

Hee-Sung KEEL, *Understanding Shinran: A Dialogical Approach*. Fremont: Asian Humanities Press (Nanzan Studies in Asian Religions 6), 1995. 210 pp. \$45.00 cloth. ISBN 0-89581-937-6.

INCREDIBLY, *UNDERSTANDING SHINRAN* is the first book in English by a Korean scholar on Japanese Buddhism. It is a welcome addition to the small number of studies of Pure Land Buddhism in European languages, and it is in itself a significant event in the Christian response to Pure Land Buddhism, from Francis Xavier to Karl Barth, Henri de Lubac, John B. Cobb, Jan Van Bragt, and Dennis Gira. One always has the sense that this response has somehow been stymied, that Pure Land has eluded our grasp and lent itself to misprision. The apparent parallels with Christian faith and piety have been hindrances to entering into the mindset of Hōnen and Shinran. These beloved medieval teachers seem separated from us by a pane of transparent glass. Keel has not shattered the glass, but his challenging book reveals more clearly what the hermeneutical obstacles are. His sterling ethical and religious concern attunes him to the depth of Shinran's thought, yet at the same time it exposes him to a hermeneutical short-circuit. When he declares, "I have tried not to lose a healthy tension between my obligation to listen to the voices of others and my obligation to listen to my own voice; between a faithfulness to the 'other' and a fidelity to myself" (p. 3), he prompts the fear that the strength of his own religious vision has not left him sufficiently free to absorb the distinctive vibrations that can be picked up from the remote world of Shinran's religiosity. His work is a rich, penetrating exposition of Shinran's thought, which never loses sight of its existential thrust. But in his negotiation of a critical response to that thought, he leaves some questions finally unsettled, for when Shinran is allowed to speak for himself without reference

to Christian categories (pp. 154-75) he renders ineffectual efforts to bring him within their ken (pp. 175-82).

Keel's dialogical approach is in part a polemic one. This may shake some apples from the tree of understanding, but there is also a danger that it can block empathy where it is most needed. Shinran is hailed as representing the best of Japanese thought, because a sense of sinfulness, transcendence, and the paradoxical otherness of grace led him to reject "the predominant this-worldly orientation of traditional Buddhism and the Shinto religiosity." "The absence of transcendence and negation in Japanese thought in general is not a mere religio-philosophical problem; it constitutes in my mind the core issue, one directly related to the tragic history of modern Japan that culminated in the nuclear holocaust of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (*sic*)" (p. 7). This saddles Shinran with a historical significance that he may be ill-prepared to carry. The diagnosis of the evils of immanentism is far too sweeping in any case; one might equally well blame the abstraction and unilaterality of the biblical sense of transcendence for the militaristic violence of the West (including Hiroshima).

When Keel suspects Mahayana Buddhism of "losing the transcendent perspective characteristic of Theravada Buddhism, and hence of losing its tension with the world" (p. 4), he is rehearsing a rather tired Christian insistence on "the 'infinite qualitative difference' between the absolute and the relative, the transcendent and the immanent, the divine and the human" (pp. 7-8) that has not proved totally persuasive even in Western theology and that needs to be cast in much more concrete terms if it is to cut any ice in cross-cultural dialogue. "The so-called 'dialectical' logic of identity *sive* difference (*sokuhī*), which can never take the reality of evil seriously in its raw force, and hence not the wonder of grace either, ... destroys the realistic sense of the irreducible gap between *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, the sense of the tension and the crisis upon which faith rests" (p. 136). Is Mahayana dialectic really so flabby and complacent as this suggests, and are "evil," "grace," and "faith" really so accessible, as solid, irreducible phenomena, to a "realistic" vision? Such precipitate opposition of languages from vastly divergent religious and cultural horizons hardly conduces to a subtler grasp of the true upshot of either language.

Keel has done well to put the question of sin or evil back on the agenda of Christian-Buddhist dialogue, for it is usually glossed over in philosophical musings on emptiness, impermanence, and non-self. But the Christian understanding of sin (itself a complex and pluralistic one) does not allow one to simply read off from the texts of Shinran his account of sin. Premature appeal to a biblical or Augustinian sense of sin can block access to the specific character of Shinran's experience of weakness and evil. "Conviction of sin" is not what Shinran's self-designation as "Gutoku," "foolish and stubble-haired," "neither a monk nor a layman" (p. 46) suggests, but rather acceptance of himself as a confused and ordinary being. This sense of karmic bondage does not translate directly into the phrase "we are all sinners" (p. 48). Exposure to a thinker who is independent of the biblical horizon can have the salutary effect of demystifying our notions of sin. Keel does not seem interested in such a possibility. We cannot challenge the Mahayana vision

from a biblical standpoint without allowing this standpoint to be challenged in return. Even to formulate this mutual challenge is a task of extreme delicacy. Indeed, I suspect that Christians and Pure Land Buddhists are still so far from understanding one another's traditions that such challenges cannot be formulated at all.

Keel praises Shinran for breaking with "the Mahayana worldview of the continuity between the relative and the absolute, the impure land and the Pure Land" (p. 6), and contemporary interpreters of Shinran (especially UEDA AND HIROTA 1989) are accused of papering over his disparity from the tradition. Keel sees Zen as promising complete freedom from karma here and now, whereas Shinran refuses to recognize such a miracle, teaching instead that faith in Amida gives present certainty of a future salvation. In language uncomfortably close to that of modern understandings of New Testament eschatology, Keel refers to "the paradoxicality of 'already, and not yet'" in Shinran; scholars who invoke classical Mahayana doctrines of the identity of passions and enlightenment, sentient beings and Buddhas are guilty of "gross misunderstanding and misrepresentation" for they dissolve "the very paradoxicality of Shinran's salvation by faith" (p. 135). But Keel himself notes how indebted Shinran was to "T'an-luan's philosophical attempt to reconcile the form-oriented Pure Land faith with Mahayana ontology, which denies form (at least in its ordinary sense)" (p. 159) and how he reversed the trend towards a more "realistic" understanding of the Pure Land faith that would dispense with such insight. Does Keel resolve the tension between these Mahayana emphases and the "realism" about sin and transcendence that he also sees in Shinran?

When Shinran writes, in the typical rhetoric of Mahayana nonduality, that "Hindrances of evil become the substance of virtue" (p. 133), Keel believes that what he is saying can readily be translated into the language of Luther's *Commentary on Galatians*: "When we look at ourselves, we ever remain sinful beings. When we look at Amida's compassionate Vow in faith, however, sins and evil have no power and we will certainly be in the Pure Land. Our blind passions are like non-being as far as our faith in Amida is concerned" (p. 134). But Shinran's statement seems to step over to a different kind of paradox, undercutting the very dualism on which Luther thrived.

Shinran's career as narrated by Keel is ghosted by parallels with Luther's; in each case I wish he had burrowed a little more to bring out what are probably the far more telling differences between the two. One such point is Shinran's moral agnosticism: "I know nothing of good and evil.... For a foolish being full of blind passions, in this fleeting world—this burning house—all matters without exception are lies and gibberish, totally without truth and sincerity. The nenbutsu alone is true and real" (p. 45). In Luther, the biblical word brings clear knowledge of good and evil, without which the entire dialectic of law and gospel, sin and righteousness, would be impossible. The function of the nenbutsu, in contrast, is to suspend the incertitudes of reflective thinking, rather than to resolve them. It is a practice that links one immediately to the real, despite one's continued floundering in the sea of delusions and passions.

Such a serviceable and practical technique is what one expects of Buddhism. The attitude enacted in reciting the nenbutsu is *shinjin*, which Keel translates as “faith.” This opens a door to misleading Christian associations and to metaphysical conundrums of the kind that have bedeviled Western theology, for example, “the idea of double faith, i.e. faith of faith, or faith to accept faith” (p. 110), involving an infinite regress. Keel stresses the cognitive dimension of *shinjin*: “it is ‘believe-that’ rather than ‘believe-in’” (p. 89). I would have thought that the heart of Pure Land is the salvific practice, enacting trust in Amida; perhaps the tradition licenses unquestioning fideism precisely because it does not focus too intently on the cognitive aspect. But even if Keel is right, the distance between the Pure Land and the Christian belief-systems and between the ways in which they are established and sustained needs to be focused.

Shinran’s and Ippen’s problems about the certainty of being “settled” (destined for birth in the Pure Land) and the propagation of a faith that was seen as a sheer gift of Amida (p. 114) should be marked off from Christian concerns with salvation and election; the fear of eternal damnation raises the Christian worry to a metaphysical pitch not found in Buddhism. The problem of what we can do to practise faith if it is sheer gift is a practical issue, not a topic for complicated speculation on grace and free will. Ippen’s teaching that “No settledness is to be found in the hearts of foolish beings. Settledness is the Name” is aligned with the spirit of Shinran’s teaching; Keel sees here a shift from “faith, the subjective state of mind, to the objective givenness of salvation itself” (p. 116)—but the opposition may not be as marked as the Western theological contrast of subjective and objective suggests.

Luis GÓMEZ’s recent translations (1996) of both the Sanskrit and Chinese versions of the shorter and longer Pure Land sutras help to put this work on Shinran in perspective. Returning to them from Shinran, one finds oneself in a world far from the Bible or Luther, a world of Indian legend which is far more inaccessible to the modern Western imagination than the philosophical worlds of Vedānta or Zen. There are feelings, virtues, religious attitudes that one may savor and esteem, but the general imaginative context within which these emerge remains alien. As a passionate individual thinker Shinran seems less alien to us, but study of the scriptures which shaped his mind will dispel any illusion that we can easily put ourselves on his wavelength.

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