



Melissa Anne-Marie Curley, *Pure Land, Real World: Modern Buddhism, Japanese Leftists, and the Utopian Imagination*

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MUCH TWENTIETH-CENTURY scholarship on Japanese Pure Land Buddhism in English styled it as a religion of resignation that gained traction with a wide swath of the Japanese masses for its promise of rebirth in a postmortem paradise. This was appealing to them because of its emphasis on recognition of one's own ignorance, the easy practice of chanting the name of Amida Buddha, and simple faith in that Buddha's vows to bring about one's ultimate

salvation. As Galen Amstutz pointed out at the end of that century, the picture painted in the scholarship presented Japanese Pure Land Buddhism as an intellectually unsophisticated tradition that fundamentally lacked anything compelling within it that would justify or require engagement by a contemporary audience.

In line with a number of studies that challenge this simplistic understanding of Pure Land Buddhism, particularly Shin (True Pure Land) Buddhism, Melissa Curley's *Pure Land, Real World* proves such stereotypes to be wrong on at least three different levels. First, she shows that in the earliest forms of the tradition—in the communities that grew up around Shinran (1173–1262) and his descendant Rennyo (1415–1499), as well as later—the sole orientation of the tradition was not just toward a postmortem paradise, but also included profound concerns over the creation of community in the real world of suffering, what Curley calls “conviviality,” and how the Shin teachings could serve as a foundation for that community. Second, by contrasting two contesting modern interpretations of the nature and location of the Pure Land by representatives of the Shin institution, she points out the possibility that the relegation of the significance of the Pure Land to the afterlife, which has generally been considered to have been the orthodox Shin stance for most of its history, is actually a modern phenomenon brought about by the Shin institutions' attempts to navigate and survive the process of the creation of a modern nation-state in the wake of the Meiji Restoration. Third, Curley shows that the figure of Shinran and the Shin Buddhist imaginary were in fact extremely compelling resources for three modern intellectuals with no direct connection to the Shin denominations: Kawakami Hajime (1879–1946), Miki Kiyoshi (1897–1945), and Ienaga Saburō (1913–2002), who drew upon them in their attempts to understand the relationship between the state and the individual, as well as their struggles to right that relationship in the face of the totalitarian encroachment of the state upon the individual in the 1930s and 1940s.

The work thus makes a major contribution to our understanding of the intellectual complexity and richness of the Pure Land tradition and also gives us great insight into the nature and breadth of the influence that Shinran's thought had in modern Japan, extending far beyond sectarian bounds and deep into the imaginations of a Marxist economist, philosopher, and one of the most influential historians of the postwar period. Clearly the product of sustained engagement with the source material and deep thought about the implications of what is to be found there in light of an extremely robust theoretical framework, Curley's work is carefully reasoned, masterfully written, and on the whole a joy to read. It is full of insights for those interested in modern Buddhism, Japanese intellectual history, religion and modernization, and the history of religion in Japan, as well as anyone who is sincerely concerned with the question of how an individual

ought to relate to the violence and oppression inherent within the structure of the modern nation-state. It is also one extremely important step in correcting the problems AMSTUTZ points out in his *Interpreting Amida* (1997), because it shows some elements of the complexity of the Shin tradition and its far-reaching influence in Japanese society.

I do, however, have one major concern with the work as a whole, especially with Curley's presentation in the first two chapters of the book, where she deals with the concept of the Pure Land in the history of the Shin denominations through the first half of the twentieth century: I fear that the focus in the second part of the work on the relationship between the state and the individual in the thought of Kawakami, Miki, and Ienaga, has led Curley to anachronistically project certain categories and concerns on historical actors such as Hōnen, Shinran, and Rennyo, that not only did not motivate them, but that they perhaps never would have conceived of. For instance, pointing to Hōnen's stress on the salvific power of the *nenbutsu* regardless of one's upholding of Buddhist precepts or taboos related to defilement, Curley argues that the Pure Land functions "as a site within which the law is suspended" (25) and states, "Through undermining the rules that govern the real, Hōnen's Pure Land negates the real world" and serves "as a principle of social criticism" (26). Although Hōnen's teaching about Buddhist practice clearly challenged certain social norms and ideas about who was able to achieve the ultimate goal of Buddhahood current in his day, there is nowhere in his writings where he describes the Pure Land as a principle of social criticism or criticizes (let alone "negates") the code of laws that the state used to govern at the time. Also, it would be impossible to find any evidence of him arguing that the egalitarian community that grew up around him was actually a representation of the Pure Land. Later thinkers have made that argument, but to say that Hōnen did is clearly an unwarranted projection that misrepresents the role the Pure Land played in his soteriology.

The author's emphasis on the importance of Shinran's exile also seems to be an instance of projection, but clearly the most problematic anachronism in the book relates to the treatment of "the theory of the two truths" (*shinzoku nitai ron*), which Curley uses as an analytical category to discuss the implications of the thought of virtually all the thinkers presented in the book. Although the language of "true" and "conventional," or "mundane," truth has deep roots in the history of Buddhism that can be traced to Mahayana thinkers in India, the application of those categories to the idea of the separation between the "Buddha's law" and the "Imperial law" presented by Rennyo (and before him Zonkaku [1290–1373]) is in fact an invention of Shin scholar priests of the Edo period. This Edo-period choice actually imbues an entirely different significance into these two categories that they had never held up to that point, so the discussion of them in the context of Rennyo and Zonkaku (32) is entirely out of place. Given

the important role that this concept plays in so much of her analysis throughout the book, it is extremely unfortunate that she makes no mention of the history of the development of the concept and also does not provide a clear definition of it which rightly reflects the complexity of that history.

As I wrote above, aside from this slightly distorted interpretive lens and a few minor errors about the nuts and bolts of Pure Land doctrine (such as the misrepresentation of Shinran's system for classifying the Buddhist teachings [26] and the attribution of a passage by Shandao [613–681] to Kōsai [1163–1247] [31–32]), Curley's work makes an excellent contribution to the field.

REFERENCE

AMSTUTZ, Galen
1997 *Interpreting Amida*. Albany: SUNY Press.

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