

Dennis HIROTA, ed., *Toward a Contemporary Understanding of Pure Land Buddhism: Creating a Shin Buddhist Theology in a Religiously Plural World*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000. ix + 257 pp. \$65.50 cloth, ISBN 0-7914-4529-1. \$21.95 paper, ISBN 0-7914-4530-5.

LET ME FIRST INTRODUCE the “format” of the book. After a long introduction by the editor, Part One, “Contemporary Interpretations of Pure Land Buddhist Tradition,” consists of three essays, respectively by Dennis Hirota, John S. Yokota (both Shin Buddhist priests), and Musashi Tachikawa (Buddhist scholar). Part Two, then, offers “Responses from Two Western Religious Thinkers,” namely, the Christian theologians Gordon Kaufman and John Cobb, Jr. In Part Three, “Reconsiderations of Buddhist Theological Reflection,” the three Buddhist authors extend some further clarification of their views,

partly in response to the questions and criticisms of the Christian authors. The book is then rounded off by an Afterword written by the editor.

“In the view of all three [Buddhist] authors, the Pure Land Buddhist tradition, in spite of the richness and relevance it possessed in the past, lies dormant” (247). Against this background (shared by Christianity), they “attempt to suggest... directions in which the tradition might be reoriented and transformed so that the life it has harbored becomes manifest in the present” (26), or to bring “Pure Land symbols into a frame of reference with sufficient resonances in the present” (244). As attested to in the subtitle, “Creating a Shin Buddhist Theology,” the authors are conscious that, hereby, they are attempting “to develop a new branch of Buddhist study” (3)—the newness of which lies in that, “while standing within Buddhist tradition, [it] seeks the development of the tradition through efforts to respond to contemporary concerns and to critically utilize contemporary thought” (4).¹

Granted that this is the common aim of the Buddhist authors, it is hard to imagine a greater divergence in approach and methodology than the one that de facto exists among these attempts at revision of the tradition. Tachikawa, a renowned Buddhist scholar, maintains a high level of theory from where he can oversee all the different branches of the Buddhist tree and, supposedly, allot a legitimate place to the apparently deviant branch that is Pure Land Buddhism. Unfortunately, he does not spell out the applicability of his scheme to Pure Land Buddhism. It is, then, hard to see how this presentation would make Pure Land Buddhism more acceptable to modern people, except maybe Buddhist scholars. Indeed, there is no clear indication that he would “seek to move beyond... the stance characteristic of traditional Pure Land Buddhism” (Kaufman’s judgment, 132). And it is also true that “his criticism tends to be more objectifying, more that of one who studies the Buddhist tradition as a scholar than of one who undertakes the revision as a participant” (thus, not so theological) (Cobb’s judgment, 148).

Yokota’s paper is by far the boldest attempt at reinterpretation of the Shin tradition. He believes that this “modernization” cannot stop at a mere hermeneutic reinterpretation of the doctrine, but calls for an “imaginative reconstruction” of the tradition. “He thinks certain traditional emphases must... be regarded today as no longer useful or appropriate for orienting human life in the world, and therefore should be changed” (Kaufman, 144). For this “reinterpretation” he also avails himself most clearly of non-traditional sources, *in casu*, some basic ideas of Christian process theology. Inspired by the Whiteheadian idea of a consequent nature of God, which allows for an influence of what happens in the world on God, he rethinks Amida’s compassion, from a passionless and detached one toward “the Passion of Amida.” Challenged by the importance of the historicity of Christ in Christianity, he anchors “the myth of Amida” in history by interpreting Sakyamuni as “the actualization of Amida in history.” He attempts to make the idea of birth in

¹ It is probably not accidental that in the same year 2000 a book appeared entitled *Buddhist Theology* (JACKSON and MAKRAANSKY 2000), wherein the pros and cons of that neologism are probed from all sides.

the Pure Land (with its implication of a personal immortality) believable by adopting the Whiteheadian idea of objective immortality. Hirota, however, throws doubts on these procedures by stating that Yokota “may be sacrificing significant elements of continuity with tradition merely to open a window onto another ‘circle of faith’” (176).

Hirota’s proposal is the most elaborate of the three by a long stretch (he uses 108 of the 247 text pages of the book). In his reinterpretation of the Shin tradition he too uses non-traditional sources: namely, the distinction between teleological transcendence and interpersonal transcendence, which he found in the writings of a Christian theologian and applies it in a masterly fashion. However, he finds the real key for his modernizing and demythologizing effort in the Buddhist tradition itself: namely, in the Mahāyāna logic of non-duality. Rather than looking for a more coherent and appealing presentation of Shin doctrine, he focuses on the praxis of Shin Buddhism as a *sui generis* existential path to enlightenment or awakening to non-duality. Thus, he defines Shin Buddhism as “a Buddhist transformation path for lay people... arisen on the basis of fundamental Mahāyāna insights” (3).

Stating that Shinran (and the tradition) did not sufficiently explain what *shinjin* means subjectively, how it manifests itself in daily life, and how it relates to society, he sets out to fill that lacuna and, by doing so, to present Shin Buddhism as something that will appeal to “modern man.” He distinguishes two stages in the practical engagement with Shin concepts and symbols, and describes the life of a Shin believer as a process wherein he/she passes, by the power of the *nenbutsu*, from an “initial engagement” to a “fulfilled engagement.” In the initial phase the objects of faith are seen from the standpoint of the ego-centered self, reified and “framed in terms of will,” and the view is characterized by deep dichotomies between this world and Pure Land, Buddha and self, self-power and other-power. Fulfilled engagement (which Hirota identifies with the attainment of true *shinjin*) implies a selfless view of true reality, wherein the teleological and interpersonal conceptions of the transcendent have been overcome (without, however, being totally rejected). The practitioner has come to a “coherent understanding of reality as itself wisdom-compassion” (54). “In this perspective, Amida and the Pure Land are grasped not as means toward transcendence—as agent or object of will—as in the initial phase, but as images of the way in which wisdom-compassion has moved towards one, comes to grasp one, and becomes authentic aspiration for enlightenment in one” (60).

In this short summary, I have certainly not been able to do justice to the very rich content of Hirota’s considerations, but precisely my admiration for his presentation of Shin Buddhism prompts me to ask a few questions:

1. In this book, Hirota has admirably conjoined his two major concerns. In his own words, he aimed at “a formulation of the Pure Land tradition that is at once true to its paramount aspirations as a Mahāyāna Buddhist path [a concern that is amply documented in his book, *Shinran: An Introduction to his Thought*, 1989] and disclosive of its significance for our contemporary situation” (164). As to the first concern,

his explanations are certainly convincing and, I think, true to Shinran's intentions, but he does not make clear why exactly he considers his presentation to be more appealing to his contemporaries than the more traditional ones.

2. I cannot but wonder as to how far Shin scholars can go along with his characterization of Shin Buddhism as a "transformative path." Is not a "path," after all, a methodical process toward a goal by sustained effort, and does this not smell of self-power? It is true that he presents the transformation as happening "of itself" (*jinen*) by the power of the *nenbutsu*. But this sounds believable only if by "*nenbutsu*" is meant something like "perpetual recitation" or "*nenbutsu zanmai*." But, can it be maintained that true *shinjin* requires a transformation of consciousness, while it is said that Amida accepts (never to reject) people as they are, with their passions (and ego-centered views) in place?
3. And is it not problematic to present the result of the transformation as so pure an engagement with Other-Power that only religious virtuosi can ever dream of attaining it? Is not this truly "elitist?" I think I recognize that tendency in Shinran himself, but this does not do away with my problem.
4. According to Hirota, the transformation from ego-centered self-power to ego-less Other-Power appears to happen in the initial phase and is perfected at the moment of attainment of true *shinjin*. As a gift from Amida, *shinjin* is, of course, perfect from the beginning, but from the side of the believer is it not easier to believe, as Soga Ryōjin seems to suggest, that the transformation goes on within the life of *shinjin*?

The two contributions by Christian theologians are also rather different in nature. Gordon Kaufman, who had asked the hard questions (found on pages 23–25 of the Introduction) on a previous occasion, really concentrates on the three Buddhist papers, providing a thorough analysis of their positions, methodologies, and mutual differences. But his interest thereby does not seem to be directly focused on the eventual gain in acceptability of Shin doctrine, but more broadly on the adaptability of religious doctrine in general, and especially on the Christian way of thinking. John COBB, on the other hand, does not especially delve into the contents of the papers presented here, but rather "uses the occasion" to present his own list of questions, several of which appeared first in his book, *Beyond Dialogue* (1982). But, in asking these pertinent and probing questions, he shows a keen interest in Shin Buddhism as such, together with a concern for problems shared by Christianity and Shin Buddhism.

As for the Bibliography, I regret that it restricts itself to "Related Works by the Contributors," since it would have been interesting to see which writings (if any) are considered by the editor to be worthy attempts at a theological reconstruction of Pure Land doctrine and at Pure Land-Christian dialogue.

Overall, this is a pioneering and challenging book, which—like all interesting writings—evokes more questions than it solves. Highly recommended to all scholars interested in Shin Buddhism and in Shin Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

REFERENCES

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