

On the Absence of Buddhist Ethics: An Examination of Interwar Shin Writings on the Two Truths

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DISCUSSIONS of social ethics by Shin 真 Buddhists during the modern period were dominated by the doctrine of the “absolute and conventional two truths” (*shinzoku nitai* 真俗二諦). According to the interpretation put forward by modern Shin sect authorities, “absolute truth” (Skt. *paramārthasatya*; Jp. *shintai* 真諦) referred to the Buddha’s teachings while “conventional truth” (Skt. *saṃvṛtisatya*; Jp. *zokutai* 俗諦) referred to secular law and morality. As discussed below, the unorthodox analysis of the two truths by Kiyozawa Manshi 清沢満之 (1863–1903) has been seen by many scholars as a critical step toward casting off the dominant ethics of subservience to the state and establishing an autonomous Buddhist ethics. Historically, however, this is not how Shin thought developed after Kiyozawa. The members of Kiyozawa’s Seishinshugi 精神主義 movement did not go on to develop social or political views significantly at odds with the state or with mainstream society.¹ To the contrary, in response to such events as the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905, the Great Treason Incident (*Taigyaku jiken* 大逆事件) of 1911, and the death of the Meiji 明治 Emperor in 1912, Seishinshugi figures echoed popular opinion in their statements of war support and loyalty to the emperor.² When the period of war mobilization arrived in the 1930s and 1940s, Seishinshugi figures led in the production of “imperial-way Buddhism” (*kōdō bukkyō* 皇道仏教), advancing the view that Shin thought and imperialist ideology were in harmony.

Yoshida Kyūichi attributes this trend in part to the failure of Kiyozawa’s followers to uphold their teacher’s stance on the two truths: “The Seishinshugi movement was unmatched in its exaltation of absolute truth. Yet after Manshi, it unexpectedly produced labored explanations of conventional truth, advancing arguments that can only

¹ Seishinshugi has been variously translated into English as “Spiritualism,” “Spirit-ism,” “Spiritual Activism,” “Spiritual Awareness,” or “Cultivating Spirituality.” For a review of recent studies of the movement, see Ōmi 2014.

² Kondō 2013.

be understood as a total degeneration of conventional truth.”³ Through a close reading of interwar writings on the two truths by Sasaki Gesshō 佐々木月樵 (1875–1926) and Kaneko Daiei 金子大栄 (1881–1976), this paper will investigate how two of Kiyozawa’s most esteemed followers diverged from or developed Kiyozawa’s interpretation of the two truths, and more broadly, why they failed to develop a robust social ethics capable of critiquing the state.

Ōtani Orthodoxy

According to the traditional Mādhyamika interpretation, absolute truth and conventional truth relate to reality as understood by enlightened and unenlightened beings respectively. An enlightened being perceives the absolute truth that all things are empty of intrinsic, independent existence while unenlightened beings perceive only the surface reality of a world of distinct, separately existing entities. That surface reality is true in a conventional sense—it does reflect an aspect of experience and must be invoked in communications with others. However, problems arise when conventional truths are taken to be absolute.

In early modern Japan, the two truths doctrine was taken out of its original context and applied to the political realm. In a work dated to the Bunka 文化 (1804–1818) or Bunsei 文政 (1818–1830) period, Nishi Honganji 西本願寺 Shin priest Jōsei-in Shōkai 乘誓院性海 (1765–1838) described the two truths as pertaining to obedience to the state, arguing that for Shin Buddhists, who do not observe traditional Buddhist precepts, secular laws and regulations replaced those precepts in governing their actions. Facing critiques of Buddhism by Shinto Nativist (*kokugaku* 国学) scholars, as well as a financial crisis and a weakening of institutional control over sect members, Shōkai and others after him advanced this new doctrinal interpretation in order to demonstrate stronger allegiance to the shogunate and to better unify the Shin community.⁴ This new interpretation of the two truths was bolstered through a connection to the teachings of Rennyo 蓮如 (1415–1499) on the need to follow the “king’s law” (*ōbō* 王法) alongside Buddha’s law (*buppō* 仏法). Absolute truth was associated with Buddha’s law and conventional truth with the king’s law, and the two truths doctrine was interpreted to mean that Buddhist teachings and secular law are separate but mutually beneficial truths.

³ Yoshida 1986, p. 184.

⁴ Iwata 2010. Nishi Honganji’s financial crisis and weakened institutional authority were partly a result of the *sangō wakuran* 三業惑乱 doctrinal dispute (1797–1806). This dispute, initiated by provincial priests’ objections to the interpretations of scholars at the organization’s seminary, involved the banning of books, imprisonment of sect members, large-scale protests, violent confrontations, and a trial in Edo 江戸 that led to exile and other harsh punishments for those on both sides of the conflict. See Shimazu 2004.

Such innovations were incorporated into the official orthodoxies of both the Honganji and the Ōtani 大谷 denominations. In his final testament of 1871, Honganji Chief Abbot Kōnyo 広如 (1798–1871) defined the two truths as “to be loyal to the emperor and the state, responding in kind to the unlimited debt we owe to the court, and to achieve birth in the Western Land in the next life where you become someone who will escape suffering forever.”⁵ Similarly, Ōtani Chief Abbot Ōtani Kōshō 大谷光勝 (1817–1894) issued a statement in 1875 declaring, “The Shin Buddhist school establishes teachings pertaining to the absolute and the conventional. It is a religion of the mutual dependence of the two truths, upholding heavenly principles and following human morals while also looking forward to the attainment of liberation in the next world.”⁶ Article 19 of the 1886 Ōtani sect constitution defined the two truths in more detail:

This sect’s essential teaching is the sectarian principle of wholehearted exclusive calling [upon Amida 阿弥陀 Buddha]. Without calling upon the miscellaneous *kami* and Buddhas and without engaging in other practices or good deeds, by single-mindedly entrusting in the one Buddha of Amida Nyorai 如来, one obtains a peaceful mind concerning birth in the Pure Land. When this one moment of calling [upon Amida] arises, the cause of rebirth is completed, so after that, recitation of the Name and calling upon the Buddha are carried out as acts of gratitude. This is the gate of absolute truth.

By reverentially serving the emperor, complying with government commands, not turning away from worldly morals, and not disturbing human relations, and by working hard at one’s occupation, one benefits the nation-state. This is the gate of conventional truth. Absolute truth contributes to conventional truth. Conventional truth contributes to absolute truth. Through the interdependence of the two truths, the two times of present and future benefit each other. This is the Dharma gate of the mutual benefit of the two truths.⁷

The two chief abbots’ statements enshrine reverence toward the emperor and compliance with secular law as sacred duties. Article 19 of the Ōtani constitution begins by disassociating Pure Land rebirth from engagement in “other practices *or good deeds*.” However, it then presents observance of laws and moral duties (i.e., conventional truth) as “contributing to” (*tasukeru* 資ける) the process of attaining birth in the Pure Land after death (i.e., absolute truth).

⁵ Quoted in Blum and Rhodes 2011, pp. 30–31. For further discussion, see Rogers and Rogers 1991, pp. 319–25.

⁶ Quoted in Sasaki 1921, p. 123.

⁷ Ōtani-ha Honganji Bunshoka Hensanbu 1912, pp. 7–8.

Melissa Curley argues that this reinterpretation of the two truths entailed a redefinition of the Pure Land as an object of private, internal belief pertaining to the afterlife. According to her analysis, Shinran 親鸞 (1173–1262) and Rennyo had discussed Pure Land rebirth in spatially and temporally complex ways that did not pertain only to an afterlife in a distant world; rather, their teachings on the Pure Land had implied critiques of the social order and had motivated the establishment of autonomous Shin communities based on equality and non-ownership (which amounted to “rehearsals” of a future Pure Land assembly). The modern reinterpretation of the two truths did away with these politically transgressive implications of Pure Land teachings by bifurcating the world into internal and external worlds and into present and future worlds. Pure Land rebirth became strictly associated with internal beliefs in a future world—separate from, and thus in no conflict with, secular laws governing the present world.⁸ Kiyozawa Manshi and his followers would object both to this strict association of the Pure Land with the afterlife and to the implication that fulfillment of moral duties can contribute to the attainment of salvation in the Pure Land.

Kiyozawa Manshi

Throughout his short career as a Shin Buddhist philosopher, educator, and activist, Kiyozawa Manshi demonstrated the courage to express unorthodox ideas and promote unpopular reforms, even if it meant running afoul of his sect’s thought leaders, administrators, or students. On the topic of Buddhist ethics, the essay “Negotiating Religious Morality (Conventional Truth) and Common Morality” (Shūkyōteki dōtoku [zokutai] to futsū dōtoku to no kōshō 宗教的道德 [俗諦]と普通道德との交渉; hereafter, “Negotiating Religious Morality”) that Kiyozawa authored a month before his death openly refuted his sect’s orthodox interpretation of the two truths.⁹ Kiyozawa wrote the essay specifically in response to critiques of the Seishinshugi reform movement for ignoring social issues.¹⁰ Other Buddhist reformers of that time, especially those who came to be associated with the New Buddhist Fellowship (Shin Bukkyō Dōshikai 新仏教同志会), were calling for Buddhists to demonstrate their tradition’s social relevance by becoming more socially and politically engaged.¹¹ Kiyozawa and his followers’ reform movement was more inward in orientation; it promoted introspection, realization of the limits of one’s intellectual and moral powers, and a transformative encounter with Amida Bud-

⁸ Curley 2017, pp. 24–56.

⁹ For an English translation, see Blum and Rhodes 2011.

¹⁰ Johnston (1972, pp. 256–66) reports that Kiyozawa authored “Negotiating Religious Morality” specifically in response to criticisms of the Seishinshugi movement for ignoring “conventional truth” that appeared in the journal *Seikyō jihō* 政教時報 headed by Chikazumi Jōkan 近角常観 (1870–1941).

¹¹ On the “New Buddhism” movement, see Shields 2017, pp. 91–136.

dha. From the beginning, Kiyozawa had insisted that emphasis on attainment of inner freedom untroubled by external circumstances did not amount to indifference toward the social world. In practice, though, Kiyozawa had not directed much attention to social issues beyond the confines of his Buddhist community.

In “Negotiating Religious Morality,” Kiyozawa analyzed the two truths doctrines, arguing that personal efforts to fulfill moral obligations are bound to fail, given our selfish, ignorant nature as flawed human beings. As Blum summarizes, Kiyozawa’s analysis of the two truths “affirms the paradoxical conclusion that the purpose of Buddhist morality is to teach us that we are incapable of living by it.”¹² Despite one’s best efforts to live a moral life, one inevitably fails, and this failure helps trigger a shift from self-powered moral practice to Other-powered faith in the Buddha. Following the attainment of true faith, which is to say, insight into absolute truth, one continues to experience moral failure, and this causes one’s gratitude toward and reliance on the Buddha to grow deeper. Thus, the importance of the conventional truth of morality lies in continually leading a person back to a deeper and deeper appreciation of absolute truth.

In this formulation, conventional truth stands in a subsidiary, supportive role in relation to absolute truth; morality is merely a means to an end. Viewing Buddhist morality in this way, Kiyozawa shows no particular concern about the content of those moral principles and provides no moral theory beyond the observation that we all have a sense of what is right and wrong in our hearts. Ultimately, Kiyozawa relegates moral theorizing and instruction to the domain of “moralists.” He argues that from a religious perspective, whether a person is guilty of murder, theft, licentiousness, or falsehood is entirely irrelevant.

In the context of mid-Meiji Japan, when Buddhists were pressured to accept national morality as the core of their religion, Kiyozawa’s position has been seen by many scholars as a significant act of resistance, preventing Buddhism from being co-opted by the state.¹³ For example, in Ama Toshimaro’s explanation, “Under the imperial system, the Higashi 東 Honganji institution sought to muster its believers for nationalistic political purposes by using the doctrine of the Two Truths. Yet we must not forget that there was a person [Kiyozawa] within its ranks who attempted to go beyond all this and tried, like Hōnen and Shinran, to uphold the supremacy of faith.”¹⁴ Similarly, Yoshida Kyūichi declared, “It was a significant accomplishment for Manshi to take the Shin sect’s conventional truth doctrine, which had decayed in such ways, and to repurify it by way of absolute truth grounded in the absolute infinite.”¹⁵ And in

¹² Blum 1988, p. 77.

¹³ Regarding the state’s establishment of a “national morality” (*kokumin dōtoku* 国民道徳) especially through the 1890 Imperial Rescript on Education, see Gluck 1985, pp. 102–56.

¹⁴ Ama 2011, pp. 42–43.

¹⁵ Yoshida 1986, p. 176.

an essay highlighting Kiyozawa's writings on the two truths, Blum concludes, "[Kiyozawa's] repeated rejection of the politicized values of both secular and sacred society reveals a world of Buddhism significantly different from the vast majority of politically and socially accommodating Buddhist thinkers of his day. . . . It is reasonable to see movements like Seishinshugi emerging as idealistic shelters against the storm of politically rationalized ethics pervading Japan at the dawn of its modern imperialistic era."¹⁶

Ama, Yoshida, and Blum may be correct in characterizing Kiyozawa as upholding the supremacy of faith, purifying Shin teachings of secular influence, and rejecting politicized values. But it must be asked: What social ethics emerge from an absolutist insistence on the supremacy of faith? And to what extent did the Seishinshugi adherents' cultivation of faith and inner freedom really shelter them from politicized values and cooptation by the state? Kiyozawa rejected the orthodox two truths ethical framework, but did not propose any ethical framework to take its place.

In mining Kiyozawa's writings for ethical teachings, Ama finds only vague exhortations by Kiyozawa to "promote the culture of the Japanese empire" and to "live resolutely in the everyday world on the basis of Other-power faith";¹⁷ thus, Ama turns elsewhere (socialist Buddhist Takagi Kenmyō 高木顯明 [1864–1914]) to find an exemplar of Shin ethics. And in his laudatory essay on Kiyozawa's ethical teachings, even Yasutomi Shin'ya admits, "Kiyozawa's statements are mainly strong in the direction of going 'from ethics to religion'; the direction of going 'from religion to ethics' was not necessarily sufficiently developed."¹⁸ So how did Kiyozawa's followers engage with questions of social ethics in later decades? To what extent did they uphold or build upon Kiyozawa's reframing of the two truths doctrine?

Sasaki Gesshō

Sasaki Gesshō was one of Kiyozawa's core disciples who was central to the founding of the Seishinshugi movement. A scholar of Shin Buddhism and early Mahayana and Huayan 華嚴 thought, Sasaki collaborated with D. T. Suzuki in founding the journal *The Eastern Buddhist* and also served as president of Otani University from 1923 until his unexpected death in 1926.¹⁹

Sasaki expresses his views on the two truths in the last chapter of his 1921 work *Outlines of Shin Buddhism (Shinshū gairon 真宗概論)*.²⁰ As a whole, that work aims to demonstrate that Shin Buddhism is not a particular sect of Buddhism opposed to other

¹⁶ Blum 1988, pp. 78, 80.

¹⁷ Ama 2011, pp. 46, 47.

¹⁸ Yasutomi 2011, p. 9.

¹⁹ For a brief biography, see Conway, Inoue, and Rhodes 2013.

²⁰ Sasaki 1921.

sects, but rather a true expression of the Buddhism of Śākyamuni. In line with that purpose, Sasaki approaches the topic of the two truths by first reviewing the history of Buddhist interpretations, including early Indian classifications of the four noble truths into “absolute” and “conventional”; the theories of Vasumitra (fl. ca. late 1st–2nd c.), Aśvaghōṣa (fl. ca. 2nd c.), and Nāgārjuna (fl. ca. 2nd–3rd c.); and debates among Chinese scholars of the sixth century. He then outlines theories of the two truths put forward in modern times by Shin scholars Shimaji Mokurai 島地默雷 (1838–1911), Akamatsu Renjō 赤松連城 (1841–1919), Urabe Kanjun 占部観順 (1824–1910), Yoshitani Kakuju 吉谷覚寿 (1843–1914), Murakami Senshō 村上専精 (1851–1929), and Kiyozawa Manshi.²¹

Sasaki’s own interpretation emerges from his readings of Nāgārjuna, the *Nirvana Sutra*, and the three Pure Land sutras. Sasaki first presents the verse portions of Nāgārjuna’s statements on the two truths in the *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā*:

All buddhas rely on two truths
 In teaching the Dharma to sentient beings:
 A truth of worldly convention
 And an ultimate truth.

Those who do not understand
 The distinction between these two truths
 Do not understand the true significance
 Of the profound *buddhadharma*.

Without relying on the conventional truth,
 The ultimate cannot be attained.
 Without attaining the ultimate,
 Nirvana cannot be achieved.²²

Sasaki finds evidence here for the general ideas that conventional and absolute two truths mutually rely on one another (*nitai sōe* 二諦相依) and that the process of attaining nirvana is therefore not a matter of separating oneself from, or transcending, conventional existence. In Sasaki’s explanation, this is in contrast to the view of Aśvaghōṣa in the *Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana*, which describes the origins of delusion with the phrase “Suddenly, [deluded] thought arises” (*kotsunen nenki* 忽然念起). From that perspective, attainment of absolute truth requires the cutting off of deluded thought (*rinen* 離念). Sasaki contrasts this with how Nāgārjuna, while expounding

²¹ Sasaki 1921, pp. 125–34. For another, more extensive discussion of modern Shin thinkers’ views on the two truths, see Shigaraki 1981, 1982.

²² Sasaki 1921, p. 135. For the full text of Nāgārjuna’s work (in Chinese translation), see T no. 1564, 30: 32c16–33a03. My translation is an amended version of Garfield 1995, p. 68.

upon the flaws inherent in discriminatory thinking, nonetheless promoted “faith of constant thought [directed toward Amida Buddha]” (*jōnen no shin* 常念の信) as an ideal means of attaining nirvana.²³

Sasaki then turns to a long quotation in Shinran’s *Kyōgyōshinshō* 教行信証 of a *Nirvana Sutra* passage about King Ajātaśatru’s attainment of faith.²⁴ King Ajātaśatru was guilty of murdering his own father, King Bimbisara. Having become ill, Ajātaśatru worried about the likelihood that he would fall into hell after death. After consulting a number of holy men, Ajātaśatru finally came to Śākyamuni for help. Śākyamuni assured Ajātaśatru that he need not fear recompense for his past evil deeds for a number of reasons, one being the presence of shame and remorse in him: “Although [killing] is neither existent nor nonexistent, and yet is existent, for the person who feels shame, it is not existent; for the person who feels no shame, it is not nonexistent.”²⁵ Thus, Śākyamuni explains that “killing” is ultimately empty of substantial reality and becomes nonexistent for those whose minds are transformed through shame. In the conclusion to his discourse to Ajātaśatru, Śākyamuni states, “Sentient beings are termed so for their exhaling and inhaling of breath. The cutting off of exhaling and inhaling breath is ‘killing.’ The buddhas, in accord with conventional [truth], also teach this to be ‘killing.’”²⁶ In other words, on the level of conventional truth, buddhas teach about the evils of killing, but on the level of absolute truth, killing is empty of substantial reality. Thus, through a change in mental perspective, even killers like Ajātaśatru can attain nirvana.

Sasaki’s analysis considers two passages. The first is the statement just quoted: “The buddhas, in accord with conventional [truth], also teach this to be ‘killing.’” The second is the verses of praise that Ajātaśatru subsequently recites in gratitude to Śākyamuni. Specifically, Sasaki quotes the following:

The words of the Tathagata are of one taste;
They are like the waters of the broad ocean.
It is called the ultimate truth....
Men and women, old and young, hear

²³ Sasaki 1921, pp. 135–36.

²⁴ In identifying passages most relevant to the two truths in Shinran’s writings, Sasaki (1921, p. 125) emphasizes that because faith is fundamental for Shin Buddhists, the *Kyōgyōshinshō*’s chapter on faith (including its quotes from the *Nirvana Sutra*) should be consulted prior to more obvious references to the two truths, such as can be found in the *Kyōgyōshinshō*’s sixth chapter. In that chapter, Shinran quotes a passage from Saichō 最澄 (767–822) that reads, “The benevolent king and the Dharma king, in mutual correspondence, give guidance to beings. The absolute truth and the worldly truth, relying on each other, cause the teaching to spread. Thus, the profound writings are everywhere throughout the land, and the benevolent guidance reaches everywhere under heaven” (translation modified from that found in CWS, p. 244).

²⁵ CWS, p. 137.

²⁶ CWS, p. 137.

And all alike are made to attain the ultimate.
 Without cause, without effect;
 With no arising, no perishing—
 This is termed great nirvana.
 Those who hear break all their bonds.²⁷

The first three lines praise Śākyamuni's use of expedient means. Buddhas use "gentle words" or "rough words" depending upon their audience, but all such teachings ultimately "are of one taste," leading people toward the same "ultimate truth" (i.e., absolute truth). The second passage presents "hearing" of the Buddha's skillful teachings—which Sasaki glosses as "faith" in the Buddha—as that which enables people to break their karmic bonds and reach the state of nirvana beyond cause and effect and beyond arising and perishing.

Together, these *Nirvana Sutra* passages suggest that Śākyamuni spoke of morality only out of expedience and that absolute truth is ultimately to be attained through faith. Men and women, old and young, and killers and non-killers are all able to attain nirvana regardless of their karmic roots. "Relying on the conventional truth" in order to "attain the ultimate," as taught by Nāgārjuna, cannot be a matter of successfully carrying out moral teachings. On the contrary, it is remorse about one's evil actions that leads one to seek out and attain faith in the Buddha's teachings. Essentially, Sasaki is presenting scriptural evidence to support Kiyozawa's reading of the two truths—that moral failure and reflection upon that failure are the path to absolute truth.²⁸

Sasaki then turns to the three Pure Land sutras and the question of the temporal sequence of conventional and absolute truths. Sasaki is here asking whether afflicted beings in the worldly realm make themselves into receptacles for Amida's salvation through moral self-cultivation, or whether moral self-cultivation is properly understood as a result of salvation. To answer these questions, Sasaki considers the narrative structure of each text. The *Sutra on Immeasurable Life* foregrounds the story of the vows made by Dharmākara Bodhisattva to establish a morally ideal pure land where all those who have faith in him can be reborn. Considering those vows, as well as Śākyamuni Buddha's later discourse on the three poisons and five evils, Sasaki concludes that in this sutra Amida's salvific powers precede and enable others' moral perfection. Next, the *Contemplation Sutra* begins with the narrative of Vaidehī, mother of evil Ajātaśatru, caring for her imprisoned husband, worshipping the Buddha, and imploring the Buddha to reveal to her a morally better land where she can be reborn. Before teaching her how to contemplate Amida's Pure Land, the Buddha pointedly instructs her on the

²⁷ Sasaki 1921, pp. 136–37. For the original source, see T no. 375, 12: 727c9–10; T no. 375, 12: 728b2–7. My translations are amended versions of CWS, pp. 137, 139.

²⁸ Sasaki 1921, pp. 136–37.

“three acts of merit” she should practice. Thus, according to Sasaki, this sutra teaches moral self-cultivation as preceding and facilitating attainment of absolute truth in the Pure Land. Finally, the *Amida Sutra* is a sermon preached by Śākyamuni to his disciple Śāriputra. Sasaki notes that Śāriputra reportedly returned home in the last week of his life to teach the Dharma to his mother. Thus, Sasaki characterizes this sutra as teaching that attainment of wisdom precedes moral action. Together, these sutras convey a contradictory message: conventional truth (i.e., moral action) variously precedes or follows absolute truth (i.e., salvation).²⁹

In an effort to synthesize the views found in the *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā*, the *Nirvana Sutra*, and the Pure Land sutras, Sasaki advances the theory that in Shin Buddhism, conventional truth and absolute truth constitute a three-part sequence: conventional-absolute-conventional (*zoku shin zoku* 俗真俗). The following is his explanation:

Conventional and absolute rely on one another and form one world. The two are two, and yet they must be identical and united. That is, here the two truths resolve in the term “identity” (*soku* 即). . . . We all remain identical with human life, yet we see the light. We remain identical with affliction, yet we encounter awakening. We reside in the realm of foolish beings replete with affliction, yet in this place we also see the light of salvation. Absolute and conventional are truly this realm of not-one but not-two. That is to say, having discovered the realm of faith only through the freedom of the inversion of subject and object (*nōsho tenkan* 能所轉換), we are therefore also able to reply concerning the relationship of the two truths with the term “identical.”³⁰

Sasaki argues that absolute truth is found here and now in the worldly realm of afflictions and ignorance. This is accomplished not by adhering to conventional moral teachings but rather by hearing the Buddha’s words and coming to see the world in a different way—bathed in the light of Amida’s salvific powers. One does not claw one’s way out of the worldly realm and into the absolute realm. Through introspection, repentance, and faith, a transformation takes place whereby subject and object are reversed. The object of one’s faith—Amida Buddha—becomes the subject of that faith. In the words of Sasaki’s peer Soga Ryōjin 曾我量深 (1875–1971), “The Tathāgata [i.e., Amida Buddha] becoming me saves me.”³¹ Yet at the same time, one retains one’s former identity as an ignorant, evil human being. One becomes “not-one

²⁹ Sasaki 1921, pp. 137–38.

³⁰ Sasaki 1921, pp. 138–39.

³¹ Blum and Rhodes 2011, p. 107.

but not-two” with Amida. This world becomes “not-one but not-two” with the Pure Land.

In his chapter, Sasaki makes no explicit claims about the ethical consequences of this transformation. His definition of the attainment of faith as a three-part sequence ending in “conventional truth” implies that some moral development takes place, despite one’s remaining a “foolish being replete with affliction.” Many passages in Shinran’s writings would warrant that viewpoint.³² Yet Sasaki’s study is focused on the significance of conventional truths (i.e., Buddhist moral teachings) only as they relate to the process of attaining faith; it is not concerned with the content of those conventional truths or their application in the social world. Yasutomi Shin’ya’s assessment of Kiyozawa holds true in regard to Sasaki: his writings are “mainly strong in the direction of going ‘from ethics to religion’; the direction of going ‘from religion to ethics’ was not necessarily sufficiently developed.”³³

In a brief concluding section, Sasaki notes that the two truths pertain to Shin teachings on multiple levels. At the highest level, he argues, Dharmākara’s all-important eighteenth vow contains within it absolute and conventional truths represented by the “three minds of faith” and the “exclusionary clause” respectively. The exclusionary clause refers to the vow’s apparent exclusion from rebirth of “those who commit the five gravest offences and those who slander the right Dharma.” Shinran interpreted that clause as an expedient teaching meant only to call attention to the seriousness of those offenses and the corresponding grandeur of Amida’s salvific powers that extend even to the most evil of people.³⁴

At a lower level, according to Sasaki’s explanation, Śākyamuni’s realization and teachings represent conventional truth whereas the essential content of his realization—salvation through faith in Amida Buddha—represents absolute truth. Next, Śākyamuni’s teachings represent absolute truth whereas transmission of and commentary on those teachings, particularly by the seven Shin patriarchs, represent conventional truth. Finally, at the lowest level, Buddhist teachings represent absolute truth whereas secular law—exemplified by the Buddhism-promoting Seventeen-Article Constitution of Prince Shōtoku 聖徳 (574–622)—represents conventional truth.³⁵

In each case, conventional truth is a useful, or even necessary, concomitant of absolute truth: the truth of universal salvation through faith in Amida is magnified through the exclusionary clause; the true Dharma is introduced to the world through Śākyamuni’s realization and teachings; Śākyamuni’s teachings are clarified through the

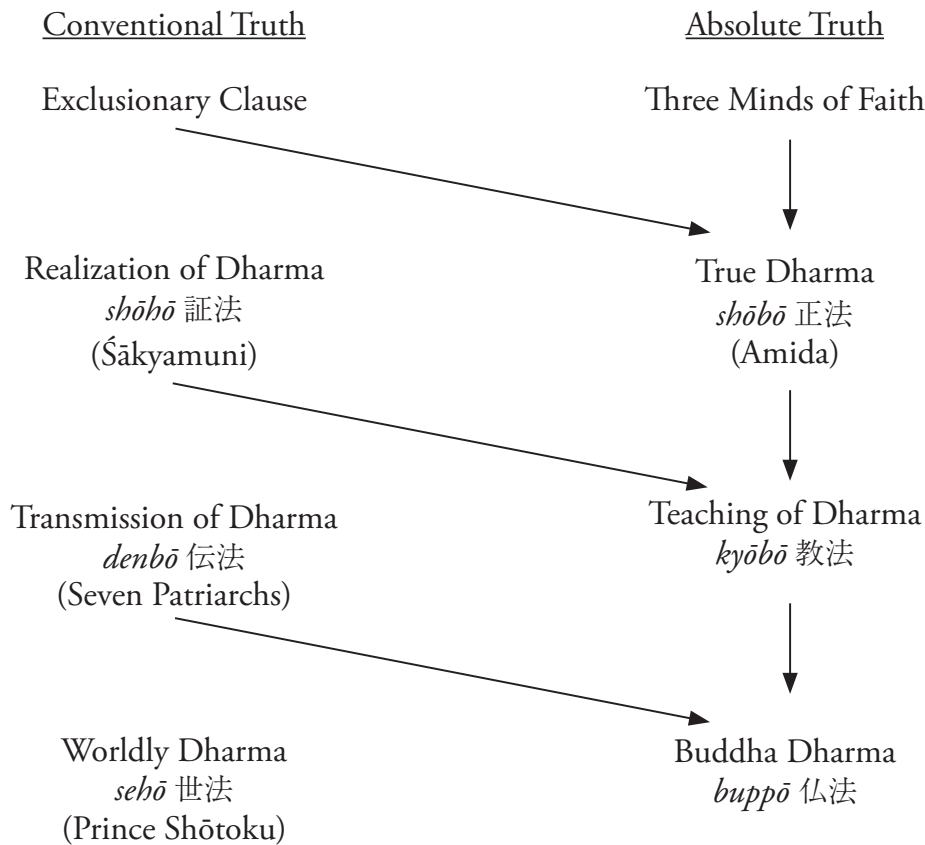
³² For example, see Shinran’s discussion of “ten benefits in the present life” that come with faith (CWS, p. 112).

³³ Yasutomi 2011, p. 9.

³⁴ CWS, p. 494.

³⁵ Sasaki 1921, pp. 139–42.

Table 1. Multiple Levels of the Two Truths



commentaries of the seven patriarchs; and Buddhist teachings as a whole are preserved and propagated through the laws of enlightened sovereigns. Conventional truth is a conduit for the communication of absolute truth.

Here, secular laws are an afterthought for Sasaki. It might be possible to extract a Buddhist social ethics from this framing of Shōtoku's constitution as conventional truth serving the propagation of Buddhist teachings, but Sasaki himself does not do so. Like Kiyozawa, he views ethical theory and practice as largely irrelevant to the principal issue of soteriology. Yoshida attributed Seishinshugi followers' ethical failings to their failure to continue exalting absolute truth as Kiyozawa had. With regard to Sasaki, that criticism is off the mark. Sasaki was as singularly focused on the cultivation of faith as Kiyozawa. Sasaki's efforts to build upon Kiyozawa only *deepened* Kiyozawa's argument—and gave it grounding in scripture—without *broadening* it to consider

issues such as what specifically would constitute ethical behavior for Buddhists. Sasaki did exalt absolute truth and uphold the supremacy of faith, and for that very reason refrained from taking up the task of defining a Shin social ethics.

Kaneko Daiei

Kaneko Daiei joined the Seishinshugi movement shortly after Kiyozawa's death. In 1928, he was famously ousted from his professorship at Otani University on suspicions of heresy (*ianjin* 異安心) for his writings on the Pure Land. In 1941, he was reinstated at Otani and became a leading voice within his sect on the topic of Shin Buddhism's accordance with State Shinto ideology. His scholarship focused on Shin studies but also extended into Huayan thought and general Buddhist studies. His work is notable for its engagement with Western philosophy, particularly neo-Kantians like Hermann Cohen.³⁶

Kaneko's most extensive statement on the "two truths" appeared in an August 1927 article in the journal *Butsuza* 仏座 titled "Worldly Good and Supra-Worldly Good: Concerning the Absolute and Conventional Two Truths" (Seken zen to shusseken zen: Shinzoku nitai ni tsuite 世間善と出世間善：真俗二諦に就いて).³⁷ The article begins by outlining five topics needing attention: (1) the three Pure Land sutras' views of the two truths; (2) Shinran's view of the two truths; (3) the Ōtani and Honganji chief abbots' view of the two truths; (4) scholarship on the history of the two truths; and (5) the relationship between the two truths. Regarding the first topic, Kaneko notes that the *Sutra on Immeasurable Life* clearly addresses the conventional truth of morality in its section on the three poisons and five evils. Regarding the second topic, Kaneko states that Shinran teaches only about absolute truth and offers no discussion of conventional truth or instructions on upholding moral principles of benevolence or justice.³⁸ Regarding the third and fourth topics, Kaneko notes that within the vast Buddhist commentarial tradition, there are interpretations of the two truths in accord with that of the Ōtani and Honganji chief abbots; thus, the chief abbots' view is one legitimate interpretation.³⁹ Although Kaneko here half-heartedly endorses the chief abbots' interpretation as valid, his claim that Shinran taught nothing of conventional

³⁶ For a biography of Kaneko, see Hataya and Tatsutani 1993. Regarding Kaneko's theory of the Pure Land and the 1928 heresy incident, see Schroeder 2014 and Murayama 2021. Regarding Kaneko's wartime writings, see Schroeder (forthcoming) and Kondō 2013, ch. 6.

³⁷ Kaneko 1927. The *Butsuza* journal was established and edited by Kaneko himself; it ran from 1926–32, regularly featuring articles by Kaneko, Soga Ryōjin, and other Shin Buddhist reformers. An abridged and slightly altered version of Kaneko's article on the two truths appeared in Sei 1927.

³⁸ Shigaraki (1982) highlights this claim about Shinran as Kaneko's most unique and valuable contribution to modern discussions of the two truths.

³⁹ Kaneko 1927, p. 4.

truth does raise the question: need Shin Buddhists pay any mind to their chief abbots' exhortations to serve the state?

For the bulk of his article, Kaneko turns to the relationship between the two truths. He broaches this topic by recalling the story of Śākyamuni abandoning his family in order to pursue a spiritual path. From a conventional, worldly standpoint, this was immoral, but from an absolute standpoint that prioritizes universal liberation from suffering, it was the highest form of morality.⁴⁰ Similarly, Kaneko points to Shinran's statement in the *Tannishō* 歎異抄 that he "never said the *nenbutsu* 念仏 even once for the repose of [his] departed father and mother" as a similar example. In Kaneko's view, Shinran was so utterly transfixed on cultivating a path to ultimate liberation that he had no room for concern about conventional morality.⁴¹

Kaneko then complicates this picture by claiming there to be a fundamental chasm between the realms of conventional and absolute truth. The latter, he argues, is absolutely inconceivable by our limited minds. To illustrate his point, he remarks that in the conventional, worldly realm, cause always leads to effect, but in the absolute realm, cause and effect simultaneously produce one another. According to Kaneko, however we conceive of the Pure Land (i.e., the realm of absolute truth), it remains a land conjured by our conventional thinking. Likewise, however much we desire to be born there, we cannot because the Pure Land has the characteristic of being "unborn." To be born into that which is unborn is contradictory. Our ways of thinking and our very nature as conditioned, created beings are incompatible with the Pure Land. Kaneko thus shifts away from speaking about conventional truth in terms of morality and instead characterizes it in terms of epistemological, and even ontological, limits. Try as we may to conceive of absolute truth and orient our thoughts and actions toward it, we cannot. On our own, we are forever trapped in the realm of conventional thoughts and actions. It is only through the gift of Amida's grace that "what cannot be born is born."⁴²

In the final pages of his article, Kaneko asks what importance conventional morality has. He reasons that although conventional values appear trivial from the perspective of faith, basic desires for long life or comfortable shelter are inescapable. As such, conventional morality retains some value, yet there is no substantial relationship between conventional and absolute truths. According to Kaneko, one's morality or immorality has no necessary bearing on one's attainment of faith, nor does one's attainment or non-attainment of faith have any necessary bearing on one's morality. Although no necessary relationship exists, Kaneko says the attainment of faith brings with it a certain "surplus" (*yo-yū* 余裕) of ability that can be applied to worldly tasks.⁴³

⁴⁰ Kaneko 1927, p. 11.

⁴¹ Kaneko 1927, p. 25.

⁴² Kaneko 1927, pp. 16–19.

⁴³ Kaneko 1927, pp. 23–37.

In sum, Kaneko speaks of conventional truth on two levels. On one level, he follows Ōtani orthodoxy in discussing it in terms of secular morality. However, he argues that conventional truth was ignored by Shinran, and implies that all devout Shin Buddhists should do the same. Arriving at absolute truth requires casting aside worldly concerns. This view unquestionably cuts against Ōtani orthodoxy, but as in the cases of Kiyozawa and Sasaki, it does not lead Kaneko to adopt any oppositional standpoints on social or political matters. Kaneko posits that attainment of faith may facilitate moral action in the world, but he stops short of asking what that surplus of moral ability ought to be used for. Like Kiyozawa and Sasaki, Kaneko upholds the supremacy of faith, and in so doing refrains from engaging with questions of social ethics.

On a different level, Kaneko speaks about conventional truth in terms of the limitations of human reasoning. In reaching toward absolute truth, our conventional ways of thinking are totally futile. Leaping from the realm of conventional truth to the realm of absolute truth can only be achieved through the workings of Amida Buddha's powers. Here it seems that Kaneko may be echoing Kiyozawa and Sasaki in emphasizing failure and realization of limits as key to attaining true faith. Whereas Kiyozawa and Sasaki focused on failure in moral terms, Kaneko focuses on it in intellectual terms. But even there, Kaneko is really echoing Kiyozawa, who wrote, "To believe in my own ineffectiveness [and thus cultivate true faith in the Buddha], it was necessary first to exhaust my entire range of intellectual faculties to the point where I could no longer even raise my head."⁴⁴

Conclusion

In their own ways, Sasaki and Kaneko both upheld Kiyozawa's rejection of the orthodox view that conventional truth represented a religious obligation to revere the emperor and obey secular laws. Sasaki echoed Kiyozawa in highlighting the overriding importance of self-reflection, shame, and repentance—rather than successful moral action—in the pursuit of faith. Kaneko echoed Kiyozawa in highlighting the limits of people's cognitive powers and in portraying conventional values as trivial in comparison to the pursuit of ultimate liberation for all. Theoretically, these rejections of the orthodox view of the two truths opened up possibilities for an autonomous, critical Buddhist ethics. Yet like Kiyozawa, Sasaki and Kaneko did not pursue that possibility. Instead, they inherited Kiyozawa's aloofness from politics and social concerns, writing essays on social ethics that refrained from analyzing the social world or from advancing Buddhist standpoints on particular social issues.

Scholars have offered various compelling arguments about the deficiencies of Buddhist thought in general, or Shin Buddhist thought specifically, in generating social

⁴⁴ Blum and Rhodes 2011, p. 95.

ethics. Christopher Ives, drawing upon the insights of Ichikawa Hakugen, highlights the problematic ethical implications of Buddhists' prioritizing of "peace of mind" (*anjin* 安心): "Zen practitioners secure 'peace of mind' by avoiding discrimination, by not making distinctions between what they like and dislike or engaging in ordinary moral consideration of what is right or wrong."⁴⁵ Such arguments apply well to Sasaki and Kaneko, who viewed success or failure in moral actions as having no bearing on the all-important pursuit of minds at peace. Prioritizing questions of soteriology, Sasaki and Kaneko viewed worldly ethics as a peripheral matter. As Kondō Shuntarō argued, although their viewpoints were distinct from the mainstream Shin view that embraced worldly ethics as "conventional truth," in practice, Sasaki, Kaneko, and other Seishinshugi figures' emphasis on individual faith and disregard for social realities ended up producing a similar result: affirmation of present reality.⁴⁶

Ugo Dessì highlights how Shin ethics have been inhibited by certain doctrinal features, including insistence on the universality of liberation for even evil beings, denial of good acts as a means to liberation, and the view that no one other than Amida can bring about others' liberation.⁴⁷ It could be argued that in choosing not to articulate a systematic Shin ethics, Kiyozawa, Sasaki, and Kaneko were simply adhering to fundamental Shin teachings on salvation through Other Power. Shinran had taught that people were powerless to progress toward salvation through their own good deeds, and that their calculations (*hakarai* はからい) about the effects of good or evil acts could even be a hindrance to salvation.⁴⁸ In place of traditional Buddhist emphasis on morality as one *cause* leading toward enlightenment, Shinran described good deeds as a spontaneous *effect* of the attainment of faith. Shinran's teachings thus prioritize faith and *nenbutsu* practice over considerations of ethics, yet they do not constitute a proscription against the articulation of a Shin ethical system—so long as ethical behavior is not defined as the means by which people attain salvation.⁴⁹

In practice, Kiyozawa, Sasaki, and Kaneko, like Shin Buddhists everywhere, did strive to act ethically and benefit others. Most notably, they spent their lives preaching and publishing writings on their understandings of Shin teachings in an effort to facilitate others' attainment of faith. They also worked tirelessly to reform the Ōtani

⁴⁵ Ives 2009, p. 60.

⁴⁶ Kondō 2013, p. 156.

⁴⁷ Dessì 2007.

⁴⁸ For example, Shinran is quoted in ch. 11 of the *Tannishō* as stating, "Next, people who discriminate good and evil acts *and consider them aids or hindrances to birth, interposing their own calculation*, do not entrust themselves to the inconceivable working of the Vow and, striving to do acts that will result in birth with their own designs, they make the *nenbutsu* they say their own practice. People with such an attitude do not entrust themselves to the inconceivable working of the Name either" (CWS, p. 668; italics added). For further discussion, see Dessì 2007, pp. 44–45.

⁴⁹ See Dessì 2007, pp. 46–51.

organization's educational and administrative institutions. In doing so, they strove to bring about an environment more conducive to people's attainment of faith and more reflective of ideals expressed in Shin scripture. There is no contradiction between such efforts and the Shin teaching of relying on Other Power, which calls not for non-action, but for actions promoting awareness of ourselves as evil, foolish beings in need of Amida's help. Likewise, no contradiction would be entailed by expanding such efforts to address social issues like illiteracy, poverty, political authoritarianism, or war, all of which have a bearing on people's access to Shin teachings and a relation to ideals expressed in Shin scripture.

In explaining Sasaki and Kaneko's indifference toward social and political matters, it is also important to consider non-doctrinal factors such as institutional context. In the 1920s, the Ōtani sect constitution continued to define absolute truth as pertaining to rebirth in the Pure Land after death and conventional truth as pertaining to compliance with secular laws and morals. Kiyozawa had rejected these understandings, but his ideas had not been accepted. Sasaki and Kaneko struggled to change this by grounding their shared modernist understandings of faith and salvation in scriptural evidence. Fighting to promote their understanding of faith within the Ōtani community, they did not have a "surplus" of attention to turn outward and consider Shin Buddhists' relations to society.

Class may also be a relevant factor. Kaneko, Sasaki, and their peers enjoyed secure social positions as well-educated priests and employees of a large, financially stable organization. As such, they were relatively immune to the dangers of poverty, discrimination, unsafe working conditions, or war. Working in elite administrative and scholarly posts, they were also removed from the struggles of ordinary temple parishioners. Only the escalation of war and war mobilization policies in the 1930s and 1940s forced Seishinshugi leaders to confront troubling social realities directly.

When those political and social pressures arrived, Kaneko and his Seishinshugi peers were unprepared.⁵⁰ The massive events of global conflict, total war mobilization, and demands for ideological unity could not be ignored; indifference to social and political issues was no longer a viable option. In reinterpreting the two truths, Kiyozawa and his followers had essentially subsumed moral questions within the topic of soteriology. From their perspective, the particular moral valence of any particular action had become all but irrelevant; all that mattered was how individuals reflected on the limits of their moral and intellectual capacities. Logically, we might expect that position to lead to critiques of Japanese imperialism as reflective of Japanese leaders'

⁵⁰ Sasaki died in 1926. However, Kondō detects in his writings ideas similar to the later Imperial-Way Buddhist views of his colleagues. Specifically, in a 1912 essay, Sasaki rhetorically linked the compassion of Amida Buddha to the compassion of the Meiji Emperor, intimating that the emperor was a manifestation of Amida (Kondō 2013, pp. 176–77).

own moral limitations and failures. But in practice, the temptation to identify the powerful forces stemming from the emperor and the state with the workings of Amida's Other Power proved too great. Unaccustomed to critically analyzing social issues and immersed in a sacred world permeated by the presence of Amida Buddha's saving powers, Kaneko and his Seishinshugi allies stumbled into the view that Japanese imperialism was a manifestation of absolute truth.⁵¹

ABBREVIATIONS

- CWS *The Collected Works of Shinran*. Vol. 1. Translated by Dennis Hirota, Hisao Inagaki, Michio Tokunaga, and Ryushin Uryuzu. Kyoto: Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha, 1997.
- T *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經. Edited by Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaigyoku 渡邊海旭. 100 vols. Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924–35.

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⁵¹ See ch. 5 of Schroeder (forthcoming).

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