

Sexual Transgression in Shinran's Dream

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WE MIGHT START with the following spritely, winking account of Shinran 親鸞 (1173–1262) and sexuality in the Jōdo Shinshū 浄土真宗 (Shin Buddhist or Shin) tradition:

By the thirteenth century, Shinran—after struggling with the problem of celibacy for years and being unable to suppress carnal desire through the proscribed course of meditation, fasting, and prayer—was declaring that it was impossible for human beings to remain chaste, so he urged priests to openly marry. Kannon appeared to Shinran in a vision and told him, “Male Buddhists should take a wife; every woman manifests my form.” This was the beginning of the married priesthood of the Pure Land schools, which eventually became the largest denomination in Japan—thanks in part to the prolificacy of its clergy. Rennyō, one of the chief Pure Land saints, reportedly wore out at least five wives and fathered so many children (one when he was in his eighties) that people lost count at twenty-seven.¹

Over the course of two millennia, attitudes towards sexuality and women in Buddhism have been complex, ambivalent, and inconsistent, and Pure Land Buddhist traditions, including Jōdo Shinshū in Japan, have been no exception.² Women's participation in Japanese Buddhism was already complex

¹ Stevens 1990, p. 96.

² As illustrated in Faure 1998 (e.g., p. 63), such evidence has long been available to scholars.

even before the advent of the Kamakura reformers, and from the start the original texts of Shinran as well contained apparent contradictions about gender because of the way their rhetoric was formed creatively out of earlier Buddhist language. These themes of sexuality subsequently developed their own six-hundred-year pre-modern history in Shin Buddhism, in which, while sexuality per se does not seem to have been a major problematic in Shinran's essential thought, in practice in the Shin tradition several gender perspectives were operant from the very beginning.³

Despite that long time span, popular notions about Shin Buddhism and sexuality often resort to a single focal point: the famous episode called Shinran's dream. While the dream has a certain distinctiveness, or even oddness, among the surviving resources of Shinran's thought, and while it represents a tiny portion of his overall oeuvre, all of the problems of interpretation relating to sex and women in Shin Buddhism do present themselves in connection to this episode. Reflecting its unique prominence, the dream has been treated notably in a number of Western sources⁴ as well as repeatedly by Japanese scholars.

Certainly nothing is more fun than sex! However, this article will try to demonstrate why the currently widespread, even conventionalized,⁵ account of sexual motivations behind Shinran (and subsequently the Shin tradition) which is expressed in the opening citation is historically invalid.

*The Basic Evidence Regarding the Dream*⁶

The extant material which constitutes "Shinran's dream"⁷ is a short medieval text called *Shinran muki* 親鸞夢記 (Record of Shinran's Dream, hereafter, *Muki*). Its exact provenance is uncertain but it was apparently an

³ Somewhat inconsistent patterns that can be traced through the early proselytizer Zonkaku 存覚 (1290–1373), the "middle founder" Rennyō 蓮如 (1415–1499), and Tokugawa-period writings (Amstutz 2008 and 2010).

⁴ Dobbins 1995 and 2004, Faure 1998 and 2003, Heidegger 2006, Lee 2007, Kiyomoto 1989.

⁵ E.g., enshrined in the article on "Sexuality" in Buswell 2004.

⁶ The description below follows the overviews provided especially by Inoue 1993 and 2005; see also Heidegger 2006.

⁷ Shinran actually had four dreams which survive in the historical record: involving Shōtoku Taishi 聖徳太子 (574–622), when Shinran was age nineteen; involving Nyoirin Kannon 如意輪観音 (age twenty-eight); the Rokkakudō 六角堂 dream which is of principal interest (age twenty-nine); and lastly a dream communication of a *wasan* verse dealing with trust in the Primal Vow (age eighty-five). (Najima 2009, chapter 6 *inter alia*.) Dobbins has covered the literature carefully, also touching on Shinran's various dreams (Dobbins 1989, pp. 23–24, 180–81).

item copied out from Shinran's own writing by one of his followers named Shinbutsu 真仏 (1209–1258). In size it is a marginal part of Shinran's legacy. The material was long known in temple archives relating to Shin Buddhism, and the story it tells was related prominently in the ritual biography of Shinran written by his great-grandson Kakunyo 覚如 (1270–1351) called the *Godenshō* 御伝鈔, but it was not otherwise much highlighted until the twentieth century. Modern awareness began with the discovery of the letters of Eshinni 恵信尼 (1182–1268?), Shinran's wife, in 1921 two of which mention the dream.⁸ In 1959 the scholar Hiramatsu Reizō confirmed the extant *Muki* manuscript as authentic, which encouraged scholars to reexamine the material as a fresh clue to Shinran's teaching.⁹ In 1961 the Japanese Buddhist historian Akamatsu Toshihide used the dream as evidence to legitimize the idea that Shinran suffered a celibacy problem in the modern sense of libido. Finally in 1963 the scholar Nabata Takashi identified a specific textual link to a text called *Kakuzenshō* 覚禅鈔, a Shingon 真言 reference book which contained a mention of the Rokkakudō Kannon 観音 statue which appears in the *Muki* (earlier the *Muki* text had appeared to be entirely isolated or stranded, without any identifiable antecedents).¹⁰ Still, there is an enormous amount of missing evidence.¹¹

Although there is a paucity of data, all historians agree that the text of the *Muki* must have derived ultimately from the famous period of seclusion at the Rokkakudō temple which Shinran undertook in 1201 just before he abandoned the Tendai 天台 monastic community on Mt. Hiei 比叡 and joined the circle centered on Hōnen 法然 (1133–1212). The text and especially its context(s) are more complex and at some points more linguistically indeterminate than commentators in English have explained.

⁸ Dobbins 2004.

⁹ Hiramatsu 1993.

¹⁰ Nabata 1988. The *Kakuzenshō* was compiled by the Shingon monk Kakuzen 覚禅 (1143–c. after 1213) to serve as a comprehensive reference work for rituals and iconography in his Ono 小野 branch of Shingon. A number of manuscripts survive, with varying numbers of fascicles, which cover Buddhas, sutras, and deities including Kannon, Monju 文殊, Myōō 明王, devas, and others. The text is specifically meant to be a compendium and contains many images of statues and paintings along with bibliographies of ritual works on each deity, quotations on rituals, relevant oral traditions, and methods of contemplation or visualization. See the entry on this text written by N. Iyanaga in the *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism* (an online electronic resource compiled and edited by Charles Muller), s.v. “*Kakuzenshō*” 覚禅鈔, accessed 20 November 2012, <http://www.buddhism-dict.net/ddb/>. As a textual or communications product this work is completely different from Shinran's writings. For a translation and discussion of the relevant passage, see below in this article.

¹¹ Kōbai 2004.

Despite its brevity, structurally the *Muki* consists of three distinct parts with two distinct voices: an opening, framing passage of flat prose (Voice A); a verse called the *Nyobonge* 女犯偈 (on breaking the monastic precepts relating to women) (Voice B); and a closing framing passage of flat prose (Voice A again).

Shinran muki ni iwaku 親鸞夢記云
Rokkakudō no Kuse Kannon Daibosatsu 六角堂救世大菩薩
Gen'yō tanshō no sōgyō o jigen shite 示現顏容端政之僧形
Shiroki nō no gokesa o fukuchaku seshime 令服著白納御袈裟
Kōdai no byakuren ni tanza shite 端座広大白蓮
Zenshin ni kōmyō shite notamawaku 告命善信言
Gyōja shūhō nite tatoi nyobon su tomo 行者宿報設女犯
Ware gyokunyo no mi to narite bonseraren 我成玉女身被犯
Isshō no aida yoku shōgon shite 一生之間能莊嚴
Rinjū ni indō shite gokuraku ni shōzeshimen 臨終引導生極樂
Kuse Bosatsu kono mon o jushite notamawaku 救世菩薩誦此文言
Kono mon wa waga seigan nari 此文吾誓願
Issai gunjō ni toki kikasu beki to kōmyō shitamaeri 一切群生可說聞
告命
Kono kōmyō ni yotte 因斯告命
Kazu senman no ujō ni kore o kakashimu to oboete yume same
owarinu 數千萬有情令聞之覺夢悟了¹²

Following is a version of an English translation:¹³

[Opening prose section, Voice A]

Kuse Daibosatsu 救世大菩薩 [Kannon] of Rokkakudō took the form of a monk with well-proportioned features, wearing a white robe. Sitting straight on a large white lotus, he told Zenshin 善信 [an alternate name for Shinran]:

¹² The *kanji* text and Japanese readings are provided in Hiramatsu 1996, pp. 125–27 as well as Inoue 2005. The pronunciations follow those given as *furigana* preserved in the original manuscript by Shinbutsu. However, as Dr. Michael Conway has emphasized, for one term—玉女, the precious-stone woman—Shinbutsu's original reading, following older Buddhist usages, was *gyokunyo* rather than *gyokujo* which became common later. This article has retained Shinbutsu's original *gyokunyo* reading throughout.

¹³ Largely, but not entirely, following Inoue 1993.

[*Nyobonge* verse, Voice B]

(a) If any practitioner(s), because of his/their past karma, commit(s) *nyobon* [noncompliance with the system of Buddhist monastic precepts concerning contact with women]

(b) I will take on the bodily form of a *gyokunyo* 玉女 [a precious-stone woman, a noble, life-preserving deity] and accommodate the rule-breaking.¹⁴

(c) I will adorn him/them all his/their life

(d) Leading him/them at death, I will cause him/them to be born in Gokuraku 極樂 [the Land of Bliss].¹⁵

[Closing prose section, Voice A]

Having recited the verse, the bodhisattva continued, saying, “This is my sworn vow. Let all the living beings be preached to and understand about it.” By that command, I realized that millions of sentient beings must be made to hear the vow. I was awakened from, and by means of, the dream.

The Japanese text is not transparent.

(1) The reference to “practitioner” is ambiguous as to number; it can be singular or plural.

(2) *Nyobon* 女犯 refers to noncompliance with the monastic rule regarding contact with women according to the *vinaya*; this may indicate, but is not always confined to, actual sexual intercourse.¹⁶ The Japanese verb *okasu* (*bon*

¹⁴ Literally “be transgressed on,” i.e., “receive,” absorb” the violation: an intransitive, passive verb form in Japanese.

¹⁵ The letters (a), (b), etc., before the verses have been inserted by the author for convenience of reference.

¹⁶ Buddhist Chinese has a vocabulary of terms, sometimes correlatable with Sanskrit, including *fujain* 不邪淫, *fujain* 不邪婬, *inkai* 淫戒, *jainkai* 邪淫戒, which refer to sexual misconduct or bad sexual behavior rather generically, especially in connection with the five or ten precepts for laymen (Skt. *śīla*; Jp. *kai* 戒). The terms can mean sexual activity at the wrong times, or the wrong kinds, or in sacred places; they do not refer purely to celibacy or a rule of physical non-contact with the opposite sex. *Nyobon* refers more specifically to the breaking of the monastic rules (i.e., Skt. *vinaya*; Jp. *ritsu* 律, the full set of precepts for the monastic community) regarding contact with women by monks; this does include physical sexual contact. See the *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism*, s.v. “*jainkai*” 邪淫戒, “*kai*” 戒, “*ritsu*” 律, “*nyobon*” 女犯, accessed 21 November 2012, <http://www.buddhism-dict.net/ddb/>. According to the *Digital Dictionary*, the straightforward *vinaya*-related meaning of *nyobon* is attested in ten specialty Buddhist dictionaries; see also the second edition of the *Nihon kokugo daijiten*

犯 in *nyobon*) had as its primary meaning simply the breaking of rules.¹⁷ In the *vinaya* context, *nyobon* was an offense against the authority of the sangha tradition and Shinran's fellow members of the sangha, i.e., it was not an offense against women.

(3) The compound term *gyokunyo* 玉女 (Ch. *yunü*; Skt. *strī-ratna*; more commonly read *gyokujo* in Japanese), literally “precious-stone woman” has a history as a floating signifier that appeared in both Taoist and Buddhist literatures and was polysemic and ambiguous.¹⁸ Since the *Muki* is an isolated bit of text, the original meaning of *gyokunyo* in it is probably impossible to pin down, but a key question is the extent to which the *gyokunyo* in this context may have been a sexualized figure. If the *gyokunyo* was, throughout the larger sphere of formal Buddhist and Taoist literatures, infrequently presented as the object of male libidinous sexual desire, then it weakens any tendency to understand the *gyokunyo*'s “accommodation of transgression” in the *Muki* in terms (even symbolically) of a physical sexual act. A lexicographical survey of this term is useful.

In general classical Chinese usage, the compound *gyokunyo* actually most often referred to a variety of grass. However, the second commonest signification was a female Taoist immortal. The compound was meant as an honorific form of address to a woman, a beautiful woman, a consort granted by the Chinese emperor, or praise of someone as jewel-like. Heian-period Japanese displayed the two Chinese usages especially referring to honored beautiful women and to a female immortal.¹⁹

In Taoist literature specifically, the *gyokunyo* showed up from a very early stage to designate female immortals; later Taoist scriptures abounded with *gyokunyo* of all types and descriptions, usually attired in splendid costumes.

日本国語大辞典 (2000–2002) and the sixth edition of the *Kōjien* 広辞苑 (2008), s.v. *nyobon*; and *Dai kanwa jiten* 大漢和辞典, by Morohashi Tetsuji 諸橋轍次, vol. 3, p. 621. Only secondarily (although this did happen as early as the Heian period) did the term develop an extended general or popular meaning of any physical sexual contact with women which shifted the primary emphasis from the *vinaya* (and all that was there implied) to “sex with women” in general. (Nelson's dictionary defines *nyobon* charmingly, if inaccurately, as a “priest's clandestine romance.” See the second revised edition of Andrew Nelson's *The Modern Reader's Japanese-English Character Dictionary*.)

¹⁷ As also indicated in the cited dictionaries, the meaning of *okasu* as rape or sexual assault is secondary or tertiary.

¹⁸ In contrast to Dobbins, Faure recognizes that the term is so problematic that he devotes several specific pages to it in Faure 2003. (See the discussion below in this article.)

¹⁹ *Dai kanwa jiten*, vol. 7, pp. 805–6; *Nihon kokugo daijiten*, second edition, s.v. “*gyokujo*” 玉女. Cf. Tanaka 2006, p. 79; Faure 2003, pp. 375–76.

Iconographically the Taoist *gyokunyo* was identified with the mother of Laozi 老子 (and thus of the Tao) and could become the celestial spouse of the practitioner in Taoist mystical practices. In folk or popular religion, *gyokunyo* was also a generic name for young female deities.²⁰ In Japan in pre-Heian or Heian times, Taoism was not imported systematically or officially but there was a degree of crossing over of various elements and thus Chinese folk beliefs such as *gyokunyo* often appeared in an amorphous bundle of practices.²¹ In later Japanese religious life the *gyokunyo* continued to appear sporadically in popular culture and rituals.²² In Shinran's own corpus of writings, outside of the *Muki* the only other references to *gyokunyo* appear in the last section of the *Kyōgyōshinshō* 教行信証 where the term appears incidentally in citations relating to Chinese Taoism; the meaning is clearly generically female immortal or deity.²³

Turning to Buddhist literature, the *gyokunyo* (along with terms like *hōnyo* 宝女 or *gyoku'nyohō* 玉女宝) is a precious-stone maiden, who is typically enumerated as one of the seven treasures or symbolic furnishings of the *cakravartin* wheel-turning king.²⁴ In the *Muki* verse a linkage between the *gyokunyo* figure and the bodhisattva Kannon seems to be of crucial importance, so the primary associations of Kannon in East Asia must be considered: compassion, protection, and manifestations of miraculous universal aid both material and spiritual, symbolized by the image of her jewel (Skt. *ratna* or *cintāmaṇi*, Jp. *nyoihō* 如意宝). In the great majority of Buddhist texts, Guanyin or Kannon was not the object of male sexual desire; that did not need to be the function of the deity in the role of protector. Hence the standard, iconic Guanyin was asexual, or non gender-identified, and in many

²⁰ Pregadio 2008, pp. 1206–7. As the encyclopedia article points out, “jade woman” is not the best translation since *gyoku* 玉 means precious stone in general.

²¹ Barrett 2000, Bock 1985, Kleine and Kohn 1999.

²² Sakade 1994. For example, in the ceremony for raising a building, a shelf or platform could be prepared for paying respects to a *gyokujo*; or in Edo-period popular culture, figures named *Tagan Gyokujo* 多願玉女 and *Shikisei Gyokujo* 色星玉女 were deities of good fortune (*Nihon kokugo daijiten*, second edition).

²³ *The Collected Works of Shinran*, v. 1. Rendered once in English as “jade ladies” (p. 284) and once as “wondrous hermit lady” (p. 276).

²⁴ The seven treasures are the wheel (*rin* 輪), elephants (*zō* 象), horses (*me* 馬), pearls (*su* 珠), able ministers of the treasury (*shuzōshin* 主藏臣), *gyokunyo* 玉女, and loyal generals (*shubyōshin* 主兵臣). See the *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism*, s.v. “shippō” 七宝, accessed 21 November 2012, <http://www.buddhism-dict.net/ddb/>. Overall, Buddhist vocabulary contains many compounds with a linguistic element for jewel or precious stone (*hō* 宝; Ch. *bao*; Skt. *ratna*) where the typical meaning is not necessarily sexual.

contexts where Guanyin was “feminized,” the deity was not meant to represent a “real” woman at all, but an idealized image. The iteration called White-robed Guanyin was a fertility goddess who was herself devoid of sexuality.²⁵

There are a few qualifications regarding sexualization. In a couple of Chinese popular stories (known as Mr. Ma’s Wife, and Fish-Basket Guanyin) the deity did appear as an alluring, sexualized character serving (momentarily, for the purposes of Buddhist *upāya*) as an object of male desire and gratification.²⁶ A few similar Japanese stories present a Kannon sexually gratifying men,²⁷ and in addition, and apparently the most directly textually connected to the *Muki*, Kannon could appear as a tantric, that is, possibly sexually yogic, deity in the manifestation known as Nyoirin Kannon. Nyoirin appears in the *Kakuzenshō* passage which is thought to be related to the *Muki*.²⁸

A highly detailed analysis of the multiple, albeit inconclusive, possibilities of the *gyokunyo* figure in Japan as it may relate to the *Muki* has been offered by Tanaka Takako²⁹ and will be partially summarized. Starting with the *Muki*, Tanaka agrees that a sexual motif is hard to miss, and that the *Kakuzenshō* passage seems to be in some respect a source text; but she also holds that ignoring the many wider implications suggested by the *Kakuzenshō* link is unsatisfactorily superficial. Following up one broad net of ideas, Shinran did willy-nilly reflect his tantric *mikkyō* 密教 background. The *gyokunyo* in the *Muki* might plausibly be Nyoirin Kannon, which might entail the tantric idea of “conversion” through sexuality and desire. But the lexicographical meanings of *gyokunyo* and the meanings of the figure in some other Japanese Buddhist-related records (including various texts which are not canonical) are still polysemic. In the dreams of the monk Jien 慈円 (1155–1225), the *gyokunyo* is a kind of regalia, a metaphor for treasure; there are associations with ancient Shinto myth and kingship; the *gyokunyo* also shows up in the dreams of the monk Myōe 明恵 (1173–1232). The *gyokunyo*’s various esoteric and sexual connections had a strong folk or popular character, and

²⁵ Yü 2001, pp. 6, 11, 418, 492. Buddhist goddesses in India represent all kinds of powers and energies of human life, but responding to male-oriented, Freudian libidinous sexuality as such is not one of the chief themes. This is also the case for the deity Tara in Tibetan tradition. (Shaw 2006, Pushpendra Kumar 1992.) Dobbins too discusses Kannon in Japan in terms of a protector deity; and Shinran had his own devotion to Kannon (Dobbins 2004, pp. 141–42).

²⁶ Broadly, the theme of sexuality as *upāya* appears occasionally in various Mahayana literature. Yü 2001, pp. 420–36; Stein 1986, pp. 54–61.

²⁷ Faure 1998, pp. 118–23. He also mentions that in Tibetan tantra, a version of Avalokiteśvara can subdue demons by copulating with them (although in this instance one wonders if the demons were really volunteers . . .).

²⁸ Faure, Yü, and Stein all draw attention to this thread.

²⁹ Tanaka 2006, pp. 75–112.

as it was known in medieval Japan the figure seems to have been a hybrid Japanese product.

Meanwhile, in a second broad net of ideas, the *gyokunyo* is associated with the likes of the deity Butsugen Butsumo Nyorai 仏眼仏母如来.³⁰ The connections here too are mostly tantric, but the emphasis is about the parental, maternal, protective aspect of Buddhas. Further, since Shinran was a thinker located in the midst of medieval *shinbutsu* 神仏 (Shinto-Buddhist) religiosity, the *Muki* was clearly influenced by the religion of the cult of Shōtoku; the *gyokunyo* figure links Shōtoku and Shinran. A further connection is the tradition of *chigo* 児 (young male monastic acolytes) on Mt. Hiei, who were associated with the tutelary deities of that mountain. In this polyanimistic world, the protective deities Kannon and Shōtoku, and others, could be functionally interchangeable. However the Shōtoku figure was not sexualized, but rather seems to have transcended sexual differentiation. Indeed Tanaka offers a culturalist argument to the effect that in Japan protectiveness or maternity was a quality displayed by both parents in a family and thus transgender in its nature. A text called the *Byōkutsuge* 廟窟偈 associated with Shōtoku Taishi presents the prince's mother and sister as Buddhas within the family, which suggests the possibility of a vision of mutual buddhahood in Shinran's own familial unit. Within the Shōtoku cult which was associated with Shinshū over a long period of time also existed several female characters who served as Shōtoku's wet nurses, and the persistence of this complex in association with Shin Buddhism showed the need (and fact) regarding the incorporation of conceptions of maternity in the sect. The image of Tamahi 玉日 (Shinran's possibly mythical first wife) may be linked to the *gyokunyo* in the *Muki*. Thus, despite certain ambiguities (monastic homosexuality, and the idea that maternal love and heterosexual libidinous love might be combined), the weight in this second semantic net is much more on protectiveness rather than (for example) fertility.

Tanaka concludes that what the *gyokunyo* in the *Muki* most essentially displays, despite certain possible subsidiary ideas of sexuality, was Shinran's conception of "women" as real, protective, and supportive. From a contemporary feminist point of view of course this is not about personal individualization, and the male gaze is still dominant, but what is visible here is that the early *gyokunyo* of folk religion and shamanism went through

³⁰ The basic meaning is goddess of the Buddha's eye, which is an alternative rendering of *butsugenson* 仏眼尊 (Skt. *buddha-locanī*) and a number of other terms used in esotericism for the source or mother of all wisdom from whom all Buddhas and bodhisattvas are born (*Digital Dictionary of Buddhism*, s.v. "*butsugen butsumo*" 仏眼仏母, accessed 21 November 2012, <http://www.buddhism-dict.net/ddb/>).

an evolution shifting it towards meanings of personal liberation as in Shinran, with the constant attribute of the figure being only (a polysemic) protectiveness. Shintoesque interpretations of the female, as in *minzokugaku* 民俗学 for example, which identify the Female as a source of cosmic fertility and so forth, mark a form of social hierarchicalization differing from Shinran's worldview. Shinran's shift in contrast shows that female fertility is not required for the manifestation of a female spiritual power, power which is in any case a socio-cultural product, not a derivative of some mystic universal.

The theme of protectiveness, unlike tantric sexuality, does have its deep echoes in what becomes later ordinary Shin sect doctrine, and that emphasis would seem to reduce expectations about the "sexuality" of the revelatory communication in the dream. Yet even without sexuality, in the end the *gyokunyo* remains perhaps ambiguous in other ways. The *gyokunyo* can represent Shinran's larger religious experience, that is his transformation to a different kind of imaginary which transcended the world of Mt. Hiei.³¹ But such a visionary figure must also be seen as part of an inherited Buddhist environment which routinely produced visionary experiences of deities, and its manifestation must indicate support for the practitioner in the form of a female bodhisattva or a *keshin* 化身 of a bodhisattva. That idea seems to have emerged anciently from earlier practices of contacts with female deities, and although the visions involved male practitioners, there may be a connection with women in general becoming Buddhas.³² Other links to inherited Buddhism are more matters of inference yet cannot be entirely ignored either. The conception of female *keshin* of bodhisattvas may be associated with sovereignty and royal power, interests which may have accompanied the eleventh-century increase of married priests with temples and children who became their hereditary successors (see below). The *gyokunyo* may point to a nexus of symbols and ideas relating to Buddha relics and royal power, not necessarily operant in terms of generic magical animism and fertility, but rather in terms of Buddhist religious charisma and authority, such as that related to Shōtoku Taishi, who was well known to Shinran.³³ But because Shinran (and the orthodox Shin Buddhist doctrines which were built on his works) were silent about such matters these ideas were not clearly articulated in the Shin sect and it is uncertain how much weight can be placed on them.

³¹ Mōri 1990.

³² Nishiguchi 2006b.

³³ Nishiguchi 2006a.

Besides the three main vocabulary challenges noted above, further issues problematize any simple or monothematic “sexualized” reading of the *Muki*.

Time of composition: The composition of the *Muki* text occurred late in Shinran's lifetime. The passage in the *Kakuzenshō* to which the *Muki* is now thought to refer is known to have not been completed until around 1213 to 1219 in Kyoto.³⁴ At that period Shinran was living in the Kantō, so it was sometime considerably later that he apparently used the Shingon book to look up the reference to the statue of Nyoirin Kannon in the *Rokkakudō*. The *Muki* composition seems to have been associated with the writing of the Shōtoku *wasan*, which was also done when Shinran was mining a variety of texts for his final writings in Kyoto, so the textual connection must place the composition of the text in Shinran's late life (c. 1255–1258, in his eighties).³⁵ This fact of chronology means that the text is unlikely to be a record of youthful hormones.

Formality of genre: The genre of the piece is not spontaneous, but represents a carefully polished piece of writing assembled in the self-conscious literary format of a public prophetic declaration. (It was not a guilty midnight entry scribbled in code in a secret illicit diary found later under a rock on Mt. Hiei.) The central *Nyobonge* verse in its whole original context is intentionally framed before and after by the passages of *kanbun* 漢文 prose, giving the piece two distinct voices, i.e., one, Shinran's prose narrative, enfolding a second, Kannon's verse revelation. The full ensemble seems to present a generalized vow by Kannon which is not directed specifically to Shinran. The message is in accordance with traditional types of rhetoric in Pure Land Buddhist texts.³⁶ The proclamatory format of the *Muki* raises a core question: why was a dream presented in the form of a general public proclamation? If it was about personal sexual frustration, why the formal presentation as a proclamation with public social consequences?³⁷

Kannon or Shōtoku?: Despite what the recorded *Muki* text seems to indicate, it is not unambiguously clear that the visionary figure met in the dream was (the female) Kannon Bosatsu. The complicating evidence is found in the third of Eshinni's famous letters, which mentions the dream. While this was presumably not the official formal statement that Shinran wanted to leave behind, according to the readings of many scholars, Eshinni reported that

³⁴ The earlier date is from the *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism*, s.v. “*Kakuzenshō*,” the latter date from Inoue 1993.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Cf. Inoue 2005, p. 26

Shinran encountered Shōtoku Taishi, not Kannon, at Rokkakudō.³⁸ Recent scholarship has demonstrated that Shōtoku repeatedly appears in Shinran's spiritual biography and apparently had a much greater or more frequent role to play than Kannon in Shinran's religious imagination.³⁹ Dobbins has argued that there would be no significant difference between Shōtoku and Kannon regarding the nature of the Rokkakudō dream revelation.⁴⁰ However, in the case where the transmitter of the revelation would be understood as Shōtoku, the dream would seem to require a gender crossover in which (should a literal sexual interpretation of *gyokunyo* be applied) the male Shōtoku would transform into a female deity to provide the libidinal gratification for Shinran.

The *Godenshō*'s mission to the Eastern Provinces: Finally, for centuries almost the entire Japanese membership of the Honganji 本願寺 temple network encountered Shinran's dream in a context which was focused away from a sexualized interpretation. That context was the formal chronological biography of Shinran called the *Godenshō* written by Kakunyo, which was intoned as the ritual centerpiece of Hōonkō 報恩講 celebrations for Shinran's memory. Two features of the *Godenshō* text pointed away from sex. The first was that in composing the biography, Kakunyo confused the likely order of events in Shinran's life. At the time he put the *Godenshō* on paper, he mis-situated the Rokkakudō dream in 1203 *after* Shinran had already left Mt. Hiei and had previously gone to join Hōnen's circle.⁴¹ The second reason was that the version of the dream given in the *Godenshō* included additional lines of text, not present in the *Muki*, which suggested that the purpose of the dream was to declaim the opening of the new Pure Land teaching to beings in the Eastern Provinces of Japan, as follows:

³⁸ The difficulty here is that the short passage of the Eshinni letter in question is linguistically unclear. On the ambiguity, see discussion in Kiyomoto 1989, especially p. 194; see also Dobbins 2004, pp. 26, 171. In any case the *Muki* certainly involves some intimate relation to Shōtoku. According to Hirose 2001, the Eshinni passage may alternatively mean that Shinran brought with him to the Rokkakudō retreat the text attributed to Shōtoku called the *Byōkutsuge*, which served as inspiration or stimulus. (Cf. Tanaka 2006, p. 75.)

³⁹ Lee 2007, pp. 13–21; Dobbins 1990, pp. 185–89; Dobbins 2004, p. 137; Hirose 2001.

⁴⁰ Dobbins 2004, p. 100. For a contrasting attitude, see Imai 2002.

⁴¹ This explanation was a discovery presented by Akamatsu 1961. It is thought that Kakunyo later understood and partly corrected the discrepancy but did not properly re-order the events in his standardized biographical text. (Inoue 1993; see also the summary by Dobbins 1989, pp. 24, 181.) The point of course is that the *Godenshō* chronology, correct or not, blunts the implication that Shinran departed from Mt. Hiei (joined Hōnen) after, or because, Shinran had received a promise of future sexual gratification via Kannon.

(closing prose section, Voice A: words in italics below are the part not in the *Muki* but unique to the *Godenshō* text)

Having recited the verse, the bodhisattva continued, saying, “This is my sworn vow. Let all the living beings be preached to and understand about it.” *At that time Zenshin [Shinran], still in the dream, facing toward the front of the temple building, looked in an eastward direction, and there were jagged mountains. On the high mountains thousands and millions of sentient beings were massed together.* By that command [of the bodhisattva], I realized that *the millions of sentient beings gathered on the mountains* must be made to hear the vow. I was awakened from, and by means of, the dream.⁴²

Some General Reflections on Religious Dreams

Since the conventional wisdom on Shinran's dream tends to display a certain narrowing of perspective as noted at the beginning of this article, it may also be helpful to provide some very brief, heuristic background gestures towards two areas of knowledge which are relevant: general theories regarding religion and dreams, including Buddhism and dreams; and comparisons with emergent Protestant Christianity in Europe, especially Luther.

As a general principle, religious dreaming has an extremely wide range of topical reference. Bulkeley's survey work identified some thirteen primary recurrent themes or tropes in such dreaming, including the dead, snakes, gods, nightmares, flying, lucidity, creativity, healing, prophecy, rituals, initiation, and conversion. Sexuality is only one among these.⁴³ It is true that in dreams sexual events are extremely common and often highly disturbing, with much frustration and blocking, and erotically stimulating dreams have occurred in every culture.⁴⁴ Yet little about dream theory seen broadly suggests that religious dreaming can be expected to be centrally, or even very frequently, concerned with genital sex per se. Chief emphasis must be put instead on dreams in their role as a “potential source of visionary insight, creative inspiration, and expanded self-awareness.”⁴⁵ Over a vast span of

⁴² Shinshū Shōgyō Zensho Hensanjo 1979, p. 640; Inoue 1993. Dobbins included this line in his translation of the *Muki* passage from the *Godenshō* (1990, pp. 184–85) but it does not appear in his 2004 book.

⁴³ Bulkeley 1995; see also Bulkeley 2001, 1997, and 1994.

⁴⁴ Bulkeley 1995, pp. 55–66; Bulkeley 2008, pp. 167–68.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

human history, dreams have been an accepted mode of cognition concerning the nature of consciousness, methods of religious insight, and sources of religious authority:

The same metaphor-making powers of cognition that produce language, culture, and artistic creativity in waking life are also active in sleep and dreaming, and the challenge for the interpreter (whether the dreamer or someone else) is to discover the strongest and most useful metaphorical connections between the dream and the individual's waking life. Traditions using the metaphorical approach have generally recognized that interpretation always depends on the personal circumstances of the dreamer. The same dream can mean different things for different people, and every symbol has multiple dimensions of significance. A metaphorical interpretation is tested and judged by its coherence, plausibility, gut-level intuitive response (the "aha" experience), and pragmatic fruits in waking life.⁴⁶

Although not voluminous, a helpful body of literature exists which specifically treats Buddhism and dreams. The primary historical associations of dreaming and Buddhism concern encounters with an Awakened One, beginning with Queen Māyā's conception dream before the birth of Śākyamuni,⁴⁷ but much of the historical evidence about Buddhism and dreaming is fragmentary. The Japanese monk Myōe wrote down some notable dreams involving relations with women, but reported them rather matter-of-factly.⁴⁸ One of the strongest recurrent reasons for Buddhist interest towards dreams was how they could be used to fuel an epistemological skepticism about the allegedly "stable" nature of reality. For Buddhist cultures, divisions between waking and dreaming forms of cognition have not been perfectly clear.⁴⁹

The most conspicuous monographic study, by Young, deals with Tibetan Buddhism, whose shamanic character meant that visionary experience had a prominent place. A major conclusion of the author is that Buddhist dream-

⁴⁶ Bulkeley 2008, pp. 277–78.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 79–109.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 97; Tanabe 1992. Bulkeley provides one mention, in passing, of a *single* Chinese text treating sexual desire in dreaming (Bulkeley 2008, p. 94).

⁴⁹ Along with the other research cited here, this has clearly been the continuing tone of modern apologetics, for example those associated with the Dalai Lama (Bstan-'dzin-rgya-mtsho 1997).

ing has always been highly variable and contextual. Nevertheless, a key positive generalization is that dreams were often associated with religious innovation.⁵⁰ Other useful observations are that typically dreams in a society like that of Tibet are not understood as rooted in some personal subconscious (the subconscious which is usually assumed in modern “Freudian” notions of dreaming which focus on personal sexual drives) but are rather seen as expressions of impersonal *external* forces. Since dreams are experienced as coming from someplace external to the dreamer, such as a divine or demonic source, a dream is “seen” not “had”; it is given to the dreamer and not created by the dreamer him/herself. Dream knowledge is often beyond everyday spatial and temporal interests, involving receipt of future prophecies, communication with deities, or contact with trans-normal realms.⁵¹

Tibetan men, at least in their function as Buddhist dreamers, commonly encountered women in roles other than objects of sexual desire. “Women” were strong figures, socially, psychologically, and imaginatively. Female characters (human and divine) appeared with mostly friendly connotations but could also be fearsome. *Dakini* female beings possessed great spiritual power. They protected Buddhist teachings, could be life givers and healers, could guide death transitions, and could bestow *siddhis* (supernormal powers). Male dependence on a female guide in the religious quest is a global theme in world religion and mythology.⁵²

The Tibetan background was quite analogous to the *mikkyō* environment with which Shinran had grown up on Mt. Hiei for twenty years. In addition, it is clear that a very wide range of dream experience has existed inside even the discourse of Pure Land thought.⁵³

⁵⁰ Young 1999, p. 117.

⁵¹ It was traditional in Tibetan Buddhism for teachers to be able to meet earlier teachers in dreams, so that dreams are vital to the functioning of sacred biography as well (Ibid., pp. 2, 4, 11, 44, 107, 138). A qualifying theme is that in such parts of the later Mahayana tradition, dreaming acquired a more important status than in early Buddhism. Earlier Buddhist doctrines suggested that dreaming would cease at the highest levels of Buddhist mental attainment. (Ibid., pp. 46, 193, 199, 207.)

⁵² Ibid., pp. 147–62. Of course the extant “records” about Tibetan visionary events present “the female” as viewed through lenses of male experience, and this sort of possible limitation or bias cannot be separated from the *Muki* either, but this does not indicate that the male “use” of the “female” was primarily sexual. It cannot be demonstrated that Avalokiteśvara in Tibet was primarily a sexualized figure.

⁵³ Najima 2009.

Regarding a few points of heuristic comparison with Protestant Christianity in Europe: in general the Christian problematic of sexuality and gender was tremendously more complex than the Japanese Buddhist one. Long-standing Christian problems included how to interpret female figures from the Bible (especially Mary), doctrines on marriage and the family and childbirth, sexual asceticism, and complexes of notions regarding ontological “femaleness” paired with notions regarding “maleness.”⁵⁴ Taking Luther particularly as a primary Christian historical reform thinker, it is striking how much information we have regarding his individual concerns about sex. The matter was both essential for him and contradictory and conflicted. He was theologically set against same-sex relations and the ordination of women; it was theologically (not just practically) important that sex be confined within marriage; marriage was a prime church issue; all sexual desire was infected by the specific Christian concept of sin (not some vague Buddhist *duḥkha*);⁵⁵ and so on, pervading the whole pre-modern (and sometimes modern) landscape of Euro-American culture. Christianity was tremendously entangled with the sexuality of the whole population both before and after the Protestant Reformation.⁵⁶

Two summary comments are important here. First, the extent to which inapplicable European assumptions have seeped into treatments of pre-modern Japanese cultural history over the course of the twentieth century has probably been inadequately addressed.⁵⁷ A suggestion needs to be taken very seriously that a strong but illegitimate tendency exists to carry into Japanese Buddhism and the perceptions of women in pre-modern Japan a network of concerns and assumptions that derive from the European Christian historical context narrowly and specifically. There is simply no analogue in Japanese Buddhism for most Christian assumptions.⁵⁸ Secondly, in

⁵⁴ E.g., Frassetto 1998, Hendrix and Karant-Nunn 2008. By necessity in European and Christian studies (including Reformation studies) there is an enormous mass of research on women, family, gender, and sexuality because the subject is so extraordinarily convoluted in the Western traditions.

⁵⁵ On Luther and women see, for few examples, Classen and Settle 1991, Karant-Nunn and Wiesner-Hanks 2003, Karant-Nunn 2008, Wiesner-Hanks 2008, Witte 1986, Fudge 2003.

⁵⁶ On pre-modern Christianity’s dominant negative historical attitude to sex for *all* members of the Christian community, see Jordan 2002.

⁵⁷ On the modern transformation of Japanese sexual attitudes, see Frühstück 2003.

⁵⁸ Even religious studies within the United States has been distorted. Views of sexuality in the American field were for long strongly dominated by Christianity, especially British Protestant attitudes, despite the actual diversity of the US population. (Taves 1997.) The principle is general: Euro-American scholars have even succeeded in imposing illegitimate

spite of the far greater concerns about sexuality in the Christian European traditions, sex was not the determining factor of the Protestant Reformation. Historians all know that Luther was very concerned, and often troubled, about sexuality, but they also all know that Luther's thought triggered a reformation in European Christianity because of extremely synthetic, wide-ranging shifts in authority in European civilization which has subsequently intertwined religion with economics, politics, and everything else for the past half-millennium. Thus, in European studies the category of sexuality is not usually overexaggerated; that is, generally historians do not think the vast phenomena of Protestant Reformation and European modernity for the past five centuries are very usefully or interestingly explained by a mono-causal resort to Luther's abandonment of certain of his monastic vows.

Currents of Interpretation of the Muki

The Rokkakudō dream episode which is the subject of the *Muki* is generally accepted as a turning point in Shinran's religious experience. The question is, what was the core issue in the turning? To start with, one ought to reiterate that the dream taps a complex, incompletely recorded thirteenth-century medieval Japanese semantic/symbolic network which we do not understand well today.⁵⁹ The event referred to in the text was apparently a visionary or samadhic altered-consciousness experience of some kind, drawing on the multivalent symbolism of Kannon (who apparently can morph back and forth with Shōtoku Taishi) and the even more ambiguous *gyokunyo*. As might be expected, even in pre-modern Japan different interpretations arose.

So, at least six main clusters of possible meaning have been attributed to the dream, of which a number have been hinted at already in the discussion. (NB: this heuristic separation does not exclude the possibility that they might to some extent overlap each other; it might also be noted that there are at least thirteen different Japanese commentators on the meaning of the dream⁶⁰ so this article does not purport to be a complete review, but only a foray.) To summarize: (1) The dream is about a need for sexual release in the most narrow and literal sense, relating specifically to Shinran's own personal sexual appetites and his libidinal frustration as a Buddhist monk. (2)

Christian assumptions on neighboring Near Eastern religions. (See, for example, Hunt 2009 on misapprehended Islam.)

⁵⁹ Which means it can be a blank slate for every kind of opinion and speculation. And of course, if the only tool you have is a hammer, everything in front of you becomes a nail.

⁶⁰ Najima 2009, chapter 6.

The dream uses *nyobon* as a metaphor for the generalized human suffering of all kinds which needs to be relieved by the Buddha. (3) Marked by the *gyokunyo*, the dream is an expression of the dominant animistic Japanese world of fertility and cosmological power, as associated with tantrism. (4) The dream is about sex and sexuality but in the quite different sociopolitical sense involving the legitimation of marriage, temple leadership families, and the institutionalization of Shinranian teachings in a family line or so-called blood lineage. (5) The dream is about Amida's manifestation in the world in the form of Shinran. (6) The dream is a complex, abstracted, processed symbolic message like many of Shinran's other writings, both articulating his personal transition into a new religious imaginary of *tariki* 他力 and announcing that this new path has been made available to everyone universally.⁶¹

The remainder of the article will examine these options briefly.

Nyobon: The Libidiously Troubled (but Eventually Happily Domesticated) Monk?

The most familiar and widespread interpretation of the dream, which might be humorously termed the "sexplanation," is a modern one which heavily focuses on alleging Shinran's all-too-human personal sexual appetite and its resolution in marriage.

Under such assumptions, Faure translated part of the *Nyobonge* on one occasion as:

"Because, due to the retribution of past karma,
{you}, the practitioner, are involved in sex,
I will manifest myself as a jade woman so that you can possess
me."⁶²

In a second attempt, Faure translated as:

"If you, the practitioner, due to past karma, must violate women,
I will become a jade woman to be violated by you."⁶³

Similarly, Dobbins translated as:

"If you the believer, because of the fruition of past *karma*, are
driven to make love to a woman,

⁶¹ There also exist, to be only mentioned here, detailed modern interpretations using Jungian theory (Mōri 1989; cf. Spiegelman and Miyuki 1985).

⁶² Faure 1998, p. 122.

⁶³ Faure 2003, pp. 205–6.

Then I shall take on the body of a beautiful woman to be ravished
by you.”⁶⁴

Both these scholars have followed the widely-accepted rather literal reading presuming the importance of Shinran's sexual appetite. Faure basically associates Shinran, along with the rest of the Japanese monastic establishment, with a whole semantic/experiential field of problematic sexual control.⁶⁵ Dobbins has argued that monks were commonly anxious about celibacy; hence the welcome message of the verse is that a path to the Pure Land would be found within sexual engagement. Kannon is an ideal image who displays an affinity with Amida but provides an image of female deity leading a priest to the Pure Land. The key point is that the female bodhisattva seems to accomplish this by manifesting sexuality instead of repressing it. Dobbins speculates that Shinran considered Eshinni, his wife and sexual partner, to be Kannon. The linkage of sexuality to religious liberation was not new, being familiar in tantric Buddhist traditions, but Dobbins argues that the verse suggests not only male sexual release, but a domestication of sex impulses, and in the context of long-term male-female relationships. Thus the message was a uniquely combined affirmation of sexuality, marriage, and family together: “the salvific power of sexual relations lay in their routinization.”⁶⁶

However, these lines of interpretation are more uncertain than indicated. Dobbins, for example, broaches no discussion of the lexicographical difficulties in the meaning of the *Nyobonge* verse. Further, to support the idea of the woman who sacrifices herself to male desire and becomes an instrument of salvation thereby, Dobbins refers to only one part of the analysis by Tanaka; for an example of Kannon as female lover, he refers only to the *Kakuzenshō*; he adopts from a single scholar, Endō Hajime,⁶⁷ the idea that Shinshū routinized an affirmation of marriage and family through sexuality; and (with the exception of Inoue Takami), he does not highlight any of the number of Japanese scholars who have problematized the sexual interpretation of the verse. Finally, despite his awareness regarding the sexual culture of Heian-Kamakura Japan⁶⁸ Dobbins insists unproblematically that classical celibate ideals still had identifiable power over individual clerics.

The conception of Shinran as heavily driven by sexual need may seem to have an obvious modern “common sense” to it. However, certain ideological

⁶⁴ Dobbins 2004, p. 101.

⁶⁵ Faure 1998, pp.122–23, 181–97. A recent Japanese representative of this view is Imai 2002, esp. p. 27.

⁶⁶ Dobbins 2004, pp. 101–3; quote from p. 103.

⁶⁷ E.g., Endō 2002.

⁶⁸ Dobbins 2004, pp. 76–77, 89.

extremes may point up a problem with the whole sexplanation approach. A few Western-oriented feminist thinkers, represented by Minamoto Junko⁶⁹ or Ōgoshi Aiko,⁷⁰ have developed views that can sometimes approach description as “Shinran the rapist.”⁷¹

⁶⁹ The early writings of Minamoto Junko observed ambiguity in Shinran regarding women (Shinran seemed to understand women as different in quality from men, but on the other hand to see both genders as the same), but she also returned to the idea of a fundamental egalitarian idea in Shinran below the apparent surface discrimination, restating basically a standard doctrinal position. A little later, she expressed a typical positive view of Shinran’s views on women: liberation of women implies liberation of men also, and both harmonize in *zaike* 在家 householder life. As the writer became absorbed in feminist thought, however, she began to strike a quite altered tone, describing the whole Japanese sexual culture, both Buddhist and Confucian, now and in the past, as uniformly permeated by negativity. In other writings, Minamoto drew connections between Shinran’s thought, Japanese war ideology, and motherhood as the mythic promotion of female oppression. She later concluded that modern intellectuals have ignored the sexual suffering in Shinran, probably because Jōdo Shinshū became a coopted patriarchal culture later. (Minamoto 1981, pp. 156–97; Minamoto 1986; Minamoto 1994, pp. 221–20; Minamoto 1996, pp. 40–42.) Such ultra-reductionist anti-Shinran feminist literature epitomizes the extent to which (even) some modern Japanese writers can be disconnected from the polyvalent complexity of the traditional culture.

⁷⁰ Ōgoshi also began with an apologetic stance, taking a positive view of Eshinni’s relationship with Shinran which suggested that Shinran established an I-Thou relationship with her and did not regard her mainly as a sex object. Eshinni greatly loved Shinran in a spiritual way and regarded him as her teacher and as a bodhisattva, so that Eshinni’s experience was the culmination of the religiosity of women. However, as Ōgoshi’s studies made her sensitive to patriarchal Western religion, she began to discuss the maternal principle embedded in bodhisattva beliefs as sexually neutering. She found something positive and exceptional in Shinran, who perceived the relationship between the person and Amida along the lines of a mother-child relationship, but Shinran’s original emphasis on the completely individual nature of this relationship became corrupted by the evolution of Shin tradition into its later communities or *kyōdōtai* 共同体 which appropriated generic secular Japanese values and enslaved women. Eventually Shin’s principle of *tariki shinjin* 他力信心 became none other than a psychologically internalized female subjection cleverly promoted by the Shin institution through its history. Ōgoshi maintained that all religions have routinely contained structural violence towards women, a fact manifested in traditional Buddhism by its ability to represent only two treatments of women, namely exclusion and service to men (which might include sexual submission). At this point Shinran’s dream is to be taken literally as a record about sexuality, and the female in the dream represents a sinful and defiled sex object to be used by men. Polluted women, becoming Kannon, save both men and themselves but through such subordination. All forms of Buddhism are thus complicit in traditions of prostitution and therefore ultimately the savagery of the WWII comfort women system. (Ōgoshi 1984; Ōgoshi 1990; Ōgoshi 1991, pp. 111–20. For reference to these writers see also Heidegger 2006.)

⁷¹ The more such thinkers studied Western feminism of a certain era and type in the 1980s and 1990s, the more they felt they understood Shinran’s *twelfth-century Buddhist texts* and

But is the text really most persuasively understood in terms of Shinran's need to satisfy his personal libido? Especially in marriage? Does it even point to marriage (a modern sexual partnership) at all? English translations of the verse, most particularly of the first two lines of the *Nyobonge* section, are much more subject to interpretation than English-language scholars have let on. In fundamental contrast, many Japanese scholars—the ones who are more situated, or saturated, in Shinran's actual texts and Buddhist language—have displayed a range of skeptical reactions to the unidimensional sexuality reading of the dream.

Some have agreed that perhaps sex was part of Shinran's dream experience, but stress that it cannot be a complete explanation.⁷² Thus Inoue Takami maintains that the narrow sexual argument about the *Muki* is plainly reductionist; what we have instead is a complex symbolic communication processed through a practice of Buddhist *sanmai* 三昧 (Skt. *samādhi*). He stresses that the *Muki* (especially the inner, *Nyobonge* section) has long suffered from isolation and loss of its full original context.⁷³ Dreams and *sanmai* had a long history of association in Buddhism dating back to India, sometimes even being functionally equivalent. (Typologies of dreams were given in the *Apidamo dapiposhalun* 阿毘達磨大毘婆沙論 [Skt. *Abhidharmamahāvibhāṣā-śāstra*, *Mahāvibhāṣā*].) The apparent problem posed by the term *nyobon* can be countered by arguing for *nyobon*'s broad *metaphorical* character, in which it stands not only for sexual suffering but all kinds of human suffering in general (*bonnō* 煩惱),⁷⁴ a move which enables Inoue to overcome the assumption that the *Muki* is primarily about Shinran's individual, personal situation.

the subsequent religion built on them. Their attitudes, which are merely an exaggerated version of the sexplanation, do not reflect an interest in adequate readings of either Buddhism or Japanese history as much as in exploiting selected Japanese historical materials for expressions of ideologies which arguably derive almost entirely from Western, not Asian, intellectual and social history. Especially in Ōgoshi, the structure of moral assumptions is a mirror reversal of traditional Buddhism, turning the presumptive karmic sin of women into the universal (original?) sin of men, and essentialistically imputing hostility and sexual violence to the whole Japanese civilization. Actually, such modernist critiques grew at the same time that the Honganji institutions in the postwar period finally began to respond better to women's concerns and to change some sect policies (Heidegger 2006). Kawahashi (2006) has noted the awkward relationship of religious studies and sharply ideologized feminism in Japan, but to a considerable extent, there is also an awkward relationship between feminism and documentary history, because ideological feminism is relatively uninterested in full-range concrete social research which gives the condition of women a fully nuanced inflection.

⁷² Taira 2001, pp. 92–111.

⁷³ Inoue 2005, pp. 22–24.

⁷⁴ See also Nagatani 2011.

Inoue's most intriguing suggestion is of a link to a metaphorical story about "injo 姪女 (lewd women) of the dream," an anecdote which appears in the *Banzhou sanmei jing* 般舟三昧經 (Jp. *Hanju sanmai kyō*; Skt. *Pratyutpanna-buddhasaṃmukhāvasthitasamādhi-sūtra*) and the *Dazhidulun* 大智度論 (Skt. *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra*) telling how three men travel in a dream to visit three distant pleasure-women, but later awaken, remember, and discover the illusion. In the former sutra the story is associated with attaining the non-retrogressive state, in the latter with the transformation of *bonnō* to *bodai* 菩提. In any event the real context, and the real communication, of the *Muki* must be understood in terms of the fullness of classical Buddhist doctrine proper.⁷⁵

It should not be hard to see how the communication could be symbolic rather than literal. Though Shinran's own idiom became Pure Land language, his entire training was spent in the heavily tantric-influenced atmosphere of Mt. Hiei, where it was commonplace that *mikkyō* language used sexual metaphors to refer to Buddhist philosophical and psychological issues that have nothing to do with genital sex per se. In the original context, it is plausible that "transgression" could be a pungent, quasi-physical metaphor for the interventionary compassion of Shōtoku/Kannon as discovered by Shinran, a metaphor marking Shinran's inner, youthful, perhaps traumatic shift from one deeply embedded frame of Buddhist authority to another, unconventional one. "Sex" can be a metaphor for all kinds of unconscious drives, not only genital sex. A symbolic reading of the verse then suggests that a variety of subconscious issues, including the sense of deeply embedded evil or existential wrongfulness with which Shinran's thought is characteristically concerned, are reconciled, or neutralized, or healed, or converted, or turned round, by the "transgressive" passion/compassion of Shōtoku/Kannon/Amida.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Inoue 2005. Indeed, though it is not the main topic here, Inoue argues that Shinran's dream as a whole is a mythic reiteration of the symbolism of the spiritual reorientation of Śākyamuni in a state of *samādhi* under the Bodhi tree. However, while honoring the deep immersion of Inoue's argument in the richness of Buddhist teaching, it also seems that at the lexicographical level *nyobon* as a term never attained any common usage anywhere in Buddhism as a general metaphor for *bonnō*, so if the verse meant this, it was a one-off example. Missing as such in Buddhist literature before Shinran, also (and more significantly) such a usage was never established even in the Shin Buddhist sectarian lexicon which was never shy about making up its own independent semantic patterns. In other words, in Shin tradition language suggesting any specifically "sexual" impurity as such, even metaphorically, becomes unimportant. (Reference to *injo* or the *injo* story does not appear in Shinran's works.)

⁷⁶ Or, in a slightly different vein, "sex" can be a metaphor for restoring the emotional, existential wholeness of a normal biological life, including childhood. (Campbell's 1996 study of Tibetan Buddhism raised the interesting question of distorted psychological development

Yet it might be possible to go considerably further; perhaps the sexplanation needs an even more fundamental redirection. Even when couched in a universalized form like Inoue's, there are reasons to be skeptical about elucidations which automatically presume any sort of libidinous sexual semantics of the dream, for anyone, in any modern sense. To be more explicit, since conventional medieval monastic concerns were dominantly about other factors, such as ritual sexual impurity and team membership, can modern libidinousness be imputed *at all* as the chief issue of *nyobon* in Shinran's era? If Shinran was struggling with a question of celibacy, was it necessarily in the terms we first expect? Perhaps difficulties in the interpretation can be resolved by returning to the simple historical meaning of *nyobon* in its plainest idiomatic sense of breaking monastic rules.

To ground the argument, some awareness of a longstanding rhetorical noise factor is helpful. In terms of polemical history the sexplanation for Shinran's dream is related to a long genealogy of cant criticism of Shinshū's nonmonastic Buddhism dating from the sixteenth century to the present which has been frequently re-enunciated by non-Buddhists. Indeed, the idea that Shin clerics must be immersed in sexual immorality has been a part of Western reactions to Shin since the Jesuit encounters of the sixteenth century and the Edo-period attacks of Hirata Atsutane 平田篤胤 (1776–1843).⁷⁷ Such critiques ignored Shin Buddhism's own doctrines. Then, as noted earlier, in the twentieth century, against a different hermeneutical background which included an effort on the part of major sectors of Japanese Buddhism to reorient themselves to the "original (monastic) Buddhism of Śākyamuni" which had achieved global cachet in part because of the intellectual hegemony of Western Buddhology, historian Akamatsu Toshihide 赤松俊英 (1907–1979), in spite of his own Shin affiliations, became the lead representative of the now mainstream psychologized, de-doctrinalized, "positivist" interpretation of Shinran focusing on a secular modernist idea of a struggle with sexuality and celibacy.⁷⁸

resulting from the monastic practice of inserting small boys [either those with mothers, or orphans like Shinran] in monastic life before the boys' maturity.)

⁷⁷ Jaffe 2001, pp. 13–14, 38–42, 53.

⁷⁸ Akamatsu 1961, pp. 40–69. The idea has spread in virtually all directions in contemporary Japan. For one example, the reputed spiritual gloom of Shinran, a piece of oral lore mentioned in a text by his great-grandson Zonkaku, has thus been attributed to a problem with sexuality rather than the usual Buddhist sense of suffering (Hiramatsu 1993). Shin's sometimes confused reception of influence from general (European) Buddhology is related to valid modernist concerns about the unification of all Buddhism and the like, but raises the question whether modern Shin scholars are necessarily always reliable guides to their own history.

This leads to three major underestimated historical objections to the sex-planation. The first of these inadequately clarified problems is that although Shinran was indeed a Buddhist monk for twenty years, his life unfolded against a common sexual background culture of pre-modern Japan which was very different from the twentieth century's. Goodwin has provided a review of the recent state of thinking about this sexuality in Heian Japan.⁷⁹ It was, in sum, a "society whose sexual taboos, marriage patterns, modes of economic exchange, and gender relations differed sharply from those in pre-modern Christian Europe and modern Japan."⁸⁰ Questions of "transgression" in sexual relationships ordinarily had little to do with sexuality in the narrow physical sense and much more with itinerancy (this is one reason why Heian prostitution is hard to define), with class boundaries, or with property. Women maintained considerable social power despite a gradual drift towards patriarchy. Marriage was poorly defined, fluid, and inconsistent. Sexual orthodoxy and heterodoxy were fuzzy. Objectified, materialized concerns about purity and pollution were pervasive. In legal codes, various terms for sexually-related rule-breaking (*midare* 乱れ, *midasu* 乱す, *okasu* 犯す) most fundamentally meant mischief and disorder. Christian cosmic concepts of "sin" relating to the physical body were essentially absent.⁸¹

The main exception was the special society of the Buddhist *vinaya*, but its exceptionality was only partial. Partial, because breaches of celibacy were undesirable but often tolerated.⁸² Partial, because much of pre-modern Buddhist monasticism was about purity and pollution concerns that were active in a pre-modern animistic setting which had little to do with modern "personal sexuality." The dominant issue was not bourgeois discipline of the body, but how monastic authority "depended on special powers of healing and magic thought to derive from asceticism."⁸³ Setsuwa tales concerned with the power of lust were probably chiefly concerned with establishing behavioral norms among clergy for those types of purposes, and Heian people were fascinated with sex and monks in the same way they were fascinated with demons, criminal pollution, supernormal powers, and thaumaturgy in their animistic universe. Furthermore, in practice outside of the (very) peculiar *vinaya* context, there was no clear dichotomy between Buddhist and indigenous beliefs

⁷⁹ Goodwin 2007, esp. pp. 49–61.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁸² Goodwin suggests that lust appears more as a force of nature than a feature under the control of human agency (p. 49). Her entire chapter 3 is devoted to purity and pollution issues.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

and practices.⁸⁴ Sacrality and fertility, with which Buddhists were also concerned, were commonly linked to sexuality and were actively performed in *matsuri* 祭り events. Everywhere in the background was the raucous rural sexuality of peasant Japan, a persistent aspect of life at least through the nineteenth century which is still residually revealed in Hōnen 豊年 festivals such as that at the town of Komaki 小牧 near Nagoya. In short, Heian *nyobon* clearly refers to control of sexuality in some manner, but the context cannot be understood as personal sexuality or libido in the modern sense.

A few Heian and Kamakura popular tales portray *asobi* (this was the general term for female sexual entertainers) as manifestations of bodhisattvas in Buddhist contexts, but these stories, ultimately relativizing the phenomenal world, tend to neutralize, not emphasize, female sexuality.⁸⁵ It would appear that the liberative protectiveness of Buddhist deities seems to have typically resided in a somewhat different field of concerns than everyday sexuality.

The second underemphasized objection is that *nyobon* was already common in Shinran's time and even in an essentially routinized mode. There is a great deal of evidence that throughout history Japanese adherence to the precepts about celibacy could be sporadic.⁸⁶ Sexual interpretations of the dream usually make the tacit assumption that Shinran, along with his thousands of colleagues on Mt. Hiei, was rigidly forced into sexual isolation and frustration by the Buddhist culture of his time as such, but recent research has revealed that this idea is not necessarily plausible.⁸⁷ The institutional circumstances were not necessarily so much sheer lust as the fact that Japanese Buddhism had long had a family dimension. Among the elites who dominated old Buddhism, there was a great deal of interaction between monks

⁸⁴ Goodwin 2007, p. 85.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 111–19. There is no lexicographical indication that the semantic network around Buddhist *gyokunyo* was entangled or overlapped with the semantic net around *asobi*, even though *asobi* were the female figures most conspicuously associated with the temptation of Buddhist monks in the tale literature.

⁸⁶ Faure 1998, especially pp. 144–206, which is all about clerical laxity; Jaffe 2001. Jaffe's overall picture was of centuries of ambivalence: *nyobon* was common enough through much of Japanese history (even during the more tightly controlled early modern period) but government authorities and monastic leaders still regarded it as officially transgressive. Prominent punishment for clerical violation of celibacy rules only appears much later, with Toyotomi Hideyoshi 豊臣秀吉 (1537–1598) and then afterwards in the Edo period. Notably Jaffe also argues that *nyobon* acquired its particularly *modern* pejorative sense only as a result of late Edo-period polemics over clerical marriage practices which had to do not with the long timeline, but with changing cultural politics at the end of the Edo period.

⁸⁷ Stone 2006, pp. 48–49; Dobbins 2004, p. 89.

and lineage members, including females. Concerns for property and power and the maintenance of government positions and income in the legal/governmental system, as much as sexual drives per se, seem to have involved many clerics in the creation of households and families; indeed the interests among aristocratic clerics involving family succession had been recognized formally since the Nara period (710–794). A normal part of this “family monastery” world was the *satobō* 里坊, settlements (most famously Sakamoto 坂本 below Mt. Hiei on the Lake Biwa side) where clerics maintained households and families at the foot of the mountain. *Satobō* began as retirement centers for monks, but eventually served as multi-functional staging areas for a range of interactions with the world outside of the monastery precincts proper (even serving for example as birthing hospices for aristocratic women). As the system evolved, the “monastic” ordained cleric could retain his official religious job while also maintaining a household and family and sustaining his webs of personal interconnections within other aristocratic families, the court, and the monasteries.⁸⁸

There is of course also abundant evidence for various other kinds of sex associated with medieval Japanese Buddhism. The Kumano *bikuni* 比丘尼 who earned money from “prostitution” and the married warrior monks or *sōhei* 僧兵 of Mt. Hiei were in the *mélange*. Further, the Mt. Hiei monastic environment proper was prominently shaped by pervasive customs of

⁸⁸ Conventionally, however, the clerical wives were not well recognized, being seen as no more than part of the private life of the *sōryō* 僧侶, even where the cleric was closely integrated into the ritual life of the local community. Nishiguchi 1987, pp. 184–218; see also an excellent short survey in Jaffe 2001, pp. 11–14. Taira (2001, pp. 92–111) has cited like Nishiguchi a number of cases which illustrate that the idea of *sōryō* in sexual or household relationships was already familiar: an example was Chōken 澄憲 (1126–1203), a quite famous scholar and preacher of the time, who had ten children, one of whom succeeded him in the famous *hereditary* Agui 安居院 lineage of preaching. The mother of one of his daughters was actually a member of the imperial household. Such circumstances were usually accepted without punishment by the court and the aristocratic families involved, especially in cases of possible succession of *sōryō* progeny to the throne. This sort of structure suggests of course that from a practical point of view at the elite level there was nothing exceptional about the later Honganji familial and succession practices except that the precepts had been neutralized doctrinally. Several Japanese scholars, observing that *nyobon* was not rare in Shinran’s time, have proposed an alternate sexual explanation for his doctrinal project by arguing that it was intended to create some kind of better justification for the clerical marriage situation in his time, in the sense of making the religious vision and teaching more congruent with actual behavior (e.g., Kōbai 2004). In this context, the idea that Shinran needed the Rokkakudō vision for the purpose of justifying genital sex has the order backwards; *nyobon* marriage practices had already preceded the doctrinal reformulations of Hōnen and Shinran.

physical relations among male clerics; Japanese *sōryō* homosexuality was routine.⁸⁹

Thus, as the historian Taira Masayuki has noted, this whole environment makes it unlikely that Shinran left Mt. Hiei because he had no access to sex or (perhaps) even no chance to form a household. If the main issue was just physical sex, why did Shinran like others not head off to Gion, or the neighboring monastic quarters, or find a peasant girl in the village, rather than undertake the much more radical act of joining Hōnen's circle and separating himself doctrinally, theoretically, and socially from the company of Mt. Hiei?⁹⁰ Are we to understand that Shinran went to the trouble of going on with the compilation of the *Kyōgyōshinshō* and other works through his entire life in order to rationalize his (presumptive) sexuality as a young man? Faure's cheerful discussion of monks violating the precepts actually, perhaps with unintentional irony, undermines any argument that Shinran could have been *primarily* wrapped up in sexual frustration, because it would appear that Shinran could have had women, if that was the only thing driving him. Indeed, within the whole Heian-Kamakura environment, it seems even strange to find something especially interestingly "transgressive" (lurid?) about Shinran's dream.⁹¹

And this leads to the third obstacle to the sexplanation, which is virtually totally ignored by interpreters of Shinran's dream, but which is probably the most brutal objection: in the entire corpus of Shinran's writing outside of the *Muki*, and then in the entire body of orthodox Shin Buddhist doctrinal development over the following centuries, focus on sexuality (and marriage) as such (i.e., as a uniquely problematic or religiously interesting moral or psychological issue) is simply *absent*. After Shinran's neutralization of the *vinaya* was accomplished, *nyobon* just *vanishes* as a concern. How could this be possible if the core motivation of Shinran's teaching had *anything* to do with sexuality in particular?

⁸⁹ E.g., Faure 1998, pp. 207–78; Pflugfelder 1999. Formally there were background rules in some Buddhist traditions about the technical prohibition of male homosexual activity, but concerns about *nyobon* were more prevalent.

⁹⁰ And according to a leading argument about chronology, it does not seem that Shinran was in a hurry to get married either. Although Hōnen is thought to have suggested marriage partners for those who needed them, it appears that Shinran did not marry for at least one or two years after joining Hōnen's group (Kōbai 2004, p. 84).

⁹¹ Faure 1998, p. 98ff. Oddly, Shinran is discussed in a chapter which opens with a discussion of madness, tantrism, and Tachikawa 立川 sect religion, a context where Shinran's teaching does not belong.

Pre-modern Japan was a different place. Modern scholars may prefer to assume a quality of modern (Freudian, bourgeois) libido in pre-modern Buddhist monks, but Freudian self-conscious bourgeois libido cannot exist in a monastic setting where the entire enfolding society and its consciousness lacks that particular notion of sexual tension. Shinran has to be understood as a twelfth- and thirteenth-century Japanese figure whose concerns were played out only against the sexual culture summarized by Goodwin, not against our own. Admittedly, Shinran's thought is somewhat confusing because it involved a degree of psychological interiority with regard to Buddhist issues *but without the anxiety about the body characteristic of European Christian culture*. Yet unnecessary anachronisms in the interpretation of Shinran point to the very large, and underdiscussed issue which still looms over Buddhist studies, which is that (with the partial exception of Shinshū and some later parts of Edo Buddhism) almost all the historical Buddhist traditions before the nineteenth century or so were substantially archaic (or more neutrally speaking, "different") in relation to our own in the twentieth century: they were animistic, monistic, and much less, or differently, psychologically internalized and subjective.

By abstaining from projecting modern libido into the center of the picture, it becomes easier to see that *nyobon* prohibitions could pivotally be about something different: an entire system of cosmology, ritual, and authority in Heian Japan.⁹² Noncompliance with the *vinaya* in the original context had wide-ranging implications going outside of any contemporary idea of personal sexuality: shamanic or visionary contact with deities; cosmic purity and pollution;⁹³ ritual simulation of the Buddha; accumulation of fungible thaumaturgical power in an animist-monist system of consciousness; support for a cosmologically conceived social order and state; the power of an aristocratic elite regime; and the creation of an institution of male brotherhood devoted

⁹² Is Faure, for example, really unaware of these distinctions? Perhaps he tips his hand at the opening of his 1998 book by revealing that a main stimulus for his investigation was Buddhist sexual scandals *in the modern United States*.

⁹³ In the polemics of later Edo Japanese Buddhist history, the act of *vinaya* noncompliance involving *nyobon* was paired up with that of meat-eating. The compound word *nikujiki-saitai* 肉食妻帯 indicated this pairing; the meat-eating violation might easily be placed first, ahead of the violation involving contact with women (Jaffe 2001). This points to concerns regarding ritual purity, something essentially different in nature from sexuality in the narrow, Freudian modern sense. Although *nikujiki-saitai* became polemically prominent only in the late Edo period, a hint of very longstanding associations between sex and meat as similarly transgressive appear already in relation to the *Muki*, for a copied fragment left behind by Shinran's disciple Shinbutsu suggests his interest in being permitted *nikujiki* as well as *nyobon* (Inoue 1993, 2005).

to those forms of spirituality.⁹⁴ Kikufuji⁹⁵ argues that the crucial point of *nyobon* is that it was part of a whole system of power relations: androcentric monasticism, *shōen* 庄園 estates, aristocratic regimes of control, even the elite's self-serving ideas about purity and pollution. In leaving Mt. Hiei, Shinran imaginatively shattered a whole interconnected sociopolitical structure.

The often confused semantics of *nyobon*—does it refer mainly to individual sexual intercourse, or mainly violation of the rules of a collective monastic system?—are related to the recurrent practice, even among academic scholars, of rendering the term *sōryo* by “monk” in English instead of by the more neutral term priest or cleric.⁹⁶ “Monk” conveys an unambiguous nuance of (Christian ascetic) sexual restraint and rule-following, which makes it hard to understand why the Japanese language continued to use the term *sōryo* in pre-modern history even for married men and even for men in the Shin organization. The problem is that in interpreting *nyobon* in terms of personal sex and *sōryo* as ascetic monk, the modern view tends to over-emphasize the individual, psychological sexual angle while minimizing the legal/political angle. Yet from the Asuka period (593–710) in Japan onwards the fundamental conception of *sōryo* was inseparable from the idea of an office in a system of political regimes and governmental authority. Subsequently in Tokugawa usage it remained a *mibun* 身分 or official legal status

⁹⁴ A review of the classic Indian understanding of the *vinaya nyobon* rule is beyond the scope of this article, but analysts of the *vinaya* have always pointed out that seminal emissions per se were not what constituted a man's violation of the rules. If these occurred in sleep, via nocturnal emission, no violation had occurred. Instead, the crucial matter of “downfall” was waking or conscious sexual congress with women. Thus the key issue may have been “political,” i.e., loyalty to and (practical) maintenance of the all-male (and child-free) sangha institution (Gyatso 2005). This contrasts with much of the Christian tradition, where *any* form of emission, waking or sleeping, could be considered a polluting sin. It was a standard obsession of ascetic self-control and broadly speaking the official Christian tradition was frequently fearful of dreaming on that account (Bulkeley 2008, pp. 167–91). This suggests that Christianity had a fundamentally different notion of the body (celibacy was a matter of control of “real bodies” whereas the Buddhist notion was “empty,” non-ontological), and that it is illegitimate to project tacit Christian notions of the body to a Buddhist setting, whether monastic or nonmonastic. The Protestant movement in Europe reformulated expectations about sexuality and the body for clerics, but also tended to generalize and universalize such theologized expectations outwards to the whole Christian membership. In Japan the outcome in Shin Buddhism after its neutralization of the *vinaya* was quite different: its own kind of moral consciousness was strong, but doctrinally programmatic expectations relating specifically to sexuality and the body, as such, disappeared for everyone.

⁹⁵ Kikufuji 1992. Shinran's thought was widely deconstructive, promoting the neutrality not only of the *vinaya* but of other gender distinctions.

⁹⁶ Jaffe 2001, pp. xvi–xvii, has a discussion of the use of *sō* 僧 (cleric) which parallels the argument here.

applying to both Shin priests and all the other (supposedly celibate) ones. When Shinran stated he was *hisō hizoku*—neither *sō* 僧 (recognized clerical status) nor *zoku* 俗 (recognized lay status) he was obviously not talking about sexual potency—his famous phrase in that case would imply, for example, that he had become some kind of neuter through physical injury. Instead, Shinran was referring to two politico-legal or socio-legal categories which existed in a binary relationship of complementary definition, and which from the Heian period were both implicated in the patterns of an ancient, cosmologically founded, conventional, aristocratically oriented authority. Modern Shin scholars, speaking genuinely for the tradition, have long articulated a perfectly clear argument that the real significance of Shinran's phrase *hisō hizoku* was as a kind of declaration of independence from the established power structures, both religious and secular.

Gyokunyo: *The Unrecognized Tantric Monk?*

A subsidiary but important question related to the sexplanation is this: is the *Muki* text really straightforwardly related to the Shingon text *Kakuzenshō*? That is, does the *Muki* therefore really necessarily, by citing the *gyokunyo*, implicate the semantic field of the sexual-yogic or fertility-oriented tantric Kannon Bosatsu?

Most scholars now accept Nabata's discovery that the Shingon *Kakuzenshō* text was somehow a proximate reference or inspiration⁹⁷ for Shinran's own *Muki* composition. The tantric *Kakuzenshō* conveys something like the following:

It is also told [in the sutra], "If a mind of wrong views [rejecting karmic causality] arises, and sexual desire is rampant, and degeneration must occur; then I, Nyoirin Kannon, will take the form of a *gyokunyo*, and become wife or concubine to him and make love. I will adorn him all his life with wealth and status, and let/cause him to do limitless good deeds. I will let/cause him to follow the Way to Buddhahood in the Western Pure Land of Bliss. Do not doubt it."⁹⁸

⁹⁷ As already noted, the *Byōkutsuge* might also have served as a reference or contextualizing text for the *Muki*, since that text has a somewhat related theme involving a marriage motif with Buddhist deities. (Endō 2002 or Hirose 2001 *inter alia*; see Dobbins 2004, p. 171, for one English version.)

⁹⁸ Based on Inoue 1993 and 2005. However, illustrating the indefiniteness of translations of these texts, Faure offers a somewhat different version in Faure 2003, p. 206. For example, in Faure's English, the *gyokunyo* and the man "produce love."

Citing Tanaka Takako's arguments only in part, Faure has insisted that Shinran's dream must be read against the background of Shingon thought, specifically the Nyoirin Kannon cult in tantric Shingon, and have identical implications. He has concentrated on the elliptical, mysterious image of the *gyokunyo* in the second line of the *Nyobonge* verse. He has noted that this image seems to express a rather complex, multi-factoral sexual semantics which includes not just Shinran's alleged personal ruttishness but also overtones of fertility and relic worship.⁹⁹ Such overtones might be thought of as "animistic" and reflective of the dominant field of pre-modern Japanese consciousness as a whole.¹⁰⁰ But crucially the purpose of Kannon's appearance is to "transmute sexual desire into a cause of rebirth in the Pure Land."¹⁰¹ In some Buddhist teachings, salvation comes from sex with a woman who is an avatar of a bodhisattva. As an added fillip, Faure proposes that the purpose of Shinran's dream was to spread among the people a Buddhist Nyoirin fertility cult which had originated in the monasteries. (At the time of the dream, a vogue of gender/sex rituals was emerging in certain elite monastic communities.) If Shinran is seen as part of that context, then, his historical distinctiveness was mainly found in the popularization of a tantric cult.¹⁰²

Faure's provocative suggestions are important. As noted by Tanaka in treating the *gyokunyo*, certainly broad connections between conventional Pure Land teachings and relics are clear. Among other things, relic worship was thought to enable birth in the Pure Land.¹⁰³ The image of an "animist" and quasi-tantric Shinran who was more a part of his medieval world than he was separate from it is a topic which has been explored in detail by Lee, for example, in relation to Shinran and Shōtoku Taishi.¹⁰⁴ The question can be tied to twentieth-century research about the extent to which there was a folk or vernacular Shin Buddhism which was not (or at least not uniformly) as much distinct from the broader environment of Japanese religion as Shin clerics wanted to make it (and which modern Shin apologists want it to be represented).

⁹⁹ Faure 2003, pp. 205–10.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Rambelli 2007.

¹⁰¹ Faure 2003, p. 206.

¹⁰² Similarly, Stein (1986, p. 38) claimed that the *Kakuzenshō* provides a point of contact between the sexualized Guanyin figure and Shinran. In his 2003 study, Faure was also concerned with feminist themes; particularly, does the *gyokunyo* provide a positive image of woman as religious initiator?

¹⁰³ Ruppert 2000, pp. 213–14.

¹⁰⁴ Lee 2007.

But the issue here is narrower: it is Shinran's own, original, formal religious writing. Unfortunately, even if Shinran to some extent "borrowed" from this verse in the Shingon manual, the tone of the *Kakuzenshō* is quite different from the *Muki* and there are significant variations in the details. The Shingon verse uses an explicit (even if tantrically symbolic) language of sexual desire, with terms such as "love" (*ai* 愛), wife, and concubine; it also refers to world degeneration. None of those items was adopted by Shinran. In the Shingon verse, there is no reference to *nyobon*, the technical term for precept-breaking. In the Shingon verse, the practitioner is not just "adorned" by the bodhisattva, but adorned specifically with wealth and status (which are dropped in Shinran's verse), and also encouraged to do limitless good deeds (*zenji* 善事, a concept associated with *jiriki* 自力 practice). The Shingon verse clarifies that the Rokkakudō statue was a Nyoirin Kannon (one of the six forms of Kannon), which was associated with wish-fulfilling gems and magical practices. Shinran changes the reference to Kuse (world-saving) Kannon.¹⁰⁵ As noted by Inoue, Shinran also added a reference to past karma (*shūhō* 宿報) which calls up the idea of the involuntariness of the practitioner. Shinran finally also closes his *Muki* composition with a double-entendre about being awakened both from and by the dream. In short, it is much more plausible to understand that Shinran's version of the verse is significantly modified in order to express his *tariki* doctrine.¹⁰⁶

The core objection to reading Shingon tantrism into Shinran's thought—granting that the diffuse Shin Buddhist tradition as a whole had somewhat more porous boundaries with other aspects of Japanese religions than its clerics wanted—is that a simple truism of Japanese religious studies remains that precisely the significant degree of divergences from other Japanese reli-

¹⁰⁵ Further, although the disconnect between the *Kakuzenshō* sphere and the Shinran sphere is mainly apparent in terms of these texts, it also seems that the image of Kannon in the Rokkakudō in 1201 was a two-armed Nyoirin in a white robe on a white lotus; most such images of that particular configuration *pre-dated* the introduction of *mikkyō* into Japan (Inoue 1993; Nabata 1988).

¹⁰⁶ Similarly, Taira (2001, pp. 92–111) notes the contrasting, differently nuanced meanings of the two texts. To use Buddhist language, whereas the *Kakuzenshō* lays out an idea of individual, relative ignorance, and of indirect, relative compassion, the *Nyobonge* presents an image of universal, absolute ignorance and direct, absolute compassion. Even if some direct carry-over of meaning from the *Kakuzenshō* passage to the *Muki* were assumed, and although the passage has Nyoirin Kannon manifesting as a *gyokunyo*, becoming wife or concubine, and engaging in "love" with the practitioner, the context is not ordinary libidinousness, but Taoist-tantric sexual yoga. This is simply not the same sort of experience as the personal sexuality which has come to be read into the *Muki* especially in the late twentieth century.

gion, especially a relative marginalization of *kami* religiosity, came to characterize orthodox Shin teaching in the long run. In spite of the interest that some of the early Shin groups seem to have revealed, Shin did not morph into a Tachikawaryū 立川流 with its emphatic sexual practices;¹⁰⁷ a proactive, quasi-tantric sexuality was not afterwards thematized in Shin teaching. *Pace* Faure, it would be far more persuasive, then, to read Shinran's *Muki* text not in congruence with the background of Shingon thought but rather in congruence with the background of *Shinran's own thought*. (Faure does not somehow seem to be able to imagine that Shinran's *Muki* could be read *against* an apparent "source" or reference text.¹⁰⁸) Shinran seriously altered the *Kakuzenshō* text for his own purposes in the *Muki*. He apparently examined the Shingon verse because he wanted some outside reference to the Nyoirin Kannon statue at the Rokkakudō, but he modified it freely in line with his procedures elsewhere in his compositions. After all, he created the *Muki* after many years of an intellectual practice (as in his creative anthology of citations the *Kyōgyōshinshō*) in which he borrowed citations from other Buddhist literature and recontextualized them in order to make them communicate his own ideas, that is, not necessarily the original contexts or ideas at all. It is completely implausible that Shinran was "nakedly" importing the sense of the *Kakuzenshō* into his own stylized account of the Rokkakudō dream-*samādhi*. Thus the *gyokunyo*, for example, can easily be understood as a "fossil" or place-holding holdover from the Shingon text, or as a marginal, non-tantric *keshin* of a bodhisattva which did not play any role in what would become standard Shin teaching.

The Clan Monk: Legitimizing Family and Lineage under a Buddhist Aegis?

If Shinran's *Muki* was not about personal sexuality or tantric fertility, then what else could it be about? Another major candidate among the principal

¹⁰⁷ Dobbins 2004, pp. 102, 198.

¹⁰⁸ Actually, Faure seems to employ a move known in logic as "begging the question" (*petitio principii*) according to which a "hidden" sexuality, revealed in certain miscontextualized readings of a tiny bit of Shinranian text, is a "key" to Shinran's "real" thought; and this move proceeds *regardless*—and this is the most significant feature of the Faure type of argument—of the tenor of the entirety of the rest of the Shinranian corpus (*completely unmentioned*) and the normative views of the later Shin-derived doctrinal tradition, which is entirely non-tantric in its practical neutrality towards sexuality as a religious tool (*totally ignored*). If Shinran's thought had an "animist" and quasi-tantric core at its root, a core that was actually the most "true" essence of Shinran, why did generation after generation of Shin clerical leaders misunderstand that fact in the following centuries despite their intensive study of Shinran?

interpretations takes the *Muki* to mean legitimation of sexuality and marriage for the purpose of building family and lineage connections under the aegis of Buddhism. But were some of Shinran's early followers right to employ the *Muki* for the purposes of supporting a conception of family-oriented Buddhist society unimpeded by the *vinaya*?

It would appear that aristocratic members of the Mt. Hiei establishment were already engaged in such practices. The *Nyobonge* offered a rationalization for doing the same, but on an independent basis for non-aristocrats and without the lingering hypocrisy of *vinaya* practices and all that those implied. Inoue describes how as a matter of historical record this employment of the dream appears to have begun with a somewhat out-of-context use made of the *Nyobonge* verse section in isolation by Shinran's follower Shinbutsu. Shinbutsu was apparently allowed to copy out the verse without the framing prose sections which provided clarification. When stripped from its fuller original context, the verse provided an apologia for the authority-defying practices of certain followers of Shinran in the Kantō in the mid-thirteenth century when they were claiming Buddhist adherence but facing local suppressions. This early (mis)contextualized, or mis-emphasized, usage of the verse, according to Inoue, led to a long-lived, eventually deeply rooted, and sometimes primary understanding of the *Nyobonge* as not just neutralizing the *vinaya*, but providing positive rationalization for marriage in a Buddhist religious context. This interpretation was in a limited sense correct, but only half-correct, although it historically seems to have had great influence in institutionalized Shin. Via legends of Shinran's marriage to the fictitious woman Tamahi of the aristocratic Kujō 九条 family, and a story presented in the secondary Shinran biography *Shinran shōnin goinnen* 親鸞聖人御因縁, the verse soon became associated with legitimations for a hereditary clerical system and even active roles for women in some of the early Shin temples.¹⁰⁹

Legitimation of family and kinship was hardly without religious overtones. The monastic Buddhist sangha itself was historically long understood in terms of fictive family, and in its flexible imaginative world, male Buddhist leaders could see their mothers and sisters, and then their wives, as *keshin* (embodied manifestations) of Buddhas and bodhisattvas, and vice versa.¹¹⁰ When joined together with neutralization of the *vinaya*, the idea of the female as *bosatsu* 菩薩 helped provide a theory for householder

¹⁰⁹ Inoue 1993, 2005.

¹¹⁰ Nishiguchi 1987, pp. 184–218; see also an excellent survey in Jaffe 2001, pp. 11–14.

relationships.¹¹¹ Dobbins has promoted the argument, often adduced in Shinran's case, that he regarded his wife as Kannon, and Shinran's dream can be paired with one of Eshinni's in which she seemed to see Shinran as a manifestation of Amida. If the message is about companionate family, women may even be the saviors of men, with Eshinni construed as Shinran's *zenchishiki* 善知識 who leads him to the Pure Land. In this context, the *gyokunyo* figure in the *Muki* may symbolize not tantric fertility or magic, but an expansion of Buddhist authority which can now be potentially channeled by women. Ideas of family, female, and sexuality blend together in the appealing image of a married Shinran as *nenbutsu* 念仏 practitioner, with women allowed to be incorporated into a Buddhist religious community in an unconventional manner with relatively high status and with the whole complex supporting an idea of model religious married couples.¹¹²

However, it pushes the evidence to maintain that Shinran himself meant to take his *vinaya*-neutralizing teachings and personal religious experience any distance along this vector. The irritating trouble, again, is that Shinran's own extensive, other, standard doctrinal oeuvre, and the orthodox Shin clerical tradition which was built on it, completely lacks significant reference to marriage or sexuality as a religious issue. So, even though there is clear evidence for such interpretations among some of Shinran's early followers, it is entirely plausible that ideas of the dream as primarily meaning either legitimation of marriage or legitimation of the blood lineage were misrecognitions of Shinran's intent. It was when the *Nyobonge* verse was taken out of its framing context that it became less about the doctrine of Amida's universal Vow and more about marriage per se. The secondary *Shinran shōnin goinnen* biography in that sense expressed a relatively narrowed understanding of the meaning of the verse. In contrast, in the standard *Godenshō* biography by Kakunyo, the focus was merely on revealing the doctrine of Amida's Vow, as became orthodox in the later tradition.¹¹³ Certainly less-standard versions of Shinran biographies continued to be used to create a kind of ideology of legitimacy for marriage in the early century or so after his passing among certain of the Shin lineages, but as noted it appears that focal commentary on Buddhist marriage drops out of the official or mainstream clerical tradition. Eventually, normative Shin Buddhist doctrine historically had nothing religiously central to say, in either a positive or negative sense, about marriage

¹¹¹ Nishiguchi 1987.

¹¹² Dobbins 2004, pp. 103–6; Heidegger 2006; Nishiguchi 1987.

¹¹³ Inoue 2005.

or interpersonal sexuality, and offered only an early-modern psychological teaching of intensive inwardness and self-reflection.¹¹⁴ Discussions of clerical marriage only came to prominence in the late Tokugawa period when the issue was inflated due to dialectical conflicts with other religious groups—particularly anti-Buddhist ones who ironically had no commitment to Buddhist values or interests.¹¹⁵

Back to Basics: The Dream from the Standpoint of Normative Historical Shin Buddhist Doctrine as Supporting the Announcement of a New Buddhist Imaginary

If the above options are unconvincing, how can the dream be best understood? This brings us to several interpretations (slightly varied) which are actually within the orthodox semantic sphere of Shin tradition. In this sphere, the focus is on the dream as an announcement or proclamation of a new kind of universal Buddhist teaching. Here, the “announcement” is only concerned with a couple of the bare bones of Shinran’s thought, specifically a suspension of the *vinaya*, and a profound sense of protectiveness provided by a nonsexualized or genderless Buddhist deity in line with the long earlier mainstream Asian traditions of Amida and Kannon.

The most important of these occasions of “announcement” has already been mentioned: based on the enlarged version of the *Muki* incident which was included in Kakunyo’s ritually pervasive biography of Shinran called the *Godenshō*, most members of the Shin tradition through Japanese history thought the dream had to do with proclaiming Shinran’s career of proselytization in the Eastern Provinces—his teaching in the Kantō region, which occupied the period of his life between his exile in Echigo and his old-age return to the capital Kyoto.

A related, but secondary, pre-modern interpretation of the dream was offered by the prominent Edo-period scholar Chikū 知空 (1634–1718). Today less treated than the others, in this version, the dream proclaims a kind of indirect instruction to Shinran, who is an incarnation of Amida, to manifest himself in the world as a married (*vinaya*-less) man. This is not because of a promotion of sexuality per se, but as an attribute of Shinran’s special role in communicating the Buddhist teachings. Shinran himself is unaware of the meaning of the dream until Hōnen clarifies it and asks Shinran to get married. Broadly, the idea of Shinran as a supernormal manifestation or

¹¹⁴ Jaffe 2001, pp. 36–57.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

apotheosis of Amida was deeply embedded in the pre-modern narrative about Shinran which had been introduced into the Honganji tradition by his biography in the *Godenshō* by Kakunyo.¹¹⁶ However, since the specific issue in this case was a popular deific conception of Shinran which had to do with the construction of the Honganji institution (a conception quite different from the modern Shinran who marries out of weakness and fallibility, as well as discrepant with other standard parts of the Shinran oeuvre such as the *Tannishō* 歎異抄 and Shinran's own claims about himself), the explanation of the dream did not really have any application to ordinary marriages, but was unique to Shinran and his cosmic role. The primary thrust of Chikū's argument about marriage for ordinary people, in contrast, was that Shin in general was justified in *tolerating* marriage, a religiously neutral phenomenon, which he supported largely by surveying a long history of de facto household life by a whole variety of Buddhists.¹¹⁷

But what explanation of the dream might be found most legitimate then for Shinran himself *originally*? It all depends upon an effective conception of what *Shinran*, not his later or modern interpreters, was really up to. It is striking that the deficient sexual, tantric, and familial explanations above do not even attempt to account for their discrepancies with the body of standard Shin religious teaching and mythopoetics which followed Shinran, a silence which is really intellectually shocking.¹¹⁸ May it not be reasonably

¹¹⁶ Dobbins 1990, pp. 185–89.

¹¹⁷ Jaffe 2001, pp. 42–53.

¹¹⁸ Some scholars have actually turned the evidence on its head, arguing with glee that the scholars of Shin tradition were inattentive to, or even suppressed, knowledge of Shinran's dream because they were embarrassed to know that their founder had violated the *vinaya* or was entangled in tantrism. But the nature of pre-modern Japanese sexuality should demolish that position. It is much more reasonable to understand (although some awareness of the dream does seem to show up at times during the later pre-modern period) that, first, the Shin intelligentsia did not think the *Muki* was about sex or fertility, second, they from their own Shin standpoint were not Buddhistically much interested in sexual regulation or thaumaturgy anyway, and third and most interestingly, over time they were not very interested in dreaming as a form of legitimation for their tradition; they were very much more interested in textual interpretation. For them, the dream was a medieval version of legitimation of authority which preceded the text-based legitimation (more early modern in character, in a manner paralleling text-based authority shifts in European Christianity) which the later tradition came to prefer. From this perspective of course Shinran was a bridging, or transitional, figure between modes of legitimation. The empirical argument that visionary experience played a role at the earliest stages of Shinran's life should not over-condition our understanding of the evolving nature of interpretations of Shinran in Japan over the historical long term. In at least one fascinating passage of his writings, Luther emphasized that he put his trust in text rather than dreams or

assumed that over the long run the mainstream tradition of Shin Buddhism itself reached relatively valid conclusions about Shinran's thinking, which were reflected in their core doctrinal orthodoxy? Therefore, unless the dream is regarded as an inexplicable outlier in his corpus of writings, it has to be understood in some way basically consistent with Shinran's larger "orthodox" body of teachings, as a significant, but also relatively peripheral, fragment of his overall expression of a new Buddhist imaginary, displaying like other parts of the corpus the rhetorical fluidity and complex metaphorical power of Shinran as a thinker in general.¹¹⁹ Shinran's project was a reworking of Buddhist narrative and authority which neutralized the *vinaya* and opened the way to the classical core themes of Shin doctrine, i.e., an enhanced notion of individual subjectivity, an emphasis on the involuntary, active "grace" of the Buddha, and the protectiveness of a universalistic gender-transcending deity. From this standpoint we might paraphrase two lines of the *Nyobonge* verse as follows:

If practitioners are led by their karma to openly violate the formal monastic rule [and all it implies in terms of conformity to power, authority, pollution-consciousness, and social order in late Heian elite society],

I will in response become a visionary transformation into a guardian in female guise and take care of you.

It is a matter of speculation why Kannon or Shōtoku, who communicated the dream, chose contact with women as the lead example of violation of the *vinaya* or as the illustration for why the monastic system of the late Heian period was not working properly; however, *nyobon* was certainly an extremely conspicuous example of failure to observe the *vinaya*. On this view, the challenge of the imagery of the dream is that it is too condensed, for in a few words it is a gesture towards Shinran's whole "political" reconstruction of self, authority, and social relations in late Heian Japan, which provided an alternate way of finding Buddhist compassion and liberation outside of the *kenmitsu* 顕密 monastery setting. For people of today, this presents a daunting challenge: to reimagine to some extent a configuration, and then a reconfiguration, of an ancient religious imaginary which melded

visions as a source of sober and legitimate authority (Bulkeley 2008, pp. 185–86). Of course, Christians continued to dream, but dreaming was not really mainstream in Protestant Christian clerical tradition although it continued to play a role in some pockets such as Quaker tradition (Gerona 2004).

¹¹⁹ Yasutomi 2004, pp. 110–22.

together disparate elements in a manner not modern and not familiar: visionary experience, Buddhist psychology, pre-modern mythic images, and pre-modern social organizations. In this blend, there was plausibly some semantic/symbolic crossover among Shōtoku Taishi, Kannon, and Shinran's dream. However, the mode of symbolic interplay was typical of medieval Japanese (or any medieval Mahayana) Buddhism and does not automatically imply that we are dealing with either sexuality or some kind of animistic consciousness which is "essentially just the same" as that which dominated pre-modern Japan as a whole. As Inoue Takami has emphasized, the kernel of the process was the orientation to the Mahayana bodhisattva path, including the experience of adornments, combined with Shinran's sense of universalism, which was planted in the whole previous bodhisattva tradition.

Shinran's Dream and the General Problem of Handling Shin Tradition

Shin Buddhist tradition has suffered widely from a problematic modern historiography, owing to unsatisfactory attention from mainstream Buddhologists, conventional historians of Japan, and others. Western/Christian intellectual penetration after the Meiji period brought to the Japanese environment several concerns which were not in the purview of traditional Shin, among which a misplaced focus on sex may be only one item (others might be fundamentalist/foundationalist attitudes towards Buddhism in India, modernistic overrationalization, and cultural nationalist fantasies about some underlying homogeneous Japanese religiosity which was rooted in modern Shinto). Of course, when conservative Japanese Shin Buddhists have resisted these pressures, they have been in the counter-danger of falling into their own cultural nationalism (which ironically has been another of the nontraditional *Western* imports). While this hundred-year-old furore has created an extraordinarily difficult hermeneutical situation on all sides, perhaps we are now in a better position than in the past to correct it.

We cannot look back retrospectively into Shinran's mind. The fact is that we really know almost nothing about sex and the particular individual named Shinran. One thing we do know is that Shinran was not a European Christian. Accounts like those available for Luther are totally inconceivable for the Japanese thinker.¹²⁰ Even if we should assume that the one bit of Shinran's oeuvre constituted by the *Muki* text had something to do with genital sexuality per se, there would still remain an incommensurable gap between the thinness of Shinran's concerns about sex and the thickness of Luther's

¹²⁰ Wiesner-Hanks 2008.

Christian-based intrinsically intense level of concern. (Arguably the difference is just the same for concerns about gender.) James Dobbins has focused attention on the tendency of twentieth-century apologetics for Shinran to overemphasize his contemporary character, thus generating a kind of distorted or edited Shin modernism which does not accurately depict the earlier history of the tradition. By the same token, however, we ought not attribute to Shinran or his world any twentieth-century Japanese attitudes about sexuality which have been influenced by modern Western-Christian culture. The modernist argument cuts both ways.

Still, enough is known to defend the claim that the core intentionality or “aboutness” of the *Muki*—to speak in terms of one kind of philosophical language—does not lie in the area of personal sexuality. Shinran’s thought was concerned with a transition in the notion of authority in Buddhism, from the older *vinaya*, with its vested interests in adherence to mythic models of monastic behavior, the “club” of the male sangha, and ritual purity for thaumaturgical purposes, to a newer interiorization of authority which released those expectations in favor of a different kind of self-reflective insight and acceptance of Buddhist liberation as a “gift.” If we look away from a certain kind of modernist discourse about the existential Shinran (valid on its own territory, but not necessarily the territory of the *Muki* or other parts of pre-modern Shinshū), it is apparent that issues of *vinaya* institutionalization, whether or not openly articulated, played a quite major role over the course of Shin history. In the thirteenth century Shinran’s new ideas offered a way to step past, or transcend, an institution which seemed no longer to match its environment. But his interiorization still did not imply a concern with personal sexuality and anxiety about the body in the modern Western sense. Behind the *Muki* was a psychological-spiritual “quantum leap,” raising Shinran to a different matrix of religious psychology; but being pre-modern Japanese, this leap still did not entail engagement with “sexuality” in the expected modern way. Shinran was not a man of conventional pre-modern Buddhist externalized ritual purity struggle, but neither was he a man of modern Christian libidinous struggle.

Unfortunately, despite compendia of information like Faure’s, and despite increasing awareness of the variability and multiplicity of historical “Buddhisms,” in their interpretations of Shinran’s dream too many modern students of Buddhism—originally in the West but also in Japan during the twentieth century—have tended to adopt an originalist, fundamentalist “mono-mythic” notion of Buddhism in which *only* the Śākyamuni tradition, and consequently its *vinaya* are really “true.” Consequently failures to live up to that *one* version of Buddhism are not “good” Buddhism. Strangely at this point, contemporary literature

on Buddhism tends to rehearse classic Buddhist positions on sexuality (which were actually highly diverse) without imposing creative attempts to reevaluate what celibacy might actually have meant in larger contexts.¹²¹ In the Shin case, this yields a stubborn pejorative tendency to treat its distinctive “noncompliance with *vinaya*” as a collapse of a monothetically imagined “true” Buddhism. By focusing on the celibacy issue in Shinran, instead of seeing his ideas as a creative, positive response to the complexity of a Buddhist tradition which was perceived to be in a state of breakdown, the emphasis falls on Shinran’s “weakness,” “fallibility,” or “inability,” i.e., his ideas become a negative, passive adaptation to a troubled Buddhist cultural situation which is falsely turned on its head and treated as unproblematic. The tendency reinforces a negative paradigm of Shin as failed monasticism rather than a more cogent conception of it as a positive reconfiguring of the tradition with its own historically powerful logic, psychological basis, and cognitive justification. And intentionally or not, all these patterns tend to reinforce the gentle, knowing condescension which many Buddhist cognoscenti¹²² display towards Shin Buddhism. Through a familial argument, interpreters like Dobbins clearly want to sustain a positive, good-willed, generative understanding of Shinshū. Still, intentionally or not, it is a bit disingenuous to think that any kind of sexplanation does not lower the relative status of Shin among Buddhist traditions. Even though sophisticated scholars like Dobbins and Faure are surely aware of matters of political correctness and orientalism, inadvertently or not the image of Shinran as sexualized monk is reminiscent of the prejudicial trope of the voluptuous Oriental Other, indicated by Edward Said, which has been so common in the Western imagination.¹²³

This persistent outcome is discouraging, because the fluidity, flexibility, and creativity of human mythopoetic power, the range of human cultural modalities, and the evolutionary properties of history, are supposed to be the specialty of modern religious studies. Responsible scholars are obligated to continue reevaluating their assumptions about this major strand of Japanese Buddhism. Until that shift makes more progress, however, the theme of Shinran’s dream will continue to be understood simplistically as sexual transgression. But the fact will remain that the most sexually transgressive thing about the dream is that it does not actually meet modern people’s imaginary (or hopeful?) expectations about sexual transgression.

¹²¹ See, for instance, Powers 2008, which focuses unambiguously on the key importance of *brahmacarya* in the Buddhist context.

¹²² Who otherwise themselves may have not the slightest personal interest, or personal ability, regarding the observance of Buddhist sexual renunciation.

¹²³ Said 1979, pp. 188–90, 315, etc.

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