

Encounter with an Empathic, Personal God

— A Seminar on *Shingon Mikkyō* —

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Introduction

A seminar on the theme of “In Search of Dialogue and Communication with All Religions” was held on December 26–29, 1986, at Daien-in on Mount Kōya in Wakayama prefecture. This seminar was sponsored by the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture. It was the second such study group sponsored by this Institute, this one taking up the theme of Shingon *mikkyō* 密教, or esoteric, Buddhism. Participation was limited to Catholic seminarians, and a total of twelve members from five seminaries across Japan took part in the meetings. The present age has been called the age of religions, and the importance of dialogue between religions has been stressed. Whether due to the instinct for self-protection or some other reason, the fact remains that such contact is usually limited to social or diplomatic exchanges, and there has been little true and intimate communication. In this sense the present seminar involved actually visiting the other side’s “home,” as it were, and sharing in their inner “family” life, thus adding a new dimension to interreligious communication. I would like to report on this event as one who feels that it was a very valuable experience to come in such close contact with a school such as Shingon, one of the most representative schools of Japanese Buddhism.

Mount Kōya was established as the headquarters of the Shingon school for the practice of Buddhist meditation in A.D. 816 by their founder Kūkai 空海, better known by his posthumous title, Kōbō Daishi 弘法大師. The mountaintop, about a thousand meters above sea level, forms a flat basin, where today the Kongōbu-ji temple is situated as the center for a complex of temples and other buildings. There are a total of one hundred and seventeen temples, including the Oku-no-in (the location of Kūkai’s resting place), Konpon Daidō (the central stūpa), and Kondō (the main worship hall). This are surrounded by dwellings, shops, public facilities, Kōya-san University, and so forth, to form a large religious community with a population of over four thousand people.

Our meeting place, the Daien-in, is a famous temple noted for its affiliation with Takeguchi Nyūdō. Its central object of worship is called the “*Uguisu Amida*

nyorai (the “nightingale” Buddha Amida). Without straying too far from the subject of this report, the reason that this Buddha image is called the “nightingale” stems from that fact that Takeguchi Nyūdō left his lover to seclude himself in this temple. The abandoned lover was a beautiful woman by the name of Yokobue. It is said that Yokobue wanted to visit Nyūdō, but could not enter Mount Kōya since it was off limits to women. She nevertheless came as close as she could, to a place called “the women’s Kōya,” and there met her death. Yokobue then turned into a nightingale and flew to Nyūdō’s side, fulfilling her heart’s desire. Daien-in struck me as a place steeped in history—just the right setting for us as seminarians to seclude ourselves for our study. By the way, the prohibition against women entering the precincts of Mount Kōya was lifted by a proclamation of the head of Kongōbu-ji in 1906.

Our lecturers at the seminar were Takada Ningaku 高田仁覚, Tanaka Chiaki 田中千秋, Nagaoka Shūkō 長岡秀幸, and Matsunaga Yūkei 松長有慶, all of them professors at Kōya-san University. Each spoke for an hour and a half on the rituals, doctrines, practices (concrete actions for realizing enlightenment), and worldview of *mikkyō*. Of course they were also Shingon monks and came dressed in their black robes and vestments, carrying the Buddhist rosary. They spoke with great conviction and left an indelible impression. Especially memorable were the points made often about the deeper meaning of *mikkyō*, how difficult it is to express through books or lectures, and how it is pointless to try to understand it conceptually without direct experience. This is expressed in the phrase *furyū monji, ishin denshin* 不立文字以心伝心, which means that one cannot rely only on words and that the tradition must be passed on directly from mind to mind and heart to heart. Despite our being newcomers to all of this, the monks were very conscientious and patient in trying to bring us into contact with and help us experience the attraction of *mikkyō*. For my part, I am persuaded that this kind of experience can be a nourishment for our Christian faith, and would there like to record my impressions in two parts dealing with the themes of “salvation” and on the forms of faith.

*The Joy of Salvation in Mikkyō:
On Attaining Buddhahood in This Life (sokushin jōbutsu)*

The goal of *mikkyō* is to “attain Buddhahood” or “become a Buddha” (*jōbutsu* 成仏). This is accomplished by uniting the self with the fundamental principle of the universe through the activity of yoga (a Sanskrit term meaning the binding together of two separate things), and thus becoming a Buddha (an awakened one). In Japan *jōbutsu* usually refers to becoming a Buddha after one has died, thus postponing the attainment of awakening until after death. In contrast, Shingon *mikkyō* teaches that the highest goal and achievement is the attainment of Buddhahood in this life and within this world of delusions. I raised a question concerning the comparison of this concept of attaining Buddhahood in this life and the Christian idea of salvation, and the answer which came back

directly was: "It is possible to attain Buddhahood because we are already 'saved'. To 'attain Buddhahood' means to become awakened to the fact of one's salvation" (Tanaka).

In other words, the idea that one can "become a Buddha" does not mean that one was not a Buddha before, but rather that one awakens to one's already inherent "Buddha-nature." "When people mature and become adults, this does not mean that they were not persons before they became adults. In the same way, we have within us the seeds of Buddhahood, and we become Buddhas when this seed blooms" (Nagaoka).

Therefore, for *mikkyō*, the Buddha is not an "other" existence. "We do not predicate a God apart from and above us, as in Christianity. We see the Buddha within ourselves, and coming to know this Buddha is the meaning of becoming a Buddha" (Takada). But if the verb "to become" implies some one or some thing assisting in the "becoming," this does not mean that the awakening of Buddhahood is accomplished only through one's own power. This idea was reflected in comments such as "becoming a Buddha is a fulfillment of the power of the Buddha, because we attain Buddhahood through the power of the Buddha," and "This experience is better described not as the attainment of Buddhahood by oneself, but rather that the Buddha approaches one and one is taken over by the Buddha" (Takada). The nuances expressed in these ideas reminded me of the mystical thought of the Eastern Church or Roman Catholicism.

In any case the main point is to understand that people are already Buddhas and to appreciate the dynamism of the idea that awakening to this fact is the attainment of Buddhahood in this life which is "beginningless and endless" (beyond time). The concept is a stimulating one, reminiscent of the Christian concept of salvation in and through history, the eschatological tension of salvation already accomplished and yet still to come (salvation is here-and-now but not yet perfected). The relevance of salvation is a central issue for the religious spirit in the present age.

All Buddhist schools other than Shingon are referred to in the Shingon school as *kengyō* 顯教 ("manifested teachings") in contrast to *mikkyō* ("secret teachings"). *Kengyō* is centered on the Dharma (the content and substance of the teachings of Buddhism), and *mikkyō* is centered around human experience and integration with mystical reality, thus illustrating the superiority of the later. This emphasis on the accomplished fact of salvation also illustrates the difference between the two. For *kengyō*, one must strive in various ways to attain enlightenment, but according to *mikkyō* one manifests the already-attained realm of enlightenment, that of the Buddha, through physical, verbal, and mental activity, and thus perfect Buddhahood.

The path to enlightenment in the Zen school, for example, is a process whereby "conceptual discriminations (analysis of objects by the self; knowledge which gives rise to discrimination between the self and other objects) are removed one by one, until finally all passions and attachments are severed by

nondiscrimination, a path whereby the self is weakened through diligence” (Takada). In *mikkyō*, however, these conceptual discriminations are said not to disappear, and thought is analyzed as the realm of enlightenment itself, thereby revealing the Buddha nature inherent in it.

“It is unreasonable to expect that common, ignorant people can gradually purify their minds and enter the realm of enlightenment. What common people can do is to meditate on themselves as being the realm of the Buddha, or taking on the body of the Buddha, and thus imagine themselves in the state of enlightenment. This is to “taste” enlightenment not in a notional sense but as an actual sensation and experience” (Takada). “It is said that one should reject conceptual discriminations, but if conceptual discriminations are rejected, then one is no longer dealing with this world. Rather, one should perceive that conceptual discriminations, or everything that is discriminated within the world of conceptual discriminations, is really one with the world which supposedly transcends our concepts. Enlightenment or awakening is not a clarification (*hatsumei* 発明) but a discovery (*hakken* 発見)” (Nagaoka). “Even if people do not undertake religious practices, they are perfected from the very beginning. The common people will not be saved through difficult and ascetic practices. Practice becomes pleasant and one finds joy in the Dharma because one becomes aware of the fact that one is already a Buddha. Then one can worship a living Buddha which transcends the dichotomy of self and others; one is changed by the shining of this light and can overcome sadness and suffering” (Tanaka). All of these statements teach a path by which the common people can be transformed through experiencing the beginningless Buddha nature. As a human being who is burdened by physical concerns and other suffering, I found something comforting in these statements.

Of course this does not mean that there are no religious austerities practiced in *mikkyō*, but only that the purpose of religious asceticism is not “to seek” but “to taste.” And what is to be experienced is the fact that the great expanse of the macrocosm is reflected within the macrocosm of every human being. In order to taste this experience one must shift one’s perspective from the common self-centered way of seeing that objectifies other people and the natural world, to a perspective of the universe as a whole which sees the unity of all nature (the mountains, rivers, grass, and trees). This is the practice of *mikkyō*, technically known as “the practice of the three mysteries” (*sanmitsugyō* 三密行). In other words, the physical, verbal, and mental activities of a human being are, just as they are, the activity of the Tathāgata, the Buddha. In order to experience this fact, one makes special symbols (*mūdra*) with one’s hands (physical action), chants special spells (*mantra*) with the mouth (verbal action), and with the mind concentrates on one point, such as concentrating on integrating a pictorial representation of the Buddha (*maṇḍala*; mental action). In this way the three mystical actions of the practitioner and the Buddha come to correspond to each other, and one perfects Buddhahood. Even in this modern age anyone can perfect Buddhahood through these three mysteries. It is properly speaking the practice of everyman.

A general impression I received was that *mikkyō* is an optimistic religion, and therefore one which has appeal to the general populace. Rather than emphasizing difficult religious austerities and scholarship, it offers the comforting and encouraging teaching that anyone and everyone already has the Buddha nature. Certainly this must appeal to many people. Moreover a method by which anyone can experience the realm of enlightenment holds out the promise that anyone who undertakes this practice can experience the joy of the Dharma. It seems to me that in the “telling of the Gospel” in the Catholic Church, there is much emphasis on mature believers and a reverence for those of strong faith, and there is no place for ordinary people whose faith has yet to mature. The Catholic Church is also supposed to have a basis for joy in that it proclaims the good news that our salvation has already been accomplished, that Christ has died for the salvation of all, that common ordinary people like myself already have the “Buddha-nature.” I received the impression that in *mikkyō* this “good news” had given birth to a culture of joyful practice, and that *mikkyō* had, over the span of many years, carefully developed a faith which fit well with the needs of the common people.

Next I would like to examine *mikkyō* in light of the four lectures given during the seminar.

The “Empathic” Faith of Mikkyō
The Buddha Mahāvairocana

The attraction of *mikkyō* for ordinary people seems to be a result of the process of its development. As is well known, *mikkyō* grew out of the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition, and the Mahāyāna tradition grew out of the so-called Hīnayāna tradition. In the early period of Buddhism when the sectarian Buddhism of the Hīnayāna prospered, it is said that there was a strong emphasis on the practice of religious austerities and on scholarship. Buddhism was a religion for the elite who lived secluded deep within the monastery walls. The rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism took place against this background. Mahāyāna captured the enthusiastic support of the masses through the use of catch phrases such as “All sentient beings without exception have the Buddha nature,” and “The mountains and rivers, grass and trees, all perfect Buddhahood.”

Mikkyō arose as a teaching which brought Mahāyāna Buddhism to its completion. It found its identity in consummating the appeal to the masses. Its central scriptures were newly compiled texts based on the one hand on miscellaneous esoteric works which aimed at the avoidance of misfortune and attraction of good fortune, and on the other hand on the ideas of the two major streams of Mahāyāna Buddhism—the emptiness philosophy of the Mādhyamikas, and the idealistic thought of the Yogācarin. The two most representative texts in this genre are the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* (*Dainichikyō*) and the *Vajraśekhara Sūtra* (*Kongōchōkyō*).

These two texts, however, differ radically on some points from previous Mahāyāna Buddhist teachings, for example in the worship of the Buddha

Mahāvairocana as a living Buddha who is the foundation of the universe. It is taught that all things and all Buddhas are but manifestations of this one Buddha Mahāvairocana. The teacher of previous Mahāyāna scriptures was Śākyamuni, but in the *mikkyō* texts the work of Śākyamuni is included within the activity of Mahāvairocana. In other words, Śākyamuni becomes simply a historical manifestation of Mahāvairocana, an expression of Mahāvairocana's compassion and vow to save all people. This is none other than the idea of the incarnation, and I felt that the appeal of *mikkyō* to the masses is based on this idea of an incarnation, on the existence of a personal, divine being.

“Before *mikkyō*, and in other schools of Buddhism, the notions of emptiness (*kū* 空) or nothingness (*mu* 無) were emphasized, teaching a negative concept of the truth and denying the existence of a personal divinity. But *mikkyō* is open enough and vast enough to accept anything, be it a personal God or a plurality of gods. An abstract idea of God has no meaning to the masses, and the Sanron school (which teaches an abstract theory of emptiness or nothingness) is not accepted by the people. The important thing is *an encounter with an empathic deity*. In *mikkyō* it is believed that the Buddha Mahāvairocana, the spiritual being who illuminates the entire universe, is present in all things. We honor all things as manifestations of Mahāvairocana, and through this come in contact with life itself. In this way, to become one with Mahāvairocana is to experience the joy of enlightenment. The one who showed us this path was the Buddha Śākyamuni, who was in perfect oneness with Mahāvairocana” (Tanaka). “Mahāvairocana was the eternal truth before Śākyamuni became enlightened, and it was Śākyamuni who introduced this truth to people. In a sense Śākyamuni is like a radio through whom the transmission of the truth which is Mahāvairocana is continually received” (Matsunaga).

Certainly a colorless and invisible “unlimited being” such as “the truth of the universe” or “the Buddha Mahāvairocana” is far removed from the lives of ordinary people. Perhaps the greatest contribution of *mikkyō* was to bring together the human and the divine in the person of Śākyamuni. I was particularly impressed by Tanaka's use of the phrase “an empathic deity” (*kokoro yasui kami* 心やすい神).

From this perspective it is easy to understand how *mikkyō* focused on the salvation of the masses. This point is reflected in the process by which *mikkyō* incorporated all sorts of folk beliefs and practices. The historical and geographical development of *mikkyō* shows how it accommodated itself to each time and place for the sake of the salvation of the people. This process of acculturation can perhaps be called a kind of religious “incarnation.”

Mikkyō first arose in India in the 4th and 5th centuries A.D., and from there spread to central and Southeast Asia, China, Tibet, Japan, and elsewhere. In each of new area it fused with the local beliefs and religious practices of the people and underwent its own particular development. (*Mikkyō* itself was transmitted to Japan by Kūkai in A.D. 806.) Śākyamuni himself rejected the rituals of Brahmanism, the religious practices of his day, and valued a more spiritual path,

thus providing the conditions for a universal religion. But a way of life that requires a high level of spirituality is difficult for the masses to accept. Eventually the people built images of the Buddha, offered incense, and came to worship a variety of deities and Buddhas. *Mikkyō* actively incorporated all sorts of these folk practices and used them as means to disseminate the way of the truth. "Merely emphasizing the keeping of a pure life style is not enough. One must teach the way of seeking change while respecting the practices which are prevalent among the people. If Brahmanism is prevalent, then use the rituals of Brahmanism to guide people into a deeper understanding of the purpose of *mikkyō*, i.e. to finally perfect Buddhahood. In order that the people awaken to their inherent Buddha nature, we must transcend religious distinctions and blend them into one" (Matsunaga).

This comprehensiveness of *mikkyō* can be seen concretely in the Brahmin, or Hindu, elements still found in the *mikkyō* rituals today. For example, *mikkyō* practices include the *goma* fire ritual. The origin of this ritual can be traced to the rituals of Brahmanism based on the Vedas, or the Hindu rituals performed for the god of fire. Originally these were performed for the sake of warding off misfortune and attracting good fortune by sending an offering by smoke to the gods in heaven. *Mikkyō* has incorporated the ritual forms while giving it new Buddhist meaning. "In *mikkyō* it is said that the Hindu gods, such as the god of fire, rely on the Buddha Mahāvairocana, and thus the *goma* fire is burned as a symbol of the realm of enlightenment" (Takada). "Fire is a manifestation of the Buddha's wisdom, and it is also a method for perceiving the burning away of one's passionate attachments" (Matsunaga).

Another important aspect is the *maṇḍala*, which symbolizes the worldview of *mikkyō*. Many of the Buddhas and gods pictured here are originally Indian or Hindu gods which were well known and popular among the people. *Mikkyō* did not reject these deities but rather incorporated them into its own worldview. "With Mahāvairocana in the center, all the divinities worshiped by the people were arranged and each presented as some manifestation or aspect of the activity of Mahāvairocana. Instead of weeding anything out, all are included and giving a part in the cosmos" (Matsunaga). This is a comprehensiveness taken to its limit.

Until recently the kind of "assimilation" of other religious practices found in *mikkyō* was wrongly interpreted as a degeneration of Buddhism into heresy through adulteration by elements from Brahmanism or Hinduism. As Takada says, "*mikkyō* was born in order to incorporate non-Buddhist religions into the light of the truth." The worship of Hindu gods in the context of *mikkyō* is a *means* for leading people with such beliefs to come to rely on Buddhism and thus be saved.

As we have seen, *mikkyō* has tried throughout the ages and in various locales to present the deep mystery of Mahāvairocana in its historical and cultural setting as an "empathic deity" which can be intimately accepted by the people. The faith of the common people requires a clear and easily comprehensible image. Since its inception in India *mikkyō* has sought to present this image.

Of course it is necessary to advance from such an image to a more basic and deep faith, and *mikkyō* has sought to provide this also. All guidance is directly from a master to a disciple, and the methods are secret. The meditation of the realm of enlightenment by using a *maṇḍala*, for example, are not available to anyone except those who have received a certain initiation (*kanjō* 灌頂). The purpose of this is to avoid misunderstanding which may lead instead to evil or harmful results. This is one reason why it is called *mikkyō*, the “secret teachings.” However, this secrecy must be balanced by the aforementioned needs of the people in general, and it is on this point that *mikkyō* is faced with a dilemma.

In any case, it seems to me that this “populism” and mixture of “purity and impurity” offers a challenge to the “refined” Catholic Church of the present day. Matsunaga said “We strive to be tolerant of human passions and the desire for worldly benefits, to be aware of the danger of corruption, and to support all people in their weakness.” I cannot but admit that this tolerance is greater and deeper than that of the Catholic Church. It is not impossible that in the not-too-distant future, images of Jesus and Mary will be incorporated into a *maṇḍala*. If at that time the Catholic Church, as usual, has only doctrines and liturgy which are orthodox but irrelevant, then it is clear which religion the people will choose.

Concluding Remarks

Winter on Mount Kōya is cold. The windswept snow blows constantly, and at night the temperature drops considerably. We participated every day in the early morning services (*gongyō* 勤行). The snowy mornings were particularly still, and the severe cold seemed to cleanse the heart and mind. The central hall was adorned with images of various Buddhas and gilded decorations from the floor to the ceiling, and a host of candles illuminated the inner sanctuary. This contrasted remarkably with the simplicity of a Zen temple, but fit well with the teaching that all things are the manifestation of Mahāvairocana’s realm of enlightenment. I recalled Tanaka’s words that “even an artificial image of the Buddha becomes a true Buddha when worshiped as such.”

Mikkyō has a practice called “the contemplation of [the object] entering the self and the self entering [the object].” This practice consists of the practitioner “entering” the image of the Buddha which is his object of contemplation and becoming one with this object of worship. Thinking that this was perhaps a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, I attempted this contemplation in front of the image of the Uguisu Amida, but with mixed results. I couldn’t get my mind off Yokobue, the woman who became a nightingale.

At the center of the inner sanctuary was a large altar modelled after a *maṇḍala*. The early morning services were performed in front of this altar, during which the *Rishukyō* was chanted. A bell is struck to the rhythm of the chanting, and at times a cymbal-like instrument called a *ryōhachi* 饒鉞 was struck. During the service the monks made various signs with their hands and fingers, called *mūdras*. This may not be an appropriate analogy, but it reminded me of a

child at play in a room filled with all of its favorite toys. I do not mean to imply that *mikkyō* is child's play, but rather that I was attracted by the simplicity and charm of the religious rituals with their basis in the sacred. Play is a fundamental part of being human, and in that sense it is not inappropriate to compare the realm of enlightenment with that of the play of children.

We visited the Oku-no-in during our pilgrimage around the mountaintop. Kōbō Daishi's mausoleum is there, and it is believed that Kūkai, who attained Buddhahood during his lifetime, is still present. Kūkai is said to have passed away at the age of 62 in A.D. 835, but the members of the Shingon sect do not refer to Kūkai as having died; they say that he has "entered *samādhi*" (*nyūjō* 入定). In this case "entered *samādhi*" means that Kūkai, seeking the salvation of all beings, entered *samādhi* (the realm of enlightenment) while he was still alive and thus continues to work for the salvation of sentient beings. The *Eiga monogatari* (A.D. 1092), contains a story of how Fujiwara no Michinaga climbed Mount Kōya and visited the Oku-no-in and there saw the figure of Kūkai sitting in meditation. This story shows that this belief has been alive for a long time, and even today is a major part of the faith of the Shingon school adherents. At many places on the mountain I saw the following poem:

Let us give thanks
For in the shadows
On the high plain of Mount Kōya
Daishi even today
Is alive.

This reflects the continuing strength of the belief that "Odaishi-sama" (Kūkai) is still alive and with us, and that the belief in eternal life has not faded.

This point was brought home forcefully in ceremony in which food is offered to Kūkai. At first I didn't realize what was happening, but then I noticed that food is offered every morning and noon in the same manner as if to a living person. This is called *goshōshinku* 御生身供, the "offering to the living body," and it is far from a dead and empty ritual. The food is carefully prepared, choosing vegetables according to the season and properly flavoring them. The menu changes daily. The rice is not dished out until it is brought in front of the mausoleum, and the *miso* soup is kept hot in a jar until it is served. When this was explained to me, I was reminded of the risen Christ eating fish with his disciples. The faith that he is alive and with us is not something that can be proven academically but must be accepted and passed on by its power to move hearts.

The gradually sloping path which continues for about two kilometers from the Ichi-no-hashī bridge to the entrance to the Oku-no-in passes through a graveyard, the likes of which are unknown elsewhere in Japan. Under pines which have grown undisturbed for centuries, large and small gravestones throng on both sides of the path. Some are small enough to fit on the palm of one's hand; others are massive five-tiered stone towers which soar above the human frame. There are said to be between 25,000 to 40,000 graves here. The visitor to this place, dark even during the day, cannot help but feel a spiritual presence.

Ever since the later part of the Heian Period (9th to 10th century), thousands of people — emperors, aristocrats, feudal lords, warriors, townspeople, and farmers — carried their gravestone up to the mountaintop to make themselves a resting place near Kūkai. The Sengoku (warring states) period general alone include people like Takeda Shingen, Uesugi Kenshin, Oda Nobunaga, Akechi Hidemitsu, and Toyotomi Hideyoshi. Enemies during life, their coexistence here after death reminds one of the transiency of life. The fact that so many people wanted their final resting place to be close to that of Kūkai makes the mind spin with other thoughts. People who were attracted by Mount Kōya and came here to rest believed that they were not alone but were walking with Odaishi-sama. This comforting belief plays an important part of the Japanese view of death. I myself, if given the choice of being buried in a subterranean vault beneath a cathedral or among the trees and rocks of Mount Kōya, would surely choose Mount Kōya.

There were many other experiences which I could share, but I will close with only one final observation. Prior to the seminar, I was looking forward to finding something in Shingon *mikkyō* which I might use or adapt for Catholicism. Now I find that my perspective has changed somewhat. The focus has shifted away from “the Catholic Church” to that of “the salvation of all people.” How are *mikkyō* and the Catholic Church useful for this goal? This universality, this “catholicism,” *should* be something natural to the Church. Was not this the prayer of Jesus? To fulfil the hope of Jesus Christ we must break down the walls separating the religions of the world. In order that people meet and communicate, it is necessary to have a common forum. In the same way, in order for different faiths to communicate, they must find a common sacred ground to share.

I cannot forget the words which the head of Daien-in spoke to us as we departed. “In the realm of the gods and Buddhas, there is no distinction of religious sects. It was a great pleasure to share with you the joy of praying together.” *Mikkyō* has been keeping the spirit of Vatican II for over a thousand years.

[Translated and edited by Paul L. Swanson]