

SYMPOSIUM:
Reading *The Collected Works of Shinran*

Preface

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THE three articles comprising this symposium are based on presentations at a panel of the American Academy of Religion in 1999. The first two offer responses to *The Collected Works of Shinran*, a complete English translation, with introductions and interpretive materials, of Shinran's doctrinal writings.¹ Following the format of the original panel, I will briefly describe the translation project and its aims by way of introduction, and in the concluding article offer some reflections on the readings and on directions for further exploration.

The work to translate Shinran began in 1974 with the purpose of producing an English version that would be complete, consistent in style and terminology, and as precisely reflective of the originals as possible both in thought and expression. Ueda Yoshifumi, a prominent specialist in Indian Yogācāra thought, set the direction of the project as general supervisor (*kanshū*), a position he held until the year of his death in 1993 at the age of eighty-eight. Following him, Nagao Gadjin, also a widely-known scholar of Indian Mahāyāna, filled this post to the end of the project. I served as head translator throughout, with the basic tasks of composing the first drafts of the translations, which were reviewed twice by overlapping committees of scholars,²

¹ Dennis Hirota et al., *The Collected Works of Shinran. Translated, with introductions, glossaries, and reading aids* (Kyoto: Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha, 1997). Volume One: The Writings, 704pp. Volume Two: Introductions, Glossaries, and Reading Aids, 362pp.

² For much of the project, a first weekly review was performed by a committee consisting

editing them, and producing a final draft with commentarial materials and reading aids for book publication.

The Aim of The Collected Works of Shinran

The translation project that produced *The Collected Works of Shinran* (CWS) has occasionally been misunderstood by readers who have approached the publications with a strongly held presupposition. This presupposition has been stated most baldly by a recent reviewer for an American academic journal: “Having been prepared and published under sectarian auspices, [*The Collected Works of Shinran*] inevitably reflects those current sectarian views.”³ The assumption that there exists a standard sectarian interpretation of the entire body of Shinran’s writings and that such an understanding has been directly imported into the translations and commentary is simply incorrect. Further, it leads to the corollary, also widely embraced, that CWS is merely a transposition into English of current, average Japanese writings, and that therefore that there is nothing in it that need be recognized or acknowledged as distinctive or original. In fact, even such obvious reading aids as the annotated list of the passages in *Teaching, Practice, and*

of a specialist in Pāli (Watanabe Fumimaro), one in Indian Mahāyāna (Uryūzu Ryūshin, and later also Inagaki Hisao), one in Shin studies (Tokunaga Michio), and myself. For a second review, held monthly, we were joined by Ueda Yoshifumi, Nagao Gadjin, Ishida Mitsuyuki, and a number of other senior scholars of Buddhist, Shin, and religious studies. In the early years of the project, we were also aided from time to time by Taitetsu Unno.

³ Robert E. Morrell, in *Journal of Japanese Studies* 25: 1 (Winter 1999). Out of fairness to Morrell, the extended comments should be quoted:

“Having been prepared and published under sectarian auspices, it inevitably reflects those current sectarian views. No matter. I know of no ideological movement whose members are overly zealous about presenting a totally ‘objective’ statement of their position. And one may reasonably doubt the ‘objectivity’ of nonsectarian academics, who also cannot divorce themselves from their own hidden agendas.”

The “agenda” of CWS, for Ueda and myself, was largely theological in that we sought to elucidate Shinran’s religious awareness; whether there are hidden designs on the reader, or what the stricture “totally objective” might mean in this context, should perhaps be left to the readers to decide. The issue raised by Morrell regarding “nonsectarian academics” appears pertinent, however, particularly because a double standard is frequently imposed on work that is funded by Japanese temple institutions or their academic arms and that draws on the aid of Buddhist scholars who are often also temple priests. It appears that such work, though widely used, is often not deemed academically worthy of acknowledgment, unless it is filtered through the participation of Western scholars.

Realization does not exist in Japanese. More importantly, as students actually familiar with the Shin commentarial tradition and its present malaise will be aware, there is currently no consensus on any number of thorny issues, and the relatively coherent grasp of Shinran's thought reflected in the translations would at various points be considered highly controversial in Japan, though perhaps not publicly contested.⁴

One major aim of the translations was precisely to facilitate or stimulate the development of Shin thought through exposing Shinran's writings to an encounter with and engagement of Western religious scholars and theologians. This was, at least, the explicit and conscious understanding shared by Ueda and myself from the beginning of the work. In some sense, then, such responses as the present symposium represent a significant aspect of the fulfillment of the project. Underlying this thinking was the view that, because of the continuing conservatism of Shin doctrinal studies in Japan, which is part of the legacy of Edo-period state and temple policies, there would likely be no adequately new developments in the understanding of doctrine without impetus from outside the temple institution.⁵ Further, although the American Shin temple system has a one-hundred year history in the United States, it has accomplished little to adapt Shin teachings to the American environment.

Ueda believed that crucial aspects of Shinran's thought—aspects that reflected its roots in Mahāyāna tradition—had been neglected in the traditional scholastics because inadequate attention had been paid to reading Shinran's Japanese works with precision. This was the result of a tendency to regard writings in *kanbun* as of greater scholarly value than those in

⁴ Controversial interpretations include, for example, the body of issues surrounding the avoidance of “faith” and “belief” as translations for *shinjin* 信心 or *shin* 信, and Shinran's assertion that realization of *shinjin* is “immediate attainment of birth.” Ueda has asserted, in a strongly criticized article, that Shinran used the term “birth” both for birth in the Pure Land at the moment of death and for realization of *shinjin*; in other words, that realization of *shinjin* in the present is also “birth.” Traditional Shin scholastics insists that birth properly refers only to birth in the Pure Land at the time of death, and that upon realization of *shinjin*, attainment of such birth in the Pure Land is settled or assured. I have edited and translated Ueda's article with the title, “The Mahāyāna Structure of Shinran's Thought,” *Eastern Buddhist*, xvii: 1 (1984) and xvii: 2 (1984).

⁵ I have outlined some of the historical background in “Introduction,” Dennis Hirota, ed., *Toward a Contemporary Understanding of Pure Land Buddhism: Creating a Shin Buddhist Theology in a Religiously Plural World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 1–29.

Japanese, and to read the Japanese through an imposition of a highly abstract and schematic doctrinal understanding based on the *kanbun* works. It was through a careful and close reading of the nuances of expression available to Shinran in Japanese that Ueda was able to delineate what he asserted to be significant parallels in thinking with general Mahāyāna thought.

At the same time, I understood my task in translation as the recreation of the textures of language and movements of mind experienced in the original. Perhaps the clearest attempt at this ideal was *Tannishō: A Primer* published in 1982, in which I give two translations, one freer, and the second intended to allow the reader to reconstruct the Japanese sentence structure phrase by phrase.⁶ This sense of translation was not necessarily shared by some Japanese colleagues, who preferred a model in which the ideas could simply be taken out of the original and expressed in idiomatic English. However, Ueda's concern with precision and my own interests in reproducing the movements of thought in the original converged.

I continue to believe that it will be in interaction with Western thought that moves toward a genuinely contemporary grasp of the nature of Shinran's religious awareness will emerge, and if *The Collected Works of Shinran* should somehow contribute toward such moves, then the original purpose envisioned, at least by Ueda and myself, will have been fulfilled.

⁶ Dennis Hirota, *Tannishō: A Primer* (Kyoto: Ryukoku University, 1982); the translation included in CWS is a slightly modified version without the phrase by phrase translation.