

VIEWS & REVIEWS

Shinjin and Faith: A Comparison of Shinran and Kierkegaard

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Introduction

OVER twenty years ago, a lively exchange took place between Ueda Yoshifumi, the editor of the Shin Buddhism Translation Series, and two American scholars of Buddhism, Thomas Kasulis and Luis Gómez, concerning whether or not *shinjin* 信心 could legitimately be translated as “faith” in English. The Shin Buddhism Translation Series adopted the romanization of *shinjin* rather than translating the term as “faith.” It is argued the term faith is not only misleading, as an equivalent, but also ambiguous as a term in English itself. For Ueda, however, the ambiguity of this word is not the principal reason for not using it. The main problem with the term is not only that it does not convey the essential meaning of *shinjin*, but also that such a translation would create a serious obstacle in transmitting the essence of Shinran’s thought.¹

Kasulis and Gómez, however, question the need to retain the original Japanese word, *shinjin*, when there are a number of acceptable English equivalents. While they acknowledge that one should not overemphasize the theistic appearance of Shinshū doctrine, it is difficult, if not impossible, to deny the fact that Shin Buddhism is one example of a religion of faith and that the *shin* 信 of *shinjin* 信心 means *trust, belief or faith*.² Gómez writes:

¹ Ueda 1981, p. 507.

² Kasulis 1981, p. 247; Gómez 1983a, p. 82. Some years later, Takeda Ryūsei joined the debate, defending the view that faith is an appropriate term for the translation of *shinjin*. See

One has to share in the Committee's concern with conveying Shinran's meaning as accurately as possible, but one has to question the wisdom of the procedure followed. . . . The context of Shinran's own teachings mark his doctrine as fitting the general type of "religion of faith." . . . Why not let the context of Shinran's own words gradually lead the reader to an understanding of Shinran's conception of faith as the means to unity with the Buddha's treasure house of merit and compassion?³

In his reply to Gómez's criticism, however, Ueda stresses the view that:

shinjin is not a "means to unity with the Buddha's . . . merit and compassion" or an "act of trust in a power" beyond man; it is the merit and compassion and power itself. In other words, shinjin refers fundamentally to the true and real mind of Amida, not an attitude of the mind of man.⁴

Without wanting to enter into the debate of whether or not it is appropriate to translate the word *shinjin* as faith, we are sympathetic to Ueda's position in trying to keep the concept of *shinjin* distinct from faith. In our comparative study of Shinran and Kierkegaard's thought, we also found it necessary to differentiate between the two concepts. In our view, the concepts of *shinjin* and faith cannot be conceived as two manifestations or modifications of a single generic reality called faith; they point to two essentially different religious experiences. Faith cannot adequately express the experience of *shinjin* just as *shinjin* cannot express the experience of faith.

It seems to us that underlying the disagreement between Ueda and the two American scholars, there are two different approaches to religion at work. One approach is what can be called an experiential-expressive model of religion.⁵ This model affirms a basic unity of experience common to a wide diversity of religions. In other words, different religions and belief systems are diverse expressions and objectifications of a common core experience.⁶

Takeda 1989, pp. 2–30. More recently, Hee-Sung Keel has found no "justification for not using 'faith' as the translation for *shinjin*." See Keel 1995, pp. 82–83, n. 6.

³ Gómez 1983a, p. 83.

⁴ Ibid. 1983b, p. 416.

⁵ Here, I follow the distinction George A. Lindbeck makes between an experiential-expressive model of religion and a cultural-linguistic one. See Lindbeck 1984, pp. 30–45.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 31–32.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith's understanding of faith can serve as a good example of this approach. According to him, faith is an essential human quality of which belief systems are no more than expressions.

Faith . . . is an essential human quality. One might argue that it is the essential human quality: that it is constitutive of man as human; that personality is constituted by our universal ability, or invitation, to live in terms of a transcendent dimension, and in response to it.⁷

The problem with this approach is that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to describe, except in the broadest terms, an experience of faith common to a wide diversity of religions. The inevitable result is that the specific elements, which make any particular religion unique, are lost. Moreover, it begs the question about the relationship between experience and the language of belief systems. The latter is not simply an expression of a particular religious experience; it also shapes and forms it. To be religious is not primarily a matter of gaining the experience and then learning the language. Rather, one first becomes skilled in the language which itself shapes and produces our most profound sentiments and attitudes.⁸ Therefore, it is extremely questionable to assume an underlying unity of the experience of faith common to widely diverse religions. Religious experience is always mediated through the particular language of a belief system.

There are No pure (i.e., unmediated) experiences. Neither mystical experience nor more ordinary forms of experience give any indication, or any grounds for believing, that they are unmediated. That is to say, all experience is processed through, organized by, and makes itself available to us in extremely complex epistemological ways. The notion of unmediated experience seems, if not self-contradictory, at best empty.⁹

The aforementioned problems with the experiential-expressive model can be avoided by an alternative cultural-linguistic model. In this approach, religions are not seen as expressions of primordial inner experiences that all humans potentially share. Instead, religions, like languages, are best understood as cultural frameworks that shape human experience. Human experience is

⁷ Smith 1979, p. 129.

⁸ Lindbeck 1984, p. 35.

⁹ Katz 1978, p. 26.

shaped, molded, and in a sense constituted by cultural and linguistic forms. Different religions do not diversely express similar experiences. Rather, they shape and produce different experiences.

A religion . . . is similar to an idiom that makes possible the description of realities, the formulation of beliefs, and the experiencing of inner attitudes, feelings, and sentiments. Like a culture or language, it is a communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of individuals rather than being primary a manifestation of those subjectivities.¹⁰

Although in the interplay between inner experience and the cultural-linguistic forms of religion, priority is given to the latter, the relationship between them is not unilateral but dialectical. The essential difference between a cultural-linguistic model of religion and an experiential-expressive one is that, while in the latter the external features of religion are derived from inner experiences, in the former it is the inner experiences which are derivative.¹¹

While neither Ueda nor Kasulis and Gómez explicitly formulate their views in terms of the two approaches of religions outlined above, Gómez's position comes very close to an experiential-expressive model of religions in his assumption of a "general type of religion of faith" of which *shinjin* is no more than a modification and expression. Ueda, in turn, by stressing the radical difference between *shinjin* and faith is more in line with a cultural-linguistic approach. For him, *shinjin* is not an instance of a "general type of religion of faith," but rather it refers to a fundamentally different religious experience which the term faith cannot adequately express.

In our view, the cultural-linguistic model provides the most adequate basis for a comparative study of religion. Such an approach affords a more straightforward affirmation of the distinctive features of experience and the patterns of belief of different religions. At the same time, it avoids the danger of interpreting other religions in terms of our own.

It is from this perspective that this paper compares and contrasts the concept of *shinjin* in Shinran with that of faith in Kierkegaard. It will be shown that while these two concepts perform a similar function in their respective religious contexts and share some common characteristics in terms of structure, they refer to two fundamentally distinct religious experiences. In Shinran's thought, *shinjin* is essentially an experience of awakening. Human beings

¹⁰ Lindbeck 1984, p. 33.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 33–34.

contribute nothing to this experience of awakening. It occurs in them totally by the power of Amida. In contrast, faith in Kierkegaard is not an experience of awakening, something you acquire once and for all. It is never a completed act. The believer is always in the process of reaffirming and preserving his faith. Although faith is essentially a gift of God's grace, it requires a free human response. It is, in other words, a personal relationship between a trusting human being and the gracious God.

Shinjin as Amida Buddha's Gift

Teaching, practice and realization were the three fundamental dimensions of the religious life in primitive Buddhism. In other words, the realization of Buddhahood was thought to be attained through the practice of the Buddha's teaching. In line with this basic understanding of Buddhist religious life, Shinran called his major work: *The True Teaching, Practice, and Realization of the Pure Land Way*. But in fact, though not mentioned in the title, the central part of this work is Chapter Three: "The True *Shinjin* of the Pure Land Way." We can say that the whole work is developed from the perspective of this chapter. For Shinran, the realization of Buddhahood is attained not through practice but through *shinjin*. While in primitive Buddhism, *shinjin* was considered to be the first stage on the path to enlightenment, in Shinran it becomes the true and ultimate cause of enlightenment. In fact, *shinjin* overlaps with the meaning of enlightenment itself. *Shinjin*, however, arises in human beings, not through an act of will on their part, but through Amida Buddha transferring his true and real mind to sentient beings ridden with falsity and selfish desires.

According to Shinran, *shinjin* arises in sentient beings as a threefold mind: sincere mind (*shishin* 至心), entrusting with joy (*shingyō* 信樂), and aspiration for birth (*yokushō* 欲生). Reading the Eighteenth Vow according to his insight that *shinjin* is not an act of will, but solely the action of Amida in human beings, Shinran writes:

All sentient beings, as they hear the Name, realize even one thought-moment of *shinjin* and joy, which is directed to them from Amida's sincere mind, and aspiring to be born in that land, they then attain birth and dwell in the stage of nonretrogression. Excluded are those who commit the five grave offenses and those who slander the right dharma.¹²

¹² CWS vol. 1, p. 80.

Contrary to the original meaning of this text, Shinran considers the *sincere mind*, the *entrusting* and the *aspiration* as attributes of Amida and not as qualities of the human mind.¹³ In traditional Buddhism, these were qualities of the individual who undertook the right practices and disciplines for the attainment of Buddhahood. An essential feature of the original Pure Land path was that one does not seek merely one's own realization of enlightenment but through the transference of merit accumulated in one's practice (*ekō* 回向), one contributes in turn to the enlightenment of all beings. Thus, the directing of merit becomes an intrinsic part of the aspiration for birth in the Pure Land and for enlightenment. In Shinran's thought, however, the concepts of practice and merit are completely reformulated. Since, according to him, human beings are deeply evil and, therefore, incapable of genuine practice, they have no merit to transfer. Amida alone is the source of practice and merit which are transferred to human beings. Explaining the threefold mind of *shinjin*, Shinran writes:

With sincere mind entrusting themselves: Sincere means true and real. "True and real" refers to the Vow of the Tathagata being true and real; this is what *sincere mind* means. From the very beginning sentient beings, who are filled with blind passions, lack a mind true and real, a heart of purity, for they are possessed of defilements, evil, and wrong views. *Entrusting* is to be free of doubt, believing deeply and without any double-mindedness that the Tathagata's Primal Vow is true and real. This *entrusting with sincere mind*, then, is that arising from the Vow in which Amida urges every being throughout the ten quarters, "Entrust yourself to my Vow, which is true and real"; it does not arise from the hearts and minds of foolish beings of self-power.¹⁴

Shinran's explanation of the threefold mind of *shinjin*, may give the impression that there are three separate elements in *shinjin*. This is not the case. The

¹³ It was Shinran's logic of *shinjin* that compelled him to read into the text the idea that the mind of *shinjin* is directed by Amida. The original text of the Eighteenth Vow says: "If, when I attain Buddhahood, the sentient beings of the ten quarters, with sincere mind entrusting themselves, aspiring to be born in my land, and saying my Name perhaps even ten times, should not be born there, may I not attain the supreme enlightenment. Excluded are those who commit the five grave offenses and those who slander the right dharma." Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 493.

three elements point to the single and perfect mind of *shinjin*, which is free from the hindrance of doubt. Shinran writes:

Truly we know that although the terms “sincere mind,” “entrusting,” and “aspiration for birth” differ, their significance is the same. Why? Because these three minds are already completely untainted by the hindrance of doubt. They are therefore the true and real mind that is single. This is called the diamondlike true mind. The diamondlike true mind is true and real *shinjin*.¹⁵

True and real *shinjin* is completely free from the hindrance of doubt because this “*shinjin* is none other than Buddha-nature. This Buddha-nature is dharma-nature. Dharma-nature is dharma-body.”¹⁶

It becomes clear from the above that, for Shinran, *shinjin* is not the result of a person’s own resolution, but an absolute gift from Amida Buddha; not an operation of the human will but the very activity of Amida Buddha in the mind of the individual.

The view that *shinjin* is a gift from Amida Buddha naturally raises the question: how does *shinjin* arise in human beings? In order to answer this question, we must consider the Pure Land Buddhist practice of Nembutsu. According to Pure Land Buddhism, Amida Buddha, in fulfilling his bodhisattva vows over enormous stretches of time and against immeasurable obstacles and hardships, has accumulated a vast store of merit that can be transferred to all other spiritual beings so as to enable them to attain enlightenment. Thus, the Nembutsu becomes the primary vehicle of merit-transference, which offers the enabling conditions for birth in the Pure Land and the attainment of enlightenment. The practice of Nembutsu consists of saying and considering over and over again the formula, *Namu-Amida-Butsu* 南無阿弥陀仏. Prior to Shinran, the Nembutsu was a kind of spiritual practice performed by the individual as an effort to attain birth in the Pure Land and enlightenment. For Shinran, however, the practice of Nembutsu is given by Amida. Hence, he calls it “great practice.”

Reverently contemplating Amida’s directing of virtue for our going forth to the Pure Land, I find that there is great practice, there is great *shinjin*. The great practice is to say the Name of the Tathagata of unhindered light. This practice, embodying all good acts and

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 107.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 461.

possessing all roots of virtue, is perfect and most rapid in bringing them to fullness. It is the treasure ocean of virtues that is suchness or true reality. For this reason, it is called great practice. This practice arises from the Vow of great compassion, which is known as “the Vow that all the Buddhas extol the Name,” “the Vow that all the Buddhas say the Name,” and “the Vow that all the Buddhas praise the Name.” It might also be called “the Vow of directing virtue for our going forth” and “the Vow in which the saying of the Name is selected.”¹⁷

The view, suggested here, that the Buddhas throughout the universe say and praise Amida’s Name, is based on the Seventeenth Vow.¹⁸ The source of great practice in human beings lies precisely in the Buddhas’ praise of Amida’s Name. By hearing the Name, beings are awakened to the nature of Amida and his Vow of compassion. *Shinjin* arises in the encounter with the Name of Amida. Explaining the relationship between the practice of reciting the Name and *shinjin*, Ueda writes:

Because the Name is given—is spread throughout the universe by all the Buddhas—sentient beings are able to hear it and come to know Amida’s Primal Vow. Through hearing the Name—not just grasping it intellectually, but being penetrated by the dynamic reality of compassion that it embodies—*shinjin* is awakened in them. This *shinjin* is therefore also “given,” and is itself the Buddha’s wisdom-compassion turning itself over to beings. Further, this *shinjin* expresses itself in utterance of the Name, which is true practice, and which therefore results in attainment of birth.¹⁹

The Name, however, cannot be viewed as some objective and self-subsisting reality existing outside the mind of the practicing individual. It has reality only as the subjectivity of *shinjin* expressed in the practice of recitation. As Alfred Bloom, rightly points out,

For Shinran, the name of Amida Buddha is not some metaphysical entity of some objective existence somewhere in the world, nor

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁸ Called by Shinran “the Vow that all the Buddhas extol the Name,” it says: “If, when I attain Buddhahood, the countless Buddhas throughout the worlds in the ten quarters do not all praise and say my Name, may I not attain the supreme enlightenment.” *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Ueda and Hirota 1989, pp. 149–150.

truly are the Buddhas who speak this name some type of objective existences located in the universe. The name, spoken by the Buddhas, or heard by people in whom the faith is to be aroused, is the name heard upon the lips of ordinary people, or the content of teaching in which Amida Buddha's intention is praised.²⁰

Thus, as "great practice," the Nembutsu is not something human beings perform to attain birth. Although the practicing individuals recite the Nembutsu, in reality it is the activity of Amida Buddha awakening *shinjin* in them. Both the practice of recitation and *shinjin* as the ensuing inner state of mind are given by Amida Buddha. Therefore, *shinjin* and Nembutsu are inseparable realities. Shinran writes:

[A]lthough *shinjin* and nembutsu are two, since *shinjin* is to hear and not doubt that you are saved by only a single pronouncing, which is the fulfillment of practice, there is no *shinjin* separate from nembutsu; . . . Both should be understood to be Amida's Vow. Nembutsu and *shinjin* on our part are themselves the manifestation of the Vow.²¹

Both Nembutsu and *shinjin* emerge as manifestations of Amida's activity in the human person. It follows that there is nothing that one can do to acquire *shinjin*. For "both the entrusting of oneself to the Vow and the saying of the Name are given unfolded in beings through and as the activity of the Buddha."²² The reason there is no practice whatsoever human beings can perform to attain *shinjin* is due to their evil and passion-ridden nature. Whatever good deed a human being appears to be doing, it is always done with self-seeking calculation in mind, making it, therefore, impossible to attain the incomparable goodness and purity of Amida Buddha's nature. For Shinran, there is an infinite gulf between passion-ridden human nature and Amida Buddha's nature, such that no good deed on our part can bridge. Only an unconditional and absolute act of compassion by Amida Buddha can bridge that infinite gap. It should be noted, however, that the awareness of the selfish desires that permeate human life are not the result of self-reflection, but of the action of Amida Buddha in human beings.

²⁰ Bloom 1965, p. 55.

²¹ CWS vol. 1, p. 538.

²² Ueda and Hirota 1989, p. 144.

I know nothing at all of good or evil. For if I could know thoroughly, as Amida Tathagata knows, that an act was good, then I would know good. If I could know thoroughly, as the Tathagata knows, that an act was evil, then I would know evil. But with a foolish being full of blind passions, in this fleeting world—this burning house—all matters without exception are empty and false, totally without truth and sincerity. The nembutsu alone is true and real.²³

Since *shinjin* is considered to be entirely the activity of Amida Buddha without involving any kind of decision or act of resolution on the part of human beings, Shinran insists that when it occurs one attains the stage of non-retrogression. In other words, the achievement of the ultimate goal of birth in the Pure Land and the attainment of enlightenment are assured in the moment of realizing *shinjin*. In the tradition of Pure Land Buddhism prior to Shinran, the stage of non-retrogression referred to a stage attained by those born in the Pure Land after death. It was taught that, after birth in the Pure Land, one attains the stage of non-retrogression and thereafter continues to perform practices until one attains enlightenment.²⁴ Departing from this traditional understanding, Shinran stresses that this stage is attained at the moment of the arising of *shinjin*. He stresses, furthermore, that the realization of *shinjin* coincides with the moment of being truly settled and the attainment of birth. The passage upon which Shinran bases this particular understanding of birth in the immediate present is the one on the fulfillment of the Eighteenth Vow in the *Larger Sutra*, quoted above. There, it is stated that, in a single thought-moment (*ichinen* 一念) of *shinjin*, human beings “attain birth and dwell in the stage of nonretrogression.”²⁵ Explaining the identity of the arising of *shinjin* with immediate attainment of birth, he writes:

When one realizes true and real *shinjin*, one is immediately grasped and held within the heart of the Buddha of unhindered light, never to be abandoned. . . . When we are grasped by Amida, immediately—without a moment or a day elapsing—we ascend to and become established in the stage of the truly settled; this is the meaning of *attain birth*.²⁶

²³ CWS vol. 1, p. 679.

²⁴ Ueda and Hirota, 1989, pp. 169–170.

²⁵ CWS vol. 1, p. 80.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 475.

Further, in another work, he states:

They then attain birth means that when a person realizes shinjin, he or she is born immediately. “To be born immediately” is to dwell in the stage of nonretrogression. To dwell in the stage of nonretrogression is to become established in the stage of the truly settled. This is also called the attainment of the equal of perfect enlightenment. Such is the meaning of *they then attain birth*.

Then means immediately; “immediately” means without any passage of time and without any passage of days.²⁷

The fundamental reason for Shinran’s emphasis on the attainment of birth in the Pure Land as a present reality is deeply grounded in his understanding of *shinjin* as an act of entrusting that, both in arising and settling, is entirely the work of Amida. By making the realization of *shinjin* coincide with birth in the Pure Land, Shinran brought about a revolutionary change in traditional Pure Land Buddhism. What is crucial now is not the moment of death but the moment of the arising of *shinjin*. Once *shinjin* is realized, even though a person remains in this world, he lives and dwells in the transcendental realm of enlightenment.

While Shinran stresses birth in the Pure Land as a present reality, he does not identify it with the attainment of enlightenment itself. Being deeply aware of the defiled character of the physical body fraught with blind passions, only after death, when the karmic bonds to this world are broken, is one, for the first time, able to fully realize Buddhahood. In the *Tannishō*, the possibility of attaining enlightenment with this present body is clearly rejected:

On the assertion that one attains enlightenment even while maintaining this bodily existence full of blind passions.

This statement is completely absurd. . . . [I]t is extremely difficult to free oneself from blind passions and the hindrances of karmic evil in this life. . . . According to the true essence of the Pure Land way, one entrusts oneself to the Primal Vow in this life and realizes enlightenment in the Pure Land.²⁸

²⁷ Ibid., p. 455.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 674–675.

Faith as a Divine Gift and Human Decision

Kierkegaard frequently stresses that faith is a gift of divine grace, a miracle and cannot, therefore, be produced by an act of will.²⁹ But although as grace, faith is clearly a gift, he maintains that it is also something we do, in other words, it involves a free and personal decision. “Belief is not knowledge but an act of freedom, an expression of will.”³⁰ In a crucial passage of his *Journals and Papers*, the dialectical tension between grace and human freedom is set forth like this:

In order to constrain subjectivity, we are quite properly taught that no one is saved by works, but by grace—and corresponding to that—by faith. Fine. But am I therefore unable to do something myself with regard to becoming a believer? Either we must answer this with an unconditioned ‘no,’ and then we have fatalistic election by grace, or we must make a little concession. The point is this—subjectivity is always under suspicion, and when it is established that we are saved by faith, there is immediately the suspicion that too much has been conceded here. So an addition is made: But no one can give himself faith; it is a gift of God I must pray for. Fine, but then I myself can pray, or must we go farther and say: No, praying (consequently praying for faith) is a gift of God which no man can give to himself; it must be given to him. And what then? Then to pray aright must again be given to me so that I may rightly pray for faith, etc. There are many, many envelopes—but there must still be one point or another where there is a halt at subjectivity. Making the scale so large, so difficult, can be commendable as a majestic expression for God’s infinity, but subjectivity cannot be excluded, unless we want to have fatalism.³¹

Faith is not an act of will, but a miracle of grace. However, it does not exclude the final decision of the will. Human freedom is still operative in the midst of grace. In fact, the dialectic between God’s grace and human freedom must, at one point or another, be stopped by human subjectivity. In other words, humans have a role to play in the act of faith. We cannot independently, by

²⁹ Kierkegaard 1985, pp. 62, 65.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

³¹ *Ibid.* 1975b, p. 352.

an act of will, reach for the gift of faith. We can either accept or refuse it. Even God will not override our freedom.

At the heart of Kierkegaard's account of faith is the idea of subjectivity and the conception of truth associated with it. Faith, he insists, "is rooted in subjectivity" and constitutes its "highest passion."³² "The essential thing about subjectivity is that in resolution and the decision of choice one runs a risk. This is the absolute decision."³³ Therefore, when he refers to faith as a passion, he is not thinking of faith as a mere emotional state. Faith as passion means personal choice and involvement as opposed to detached objective knowledge.

In trying to delimit the realm of faith, Kierkegaard distinguishes two possible approaches to religious truth: objective and subjective reflection.

When the question about truth is asked objectively, truth is reflected upon objectively as an object to which the knower relates himself. What is reflected upon is not the relation but that what he relates himself to is the truth, the true. If only that to which he relates himself is the truth, the true, then the subject is in the truth. When the question about truth is asked subjectively, the individual relation is reflected upon subjectively. If only the how of this relation is in truth, the individual is in truth, even if he in this way were to relate himself to untruth.³⁴

Kierkegaard's main point here seems to be that it is possible for an individual to believe what is objectively true while being personally in untruth and vice versa. And if the two collide, it is subjective truth that ultimately matters. The crucial question for Kierkegaard is not whether a person's beliefs are objectively right but whether the person has the right kind of relationship to what is believed. He illustrates his claim by the famous comparison between someone who, though living in the midst of Christianity and having a true conception of God, prays to Him in a false spirit, and someone who, though he lives in an idolatrous land, prays to his idol with the passion of infinity.

³² Ibid. 1990, p. 132.

³³ Ibid. 1975b, p. 346.

³⁴ Ibid. 1990, p. 199. It should be noted that Kierkegaard's definition of truth as subjectivity applies only to the essential truth, that is, to the truth that has an essential relationship to existence. "The reader will note that what is being discussed here is essential truth, or the truth that is related essentially to existence, and that it is specifically in order to clarify it as inwardness or as subjectivity that the contrasted is pointed out." Ibid.

According to Kierkegaard, it is at the side of the second man, not the first, that more truth is to be found. “The one prays in truth to God although he is worshipping an idol; the other prays in untruth to the true God and is therefore in truth worshipping an idol.”³⁵

As to the subjective character of religious truth and faith, Kierkegaard stresses that the degree of involvement of the subject increases to the extent that objective certainty diminishes. Subjective interest in the act of faith reaches its peak when every objective certainty disappears. Where there is objective certainty or security, he says, there can be no question of risk and where there is no possibility of risk, there can be no faith either. “Faith is the contradiction between the infinite passion of inwardness and the objective uncertainty. If I am able to apprehend God objectively, I do not have faith; but because I cannot do this, I must have faith.”³⁶

Such a position appears to suggest a religious relativism in which “to say that a belief is true means no more than that it is held sincerely and without reservations.”³⁷ In other words, it allows any believer to be counted as “in the truth” provided only that he is passionately committed to his belief, irrespective of its content. In this sense, even an atheist can be considered “in the truth,” as long as his atheism is sufficiently profound and unqualified.³⁸ Some have gone so far as to suggest that to reduce faith to a passionate commitment of the will destroys the very basis of Christian faith.

For it implies that there are no common truths for Christians to accept, no common principles by which their lives may be guided, indeed no common Deity for them to contemplate and worship. The Kierkegaardian subjectivity would dissolve these things away into a set of processes in individual minds where there would be as many Christianities as there were persons to exercise their “inwardness” and their passion.³⁹

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 204. “When belief resolves to believe, it runs the risk that it was an error, but nevertheless it wills to believe. One never believes in any other way; if one wants to avoid risk, then one wants to know with certainty that one can swim before going into the water.” *Ibid.* 1985, p. 83, n. 53.

³⁷ Edwards 1973, pp. 513–514.

³⁸ Gardiner 1988, p. 98.

³⁹ Blanshard 1968, pp. 15–16.

Kierkegaard does make the claim that “truth is subjectivity.” This, however, does not imply that truth is a construct of the self. Subjectivity is not to be equated with subjectivism. When he defines faith as the “infinite passion of inwardness,” he is not suggesting that a belief is true just because one believes it to be true. It should be noted that Kierkegaard mentions “objective uncertainty” in the act of faith. In other words, the subjectivity of the act of faith arises precisely in the relation of the existing individual to an objectively given truth.⁴⁰ If there were no question of a relation to an objective reality, then there would be no cause for passion nor subjectivity. It is precisely because faith is a response to a reality that is objectively uncertain, that the existing individual must choose with passion. Therefore, Christian faith does not lose its objective content by the thesis that “truth is subjectivity.” Even though he stresses the subjective element in the act of faith, he never loses sight of its objective content nor confuses subjectivity with objectivity.

The essential Christian exists before any Christian exists; it must exist in order for one to become a Christian. It contains the qualification by which a test is made of whether someone has become a Christian; it maintains its objective continuance outside all believers, while it also is in the inwardness of the believer. In short, here there is no identity between the subjective and the objective. If the essentially Christian enters into the hearts of ever so many believers, every believer realizes that it did not arise in his heart. . . . It is therefore a volatilization of the concept, a dislocation of all the essentially Christian, when one admits the wordplay that a revelation is a qualification belonging to subjectivity, or is the direct identity of subject-object. . . . No, even if no one had become aware that God had revealed himself in human form in Christ, he still had revealed himself.⁴¹

Here Kierkegaard makes it clear that the object of faith must exist independent of the self and prior to the act of faith. It is true that for him faith is the highest passion of subjectivity. But this does not imply a denial of an objective reality in the act of faith. His concern is to show that the only possible means by which one comes to relate “in truth” to the object of faith is by developing one’s “inwardness” and “subjectivity.” In other words, while recognizing

⁴⁰ Thomas 1994, p. 77.

⁴¹ Kierkegaard 1998, pp. 117–118.

that the objective content of doctrines is important, he stresses that the truth about such doctrines can only be gained through subjective appropriation. Kierkegaard tries to prevent both a conception of faith as an objective truth, which can be acquired without personal engagement and the volatilization of faith into an amorphous subjectivism. By the principle that “truth is subjectivity,” Kierkegaard wishes to tie together the “what” with the “how” of faith into one indissoluble whole.

The remarkable thing is that there is a How with the characteristic that when the How is scrupulously rendered the What is also given, that this is the How of ‘faith.’ Right here, at its very maximum, inwardness is shown to be objectivity.⁴²

This passage seems to suggest that the degree of passion and commitment to religious beliefs is by itself sufficient to ensure the validity of its objective content. But how can the subjective aspect of faith alone certify the reality of what is believed? The answer must be sought in the nature of the object of faith. The object of faith is not given immediately, such that it determines assent, rather it lies beyond the reach of any rational demonstration and any sort of objective warrant. It is, in other words, a paradox. “When the subjectivity, inwardness, is truth, then truth, objectively defined, is a paradox; and that truth is objectively a paradox shows precisely that subjectivity is truth.”⁴³ It is precisely the paradoxical character of its object which makes the act of faith purely subjective. The greater the improbability that some reality is objectively true, the greater the passionate commitment necessary to accept it. The passionate commitment in the act of faith reaches its peak when every shred of objective certainty disappears. This, however, does not mean that passionate commitment involved in the act of faith guarantees the objective truth of the paradox. The paradox is the proper object of faith precisely because there is no evidence for it.

Kierkegaard makes the distinction between simple and absolute paradox. The simple paradox refers to the Socratic view of truth. According to the Socratic model, knowing the ultimate truth was a matter of the existing individual becoming aware of what was present, though dormant, in his own mind, and the teacher’s function consisted in reminding him of what he implicitly possessed; it was a matter of recollecting knowledge that was in some sense

⁴² Ibid. 1975b, p. 351.

⁴³ Ibid. 1990, p. 204.

already there. As this truth, however, cannot be fully apprehended by the existing subject, it manifests itself as the unknown. Kierkegaard calls this unknown the god “against which the understanding in its paradoxical passion collides.”⁴⁴ The unknown is the frontier of the understanding that is continually arrived at, but which cannot be assimilated by the categories of the understanding. The paradox is not something the existing individual encounters outside of himself; thought itself is paradoxical. By its nature, the understanding seeks absolute knowledge, but, as with everything human, it is finite and has limits. At the extreme point of its limits, it encounters the unknown that cannot be thought. “This, then, is the ultimate paradox of thought: to want to discover something that thought itself cannot think.”⁴⁵ The paradox lies in the fact that reason can never reach what it seeks.

The absolute paradox refers to the Christian conception of the incarnation and represents a radically new point of departure for approaching the highest truth. Christianity assumes that the existing individual is not in possession of ultimate truth. Since human beings lack the truth about God, they must receive that truth through a revelation which comes directly from God. In order to make it possible for the individual to receive the truth, God appears in human form. There is a moment at which the eternal enters the temporal sphere, taking upon itself the limitations of human existence. However, that a particular human being is also God is something that transcends the possibilities of human knowledge. As Kierkegaard puts it: “This human being is also the god. How do I know that? Well, I cannot know it, for in that case I would have to know the god and the difference, and I do not know the difference as the understanding has made it like unto that from which it differs.”⁴⁶

This surely is a paradoxical state of affairs. It represents what Kierkegaard calls the absolute paradox. For in order to know something about God, the human person has to know first that it is absolutely different from him. This knowledge, however, cannot be acquired by human beings “because the understanding cannot even think the absolute different.”⁴⁷ It has to be taught by God, Himself. Why is the human person unable to acquire this knowledge? The answer is that, in sin, human beings have withdrawn from God so utterly that they cannot perceive the separation between God and themselves. If, in

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 1985, p. 39.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 45–46.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

the Socratic perspective, eternal truth was already paradoxical, it becomes an absolute paradox in Christianity where God and the existing subject are totally disproportionate due to sin. The absurdity of the Christian paradox lies in the fact that despite the absolute difference between God and the human person, God enters into relation with him to reveal his sinful state and subsequent redemption.

Thus the paradox becomes even more terrible, or the same paradox has the duplexity by which it manifests itself as the absolute—negatively, by bringing into prominence the absolute difference of sin and, positively, by wanting to annul this absolute difference in the absolute equality.⁴⁸

When confronted by the absolute paradox, reason is left with a choice: either to come to a mutual understanding with the paradox in the passion of faith or to reject it and take offence.⁴⁹ But how does reason come to an understanding with the paradox? Reason is not “supposed to understand the paradox but is only to understand that this is the paradox.”⁵⁰ The mutual understanding between reason and the paradox occurs “when the understanding steps aside and the paradox gives itself, and the third something, the something in which it occurs . . . is that happy passion to which we shall now give a name. . . . We shall call it faith.”⁵¹ The paradoxical character of God’s revelation in Jesus lies in the fact that it is revealed in history, and yet its content is such that it transcends the categories of the understanding. Only by faith, can we gain access to it.

Some writers have interpreted the paradox as a logical contradiction. For them, when Kierkegaard asks for faith in the paradox, he is asking the believer to put logic aside and embrace what is unintelligible to human reason.⁵² It is true that Kierkegaard often refers to the paradox as a contradiction; the incarnation is even described as a “self-contradiction.”⁵³ The contradiction consists in the fact that the eternal “can become historical only in direct opposition to all human understanding.”⁵⁴ This contradiction is further designated as the

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² See Hannay 1982, p. 107; Blanshard 1969, p. 15.

⁵³ Kierkegaard 1985, p. 87.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 1990, p. 211.

absurd. "The absurd is that the eternal truth has come into existence in time, that God has come into existence, has been born, has grown up."⁵⁵ This is not an object for knowledge; it is only an object for faith. "For all knowledge is either knowledge of the eternal, which excludes the temporal and the historical as inconsequential, or it is purely historical knowledge, and no knowledge can have as its object this absurdity that the eternal is the historical."⁵⁶ The incarnation as the object of faith, however, is not absurd or paradoxical in the sense that it violates the principles of logic, but in the sense that it absolutely transcends human knowledge.⁵⁷

Although Kierkegaard often speaks of the paradox or absurd as the object of faith that requires one to believe against understanding, he, at times, follows the more traditional view of faith as above reason.

What I usually express by saying that Christianity consists of paradox, philosophy in mediation, Leibniz expresses by distinguishing between what is above reason and what is against reason. Faith is above reason. By reason he understands, as he says many places, a linking together of truths, (enchainment), a conclusion from causes. Faith therefore cannot be *proved, demonstrated, comprehended*, for the link which makes a linking together possible is missing, and what else does this say than that it is a paradox.⁵⁸

The absurd or the paradox is above reason and therefore not really supported by reason. However, there is some way in which reason can affirm what is above it and distinguish between the absurd of Christianity and what may be called vulgar absurdities or nonsense. Therefore, the person who embraces the absolute paradox does not believe mere nonsense. The believer "both has and uses his understanding . . . in order to see to it that he believes against the understanding. Therefore he cannot believe nonsense against the understanding, which one might fear, because the understanding will penetratingly perceive that it is nonsense and hinder him in believing it."⁵⁹ To

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 1985, p. 62.

⁵⁷ For the view that the paradox is to be understood as above reason not against reason, see Evans 1989, pp. 360–363; *ibid.* 1998, pp. 78–92; Fabro 1962, pp. 174–178; Soe 1962, pp. 206–227; Emmanuel 1996, p. 45.

⁵⁸ Kierkegaard 1975a, p. 399.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 1990, p. 568.

reason is assigned the negative but important task of pointing out the incomprehensibility of the paradox.

Kierkegaard's position bears some similarity to Pascal's view that God is incomprehensible to the human intellect. According to Pascal, reason can neither prove nor disprove the existence of God.

If there is a God, He is infinitely incomprehensible, since, having neither parts nor limits, He has no affinity to us. We are incapable of knowing either what He is or if He is. This being so, who will dare to undertake the decision of the question? Not we, who have no affinity to Him.⁶⁰

The decision to believe must be made without the benefit of any objective assurances. In his celebrated "wager argument," he makes it clear that the decision to believe in the existence of God cannot be made on objective grounds but relies on purely subjective considerations. "Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then without hesitation that He is."⁶¹ Although Kierkegaard does not put forward a wager-style argument, both thinkers affirm that the object of faith is objectively uncertain and, therefore, the decision to believe always involves a risk.

For Kierkegaard, between faith and knowledge, there is an unbridgeable gap. Faith is set apart from knowledge into a sphere of its own; it believes what for the understanding is the paradox and the absurd. For the believer, the absurd is not the absurd because faith transforms it.⁶² But it remains absurd for the understanding even as one believes, for the contradiction residing at the heart of the absolute paradox cannot be overcome in any form of knowledge. The absolute paradox cannot be known but only believed. At no point can the absolute paradox be mediated by the understanding. It is precisely because the absolute paradox lies beyond the grasp of the understanding that the passion of faith arises, that faith becomes the highest passion of subjectivity.

⁶⁰ Pascal 1963, p. 550.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Kierkegaard 1967, p. 7.

Conclusion

In a comparative examination of two religious thinkers belonging to such disparate traditions as Buddhism and Christianity are, while structural similarities between *shinjin* and faith may be recognized, in terms of content, radical differences are to be expected. We can find such similar features as the point that *shinjin* arises in human beings through the power of Amida as faith arises through the grace of God; or that the experience of *shinjin* is intimately related to the awareness of evil, as faith is to the consciousness of sin. But from these and other possible similarities, it does not follow that they share common elements in terms of content.

Shinjin for Shinran is not to be understood as a religious experience between a subject and an object of faith. For Shinran, *shinjin* arises in us entirely by the power of Amida. It follows that *shinjin* is beyond any decision, voluntary choice, or act of resolution on the part of human beings. Any agency in *shinjin* must be ascribed to Amida. In other words, Amida's Buddha-nature becomes one with the human self. In this sense, we could say that *shinjin* is a non-relational state of mind in which Amida Buddha's mind opens forth in the minds of human beings. Human subjectivity in *shinjin* is completely eclipsed by the power of Amida.

For Kierkegaard, however, neither God's grace, alone, nor an act of will can bring about faith, both are required. Faith is a gift of God. However, a free act of will is required if the gift is to be received. The individual must choose whether or not to accept it. Rejection is possible. For faith as gift of God is not forced on the existing individual against his will. As Kierkegaard puts it: "God can give help for what only freedom can do."⁶³ Human decision is demanded by the very paradoxical character of the object of faith. The claim that the eternal God becomes temporal in the historical figure of Jesus absolutely transcends human standards of knowledge. Faced with the objective uncertainty of this fact, only by a passionate decision can the individual hold fast to its truth. The only certainty provided is the continued striving of the individual. Hence, faith is not something accomplished or attained once and for all at one specific moment. As a personal relationship between God and human beings, faith must be maintained by constant striving. The human person is never free from the temptation of disobedience to God. Although

⁶³ Ibid. 1978, p. 576.

essentially a gift of God, faith must be sustained by a continual effort of the will.

Thus, *shinjin* and faith are two fundamentally different concepts that point to very distinctive religious experiences, shaped and produced by widely diverse religious contexts. *Shinjin* and faith are not simply different terms which point to a single reality sought by Shin Buddhist and Christian adherents. *Shinjin* in Shin Buddhism and faith in Christianity each fosters different sorts of experiences and dispositions in their respective members. In line with a cultural-linguistic approach to religion, the distinctive patterns of story, belief, and behavior that give *shinjin* and faith their specific and sometimes contradictory meanings are significant. The focus is on what is particular and specific to both concepts rather than on possible general similarities.

ABBREVIATION

CWS *Collected Works of Shinran*. Translated by Dennis Hirota, Inagaki Hisao, Tokunaga Michio, and Uryuzu Ryushin. 2 vols. Kyoto: Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-ha, 1997.

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