

REVIEWS

Dennis GIRA, *Le sens de la conversion dans l'enseignement de Shinran*. Paris: Éditions Maisonneuve et Larose (Collège de France, Bibliothèque de l'Institut des Hautes Études Japonaises), 1985. xx + 271 pp., including an index and glossary. Paperback.

"Thank you very much for writing this book for me." These words are far from original, but I want to make them my own and address them to Dennis Gira on this occasion, not only because they have a suitable "Shinranian" sound, but because they render my true feelings quite nicely. This book has, indeed, provided me with incisive and felicitous formulations for many questions central to Shin dogmatics, and in several cases also with plausible and satisfactory answers. Still more importantly it has brought home to me, in a way no other book has, the originality of Shinran's way of thinking, over against not only that of the "path of the sages" but equally that of all preceding Pure Land teachers.

This feeling of deep appreciation is accompanied, however, by deep regret concerning the great probability that many are going to miss this "grace," since few are going to expect such treasures from this book after reading its title, "The Meaning of Conversion in Shinran's Teaching," or having a quick look at the table of contents (the way most decisions about reading or not reading are made). Both of these project the image of a detailed exegesis of one cluster of ideas out of a wider doctrinal system.

Not that this first impression is wrong in itself. The book is everything it promises to be. It bears all the earmarks of a *maxima cum laude* doctoral dissertation, and may remind one most of a highly professional piece of biblical exegesis concerning, let us say, the idea of *kenosis* in St. Paul. But at the same time the author manages to offer us much more than he appears to promise. First of all, by his care not to use any technical term without explaining it for the benefit of the uninitiated reader, his copious notes come to constitute by themselves a kind of (non-exhaustive) dictionary of Pure Land teaching. Secondly, and more important, he leads us beyond the confines of the exegetical study of one (more or less) central concept to a confrontation with the core of Shinran's doctrine as a whole.

This broadening of scope undoubtedly makes the book so much more important and its reading so much more rewarding, but also accounts for what I must regretfully call its "split personality" flavor. Its proclaimed

theme, “conversion,” while paid adequate and even thoroughgoing attention, appears to be only a vehicle or “cover” for what it is really concerned with, “the unique contribution of Shinran’s doctrine to the development of Buddhist thought” (p. 3). This fact may elicit a few questions in the reader, and possibly sharpen his attention: Is the author’s factual progression from the idea of conversion to Shinran’s unicity a logically inescapable one, or is it brought about by extraneous factors? Does he consider conversion as *the* pivotal idea of Shin Buddhism or, at least, as the best gateway to approach its essence? May not the idea of conversion, on the contrary, be a deforming perspective on the whole of Shinran’s doctrine, as the author himself seems to suggest where he writes: “That Shinran does not offer us a very explicit doctrinal explanation of the meaning of conversion may be due to the fact that the term itself has a strong link with the notion of *jiriki* (own power)” (p. 209)?

Now that my petty reservations about the form of the book have been vented, we can revert to the deeper positive vein. More objectively this time, the book could be characterized as the second substantial study on Pure Land doctrine to appear in the French language; in other words, as a worthy successor—although with a completely different approach—to Henri de Lubac’s *Amida* (1955). It may be rather significant for the state of Pure Land studies in the West—and at the same time a trifle ironic—that the first book had to be written by a specialist in patristic theology and the second, thirty years later, by an American specialist in Buddhism.

Let us now come to the presentation of the book’s content. The *Preface* introduces the cult of Amida and preempts in a very plausible way two incredulous reactions to be expected from Western readers. How could Amida become such a central figure in the Buddhist pantheon, and how in the world could such a non-historical figure come to be relied on as savior by so many? The *Introduction* then introduces the person of Shinran and deplores the Western ignorance in his regard. The fact is that there is only one, good but short and undocumented, Western language treatment of Shinran’s doctrine as a whole, namely, Alfred Bloom’s *Shinran’s Gospel of Pure Grace* (1965).

The book itself then is divided into two parts, of which the first carries the title, *Analysis of Shinran’s Use of the Term Eshin* (“eshin” being the Japanese word for conversion). In the first section the author analyses the meaning of the term for Buddhism in general. He discovers here five shades of meaning: a first “turning of the mind” toward the Buddha’s path (or again, the moment of full commitment to Buddhism); conversion from Hīnayāna to Mahāyāna; conversion-repentance; conversion from reliance on one’s own powers to reliance on Other Power (*tariki*); and finally a very special

sense, the turning of all one's merits (*ekō*) towards a definite goal—enlightenment or birth in the Pure Land for oneself or for others.

The stage is thus set for Shinran's use or rejection of these elements. But on the way Gira has thrown in already a few bonuses: a short history of the growing importance of repentance in Buddhism and its tie-up with the idea of faith in the Jōdo school (pp. 39-42); an overview of the gradual turn towards reliance on Other Power in Buddhism—with the repeated restriction, however, that the "*jiriki* principle" is never completely abandoned before Shinran, even in the Jōdo school (pp. 48-59); an analysis of the different elements of the "transfer of merits" (*ekō*) idea and the problems they pose for Pure Land thinkers (pp. 73-76).

The second section of Part I corresponds most closely to the problem indicated in the title of the book. It studies successively fourteen passages wherein Shinran (and the *Tannishō*) uses the term "conversion"—four of which are quotations from older Pure Land texts. It appears here that Shinran's use of the term is not univocal. He sometimes adopts one or more of the meanings found in general Buddhist usage but, on the other hand, sometimes endows the word with a unique "true" meaning. In his conclusion, the author can distinguish three different usages of the term in Shinran: 1) In a sense opposed to that of true conversion (four passages); 2) In a sense compatible with the true meaning but not really expressing its true originality; 3) In a sense clearly going beyond the traditionally accepted ones. Here, the inner dispositions and practice, which the human ordinarily is supposed to contribute to his conversion himself, are now seen as bestowed by Amida to the sinful human, incapable of contributing anything to his salvation.

One might be forgiven for thinking that herewith the "meaning of conversion in Shinran's teaching" has been fully treated, and thus the end of the treatise has been reached. In fact, however, a second Part entitled "The Fundamental Meaning of the Experience of Conversion" follows. The author justifies this further treatment by pointing out that "unfortunately Shinran does not explain in a systematic way his doctrine on conversion. In order to arrive at a deeper understanding of his thought on the subject and of his originality, we must use other passages of his works which indicate more clearly how the experience man makes of the faith in Other Power, Amida's Power, is an experience totally different from the faith experience described in all the other schools of Buddhism—that of the earlier Pure Land schools included" (p. 122; cf. p. 209). It is on this point that the author most clearly reveals what he is really aiming at: the unique contribution of Shinran to Buddhism. As a result, from now on the term "conversion" in fact cedes its central place to other concepts, probably more intrinsically

central to Shinran's thought, namely, faith and *ekō* (Amida's grace).

In this second part Gira offers us a brilliant analysis of Shinran's view of the different doctrinal trends in Buddhism and of his own relationship to them—in other words, of Shinran's personal “doctrinal classification” (*kyō-sō hanjaku* 教相判釈), the so-called *nisō shujū* 二雙四重. Herein Shinran classifies all Buddhist doctrines in four categories according to their conception of the process of salvation (or enlightenment)—of which conversion is, at the least, the starting point. After a general consideration of this classification, Gira devotes a separate chapter to each of these four categories.

1. *Jushutsu* 堅出 : gradual transcendence (of the warped human condition) by one's own power.
2. *Juchō* 堅超 : sudden transcendence by one's own power.
3. *Ōshutsu* 横出 : gradual transcendence by Other Power.
4. *Ōchō* 横超 : sudden transcendence by Other Power.

In the first three chapters the author briefly examines how the moment of conversion fares in this view, but always comes to the same conclusion. Conversion is only a first step, after which prescribed practices must carry the process of salvation to its end (pp. 150-51; pp. 158-59; p. 171). We come then finally to *ōchō*, or “sideways leap,” which is Shinran's own position.

In this chapter the author succeeds, indeed, in presenting in a forceful and clear way all the elements which account for Shinran's originality (and which were all intimated already in Chapter II, section II). It is, in a word, his total elimination of the *jiriki* principle by a radical reinterpretation of *ekō*, this time as the transference by Amida of faith and praxis to the human. Since the whole process of salvation thus becomes exclusively Amida's doing, it is absolutely instantaneous, and all worry about a person's contribution becomes superfluous. “It is only with Shinran that the human's dependence on his/her own inner dispositions and *nenbutsu* praxis has been broken once and for all” (p. 180).

To bring out this essence of Shinran's message, the author has recourse to an analysis of further central passages in Shinran's writings (pp. 180-96), and a new look at the conversion (*ōchō*) texts, already studied in Part I, in the light of these passages.

Finally, in Chapter IV, the conclusions from all this for the moment of conversion are drawn. Conversion in the *ōchō* process of salvation, although phenomenologically not distinguishable from conversion in other Jōdo schools, is doctrinally radically different on two scores. First, in its origin: In the other schools “the moment of conversion depends on a faith, the origin of which lies in the human” (p. 213), while here “the essence of the moment of conversion is the Great Faith (of Amida) which manifests itself in the

human when he/she comes into contact with the Name of Amida" (p. 215). Second, in its effect: While in the other schools conversion is but the first of several steps in the process of salvation, here it concentrates everything in itself as instantaneous salvation. Since it is all Amida's work, the process of salvation is perfected from the beginning, and the moment of conversion is the moment of Birth.

In this way the author's path comes full circle. On the way, however, he has generously strewn this path with petals of insight on, for example, the exact role of repentance in Shinshū, Shinran's position toward the Buddha-nature theory, the "mediating role" of Hōzō Bosatsu, and so forth.

To end this review I have a few questions and a request. Since Gira's book is very much concerned with Shinran's doctrine as a whole and beautifully brings out its essence and originality, I want to recommend it warmly as a general introduction to Shinshū Buddhism—something the West stands badly in need of. Not surprisingly, however, since it was not written with this purpose in mind, the book does not offer a systematic treatment of the different chapters of Shin dogmatics. The question then becomes relevant as to which essential elements did not get sufficient treatment in the book. But, rather than trying to offer suggestions on this point, I would like to make an earnest plea to the author. Could he not, since he is evidently the man to do it, consider a "rewrite" of the book—with the necessary additions and maybe in English this time—in the form of a general introduction to Shin Buddhism? Buddhist studies in the West would then owe a still greater debt to him than it certainly does already.

My second question is very much connected with the first. Gira pursues in an admirable way the logic of Shinran's religious standpoint, which directs all attention toward Amida's work and away from that of the believer. But would he not agree that a full treatment of Shin Buddhism must, nevertheless, consider how this religion is lived by the believer; for example, how the believer really "comes into contact with the Name of Amida" (p. 215)—here the transmission of the Name in history, the role of the *zenchishiki* (善知識, "good teacher"), become important—, how his total rejection of *jiriki* expresses itself, and so on?

My last question is rather an expression of curiosity. How will this Western work on Shinran be accepted and judged by the Shinshū "theologians" in Japan? Would it contribute anything original, not to be found as such in the often tradition-bound theses of the Shin schools?

Finally, the printing of the book is exemplary (though not its binding). Misprints are few and far between; the diacritical marks get out of place only about twenty times (a rough estimate). Among the Chinese characters

I found only one mistake. On page 86, note 6, 縁 should read 縁 (four times).

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