

VIEWS & REVIEWS

Shinran's Way in Modern Society

ALFRED BLOOM

Introduction

IT IS A common practice when discussing the significance of a religious or philosophical system to put it in the context of the times and spend most of the period discussing contemporary problems rather than the nature of the teaching which will resolve those issues. It is as though we went to the doctor and got a diagnosis and then thought we were cured. We will not analyse the contemporary situation in detail except where it is immediately relevant to consider a point in Shinran's teaching.

We are all aware of the variety of problems that confront the modern world from even the most casual reading of the newspaper. When all the problems are reduced to their most fundamental character, they focus upon the problem of the ego. A recent work exploring the meaning of Shinran's teaching for the contemporary world states:

What is the cause of this modern dilemma? Can we blame science which is at the base of technological advances? The answer is no, because science in itself is neither good nor evil. The problem lies in the manner in which we utilize the results of scientific research; it is man, and not science, who ultimately decides on how scientific knowledge shall be used. Thus, the responsibility for the dark aspect of modern civilization rests with man himself.¹

According to this text, modern people have become alienated and dehumanized as a result of the very freedom they sought in the assertion of ego that emerged from the Renaissance, Reformation and other modern western developments in philosophy and politics. Egoism, whether of individuals or

¹ Nishi Hongwanji Commission on the Promotion of Religious Education, *Shinran in the Contemporary World* (Kyoto; Jodo Shinshu Nishi Hongwanji, 1974), p. 6.

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nations and groups, is the fundamental issue of our time. However, it is easy to look out at the world and see the problems, but not recognize that they lie within each of us.

Before taking up Shinran's thought directly, we should make some observations concerning Buddhism and religion in general. Although we assume that religion can help us solve our problems, we must recognize frankly and honestly that religion is also the cause of some problems.

As a result of the complicity of religion and political authorities throughout history and in the modern world, religion itself has become a problem. Freedom from despotism has frequently required refuting the religious views of society. In Europe political oppression was carried out on the basis of "the divine right of kings." In Japan there have been similar tendencies and problems leading to disaster. Further, religion has frequently resisted the progress of modern knowledge and has given rise to the conflict of science and religion. Religious sectarianism has produced wars as in Ireland, Palestine, Philippines, sometimes in India, and in pre-modern Europe. Even in Japan during the ancient and medieval periods there was petty strife between temples seeking their own privilege. Persecution, bigotry, dogmatism and hatred have often been the marks of religion from ancient to modern times in every culture and nation. We must understand that there is religion which cloaks egoism or masks it with high sounding terms, and there is religion which penetrates the deceptions of the ego and liberates everyone for a fuller life.

We should also point out that for people everywhere religion has become a spiritual problem, because they confuse matters of formality and ceremony with the true essence of religion as life and a way of living. Religious traditions are highly conservative. The problem of tradition is well illustrated by the story of a man from Ch'u in ancient China who dropped his sword in the river. In order to be able to find it again, he marked the edge of the boat where it fell, never realizing that the boat itself was moving in the current.

We must also recognize that religion has become a personal problem with the collapse of traditional social structures that enforced obligatory religious participation. A person can now choose his own religion. However, individuals are now more at a loss to discover meaningful insight in the face of the enormous diversity of religious viewpoints that circulate in our time. They may become fanatic, or indifferent. The spread of some movements indicates a yearning on the part of individuals for meaning, but also a gullibility to believe anything soothing. We are living in an age described by the Japanese proverb: *Iwashi no atama mo, shinjin kara*—"Even a sardine's head can be an object of worship."

Further, secularization in all areas of society is pushing religion to the fringes of life. It has become an occasional event or is relevant only in crisis. It is resorted to only when all else fails. Religion appears to mark the dead ends of

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life, or it is like an aspirin to cover over symptoms, but not to provide fundamental cure. In many cases, Buddhism has suffered from such views of religion, and its real potential to contribute creatively to modern issues has been obscured.

Despite its many problems, Buddhism, among the many competing world philosophies, is relevant to our age because it focuses primarily on the problem of the ego that afflicts humanity. The Buddhist concepts of Delusion, Non-soul, and Voidness have great importance in breaking through prejudices, preconceptions, dogmatisms and egoism. There are many aspects to Buddhism, but it is important to concentrate upon the more reformist and dynamic features of Buddhism as a living spiritual experience.

We are all familiar with the fact that Gautama rejected the comfortable ways of life in his aristocratic society in order to seek enlightenment. The enlightenment he attained enabled him to see deeply into the self-deceptions people nurture in making their lives secure and stable. Buddhism is a reforming and iconoclastic, truth-seeking approach to life. Buddha challenged the pursuits of permanence, pleasure and possessions as the means to security and meaning in life. He faced egoism realistically and uncovered the false consciousness which makes us seek our own benefit even at the expense of others. In modern terms, we might say Buddhism was a "consciousness-raising" effort—enabling people to become aware of their true natures to such a degree that they would be liberated from the domination of passion and egoism.

In Mahayana Buddhism, as it later developed, the doctrine of Voidness carried forward this same task of breaking through the superficialities of our perceptions and graspings by rejecting the belief that our minds could comprehend any true absolute. All our experience is limited and relative to our own egos. When we are blind to this fact, we engage in competitions and conflicts in order to secure our own desire.

In the teaching of Voidness, Buddhism has a self-renewing principle which enables it to bring new insights and fresh experiences to play in the modern world, since it is freed from bondage to the past. Buddhism teaches, through the concept of Voidness, that nothing, however absolute it may appear, can, or should, stand in the way to deeper enlightenment. Nothing that we conceive or establish in thought or organization can replace or exhaust true enlightenment. Religion, theology and institutions are only a means to the greater end of enlightenment and truth. Buddhism embodies a spirit of self criticism and reform which must be given application in our own time. Buddhist iconoclasm comes most clearly in the symbol of the sword of wisdom seen throughout the tradition, and is given most profound expression in the words of the Chinese Zen master Lin-chi (J., Rinzai). He declared Buddhist emancipation from all limiting structures:

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Seekers of the Way, if you want to achieve the understanding according to the Law, don't be deceived by others and turn to [your thoughts] internally or [objects] externally. Kill anything that you happen on. Kill the Buddha if you happen to meet him. . . . Kill your parents or relatives if you happen to meet them. Only then can you be free . . . and at ease. . . . I merely put on clothing and eat meals as usual and pass my time without doing anything. You people coming from the various directions have all made up your minds to seek the Buddha, seek the Law. . . . Crazy people! . . . 'Buddha' and 'Patriarchs' are *terms of praise and also bondage*. Do you want to know where the Three Worlds are? They are right in your mind which is now listening to the Law.²

The critical temperament which will not allow structures, distinctions, concepts, or theory to obstruct the deeper inner reality of experience was also present in Shinran. He declared that the Original Vow made no distinctions such as humans employ in organizing their lives, societies and religions. He declared in the *Kyōgyōshinhō*:

As I contemplate the ocean-like Great Faith, I see that it does not choose between the noble and the mean, the priest and the layman, nor does it discriminate between man and woman, old and young. The amount of sin is not questioned, and the length of practice is not discussed. It is neither 'practice' nor 'good', neither 'abrupt' nor 'gradual', neither 'meditative' nor 'non-meditative', neither 'right meditation' nor 'wrong meditation', neither '[ideational]' nor '[non-ideational]', neither 'while living' nor 'at the end of life', neither 'many utterances' nor 'one thought'. Faith is none other than the inconceivable, indescribable, and ineffable Serene Faith. It is like the *agada* which destroys all poisons. The medicine of the Tathagata's Vow destroys the *poisons of wisdom and ignorance*.³

The bondage of patriarchs and Buddhas in Lin-chi and the poisons of wisdom and ignorance pointed to by Shinran suggest that all aspects of religion must be scrutinized to prevent liberation from becoming a form of enslavement. From these suggestions we understand that Buddhism is not a belief, a system, or an institution. It is a continual process of growth in life which comes about

² Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton University Press, 1963), pp. 447-448. Italics added.

³ *The Kyō Gyō Shin Shō*, Ryūkoku Translation Series v (Kyoto; Ryūkoku University, 1966), pp. 113-114 (hereafter cited as RTS). Italics added.

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as we keep ourselves open to discover further and deeper truths and as we subject our "truths" to the brilliant light of the wisdom of Voidness.

We have already called attention to the fact that Buddhism, throughout its long history, has been most concerned with the problem of egoism and how it may infect all activity, thought, and even religion. Shinran, as an heir of Buddhist teaching, also focused upon this problem and even more intensely as *his own problem*. Consequently, Shinran's experience and teaching is directly relevant to our contemporary situation in society and religion. A major interest today centers around understanding how the ego functions and how to gain liberation from its bondage. There are mind control systems, human potential programs, behavior modification theories, sensitivity approaches, psychiatric analysis, and studies of consciousness. Interest in Oriental traditions which also take up the problem of ego has been strong because of these developments. While the ancient Hindu traditions primarily seek to demonstrate the relation of our limited egos to the ultimate reality of *Brahman*, Buddhism concentrates on the process of the ego and the worlds it constructs for its own advantage. It is at this point that Shinran's perception of the ineradicable egoism that distorts our every activity, however idealistic it may appear to be, is extremely pertinent.

Shinran is also important because he was an existentialist who faced the concrete realities of his life and struggled with his own destiny. In the deepest sense Shinran reveals himself in his writings as a true personality. His teachings mirror his own struggle to gain emancipation from the bondage of egoism after long years of fruitless monastic discipline. His many confessions of imperfection and evil are among the most keen and real in all religious literature.

Shinran was a therapist in assisting people on the basis of his own experience to become liberated from fear and anxiety or despair concerning their lives and destiny. He was a true teacher, because he could identify with his students and share his life and experience with them.

We may also note that a major issue of our time is interest in the occult and authoritarian religion. Shinran negates the need for magic and occult by proclaiming the all-embracing and all-sufficient compassion of Amida Buddha for whom no good surpasses and no evil can hinder. Magic is a reflection of fear and anxiety; an attempt to impose our egoistic wills on reality. When we see the true foundation of our lives in the compassion of Buddha, there is no more anxiety and no need to impose our will. Shinran also developed a non-authoritarian religion. He shares truth but does not impose it; he exhorts and encourages, but he does not coerce or condemn. While Shinran did not face problems identical with ours in modern society, he offers a perspective which can assist us in the discovery of solutions by bringing a deeper sense of compassion and self-understanding into all areas of human activity and relationships.

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There are two other points of importance in establishing the perspective of this study. One concerns the otherworldly nature of Pure Land teaching, and the other is the problem of the meaning of life in modern society.

Pure Land teaching is widely considered to be an otherworldly teaching directed to life after death. Consequently, it appears to have little relevance to affairs of this life. While evidence for this view can be seen in the historical development of Pure Land tradition, it is rather incomplete as a basis for judging Pure Land teaching. Without going into great detail, we should note that in China the teaching was severely criticised by Confucianists who misperceived the attitude which Pure Land teaching held toward life in the world of suffering. There is a social awareness built into Pure Land doctrine in its offer of salvation and purity in the other world. More important is the teaching of the *Sutra of Eternal Life* itself which exhorts people to fulfill virtue in this life:

Cultivate widely the field of virtue in this world! Share a warm heart with others, give alms, and do not break the ways of life! Know forbearance, spare no effort, and with one mind and wisdom teach each other! Cultivate virtue, do good, and with right mind and will keep your own self clean and pure for a full day and night. This will be superior to practicing good for a hundred years in the Country of the Buddha of Eternal Life.⁴

Rather than otherworldliness being advocated, ethical social life in this world is commended over life in another world. As the text goes on to point out, it is no problem to do good in other worlds where the environment is just right. It all comes naturally. In this world where evil reigns, it is a challenge to pursue the good. Throughout Shinran's writings there are also numerous references to ethical action as an integral part of religious life. According to Shinran, Faith and recitation of Nembutsu transform the person and create deeper relations with one's fellows:

Signs of long years of saying the nembutsu and aspiring for birth can be seen in the change in the heart which had been bad and in the deep warmth for friends and fellow-practicers; this is the sign of rejecting the world.⁵

That Shinran did not consider the end of religion merely salvation to live in another world is observable in his emphasis on *Gensō*, the aspect of Bodhisat-

⁴ Kosho Yamamoto, *Shinshū Sriten* (Honolulu; Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii, 1955), p. 65.

⁵ *Matsushō* xxx, from *Letters of Shinran*, Shin Buddhism Translation Series 1, 1 (Kyoto; Hongwanji International Center, 1978), p. 58.

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tva's return to this world to work for the salvation of all beings. Shinran, as well as other Pure Land teachers, had in view the welfare of people in this world as well as the next.

Finally, there is the problem of the meaning of life in modern society as it relates to our present discussion. In the upheavals of modern life, individuals have been driven to question the value of their personal existence. It is peculiarly a problem for western societies, and it is also a modern problem which did not exist in this form in earlier societies, east or west. The meaning of life has become an issue with the discovery of the individual as a real element of the world, capable of independent action. Earlier societies were communal and tribal. No independent, personal decisions could be allowed to threaten the existence of the group. In western tradition, the group became the Church, and the goal was the kingdom of God. Each person was to play his role in bringing about its realization in the process of history. Hence, according to western thinkers, history had a meaning as it was directed by God toward the fulfillment of his purposes.

Protestantism individualized the role of the person in assisting the fulfillment of God's will. According to this interpretation, each individual can find God's plan for his life, and thereby perceive its meaning within the totality of God's plan for history. In its own way it was a grand affirmation of the importance and value of each person.

However, the succession of wars and destruction, and the futility of individualism in modern times has led to a breakdown in confidence in this theory of meaning. Thus the question has arisen: what is the meaning of life? It becomes more poignant when history has no meaning and the individual is cut off from sources of direction and assurance.

In this context the Oriental teachings of Hinduism, Taoism, and Buddhism have had great attraction for contemporary people. Rather than a historical meaning of life, they offer an ontological meaning. Ontological meaning of life stresses that all potentiality and value lie within ourselves, though it may be covered by ignorance and delusion. When we enter into the depth of the mystery of our own beings and the world we have constructed from it, we contact the very root of reality that energizes all life. In Buddhism this means to realize our Buddha natures, and in Shinran's teaching it is interpreted as the awareness of the two types of deep faith: the awareness of our fundamental imperfection and the awareness of the illuminating vision of Amida's compassion which embraces us without regard to our imperfections. It is also *jinmō hōni*, the naturalness of life, which is perceived beyond or within all the conditions of life.

In essence, Buddhism turns our attention to the inner nature of our lives. It does not look to the process of history for justification and meaning. It does not deny the present for an imagined future. Rather, it means to develop a

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sensitivity to all that is around us for the direction our experiences offer. It means to be open to others, to work with them, to share with them. Finally, it means not so much to ask: what is the meaning of *my* life? But rather to ask: *How meaningful am I to others?* In contributing to the building up of others, we attain our own stature.

We have been thinking theoretically and generally about Buddhism and Shinran. We wish now to concentrate on Shinran as a model for our age. Our youth lack attractive and commanding models who exhibit in their lives the qualities and character that radiate meaning. Although Shinran did not attempt to display his own character for all to see, we do catch glimpses of his personality in his writings and the reflections of his disciples.

Shinran as a model for our time

The life of Shinran provides a clue to the way in which a person can approach his life. Victor Frankl in his book *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston, 1959), points out that, as a result of his experience in the German concentration camps, the one freedom left to a person is the ability to determine one's attitude to existence even when one is left without a shred of hope. The struggle to retain one's humanity in the face of the negation of humanity is the key to the meaning of existence. It is from this perspective that we wish to look at the life of Shinran as a guide for our own lives.

It is important to look at the life of a teacher, as well as his teaching, because more than the abstract word, it is example that moves people. The massive depersonalization of modern life tends to highlight the strength of extraordinary personalities who transcended their environments to chart new directions for the human spirit. We can see this easily in political personalities and the great followings they command. For good or ill, this is the age of the personality cult in which people try to discover a focal point for their lives. Consequently, any claims for the validity and significance of a teaching must be able to point to its realization in the life of persons.

Shinran's life has many affinities with our own time. He lived in an age of social turmoil and upheaval. There were natural disasters and wars, as well as religious corruption throughout the Kamakura era (1185-1333). Like many of his contemporaries, Shinran became deeply concerned about his own destiny—or in modern terms, the meaning of life. His dissatisfaction with life and with himself became more intense and eventually led him on a desperate search to solve his problem. During this period, Hōnen, Dōgen, and Nichiren had also passed through times of profound spiritual search.

In Shinran's case, he had been made the ward of a monastery and later became a monk on Mount Hiei. Although he participated in serious religious

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discipline for twenty years, he could not attain assurance of his own spiritual liberation. Rather, he became more keenly aware of his passionate nature. Finally, he concluded that monastic regulations and spiritual discipline were not suitable for him or the time in which he lived. Looking back over his life in later years, he declared:

The reason is that, if I could become Buddha by performing some other practice and fell into hell by uttering the Nembutsu, then, I might feel regret at having been deceived. But since I am incapable of any practice whatsoever, hell would definitely be my dwelling anyway.⁶

More poignantly he says of himself:

Even though I take refuge in the Pure Land as the True Teaching,
It is difficult to have a mind of truth.
I am false and untrue,
And without the least purity of mind.

We men in our outward forms
Display wisdom, goodness, and purity.
Since greed, anger, evil, and deceit are frequent,
We are filled with naught but flattery.

With our evil natures hard to subdue,
Our minds are like asps and scorpions.
As the practice of virtue is mixed poison,
We call it false, vain practice.⁷

As a consequence of his deep spiritual dissatisfaction and search, Shinran joined the hermitage led by Hōnen. He discovered his spiritual release there which he noted in the latter volume of the *Kyōgyōshishū*. With persecution and banishment, Shinran found himself in Echigo in a difficult and cold climate where he had to live like a peasant without the privileges of a monk. He married and began to raise a family. The experience of family life deeply influenced his thought about the life of lay people and the reality of Amida's compassion.

After his exile was over in 1211, Shinran settled in Eastern Japan (Kantō) where he began quietly to teach the Pure Land way. Never again did he meet his master Hōnen, nor apparently other companions from that time of study. Responding to the conditions of his new life, he probed more deeply into his faith in an effort to help the peasants and samurai he met. These efforts and their reflections in his writings indicate that he had personal qualities that

⁶ *The Tanni Shō*, RTS II (Kyoto, 1966), p. 20.

⁷ *Shinshū Shōgyō Zenshū* II (Kyoto; Kōkyō Shoin, 1957), p. 527 (hereafter cited as SSZ).

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promote and enhance life. He became for his followers a virtual manifestation of Amida's compassion in action. Consequently, though he is a figure of the distant past, having recently celebrated the 800th anniversary of his birth and the 750th anniversary of the establishment of his doctrine, he witnesses to us of a faith in life and truth which we need today.

We do not wish to over-idealize or modernize an ancient, historical person. As we draw new insights from his life and teachings, we must understand that the implications or possibilities were there from the beginning, though Shinran himself was not directly aware of our problems.

A singular feature of Shinran's experience of exile from Kyōto and his later teaching career was his marriage. Of course, it is known that other monks had concubines or even wives in contradiction to the discipline they professed. Shinran differed from them because he instituted this as the way of life for the leaders of his community, making it the consequence of his teaching rather than a contradiction to it.

Shinran married a young woman, Eshinni, and by her had several children. This act symbolised his identification with the full range of human emotions and problems. Some have criticised his act as a negative capitulation to the power of passion, based as it was on the doctrine of Mappō where, with the decline of Buddhism in history, human defilement increases. Nevertheless, whatever the doctrinal background of the relationship might be, it does not undermine its importance in the reconciliation of people with themselves and their world. Through Shinran's involvement in married life and the social responsibility attending it, the way was opened for the ordinary person to participate in, and have full assurance about, his own spiritual enlightenment despite his worldly involvements. For Shinran, as his letters show, the true renunciation of the world was to live compassionately *in the world*, not to reject or leave it.

The conversation between Yuiembō and Shinran concerning Yuiembō's lack of desire to go to the Pure Land has great importance in observing Shinran's relation to individuals and for an understanding of his approach to alienation. After Yuiembō relates his sad complaint and doubt about his faith, Shinran responds tenderly, "Even I, Shinran, once had this doubt."⁸ In the *Kyōgyōshinshū* Shinran records his own lament:

I know truly how sad it is that I, Gutoku Shinran, am drowned in the broad sea of lust and wander confusedly in the great mountains of fame. I do not rejoice that I have entered the company of the truly assured; I do not enjoy (the fact) that I am approaching the realization of the true attainment. O how shameful, how pitiful!⁹

⁸ *Tanishō* ix.

⁹ SSZ II, p. 80 (author's translation).

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It is important to note here how Shinran identified with his disciple's problem. He did not stand above him as a sainted master. He acknowledged the reality and seriousness of the issue. However, he also got Yuiembō to look beyond his problem to something deeper hidden in it. He helped Yuiembō to accept himself and to realize that his very awareness of his own evil was the witness to Amida's compassion.

In a sensitive way Shinran tells us that alienation is not overcome by ignoring or rejecting it, but by accepting it. The modern psychiatric method holds that mental illness is remedied only when brought to consciousness and accepted for what it is. Repression never cures, but merely shifts the mode of expression. In human relations, the only way to solve problems is by accepting them as real and accepting the person for what he is.

This touching incident is related to another problem confronting Shinran and his early community. He had to face factionalism and differences of opinion in his own group. When he was called upon by some disciples to reject those whose opinions differed from them, Shinran refused to take the authoritarian position of the teacher and demand that others follow him or be excluded. He maintained: "I have not even one disciple." He recognized deeply the compassion of Amida in bringing people together. Such community was ultimately not the property or monopoly of one person. Amida created faith, not the teacher. He explained:

The reason is, if I should lead others to utter the Nembutsu by my own efforts, I might call them disciples. But it is truly ridiculous to call them my disciples, when they utter the Nembutsu through the working of Amida Buddha.¹⁰

Shinran's identification with his followers and his refusal to stand over them as an authority points the way to the solution of many problems of personal and even social conflicts in our contemporary society. A major aspect of any problem is the issue of authority and the power it wields. Power over another person creates a distrust and a separation which make dilemmas even more difficult to solve.

Shinran's tragic disowning of his eldest son also reveals much about his character. Apparently, Zenran attempted to assume control of the fellowship by claiming he had special teachings from Shinran. This situation naturally raised questions in the minds of the disciples about Shinran's fairness and honesty. When the problem became clear to Shinran, he took decisive, though painful, measures in disowning his son and maintaining his sincerity toward his disciples.

¹⁰ *The Tsurezuregusa* vi, RTS II, p. 28.

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Many problems arose in the early Shinshu community which had necessitated sending Zenran as an emissary to deal with the issues. Shinran's letters give much information on the disputes that arose, particularly on those radical interpretations of his teaching that because Amida saves without consideration of how sinful one might be, it is alright to sin or do evil intentionally. Shinran had to deal firmly and considerately with these questions. He shows himself to be of an open mind, but also firm in stating his own position.

Interspersed throughout Shinran's letters, we can see that his relations to his disciples were warm, affectionate and sympathetic. He gave kindly counsel. They consulted and asked for direction. He never forced himself upon them; never condemned or coerced them. Some made trips to be by his side, some even wished to die there; such was their intense devotion to him.

Pure Land teaching had frequently experienced persecution and restriction by political authorities. While Shinran saw these conditions as fulfillment of the prophecies of Buddha, he cautioned his disciples not to provoke or give any reason for the authorities to interfere with their teaching and faith. He was, however, aware of abuses of power. He could register his disapproval of government action:

Lords and vassals who opposed the Law and justice bore indignation and resentment (to the Nembutsu teaching). Thus Master Genkū, the great promulgator of the True Teaching, and his disciples were, without proper investigation of their crime, indiscriminately sentenced to death, deprived of their priesthood and exiled under criminals' names. I was one of them.¹¹

Shinran not only could be critical of political action, but also of the traditional culture in which he stood. The exclusive commitment and faith he had in Amida Buddha rendered all other spiritual allegiances unnecessary. Shinran unequivocally rejected Japanese folk religion and its magical beliefs. Thus he wrote in the *Kyōgyōshinshō*:

By discerning the true and false teachings based on the sutras, I shall caution people against perverted and wrong views of non-Buddhist teachings.

The [*Nirvana Sutra*] says: 'Once you have taken refuge in the Buddha, you should never turn to other gods for refuge.'

The [*Pratyutpanna-samādhi Sutra*] says: 'If, O Upāsaka, you bear of this Samādhi and want to attain it, . . . you should take refuge in the Buddha, take refuge in the Dharma, and take refuge in the Sangha. You should not follow other paths, should not worship the

¹¹ *The Kyō Gyō Shin Shō*, RTS v, p. 206.

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gods in heaven, should not enshrine spirits, and should not weigh lucky or unlucky days.¹²

For Shinran, Buddhism was superior to secular institutions, powers and customs. Though he counseled respect for the state and society, he approvingly quoted the *Sutra of Bodhisattva Precepts* to show that Buddhism was not to be subservient to society. It states: "The monk does not revere the king, or parents, nor serve the six near relations, nor worship the spirits."¹³

When we assemble various hints throughout Shinran's writings, we can discover the outline of a person who was deeply concerned with the meaning and end of human existence in its most universal scope. He was critical of a system of politics and religion which claimed to provide meaning, but actually obscured it through injustice and by cultivating fear and anxiety. Shinran was committed by his own experience to seek a new way. He was not negative in rejecting the traditional path, but constructive and creative in his thoroughgoing reinterpretation of Pure Land doctrine. He was an existentialist in the truest modern sense, because he did not settle for fine theories and high abstractions. Rather, he permitted his doctrine to arise from his experience of life. Consequently, he introduced new perspectives on religious existence to make real the compassion he saw at the heart of reality. He demonstrated throughout his relation with his disciples the virtues of concern, commitment, constructiveness and compassion. These are qualities which all of us must embody if any of our contemporary problems and issues are to be resolved. There can be no true meaning in life beyond the fulfillment of these qualities.

Sometime ago in Japan there was an interesting controversy surrounding a statement by a government official that Japan must not rely on "other power" in dealing with her affairs, but must be self-powered. The implication was that other power represented weakness and ineffectiveness or otherworldliness. Of course, there is much in Japanese tradition and in other traditions that would support this criticism. We hear all the time that religion is just a crutch which usually means something exterior to life and useless.

However, when we observe Shinran, his life, his personality and his teachings, we see that he was a person of strength; that he could withstand the pressures and oppression of his time and retain his dignity and humanity. Shinran never gave up in despair nor became cynical when those he dealt with were even to disappoint him. Shinran was mild, but not weak; he was not self-assertive but also not ineffective. Shinran was a true person at one with himself and also a person for others. He lived a long time ago, but his qualities are timeless, making him a fitting model for our time.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 204.

¹³ *Kyōgyōshinhō*, SSZ II, pp. 191-192 (author's translation).