

Michihiro AMA

Shinran as “Other”

Revisiting Kurata Hyakuzō's *The Priest and His Disciples*

Kurata Hyakuzō's *The Priest and His Disciples* (*Shukke to sono deshi*, 1916) contributed to the unprecedented rise of religious literature during the Taishō period. The development of the Japanese religious world and the growing interests in religion by Japanese intellectuals during this period encouraged Kurata to humanize Shinran and paved the way for *The Priest and His Disciples* to become a bestseller. Although *The Priest and His Disciples* is much studied, the role of fiction played in the work based on the life of a medieval Buddhist priest remains unexplored. This study first provides a background to *The Priest and His Disciples* and explains why it aroused such interest at the time. It then treats the image of Shinran at the intersection of history and fiction by referring to the study of Michel de Certeau and investigates how Kurata constructed an image of Shinran as the “other” in *The Priest and His Disciples* and placed it in history and in legends about Shinran.

KEYWORDS: *The Priest and His Disciples*—Kurata Hyakuzō—history and fiction—Shinran—HongANJI

Michihiro AMA is the Karashima Tsukasa Associate Professor of Japanese Language and Culture at the University of Montana.

IN 1916, Kurata Hyakuzō 倉田百三 (1891–1943) serialized the play *Shukke to sono deshi* 出家とその弟子 (The priest and his disciples) in the journal *Seimeino kawa* 生命の川 (The river of life). This work, which is based on the life of Shinran (1173–1262), was reprinted as a book the following year and contributed to an unprecedented upsurge in religious literature during the Taishō era (1912–1926).¹ Specifically, it triggered the production of the so-called “Shinran literature” (*Shinran bungaku* 親鸞文学). Novelists, playwrights, and Buddhist priests fictionalized Shinran’s life, resulting in a “Shinran boom” (*Shinran dairiyūkō* 親鸞大流行) and the spread of what was called the “Shinran flu” (*Shinran kaze* 親鸞風邪).²

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1. In 1917, Iwanami Shoten, a start-up publisher in Tokyo, published *Shukke to sono deshi* and it became a bestseller, as did Natsume Sōseki’s *Kokoro* that Iwanami published in 1914. By 1970, paperback publishers, such as Iwanami Bunko and Kadokawa Bunko, had printed more than fifty editions of *Shukke to sono deshi*, respectively (SUZUKI Norihisa 1980, 303, 307–308; FUKUSHIMA 1973, 222–23; CHIBA Kōichirō 2011, 97–98). Terakawa Shunshō estimates that *Shukke to sono deshi* has sold about two million copies (TERAKAWA 1990, 22).

2. Japanese writers continue to express long-standing interest in Shinran. Yoshikawa Eiji 吉川英治 (1892–1962), perhaps best known in the West for his work *Musashi*, is one such figure. In 1922, he published a serial novel, *Shinranki* 親鸞記 (A record of Shinran), in the *Tokyo Maiyū shinbun* 東京毎夕新聞 and another novel based on Shinran’s life in 1938, which is still in print. In more recent times, Niwa Fumio 丹羽文雄 (1904–2005) published a five-volume novel based on Shinran in 1969, and Itsuki Hiroyuki 五木寛之 (1932–) recently completed a multi-volume novel on Shinran—the first two volumes of which were published in 2010, and the final volume published in May 2016. In addition to novelists, critics such as Kamei Katsuchirō 亀井勝一郎 (1907–1966) and Yoshimoto Takaaki 吉本隆明 (1924–), as well as philosophers including Miki Kiyoshi 三木清 (1897–1945) and Tanabe Hajime 田辺元 (1885–1962), have discussed Shinran in detail.

The Priest and His Disciples is considered to be one of the early works that gave Shinran a new image and aroused popular interest in him. That, in turn, led critics and scholars to discuss modern representations of Shinran (*Shinranzō* 親鸞像). For instance, Sueki Fumihiko recently considered the image of Shinran in *The Priest and His Disciples* to be “butter-flavored” (*batā kusai*), Westernized, or Christianized (SUEKI 2009, 118). Other critics have discussed how modern Japanese writers treated Shinran as an ideal religious figure and projected their personal concerns and soteriological needs onto him. Although *The Priest and His Disciples* is much studied, the role that fiction played in the work based on the life of a medieval Buddhist priest remains unexplored.

This study looks at *The Priest and His Disciples* from a new perspective. It treats the image of Shinran at the intersection of history and fiction. Referring to the study by Michel de Certeau, it explores ways in which *The Priest and His Disciples* encompasses history and fiction. According to de Certeau, “modern Western history essentially begins with differentiation between the present and the past,” and “historiography separates its present time from a past” (DE CERTEAU 1988, 2–3). History is the discourse of a past. Historians decide what needs to be known based on their interests and conceptualize the past as knowledge. On the other hand, fiction is “the repressed other of historical discourse” (quoted in WHITE 2005, 147), or “a return of what, at a given moment, has become unthinkable in order for a new identity to become thinkable” (DE CERTEAU 1988, 4). His analogy in blurring and reconnecting the categories of history and fiction is helpful in analyzing the ways in which Kurata constructs an image of Shinran as “other” in *The Priest and His Disciples* and places it in history and in legends about Shinran. He fictionalizes the historical characters referenced in the *Tannishō* and, while in accordance with the Honganji 本願寺 tradition, fabricates Shinran’s inner struggles and psychological developments of the characters around him.

The present study first provides a background to *The Priest and His Disciples* and explains why it aroused such interest at the time, summarizes the story, and then considers how Kurata humanized Shinran, which was the major attraction of the work, by treating the play as a text where fiction gains a place in history. It directs less attention to doctrinal discussions of Shin Buddhism and instead investigates Shinran as a historical and fictional character and as the main character of *The Priest and His Disciples*, although Yuien 唯円 can be seen as the protagonist. This study does not address issues of theatrical performance, aesthetics, and effects, nor spectatorship that Theater Studies deal with. The impact of *The Priest and His Disciples* was stronger as a book than as a play (FUKUSHIMA 1973, 275).

The Background

The success of *The Priest and His Disciples* reflects the development of the Japanese religious world and the growing interest in religion by Japanese intellectuals. When Kurata wrote *The Priest and His Disciples*, new religious movements were thriving in Japan. New religions began to be organized in the late nineteenth century and accelerated after the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905)—for instance, Ittōen 一燈園, which Kurata joined in 1914, was founded by Nishida Tenkō 西田天香 in 1904—and during and after World War I (1914–1918). After the Meiji Restoration of 1868, many Japanese left their rural communities and sought independence and autonomy in cities. They were, however, met by challenges of poverty, illness, and political restrictions, and as a result, turned to religions of worldly benefits. For many of them, Buddhism had lost its salvific function and had become merely institutions for conducting funerals and memorial services (SHIMAZONO 2004, 3, 6–8).

Among the established Buddhist organizations, however, Shin Buddhist denominations continued to grow.³ At the beginning of 1911, Higashi and Nishi Honganji celebrated Shinran's 650th memorial service and supported the religious fervor of Japan. According to Fukushima Kazuto, from the beginning of the Meiji era, the Honganji leaders reinvented biographical studies of Shinran and enhanced the traditional image of Shinran depicted in the *Godenshō* 御伝鈔 (Biography of Shinran) and *Shinran Den* 親鸞伝絵 (Illustrated biography of Shinran), which were written during the fourteenth century, and which Shin priests had used for centuries to propagate and glorify the founder. As the commemorative anniversary approached, however, progressive Shin priests began seeking new images of Shinran appropriate to the modern era. For instance, reflecting Shinran's life on their own religious experiences, Chikazumi Jōkan 近角常観 published *Shinran Shōnin no shinkō* 親鸞聖人の信仰 (Shinran's faith) in 1908 and Sasaki Gesshō 佐々木月樵 published *Shinran Shōnin den* 親鸞聖人伝 (A biography of Shinran) in 1910. In particular, Sasaki attempted to reexamine historical records related to Shinran and critiqued the traditional account of Shinran's life (FUKUSHIMA 1973, 9, 46, 74, 251).

Kinoshita Naoe 木下尚江 (1869–1937) was perhaps the first modern Japanese to write about Shinran without taking denominational interests into account. Although Kinoshita is largely known for his Christian socialist activism, he wrote *Hōnen to Shinran* 法然と親鸞 (Hōnen and Shinran) in 1911 after leaving the socialist group. In this work, he defines Shinran as a religious reformer and places him among the peasants of eastern Japan. According to Fukushima,

3. SHIMAZONO states, "It would be wrong, however, to think that the common people in Japan turned wholeheartedly to this-world-affirming views of salvation [that is, new religions], because at this very same time the Pure Land Shin sect was also still going strong" (2004, 16).

Kinoshita's image of Shinran expresses his own experiences with the social problems of his day, political challenges, and personal wishes. Kinoshita took the position that “investigation itself is not history, that rather, history is about creativity” (考証は歴史じゃない。歴史は創作だ。; FUKUSHIMA 1973, 56, 58, 60–61). As demonstrated by Kinoshita, Chikazumi, and Sasaki, from about the start of the twentieth century, literary writers and Shin priests began expressing personal ideas about Shinran, regardless of their denominational affiliations.

The success of *The Priest and His Disciples* also mirrors the development of the Japanese literary establishment. According to Chiba Masaaki, the second decade of the twentieth century is characterized as a period when writers reflected their attitudes of “seeking the way” (*kyūdōteki sakuhin* 求道的作品) in their works. Natsume Sōseki 夏目漱石, Masamune Hakuchō 正宗白鳥, and the writers affiliated with the Shirakaba group 白樺派, such as Mushanokōji Saneatsu 武者小路実篤, Arishima Takeo 有島武郎, and Shiga Naoya 志賀直哉, which Kurata later joined, expressed personal religious feelings in various ways. The Shirakaba group promoted Humanism (*jindō shugi*) and Tolstoy Studies by which Japanese writers reevaluated Christianity (CHIBA Masaaki 2011, 24–29, 44–47). Creative drama also boomed during this time. In 1915, Sudō Kōki 須藤光暉 dramatized Shinran's life in *Gutoku Shinran* 愚禿親鸞 for the first time (FUKUSHIMA 1973, 268).

Further, cultural critics of modern Japan showed interest in religion. In 1917, Watsuji Tetsurō 和辻哲郎 wrote his “Theory on Doubt and Faith” (*Kaigi to shinkō no ron* 懷疑と信仰の論) and Yanagi Muneyoshi 柳宗悦 published “Religious Nihilism” (*shūkyōtekimu* 宗教的無) (CHIBA Masaaki 2011, 45). All the intellectual activities mentioned above that cut through religion, literature, philosophy, and politics during the Taishō era are conceptualized today with the term “Taishō Vitalism” (*Taishō seimei shugi* 大正生命主義), or “Life as the Foundation of All Things,” where Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎 played a large role with his writings that included *Zen no kenkyū* 善の研究 (*An Inquiry into the Good*, 1911; HIGAKI 2011, 3–5).⁴ These developments encouraged Kurata to humanize Shinran and paved the way for *The Priest and His Disciples* to become a bestseller.

4. Suzuki Sadami coined the term “Taishō seimei shugi” during the 1990s. Suzuki believes that Vitalism was the force that drove the development of “Taishō elite intellectual cultivation” (*Taishō kyōyō shugi* 大正教養主義)—the Japanese intellectual pursuit of the “liberalism and idealism embedded in a European based elite education,” to borrow Angela Yiu's words (YIU 2008, 205). Taishō Vitalism was manifested in a wide range of intellectual and artistic activities in Japan, responding to the social deterioration caused by starvation, poverty, industrial pollution, and the exploitation of labor after the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905). According to Suzuki, Vitalism was developed in nineteenth-century Western Europe by proponents who saw vitality as the foundation of human activity, in contrast to scientists who viewed life as reducible to inorganic substance and promoted a positivistic teleology and mechanic production. Taishō Vitalism, therefore, suggests that awareness of life is the basis of creativity and cultural personality (SUZUKI 1995, 3–5).

From a global perspective, however, revisions and adaptations of legends of religious figures are hardly unique to Japanese. Margaret Ziolkowski, for instance, discusses the reinvention of hagiographies in modern Russian literature and the application of techniques associated with hagiographies to contemporary personalities and situations in the 1870s and 1880s. Conservative and liberal adapters of Russian hagiographies feature kenotic appeals and emphasize artistic creativity in their works (ZIOLKOWSKI 1988, 5, 122, 188–89).

Like those modern Russian writers, Kurata longed for divine inspiration, creativity, and romantic love all at the same time. Although Nishida's *An Inquiry into the Good* helped him understand "pure experience" (*junsui keiken*) to be a state of oneness—including the unity of a self and God, Kurata could not come to terms with his friends, women, and God. He contracted tuberculosis and dropped out of First High School and returned home to Shōbara 庄原 in Hiroshima, where he had been raised as the only son of a wealthy couple specializing in the cotton and linen business, and had been influenced by a devout Shin Buddhist aunt. There was also a Christian community in Shōbara through which Kurata had become familiar with Christianity. While recuperating, Kurata met a nurse, whom he called Okinu-san お絹さん. Although he initially tried to love her as a neighbor, he could not reconcile divine love and romantic love, and later married her (SUZUKI Norihisa 1980, 3, 8, 16, 50–53, 62–72).⁵

Kurata then joined Ittōen, founded by Nishida Tenkō, and sought a religious life. According to Maya Mortimer, Nishida had established Ittōen based on many different philosophies, including "Lao-Tse Taoism, Gandhi-flavoured pacifism, Franciscan Christianity, Buddhism and a dozen other tendencies" and on the notion of "gratuitous service" and "religious mendicancy" (MORTIMER 2000, 151–53). Ittōen's strict life, however, gradually wore Kurata out and diminished his creative ability. Nishida discouraged him from bringing aesthetic inspiration to ascetic life and went so far as to tell him to give up his artistic interests. Kurata grew dissatisfied and saw Nishida as a man of "self-power," whereas Kurata inclined toward Shin Buddhism as a religion of "other-power." When Kurata learned about his elder sister's critical condition, he left Ittōen and returned home with Okinu-san. Kurata's two elder sisters later died of tuberculosis and then his grandmother passed away. As a result, Kurata turned to Amida Buddha's compassion (SUZUKI Norihisa 1980, 90–94).

That was when Kurata began writing *The Priest and His Disciples*. According to Suzuki Norihisa, writing it gave him an excuse not to deal with family problems, such as the decline of the family business and quarrels between his mother

5. For a study of one of Kurata's writings in this period, *Isei no uchini jiko o miidasantōsuru kokoro* 異性の内に自己を見出さんとする心, (Finding oneself in the opposite sex, 1913) in the English language, see RIMER (1990).

and Okinu-san (Kurata and Okinu-san divorced in 1920). Writing the play also served as an opportunity for Kurata to express the artistic desires he felt had been stifled at Ittōen. Another reason that Kurata began writing was to become financially independent. He did not have a real job but lived off his parents even when Okinu-san became pregnant. Writing *The Priest and His Disciples*, therefore, represented a turning point in his life (SUZUKI Norihisa 1980, 100–102).

The Priest and His Disciples was well accepted by intellectuals and students of the day. They saw part of their activities, such as indulging in loose conduct and having a commitment-less relationship in Kurata's characters, and associated their experiences with the story line. Shin Buddhist responses to *The Priest and His Disciples*, however, varied. On the one hand, priests and lay members continued to embrace the traditional image of Shinran. Some Shin leaders criticized Kurata for confusing their religion and Christianity, for his lack of understanding regarding Shinran's teachings, and disapproved of the way Kurata fictionalized Shinran's life. They refused to acknowledge the work as anything more than a piece of fiction.⁶ On the other hand, other Shin leaders praised Kurata's discussion of faith and saw *The Priest and His Disciples* as a useful guide to Shin Buddhism (FUKUSHIMA 1973, 255–63, 271).⁷ In any case, Shin priests and Shin lay members evaluated the play primarily from a doctrinal standpoint.

Kurata related his personal experiences to Shinran and avoided replicating the traditional image of Shinran held sacred by denominational authorities. He wrote about “my Shinran” who “touched my heart, moved my inner life, and occupied my spiritual space” (私の心にふれ、私の内生命を動かし、私の霊の中に座を占めた限りの親鸞である。),⁸ and depicted Shinran as a man of unwholesome karma and full of attachments. Kurata explores conditions of unrequited love, causes of the misunderstanding between parent and son, and the nature of rivalries among the Buddhist disciples, while examining the limitations of morality and ethics. For him, exploration of Shin Buddhist doctrine was secondary. He combined the Buddhist notion of nirvana and the Christian ideas of agape and ascension, and considered prayers to be the foundation of spiritual life. Yet, the Shinran who Kurata portrays is indecisive, which reflects Kurata's own hesitation about completely entrusting himself to Amida Buddha. This is in marked contrast to Shinran who had absolutely no doubt about being in Amida's compassionate embrace (FUKUSHIMA 1973, 249, 252, 254; SUZUKI Norihisa 1980, 106–107). To put it differently, writing *The Priest and His Disciples* led Kurata to

6. For instance, according to Akegarasu Haya, *The Priest and His Disciples* did “not represent Shinran's real *shinjin*.” Quoted in MIZUSHIMA (2010, 206).

7. Recently, two Shin Buddhist Studies scholars—Terakawa Shunshō, former president of Otani University, and Shigaraki Takamaro, former president of Ryūkoku University—took more sympathetic views of Kurata's expressions of Shin Buddhism.

8. Quoted by FUKUSHIMA (1973, 250); the author's translation.

realize his lack of faith in Shin Buddhism, his attachment to art, and his desire to live a long life.

The discovery of interiority through the means of writing is a common experience in modern Japan. As Karatani Kōjin points out, Japanese naturalist writers, such as Tayama Katai and Shimazaki Tōson, realized their sexuality through the practice of literary confessions, constructing their inner lives as they seemingly acknowledged their struggles, carnal desires, and a spiritual stagnation (KARATANI 1998, 76–80). Considering Karatani's theory of inversion of consciousness, *The Priest and His Disciples* appears to be part of a larger literary movement in modern Japan in which writers gain a sense of interiority by publicly disclosing their concerns and problems.

Shin Buddhist leaders also defined their interiority through confessional writings. In 1903, just before his death, KIYOZAWA Manshi (1863–1903) wrote *Waga shinnen* (2003) (The nature of my faith), which inspired many young Shin priests, who regarded it as a testimony of his spiritual achievement. Kiyozawa discussed the importance of establishing faith in Amida Buddha through personal experience. In *The Nature of My Faith*, he talks about his failure in self-power practice, which helped establish his faith in Amida Buddha. Kiyozawa must have gone through a deeper realization of his selfhood when he wrote *The Nature of My Faith*, because confessional writing as a way of presenting a self involves self-analysis and self-confirmation.

Furthermore, Akegarasu Haya (1877–1954), a leading student of Kiyozawa, revealed his sexuality sensationally—and his faith—in a series of his confessional writings. For him, the use of sexuality and references to popular literature was an innovative medium to discuss his problems, rebel against traditional religious authority, and yet express his need for spiritual comfort. Kurata's personalization of Shinran, therefore, coincides with the religious experiences of the *seishinshugi* thinkers, as represented by Kiyozawa and Akegarasu. In fact, as Koyasu Nobukuni points out, Kurata referred to AKEGARASU's *Tannishō kōwa* in his reading of the *Tannishō* (KOYASU 2014, 161).⁹ However, unlike Kurata, Akegarasu rejects Christian doctrine as a whole while incorporating literary expressions of Christianity into his confessional writings. In addition, Kurata's creativity is related to the formation of the modernist discourse on Japanese Buddhism, including Kamakura New Buddhism 鎌倉新仏教, in which leaders of Buddhist denominations attempt to revive the teachings of their founders, such as Shinran.

9. Kiyozawa's followers did interact with Kurata for a short period after the publication of *The Priest and His Disciples*. Kurata contributed three essays to the *Seishinkai* 精神界 journal between 1917 and 1918, when the journal was in danger of shutting down, and encouraged the journal editors to continue publishing the *Seishinkai* (MIZUSHIMA 2010, 74–75).

A Synopsis of The Priest and His Disciples

The Priest and His Disciples consists of an Induction and Six Acts. The main character appears to be Yuien who lives with his spiritual master, Shinran, and other disciples. The Induction begins with a dialogue between a man and a Being whose identity is concealed and who serves the Immortal. The Being treats all humans as sinners subject to death; destroys everything that the man believes, such as faith in his son, art, and prayer; and shows him that nothing is permanent. The Being tells the man that the man has committed many sins since his birth, which is the result of adultery, and that the man has taken a number of lives; hence, the man is going to be punished. The man agonizes about what he fears is in store for him. After the Being disappears, the man accepts as fact that a Great Being controls his life, but considers the Great Being to be kind and loving, because for the man, “this world must be good” (SHAW n.d., 10).

Act One deals with Hino Saemon 日野左衛門, his wife Okane お兼, and their child Matsuwaka 松若—who later becomes Yuien. Saemon, a former samurai, returns home in a bad mood because he was unable to collect the money he had lent to poor peasants. Saemon blames himself for not being strict enough to force them to repay him. He starts drinking and wishes to become heartless so he will not feel bad about punishing the peasants. Saemon tells Okane that he has actually begun to enjoy killing hens and wild animals. Okane is horrified by Saemon’s brutality. This is when Shinran and his two disciples—Jien 慈円 and Ryōkan 良寛—who were thought to be lost in a fierce snowstorm, happen to find their house and ask Saemon for permission to spend the night sheltered from the storm. Despite Okane’s attempts to persuade him, Saemon refuses and strikes Shinran with a stick because he dislikes Buddhist priests.

In Scene Two of Act One, while Shinran sleeps in the snow, his head resting on a rock, Saemon has a frightening dream and regrets mistreating Shinran. Saemon and Okane look for Shinran and the other priests and find them freezing outside their home. They allow them to enter and apologize for Saemon’s ill behavior. Saemon is deeply moved by Shinran, who explains to him that karma is beyond one’s control and that he himself is shackled by his own karma. Saemon decides to become Shinran’s disciple, but Shinran tells him to remain with his family and just recite the *nenbutsu*.

In Act Two, fifteen years have passed from the setting of Act One. Yuien—the former Matsuwaka—is now living at Shinran’s resident quarters in Nishinotō’in 西の洞院 with other disciples. Shinran is seventy-five and Yuien is twenty-five. Yuien informs the other disciples that Zenran 善鸞, whom Shinran had disowned, is coming to Kyoto, hoping to see Shinran.

In this section, Shinran’s words recorded in the *Tannishō* are reenacted. Almost the entire second chapter of the *Tannishō*, which is written in classical

Japanese, is reintroduced in colloquial Japanese. Followers come to see Shinran all the way from eastern Japan for clarification of questions about birth in the Pure Land. The first sentence is, however, not said by Shinran, as it is in the *Tannishō*, but by one of the six followers—“In truth, we’ve crossed more than ten provinces and come all the way to Kyoto because we’re troubled by the single matter of rebirth” (SHAW n.d., 87)¹⁰—to which Shinran responds. Kurata rearranged the second chapter of the *Tannishō* to be a dialogue between Shinran and his Kanto followers: he extracts Shinran’s words from the classic text, gives it shape, and presents it as Shinran’s living experience.

Scene One of Act Three is the interaction between Yuien and Zenran and Scene Two is the exchange between Shinran and Yuien who tries to convince Shinran to meet his son. Yuien visits Zenran while Zenran is drinking with several harlots, including Asaka 浅香 and Kaede かえで. Zenran tells Yuien that Shinran disowned him because he fell in love with his relative’s wife and that his fornication caused many problems, including the death of that woman. Zenran is unable to take refuge in Amida Buddha’s original vow because he still blames himself and considers Shinran’s teachings to be “too conveniently fashioned a salvation” (SHAW n.d., 108). After returning to Shinran’s quarters, Yuien again asks Shinran to speak to Zenran. Shinran, however, while rejecting Yuien’s request, takes pity on Zenran, and prays for him.

The venue changes in Act Four when Yuien meets Kaede in Kurodani 黒谷 cemetery. Kaede, a sixteen-year-old harlot, tells Yuien that she does not deserve his love because unlike his body, which is like a “pure jewel,” her body is “stained” (SHAW n.d., 140). Yuien explains that Shinshū does not prevent priests from marrying and that Kaede suffers because of her misfortunes, not because of her sins. In Scene Two, two senior harlots gather in Asaka’s room and tell her that their “mother” is angry because Kaede is meeting Yuien without being paid and that Asaka is doing a bad job as Kaede’s supervisor. Asaka, however, remains sympathetic to Kaede and supports her love. Asaka tells her that she had previously associated with Zenran. Although they loved each other, they felt lonely inside.

Act Five brings Shinran and his disciples back. In Scene One, after an evening service at the temple hall, three disciples accuse Yuien of neglecting his Buddhist practice because of his affair with Kaede. They hate harlots and consider Yuien’s relationship with Kaede to be dirty. Yuien becomes upset and tells them, “There’s impurity even in the heart of a priest! There’s purity even in the heart of a harlot,” (SHAW n.d., 185) and insists on the seriousness of his love. They cannot agree and

10. Chapter 2 of the *Tannishō* begins with Shinran saying: “Each of you come to see me, crossing the borders of more than ten provinces at the risk of your life, solely with the intent of asking about the path to birth in the land of bliss” (see HIROTA et al. [1997], *The Collected Works of Shinran*, vol. 1, 662).

the three disciples demand that Yuien choose between his love for Kaede and the Dharma. When Yuien refuses, Yōren 永蓮, one of the three disciples, asks Shinran to decide whether Yuien or he should leave the temple. In Scene Two, Shinran takes the blame and explains that he was the one who advised Yuien to “love seriously and with all his heart” (SHAW n.d., 196). He then reminds his disciples that this temple is for those who are burdened with unwholesome karma and that forgiveness is more important than judging others. At the same time, Shinran advises Yuien to love Kaede as if she is a neighbor and to pray for her while reciting *namu amida butsu*.

The play ends with Act Six. Fifteen years have passed since the setting of Act Five. Scene One introduces Yuien’s family. Yuien and Kaede have been married for some time now and have two daughters. Kaede has become Shinran’s disciple and is now called Shōshin 勝信. They look after Shinran, who is ninety years old, at Zenpōin 善法院. Requested by Shinran, Shōshin reads aloud passages dealing with those who attain birth in the Pure Land on the highest level (*jōbon ōjō no hotsuganmon* 上品往生の発願文).

In Scene Two, a conversation takes place in Shinran’s room. Shōshin reads to Shinran the letter Hōnen had sent to his mother, which includes a description of the proper attitude at the time of death. Shinran expresses to Yuien his attachment to living, his fear of extreme pain, and his desire for forgiving others. Yuien urges Shinran to reunite with Zenran before Shinran’s death.

In Scene Three, Zenran arrives at Zenpōin. Shōshin prevents him from rushing into Shinran’s room and instead asks whether he accepts the Buddha or not. Zenran is, however, still unsure about his faith. Shōshin begs him to say “yes” because that would relieve Shinran of his agony and give him peace.

The reunion between Shinran and Zenran finally takes place in Scene Four. Zenran cries and apologizes to Shinran for being an unfilial son and blames himself for the behavior that led Shinran to disown him. Shinran tells Zenran, “Amida atoned for those sins aeons ago. They’re forgiven, they’re forgiven,” and asks Zenran whether or not he believes in the Buddha. Despite what he said to Shōshin, Zenran says, “I don’t know. I can’t decide.” Shinran breathes his last, uttering, “That’s all right. Everybody’s saved. It’s a good and harmonious world. Oh, peace! The farthest, the deepest. Namu Amida Butsu” (SHAW n.d., 244–45). The physician then pronounces Shinran’s death. Shinran’s disciples cry and the play ends in a solemn mood.

Humanizing the Akunin, Person of Unwholesome Karma

Kadowaki Ken characterizes *The Priest and His Disciples* as a work full of tears. The characters, including Shinran, cry a lot—in fact, Shinran cries in almost all of the scenes. Kadowaki considers that for the literary writers of this period in

Japan, shedding tears excessively in public was a new way of expressing sadness (KADOWAKI 1995, 299–300). The Shinran whom Kurata depicted is maudlin and worldly, but honest and sincere in accepting himself as full of base passions. While idealizing and personalizing Shinran, Kurata recreated the image of Shinran based on that medieval scripture held sacred by the Honganji organizations.

The place of history in *The Priest and His Disciples*, which incorporates the creative image of a historical figure into historical reality, needs to be reconsidered. Michel de Certeau examines history, which has become knowledge of a past and separate from a present, and calls for a “return of the past in the present discourse” (DE CERTEAU 2010, 214).

Perhaps in restoring the ambiguity that characterizes relationships between object and subject or past and present, historiography could return to its traditional task—which is both philosophical and a technical one—of *articulating time as the ambivalence that affects the place from which it speaks* and, thus, of reflecting upon the ambiguity of place as the work of time within the space of knowledge itself [emphasis added]. (DE CERTEAU 2010, 217)

In the master narrative of a historical event and a legend, which an authority has created and legitimized, knowledge of the past implies what that authority accepts and what it denies. What was silenced eventually becomes forgotten when the grand narrative is repeated again and again over the period of time. The “return of the past in the present discourse” is an attempt to recover what was lost during the process of rendering a past in the form of knowledge. This is where creative imagination plays a pivotal role as a means of interpreting historical events and surmising mental states of the historical characters that are not documented.

Shinran considered himself an *akunin*, a person of unwholesome karma, and sought salvation of *akunin*. Literally, *akunin* is a bad person, which is often translated as “evil person” as in the *Tannishō*, such as “Even a good person attains birth in the Pure Land, so it goes without saying that an evil person will” (see HIROTA et al. [1997], *The Collected Works of Shinran*, vol.1, 663). Because of Shinran’s teaching that aimed to liberate *akunin* and because of his interaction with commoners, including fishermen and hunters, the number of Shinran’s followers continued to increase. As a result, organizations called Jōdo Shinshū, or Shin Buddhism, were formed, with Higashi Honganji and Nishi Honganji being the largest. In this development and over a long period of time, Shinran was, however, consecrated and the discourse on Shinran’s life was created as the life of a holy man.

Many Shin Buddhist followers worshipped Shinran as a sacred figure when *The Priest and His Disciples* was written, but Kurata humanized him. With his creative power, Kurata depicted Shinran as a man of unwholesome karma who attains Buddhahood, and brought Shinran’s corporeal experience back to the discourse of

Shinran's life. The "other" that Kurata retrieved from the past are ordinary aspects of Shinran who suffered just like everyone else and sought spiritual liberation. In his treatment of Shinran's inner struggles and those of the characters around him, the passage of time is not unidirectional and space is ambiguous, as it is affected by the nonlinear development of time. The other side of Shinran excluded from the discourse on Shinran's life emerges from those conditions.

One of the major themes in *The Priest and His Disciples* is Shinran's search for a harmonious world. In this setting, time flows in two directions. According to Paul Ricoeur, narrative combines chronological, or the episodic, and non-chronological, or the configurational, dimensions (RICOEUR 1980, 178). The former suggests the advance of a plot, while the latter suggests the function of the plot by which non-consecutive events are put together as a complete story. A plot generates human action within memory that "repeats the course of events according to an order that is the counterpart of time" (RICOEUR 1980, 180). Memory is thus a plot device that intersects with the chronological development of time and helps the characters remember their past.

In *The Priest and His Disciples*, memory is linked to karma. After striking Shinran and chasing him and his disciples away from his home, Saemon has a nightmare: he becomes the hen he was about to kill, and now that the hen is about to be hacked to death by a butcher, Saemon tells Okane about his terror:

Then I felt somehow that this same thing had happened once before. "Hello," thought I, "isn't that a voice I've heard before?" Then a scene long forgotten came with surprising clearness into the memory of that chicken, which was I. For away back in the past, in the life before this, I once had killed a woman traveler. In the midst of the mountains, I bared my dirk and rushed upon her. She cried in a pleading voice. What I now remembered was that cry. "Now," thought I, "retribution for that has come." The knife of the butcher was about to fall, but fell not. Then I groaned and opened my eyes. (SHAW n.d., 38)

When Saemon realizes his dreadful conduct in a former life, that evil karma causes him to suffer. Okane is also disturbed by the memory of her late mother, who just before dying, told her: "...When I die I shall be born again in the form of a priest. Please remember this well. For I shall come to your door as a pilgrim" (SHAW n.d., 39). What Saemon and Okane have forgotten for a long time rises in their minds and fear of karmic punishment strikes them. For them, the recollection of these events implies the omen of a terrible incident and they relate its cause to their mistreatment of Shinran.

Traditionally, Saemon's encounter with Shinran is known as the episode at Chinshakuji or Chinsekiji 枕石寺. According to the legend, Saemon was said to have had a revelation: Shinran, whom Saemon had chased away, was the incarnation of Amida Buddha (ŌMINE 1911, 55–60). In *The Priest and His*

Disciples, however, that divine revelation is replaced by a nightmare, showing the persistence of Saemon's evil karma. Kurata, as the author of *The Priest and His Disciples*, de-mystifies Shinran's equation to Amida, while giving more depth to Saemon's psychological development and highlighting the anxiety of the couple. Kurata, however, does not completely treat Shinran as an ordinary priest; rather, he enhances Shinran's virtue by naming his two disciples, whose identities are unclear in the original story, Jien and Ryōkan. These characters are historical beings—Jien was the abbot of the Tendai school who is said to have ordained Shinran at the age of nine and Ryōkan was a popular Buddhist monk during the Edo period. Although these connections are chronologically impossible, Kurata fictionalizes and transforms them into Shinran's disciples and employs them to support Shinran's noble character.

Repetition is another concept that intersects with the chronological development of time in narrative. Like memory, repetition moves the characters back to the past. It is another plot device that restates basic human values and principles extracted from the past.¹¹ In *The Priest and His Disciples*, several characters identify themselves as *akunin*. In his conversation with Shinran, Saemon, who is afraid of falling into a hell, asks whether paradise and hell exist or not.

Shinran: I believe they do. First of all I feel that there's no reason why there shouldn't be a Hell. When I've injured the life of another and haven't been able to wipe out that injury, I feel like crying out to somebody, "Please flog me, please punish me." I haven't been able to find any way to make compensation. And when I've done something cruel, *I feel that it can't be left unpunished*. This is the actual experience of my soul.

Saemon: I felt that way a while ago. If I should have no opportunity to apologize to you, and things should end where they were, if you'd gone on your way never to take back your curse, I felt that surely the evil I'd done would go solemnly on forever unextinguished. And I always feel this whenever I kill a chicken. *Can such things go unpunished? Where I think how I struck you, I feel like saying, "please beat me"* [emphasis added]. (SHAW n.d., 46–47)

Both Shinran and Saemon are compelled to admit that they deserve punishment because of cruelty they committed in the past. Shinran, however, tells Saemon that there is a way out from the chain reaction of karma, because man cannot live without harming others and yet Shinran believes that "this world must be a harmonious whole" (SHAW n.d., 47). Here, the belief held by the man in the Induction—"this world must be good" (SHAW n.d., 10)—is reiterated by Shinran,

11. RICOEUR writes, "Repetition for Heidegger, means more than a mere reversal of the basic orientation of care toward the future; it means the retrieval of our most basic potentialities inherited from our past in the form of personal fate and collective destiny" (1980, 180).

who explains to Saemon that the Buddha loves mankind and forgives their sins, even though bad karma prevents Saemon from doing good things (SHAW n.d., 51).

Further, the idea that Shinran previously held, “I feel that it can’t be left unpunished,” is shared by other characters. Zenran, in his conversation with Yuien, regards himself as “no man to be forgiven unpunished,” and says, “Though I’m despicable, I haven’t grown so brazen-faced that while I commit foul sins like this I can pray to be saved as I am” (SHAW n.d., 109). Kaede tells Yuien that until she met him, she was “determined to be content with even that shame [‘being the plaything of men’] as my fate” (SHAW n.d., 141). Self-realization of *akunin* keeps returning in the narrative and points back to the beginning of Shinran’s spiritual quest and search for a harmonious world.

Reviving the Relationship between Shinran and Zenran

Shinran is unable to attain a world of oneness because he represses his desire to meet his son. Here, de Certeau’s analogy of two types of history is helpful. That is, “One type of history ponders what is comprehensible and what are the conditions of understanding; the other claims to reencounter lived experience, exhumed by virtue of a knowledge of the past” (DE CERTEAU, 1988). According to Shin Buddhist tradition, Shinran is said to have disowned Zenran because although Shinran had sent Zenran to clarify confusion about the *nenbutsu* teaching, Zenran misrepresented his teachings and misguided the followers of eastern Japan. Honganji organizations maintained this view based on letters that Shinran wrote to his followers and to Zenran,¹² and considered that Shinran had made this decision—although it was extremely painful for him—in order that the Dharma would be transmitted correctly. Kurata, however, attempts to revive the relationship between father and son by fabricating their mental states as a lived experience. Fiction is a powerful means to imagine Shinran’s psyche, which is neither fully recorded anywhere nor discussed by historians. As DE CERTEAU (1988, 36) points out, the second type of history is handled only in literary narrative.

Shinran confesses to Yuien his desire to meet Zenran. In Scene Three of Act Two, after talking to Zenran, Yuien returns to Shinran’s quarters and begs him to meet Zenran.

Yuien: With the hearts that have seen off the dead in loneliness, I think we who are left must live together in friendliness. For that reason, too, please hurry and forgive Zenran Sama.

Shinran: I have forgiven him. There’s no one who can judge him but the Buddha.

12. Shinran lamented and expressed sadness over his disownment of Zenran in letters sent to Shōshin-bō and Jishin-bō (Zenran). For the translation of these letters, see HIROTA et al. (1997, *The Collected Works of Shinran*, vol. 1, 575–77, 582–84).

Yuien: Then please see him. (Shinran is *silent*.) Master. You really want to see him, I think.

Shinran: I do. (*Puts force into his voice*.) Thought he's profligate, I recognize his sincerity and love him. Never has a day passed that I haven't thought of him. I want to see his face. I'm hungry to hear his voice.

Yuien: Please see him. Master. Both father and son want to meet. Then why is it such a difficult thing for you to see him? Isn't it really simple?

Shinran: Truly it's simple. If this were the harmonious Pure Land, it would be a spontaneous and easy thing. This is the inconvenient world where that simple thing can't be. (*Throws strength into his voice*.) The peace of many people hangs on that simple thing. Many powers come together to prevent me. Now I'm keenly aware of the oppression of those powers. I have no strength to oppose them. (*Writhes*.) I can't see him. (SHAW n.d., 130–31)

Shinran would have met Zenran if Zenran had not been his own son, but Shinran refuses Yuien's request to meet Zenran for three reasons. First, Shinran knows his own weakness—that is, he loves Zenran very much, just like any parent, and he would easily blame others for Zenran's wrongdoings. Second, Shinran believes that ultimate love is found only in the *nenbutsu* and that he cannot save his son. Third, as Yuien observes, Shinran behaves “too much from a sense of duty” (SHAW n.d., 131). Shinran's other disciples do not want their master to meet Zenran. Their expectations of Shinran as a spiritual leader prevent him from meeting his son. Shinran thus suppresses his longing for Zenran for the sake of the sangha.

Zenran also conceals his desire to meet his father and instead expresses his loneliness to Yuien. Zenran wishes to “revive an honest and straightforward heart” (SHAW n.d., 110), but at the same time knows that “the justice of the world is painful” (SHAW n.d., 111). He thinks his life has been cursed since he was born to Shinran and Asahime, Shinran's lover. Shinran regrets being unable to love Asahime as a neighbor after Tamahi, his wife, died, and feels bad about sleeping with Asahime. Repressed love between parent and son underlies the tension between Shinran's longing for a harmonious world and his resignation to this world, which is inconvenient and beyond one's control, and the dilemma between Zenran's animosity toward, and longing for, his father. Those strained relationships move the plot to a finale where Yuien helps the father and son to meet and enables Shinran to form a “reverse link” (*gaykuen* 逆縁) to experience oneness within this world. Zenran is also given an opportunity to apologize to his father.

This unity demonstrates that Shinran is redeemed by his own death. Death releases Shinran from the repression he has created for himself, which concealed his desire to meet Zenran. For Shinran, who considers death to be a state of perfect harmony, the moment of death emerges as a new temporality, a perspective that empowers Shinran to envision a new spatiality that goes beyond this world.

Shinran is, to borrow de Certeau’s words, in a “non-place” or “spiritual space” (DE CERTEAU 1988, 282).

De Certeau observes that the life of a saint is characterized by place. In many hagiographies, a hero departs from a place, experiences a spiritual transformation, and returns to where he began his journey. As that place signifies the movement of departure and return, it suggests a venue where two opposing forces intersect and the hero recognizes the unity of differences, making the place a symbol of his spiritual maturity, or a spiritual space.

Shinran was born and died in Kyoto, the capital of medieval Japan. He spent twenty-some years on Mt. Hiei and joined Hōnen’s sangha. Shinran was then exiled to Echigo, moved to eastern Japan after being pardoned, and finally returned to Kyoto. In other words, the capital was where his spiritual journey began and ended. In *The Priest and His Disciples*, Zenpōin, where Shinran was said to breathe his last, becomes a spiritual space for him. “Zenpōin” literally means a “Buddhist Temple of Good Dharma,” where those who consider themselves *akunin*, including Shinran, gather. Death removes Shinran from the world of inconveniences and places him in the world of oneness. The state of self-detachment allows him to see Zenran as he is—Zenran who repents his wrongdoings but is still confused about Amida’s compassion.

Death also transforms Zenran. By attending his father’s deathbed, Zenran’s mixed feelings of regret, lamentation, abandonment, and loneliness that he has built up for a long time are suddenly released. He becomes honest with himself and, while weeping, tells Shinran, “I wanted to see you. Please forgive me” (SHAW n.d., 244). For Zenran, being pardoned by his father was more important than being embraced by Amida.

In *The Priest and His Disciples*, Shinran’s attitude toward his own death is different from the traditional account. According to the *Godenshō*, for instance, Shinran’s last words were not about ordinary matters, but about thanks to the Buddha and recitation of the *nenbutsu*. Kurata’s Shinran, however, embraces the proper mindset for death, fights off his fear of death, asks his disciples to pray for him, envisions his attainment of birth in the Pure Land, charges Yuien with the management of the temple, and delivers his final instructions to his disciples. Furthermore, *The Priest and His Disciples* seems to indicate the importance of *rinjū raigō* 臨終来迎—that is, Amida Buddha’s descending to this world of *saha* in order to guide a person who is about to die to the Pure Land, although Kurata’s Shinran seems to ascend to heaven rather than waiting for Amida to come.

Kurata’s literary treatment of death differs from modern Shin Buddhist leaders’ view of the afterlife. As Schroeder points out, leaders of the *seishinshugi* movement and Shin Buddhist scholars tend to express “agnosticism regarding the afterlife” (SCHROEDER 2014, 98), while treating the birth in the Pure Land as a matter of the present life—or as attaining *shinjin* in the here and now—

and rationalizing inner Shin Buddhist experiences. This-worldly outlook of Shin Buddhism in modern Japan reinforced Shinran's notion of *shōjōju* 正定聚—"to gain entry to the company of the right definite assurance in one's present life by means of the faith [in the salvific power of Amida Buddha which Amida himself directs to sentient beings]" (SUZUKI Daisetz 2012, 245). However, Shinran also recognized the birth in the Pure Land as a matter of the afterlife.¹³ In his effort to humanize Shinran, Kurata thus maintains the traditional, mythic dimension of Shinran's moment of death, contrary to the empirical approach to his life which gained popularity at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Kurata fictionalizes Shinran's last moments and displaces him from legend. He ignores Shin Buddhist orthodoxy, adopts and rejects modernist discourse on Shin Buddhism, romanticizes and Christianizes Shinran, and fabricates the relationship between Shinran and Zenran. Using fiction, Kurata ameliorates the image of Shinran, who did not compromise his teachings even with his son, by presuming a situation where religious faith is absorbed into parental love.

Conclusion

The Priest and His Disciples reflects the conditions during the author's lifetime. Young writers and intellectuals were introduced to Christianity, new religious movements developed, the Honganji organizations conducted two major anniversary events that celebrated Shinran's passing, the *seishinshugi* movement expanded, Buddhist leaders created a modern discourse on Japanese Buddhism, literary circles showed an interest in religious literature, and theater performances on such themes attracted large audiences. The cultural prosperity led by the so-called Taishō Vitalism greatly affected Kurata's sensibility and encouraged him to de-mystify Shinran by a means of fiction.

In *The Priest and His Disciples*, history meets fiction and a medieval hagiography becomes a historical writing of a medieval Buddhist priest. The image of Shinran that Kurata constructed is ambivalent. While relying on Shinran's legends and anecdotes treasured by Honganji organizations, Kurata created new settings through which he traced Shinran's inner struggles. As Fukushima Kazuto points out, although Kurata is inconsistent in his treatment of historical materials and anachronistic in his organization of six acts, Kurata's creativity makes *The Priest and His Disciples* a unique piece of modern Japanese fiction dealing with Shinran (FUKUSHIMA 1973, 250).

By dislocating Shinran from the master narrative, Kurata agitates but moves readers. Shin Buddhist followers who are familiar with the traditional account of

13. In his reply to Yūamidabutsu, Shinran writes, "My life has now reached the fullness of its years. It is certain that I will go to birth in the Pure Land before you, so without fail I will await you there" (HIROTA et al. [1997], *The Collected Works of Shinran*, 539).

the “founder’s life” find Shinran’s attachment to Zenran hard to accept. For them, Shinran disowned Zenran because Zenran failed to understand his teachings and confused Shinran’s followers in the Kanto area. Recently, however, Hiramatsu Reizō, a historian specializing in the study of medieval Shin Buddhism, suggests another possibility for the breakup: it might have been caused by the mishandling of money between Shinran and Zenran concerning payments for the *myōgō* 名号 that Shinran brushed, which Zenran carried to the Kanto followers.¹⁴ If that is the case, the cause of contention between the two may not have been as noble as it seems.

Today, historians agree that Shinran and Zenran never reunited. That does not exclude the possibility, however, that Shinran might have wanted to meet him again if Zenran had changed his attitude toward his teachings. In that sense, Kurata succeeds in bringing back to the discourse of Shinran’s life part of the complex emotions that Shinran might have held toward Zenran. As de Certeau points out in his study of Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*, the transformation of a history to a novel takes place only within history, but not in other fields of discipline, and in this development the “other” is introduced to a discourse (DE CERTEAU 1988, 343). Kurata restored and shed light on the other side of Shinran, not as a saint removed from the lives of ordinary people but as a human, and *The Priest and His Disciples* provided a new avenue for the people of modern Japan to redirect their attention to Shinran as more approachable and as a man following the same path.

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14. Hiramatsu’s argument is summarized by AMA (2011, 88–93).

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