

# Shin Buddhist Ethics in Our Postmodern Age of *Mappō*

THOMAS P. KASULIS

IN the past few years, I have been reflecting on Shinran's understanding of *Mappō* 末法 and its helpfulness to thinking through the implications of our own *Zeitgeist* called postmodernity.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, we will explore how

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<sup>1</sup> It is often important to distinguish postmodernity (a description of our present social situation) from postmodernism (a theory that recognizes, analyzes, and offers a reasoned response to that situation). The same distinction would apply to the twin terms "modernity" and "modernism." In this paper, I often find it helpful to speak of a "postmodern (or modern) consciousness," suggesting an awareness of the postmodern situation that permeates one's judgments about fact and value. "Postmodern consciousness" is, therefore, a sensitivity to and interpretation of our current situation in light of certain categories. As a form of consciousness, however, it also involves a reflexivity that allows the possibility for reflecting on that situation, of thinking about it as well as through it, perhaps even undermining it in some way. In juxtaposing such a postmodern consciousness with Shinran's *mappō*-consciousness, we will find many of Shinran's points to be a response to our postmodernity as well as to his *mappō*.

I hesitate, however, to call Shinran's theory a "postmodernism" for two reasons. First, although his analysis of his own situation parallels in many ways the analyses of many postmodernist thinkers, his conclusions are radically unlike those of most, if not all, Western postmodern theorists. That is, one could reject all present Western postmodernist theories and still accept Shinran. Second, it has become fashionable for Western postmodernist critics to appropriate many traditional Buddhist and Daoist thinkers into their hegemonic, Eurocentric field.

Shinran's ideas can be especially pertinent to some ethical predicaments symptomatic of postmodernity. Before turning to that particular topic, however, it is useful to review some main reasons why I think it fruitful to compare *mappō* and postmodernity in the first place.<sup>2</sup> Given the differences in their intellectual and cultural contexts, their similarities are not necessarily self-evident. If we turn away from their historical development and look instead at how they characterize the human predicament, however, the parallels become more apparent. Let us start with what we mean in this paper by "postmodern consciousness." The term has multiple nuances and it is not surprising that different disciplines such as aesthetics, literary criticism, social theory, politics, and philosophy have their own understandings. In our use of the term, it is worth noting initially the prefix: *post*-modern. A previous worldview, or way of life, or set of common values is no longer operative. To understand the postmodern, therefore, we need to understand what it left behind, namely, the "modern."

"Modernism" itself has multiple meanings, but what most interests us here is its philosophical and social relevance. Philosophically, modernism was a movement in Western thought beginning with such early 17th-century thinkers as Descartes, Hobbes, and Galileo. It represents a way of thinking that turned from biblical and ecclesiastical authority to place its emphasis on what could be known through empirical observation and logical reasoning. This gave birth to a new faith: a trust in science, secular education, and research. Modernism assumes the world is fully knowable and that humanity can achieve a systematic, comprehensive understanding of it. Socially, modernism led to the establishment of a new elite. The experts in premodern society were the scholars who studied the ancient religious classics, whereas the experts of the modern period were those with developed knowledge of empirical science, mathematics, and technology. As philosophical modernism evolved into the nineteenth century, those with expert, scientific knowledge (in German, *Wissenschaft*) played a central role in defining society and

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In this paper, if anything, I am trying to reverse that trend by privileging the Asian over the Eurocentric, specifically, by interpreting postmodern consciousness as a form of *mappō*-consciousness, rather than vice versa. When we do that, we may find a way out of some of our postmodern dilemmas, especially those related to axiological issues.

<sup>2</sup> The first time I publicly discussed this issue was in my 1997 lecture at Otani, "Shin Buddhist Philosophy for a Postmodern Society." Some points in this discussion draw directly from there. Again, I would like to thank the faculty and students of Otani University for their insightful comments on that lecture.

setting its agenda. What began as a movement to analyze the natural world in terms of reason and observation expanded to the development of the so-called social “sciences” of sociology, psychology, linguistics, anthropology, economics, and political science. History became increasingly the chronology of human events arranged in a direct causal sequence that should be understood without resort to any nonempirical facts.

In the West’s social upheavals of the late 1960s, many became skeptical of the optimism behind modernism’s project and by the end of the 1970s, the terms “postmodernism” and “postmodernity” became accepted designations for important cultural and intellectual trends. In the era of nuclear and environmental destruction, scientism—modernism’s theory that science is not only *a source* of knowledge, but the *only* reliable basis for truth—has fallen into disrepute. Truth must go beyond mere positivistic facts and include axiological questions. When global technological and economic development means the subjugation of most of humanity and the destruction of the life-sustaining environment, it can no longer be accepted naively or blindly. The postmodern mood is to scrutinize the fruits of modernism and when there is bad fruit, to question the soundness of its roots. Therefore, the postmodern rejects, or at the least questions, various modernist assumptions. For our purposes, we will consider four.

Modern consciousness’s first assumption involved its understanding of authority. Although Western modernism broke away from the Church as the central authority in matters of knowledge, it still tended to think in terms of both a philosophically and socially authoritative center. That center was still defined as the dominion of the educated, but unlike the medieval period, the idea of education expanded to include, and eventually to emphasize, secular knowledge. Postmodern consciousness, on the other hand, advocates pluralism, rather than a hegemonic center. It seeks to enfranchise and recognize the voices of those excluded from modernism’s center: the poor, the ethnic or racial minorities, the colonized, women, the handicapped, and so forth. Rather than defining knowledge as rationality and empiricism, postmodernism finds insight in the unregimented engagement of all perspectives. Rather than giving dominance to one voice over the others, postmodernism tends to give each perspective its turn in a de-centered discourse that maintains difference without any attempt to resolve, dissolve, or transcend it.

Modern consciousness’s second assumption was its trust in objectivity. Modern scientism purports to take the subjective element out of experience and to leave us with the undistorting gaze of perfect detachment. It views

knowledge as impartial, justice as blind, and numbers as trustworthy. Yet, the postmodern asks, who determines what is knowledge and what is empty belief, who regulates and enforces justice, and who decides *what* to measure? The topics of medical research are determined not by the supposed objectivity of numerical analysis, but by those who fund the research. Science may theoretically be interested in every thing, but scientists naturally look first at what is closest to themselves. For example, some of the greatest killers of human beings are tropical diseases, but because the centers of science are in the temperate zones, the etiology and possible cures for those diseases are little studied (unless, like HIV, the disease moves into those technologically advanced countries). The postmodern consciousness, therefore, questions the very basis of such modernist claims to objectivity and impartiality. It contends that we see only what we look for and what we look for depends on our presuppositions and predilections, themselves influenced by the needs of our social class, nationality, gender, and political affiliations. In this postmodern shift is a recognition that what we know depends on who we are.

This leads to a third difference between the modern and postmodern: the contrast between totality and fragmentation. When confronted with the multiplicity of viewpoints, each true to its own context, the modern saw those differences as complementary facets of a single truth. Consider the famous Indian story of the blind men and the elephant. Encountering an elephant for the first time, a group of blind men are asked to describe it. The first blind man had felt the elephant's trunk and said the elephant must be something like a snake; another felt a leg and said the elephant must be like a tree trunk; a third the elephant's tail and said the elephant must be like a whip. The modernist assumed that outside the particular perspectival experiences of the individual blind men, there must be a single reality—the whole elephant. If the blind men could pool their empirical knowledge, they could get a comprehensive, coherent picture of the whole. The whole truth can be constructed out of the sum of the partial, perspectival truths. Postmoderns disagree with that metaphor and its interpretation. For them, reality is not whole, but inherently and irretrievably fragmented. It is as if instead of feeling the elephant, the blind men were asked to imagine the physical attributes of a beautiful woman. From their personal experience and acculturated preferences, each would imagine a whole physical woman—length and texture of hair, scent of perfume, body shape, and so forth. Can we, the postmodern asks, find the “true” image of physical beauty by somehow melding the various blind men's views? Obviously not. Imagine an amalgamated woman with partly

wavy, partly curly, and partly straight hair, wearing three differently scented perfumes, and having a fusion of three different body shapes. The principle of synthesis does not work in such cases. For the postmodern, the truth is always at least partially the knower's construct and it may be such that other constructions cannot enhance or complement it. No simple synthesis is possible. Whereas the modern could only understand truth in terms of a complete, all-encompassing system, the postmodern insists on fragmentation and the impossibility of completeness.

The fourth difference between modern and postmodern consciousness lies in their respective emphases on control and deconstruction. The moderns used the tools of technology and science to control or manage the world. Postmoderns, however, believe modernism's optimistic attempt to control the world has given birth to restrictive, oppressive authority structures enforcing only one vision of how the world should be. As science and technology have grown more sophisticated, their need for huge capital resources to support research and development has also grown. Only a megacorporation or the state itself can garnish the capital necessary for further basic research and that research, according to the postmodern interpretation, will inevitably reflect the interests of a corporate, global capitalism or a particular state ideology. The postmodern seeks to unmask and deconstruct such structures of power.

Let us now bring Shinran into our discussion. We find his connection with the postmodern consciousness in his focus on *mappō*. *Mappō*, like postmodernity, has a historical dimension in that it comes after and abandons an earlier way of thinking and valuing, namely, the dharma of the correct and semblance periods (*shōbō* 正法 and *zōbō* 像法). Fundamentally, the idea of *mappō* is that even though we still have the true teachings of Buddhism available to us, we can no longer either understand them or put them into practice in our own lives. In other words, our grasp of the truth about reality or even ourselves is unavoidably partial, incomplete, and inadequate. Even to the extent we understand those truths in some partial way, we fail to act on them and continue instead to enwrap ourselves in layers of delusion.

For Shinran, this meant that the authoritative institutions of the Heian worldview were no longer germane. At Enryaku-ji, the center of the Tendai establishment where Shinran had studied and practiced as a young man, they exhaustively taught all forms of knowledge, both exoteric and esoteric. Every monk had available an arsenal of practices to cut through Mara's armies of delusion and to bring one face-to-face with reality as it is. The

whole enterprise had had the social, economic, cultural, and political support of the Heian aristocracy. Yet, with all that insight and all that practice on the mountain, the world of Kamakura Japan in the valleys seemed to be falling apart. The government was the result of a military coup and decades of open warfare; there were widespread occurrences of disease and natural disasters; individuals turned inward for their own personal liberation but found themselves distracted and upset by internal conflicts as real and debilitating as what was happening in the external world. In that context, the Holy Path of Sages, the Tendai (and Shingon) promise of living in harmony with reality and with oneself, only exacerbated one's sense of not knowing what is really happening and what to do about it. This sense of both the world and one's self as being profoundly unintelligible and out-of-control is the essence of *mappō* consciousness. Let us briefly compare Shinran's reaction to it in terms of our discussion of the four characteristics of postmodern consciousness.

First, we have seen that postmoderns generally question whether there can ever be a legitimate center of authority. The late-Heian Tendai (like Shingon) system shared many similarities with modernity's scientism. It claimed to be totalistic and comprehensive (*en* 円) and had a state-supported, central institution that could integrate diverse teachings and practices into a single authoritative curriculum of studies and rituals. Tendai studied sacred texts and doctrines from every Buddhist school as legitimate perspectives that partially or contextually reveal the truth.<sup>3</sup> However, as in the case of the elephant, only the person who had the overall synthesis (*chū* 中) could understand and mediate both the unqualified pattern (*kū* 空) and the various provisional or perspectival standpoints (*ke* 仮) as parts of a single totality. Shinran found that Tendai system unintelligible, ineffective, and spiritually irrelevant. As hard as he tried, he could not grasp and put into practice the hegemonic Tendai system. He left it behind, first voluntarily and then by coercion when Hōnen and his disciples were exiled from the capital. Living among the ordinary people, Shinran did not seek to replace Tendai's systematic teachings and central organization with alternative ones of his own. His

<sup>3</sup> From the exoteric standpoint, this perspectival way of thinking is found in Tendai's classification of the teachings (*kyōhan* 教判) which claims that the efficacy of the teaching depends on the perspective and background of the audience. Esoterically, as in Kūkai's theory of the ten mindsets (*jūjūshin* 十住心), teachings have their location in a larger mandala-like view of the totalistic whole, each mindset being true to its context, but unaware of its limitations. Only the esoteric view transcends and orders such perspectives.

experience in Kantō led him to think in terms of local, coordinated religious communities, rather than centralized institutions.

Second, as we have explained, the postmodern brings suspicion to all claims for impersonal objectivity and universality. Our knowledge of the world is always colored by the context of our knowing. Therefore, the attempts to develop a totalistic system such as Tendai's or Shingon's assumes one can have the master map on which to plot the truths of the various perspectives. Shinran found such a comprehensive insight impossible, evidence that his era was not one of *shobō* or *zōbō*, but *mappō*. For Shinran, in his most intense moment of entrusting himself to Amida, in his profound *shinjin* 信心, he claimed that Amida "took his vow for me, Shinran, alone."<sup>4</sup> The foundation of his spirituality was his own personal experience in his own conditioned context, not dependence on reasoned argument (*hakarai* はからい, "calculation" or "figuring") or empirical data. Shinran found his spirituality in his personal *shinjin*, not in Tendai's authoritative comprehensiveness.

Third, postmodernity assumes insight will always be fragmentary rather than holistic. We can never see the whole truth, but only what is available from our own specific context. Even that we see only dimly. Shinran expressed this point by denying he really knew something on his own. He could never present himself as an authority; he rejected the notion the he himself could have disciples. He insisted instead that he was only repeating what he had heard from others, especially Hōnen, because in his predicament, that is all he could claim to understand. He did not grant objective authority even to that—he admits that following Hōnen's teachings might condemn him to hell—but he had no alternative (he would go to hell anyway).<sup>5</sup> In that way, Shinran made no claim of universal truth: he did not try to prove his teachings through reason, scriptural authority, or personal insight.

<sup>4</sup> "When I consider deeply the Vow of Amida, which arose from five kalpas of profound thought, I realize that it was entirely for the sake of myself alone!" *Tannishō* Postscript, in Hirota et al. 1997 (hereafter CWS) I: 679.

<sup>5</sup> "I have no idea whether the nembutsu is truly the seed for my being born in the Pure Land or whether it is the karmic act for which I must fall into hell. Should I have been deceived by Master Hōnen and, saying the nembutsu, were to fall into hell, even then I would have no regrets.

The reason is, if I could attain Buddhahood by endeavoring in other practices, but said the nembutsu and so fell into hell, then I would feel regret at having been deceived. But I am incapable of any other practice, so hell is decidedly my abode whatever I do." (*Tannishō*, ch. 2 CWS I: 662).

Finally, by deconstructing fixed ideas and practices, postmodernity forgoes modernism's attempt to control reality. That parallels Shinran's relinquishing his own power (*jiriki* 自力) to open himself to the spontaneous and natural (*jinen* 自然) power of Amida's Vow (*tariki* 他力). Through his deft use of the *yomikae* technique, he deconstructed the traditional readings of Chinese Pure Land texts. He undermined the establishment's expectations by calling himself "Gutoku" (愚秃, a slacker who cannot even follow a monastic rule as simple as keeping one's head properly shaven), by taking a wife and identifying himself as neither monk nor layman, and by not building a comprehensive Shin Buddhist institution with a single central organization like Enryaku-ji, Kōya-san, or even Eihei-ji built by his Zen Buddhist contemporary, Dōgen.

Bearing in mind those provocative similarities between Shinran's *mappō* consciousness and our own postmodern consciousness, we can now inquire into how Shinran might be able to help us with one of the most disturbing problems for postmodernity—ethics. Without established authority or universality, limited as one is to one's own particular situation, how can an ethical position be formulated, and even more importantly, how can it be lived? That predicament is common to postmodernity and *mappō*. If Shinran's philosophy can help us work through that perplexity, it would be particularly relevant to us today.

Before we go into Shinran's view, a brief comment about the general Buddhist context of ethics is in order. In our philosophical discussions, we have several different understandings of ethics. One view is that ethics is about developing a list of behavioral dos and don'ts, like the Ten Commandments of the Hebrew Bible. Other ethical positions address not so much specific behaviors, but attitudes behind the behavior. Jesus's "love thy neighbor as thyself" or the Japanese Seventeen-article Constitution's "be not envious" (Article 14) exemplify well that variety. For the most part, Buddhism does not emphasize ethics in either of those two senses, however. Even the moral precepts (*śīla*) or the Bodhisattva Vows are not like the Ten Commandments—external moral mandates from some source of authority—but more like self-imposed restrictions on one's behavior. Consider this parallel. Suppose I vow to give up smoking. It is a real vow to which I am committed and which, if I follow through, will transform part of my life. Yet, that is not in itself an ethical vow; it stems more from practical wisdom about health than ethical norms. Similarly, the bodhisattva vows or precepts are meant to transform the way I live so I can be more healthy spiritually. The original



Buddhist term applied to such precepts was not “moral” or “good” but instead “skillful” (*kuśala*). In many respects, the Buddhist precepts and bodhisattva vows resemble psychotherapy as much as ethics. Both psychotherapy and Buddhism address a negative psychic state (*duḥkha* in Buddhism) and suggest ways of breaking the cycle of self-harming habits (cycles sometimes represented in Buddhism as the twelve negative links or *nidānas* or even the Wheel of Life). Psychotherapy and Buddhist precepts show us how to break out of those cycles, how to recondition ourselves so as not to be so psychospiritually self-destructive.

Because of its emphasis on developing the right habits, that aspect of Buddhism resembles some forms of Western virtue ethics. The classical idea of virtue ethics, which we find in Aristotle for example, is that proper training, proper formation of habit, will develop people of character who will spontaneously do the moral thing as circumstances require. As long as the student follows the steps taught by the mentor or the pedagogical system, the student will develop character and eventually even understand the point of the moral training. For some traditions of Buddhism, especially those with a *guru* structure, we find some significant similarities, but certainly such an understanding would not apply to any form of Buddhism that takes *mappō* seriously. In the age of *mappō*, there are no authoritative sages or mentors and the systems of the dharma cannot be understood.

This brings us to a final contrast between general Buddhist ethics and many forms of Western ethics. In the West because moral maxims or principles are understood to have a source beyond the individual, they are understood to be equally applicable to every person. Therefore, I can morally judge others by the same criteria I judge myself. In fact, for many Western ethicists, I am not only entitled to judge the actions or motives of others in that way, but I also have a moral obligation to prevent others from acting immorally. If it would be immoral for me to treat people in a certain way, it is also immoral for society or the government to treat people in that way. Therefore, this sort of reasoning goes, it is my own moral responsibility to stand against society or the government if it acts in such an immoral manner. In contrast, the Buddhist tradition has not often so closely connected personal and social ethics. There have been important exceptions, of course. In India, Buddhism has traditionally stood up against the injustices and unfairness of the caste system, for example. Today in Southeast Asia and other parts of the Buddhist world, so-called “engaged Buddhism” calls for social justice as a demand arising from the Buddhist Dharma itself. Despite such

examples, it is fair to say that Buddhists have more often than not interpreted precepts and vows to be an internal exercise in removing the roots of one's own delusions, rather than changing the conditions of society. In that respect, Buddhism is quite different from most Western ethical systems.

Let us now turn our attention to the specific case of Shin Buddhism. This takes us into one of the most complex areas of Shinran's thought. In fact, if we take a superficial reading of Shinran's position, we might conclude that Shin Buddhism has nothing distinctive whatsoever to contribute to our understanding of ethics. There are three reasons for such an interpretation. First, discussions of Shin ethics inevitably cite Shinran's famous line from *Tannishō* chapter 3: "Even a good person can be reborn in the Pure Land; how much more so an evil one." That might be taken to mean that "an ethical Shin Buddhist" is an oxymoron. Second, because of their traditional suspicion about universal claims—their unwillingness to proclaim an authoritatively single truth to the misguided or ignorant—Shin Buddhists find it difficult to develop a collective social or ethical position. If Shin Buddhism as an institution were to take a moral position, that might give the impression that the organizational structure has a legitimate center of authority, the kind of structure theoretically excluded by *mappō*-consciousness. Third, because Shin Buddhism has no fixed set of moral precepts distinctive to its tradition, on ethical issues Shin might seem to be a generic Mahāyāna Buddhism. Yet, even taking the Mahāyāna Bodhisattva Vows is, on the surface at least, a kind of *jiriki*, a claim that one can do something meritorious by one's own efforts. Shinran is clear on this point: whatever good I might perform is not my own act, but rather the working of Amida's Vow.<sup>6</sup> In that context, Shin Buddhism would seem to be the Mahāyāna tradition least likely to say something helpful about ethics.<sup>7</sup> In short, it would seem that the more we move

<sup>6</sup> The idea that the working of Amida's Vow is the source of all truly good and compassionate action can be found in several places within Shinran's works. Two examples are:

"[The] Second [way Amida directs his virtue to us] is Amida's directing of virtue for our return to this world. This is the benefit we receive, the state of benefiting and guiding others." (*Passages on the Pure Land Way*, CWS I: 301)

"To be made to become so" means that without the practitioner's calculating in any way whatsoever, all that practitioner's past, present, and future evil karma is transformed into the highest good. (*Notes on 'Essentials of Faith Alone,'* CWS I: 453)

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted, however, that East Asian Buddhist traditions in general have traditionally said little about social ethics. That is partly because East Asian Buddhism took root in cultures already deeply influenced by Confucian social and moral norms. In contrast to Indian Buddhism's taking root in a Hindu caste culture that Buddhists felt the need to criticize, East

from general Buddhist principles to specifically Shin Buddhist ones, the less clear the relevance to ethics. The danger is that Shin Buddhists might actually use their religion as an excuse for avoiding moral involvement in social ills. That is not at all what Shinran intended, however. Let us begin with a different interpretation of the above three points about Shin Buddhist ethics.

Let us start with Shinran's previously quoted statement about the preference for the evil person's being reborn in the Pure Land. What exactly does he mean by the term *akunin* 悪人, or "evil person" and the contrasting term "good person" or *zennin* 善人? Although doing good is not the means for birth in the Pure Land, Shinran explicitly states that a person should not perform evil in order to be saved by Amida's Vow. That would be comparable, he says, to taking a poison just because we have an antidote.<sup>8</sup> The way I gloss the passage in question is to substitute the English colloquialism "do-gooders" for "good people" and interpret Shinran as saying "Even do-gooders may be born in the Pure Land; how much more so those who are not." That is, I think Shinran is not talking about people in terms of an external standard of good and evil, but rather, is referring to the way people view themselves, their actions, and their capacities. Do-gooders are people who not only do good, but also think of their good deeds as part of their self-identity. They not only see their actions as good, but also they see *themselves* as intrinsically good and morally able to discern what is "for the good." Such a self-image would, Shinran believed, only entangle one further in *jiriki*, the idea that one can help oneself and others through one's own power. Shinran believed that the proper response to seeing one's actions as having led to something good is not pride, is not an increase in self-esteem, but rather *gratitude*. That something good was done is not my doing, but rather, it was the working of Amida's compassionate Vow.<sup>9</sup> Viewed in light of this interpretation, Shinran's message is very clear. If a person considers oneself a *zennin*, then that person may do good deeds, but will never realize the need for *tariki*, will never realize that it was not by one's own power that good was performed. Therefore, such a person does not ever experience pure *shinjin*. Yet, even that

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Asian Buddhism did not find Confucianism so incompatible with Buddhist ideals. For a fuller discussion of that point, see my "Does East Asian Buddhism Have an Ethical System" in *Journal of Religious Philosophy* (Kyoto: Zen Buddhism Today, 1990, pp. 41–60).

<sup>8</sup> See *Tannishō*, section 13, CWS I: 671 and *Lamp for the Latter Ages*, CWS I: 553.

<sup>9</sup> For further discussion of the relation between one's own personal karmic evil and the transformation into good through the working of Amida's Vow, see the editors' comment on "evil" in their glossary, CWS II: 183–186.

person is not completely excluded from the compassionate working of Amida's Vow.<sup>10</sup>

Incidentally, this understanding of *akunin* and *zennin* in Shinran's writing suggests a more general hermeneutic for interpreting Shinran's thought. It is often helpful, especially in problematic passages, to bring a psychological or even phenomenological perspective to Shinran's statements. We have noted already, for example, the importance of Shinran's emphasis on *mappō*-consciousness as a mode of experiencing and reflecting, rather than simply an idea in historical or metaphysical theory. In short, it is often more important in reading Shinran to see that he is analyzing how something is experienced rather than what it is as a fact of external reality. Speculating on the nature of reality itself is not a central focus in Shinran's work. Yet, he does engage in reflection on, and justification of, Shin praxis.<sup>11</sup> There are at least two rea-

<sup>10</sup> Shinran follows the Pure Land tradition in recognizing various "transformed lands" of paradise as well as the Pure Land itself. A discussion of those places is found in Chapter 6 of *Kyōgyōshinshō*, (CWS I: 207 ff.). On the connection between the "borderlands" and *jiriki*, see Hymn 67 of *Jōdo wasan*:

Those who, though aspiring for the Pure Land of happiness,

Do not realize shinjin that is Other Power,

Doubt the Buddha's inconceivable wisdom and therefore dwell

In the borderland or the realm of indolence and pride.

(CWS I: 343)

<sup>11</sup> This suggests that as a philosopher, Shinran is more focused on metapraxis than metaphysics. That is, religiously, he is immersed in the praxis of Shin Buddhism, the *nembutsu*, for example. Yet, given his historical context, he must philosophically justify why that practice is superior to others and not just one of many complementary practices (the Tendai view). Furthermore, he must philosophically justify his own understanding of the *nembutsu* as distinguished from that of other Pure Land Buddhists, such as the followers of Hōnen in Jōdo Buddhism. Such philosophical justification of a praxis vis-à-vis other praxes and their justifications is what I call "metapraxis." In formulating such a philosophical defense of one's own praxis, however, one will inevitably resort to some metaphysical claims about reality as support for one's claim of practical efficacy. That is, in explaining philosophically why my praxis works (and yours does not), I will assume certain things about the nature of reality at large. If I go beyond merely making those assumptions to trying to justify them, I then engage in religious metaphysics. For a fuller explanation of the relations among praxis, metapraxis, and metaphysics, see my "Philosophy as Metapraxis" in Frank Reynolds and David Tracy (eds.), *Discourse and Praxis* (Albany: SUNY, 1992, pp. 169–96).

Therefore, it is not surprising that although Shinran is not primarily interested in metaphysics, he must occasionally engage in it, nonetheless. When he does so, moreover, we must pay careful attention to what he says since it will be a critical underpinning of his entire religious philosophy and an intrinsic part of the justification for his religious way of life. Such a rare metaphysical passage, one to which we will allude in the conclusion of this paper, is from *Yuishinshō mon'i* 唯信抄文意:

sons for this: one derived from the larger Kamakura period *Zeitgeist* and one from the particular context of the Pure Land tradition.

For some time, scholars have pointed out that there is something “existential” or “personal” in much of Kamakura religious thought. In a world in which the social order was dissolving, in which the possibility of explaining everything via a single comprehensive system—either esoteric or exoteric—was being called into question, a time when institutionalized religion had limited contact with ordinary people, it was natural that the religious impulse would turn inward. The religious question had shifted from “how do I fit into the cosmos?” to “how can I find spiritual harmony within myself?” Although that Kamakura *Zeitgeist* was operative in Shinran’s thinking, probably more important was the Shin Buddhist context itself and its central ideas. If the Holy Path of the Sages were really a viable alternative, he could throw himself into its practices. That is, for example, what the Zen master, Dōgen, tried to do. Yet, Shinran’s deep sense of *mappō* convinced him that such a plan could never work for him. So he entrusted himself completely to the exemplar of his mentor, Hōnen, and in so doing, entrusted himself to the working of Amida’s Vow. In short, Shinran’s awareness of *mappō* was not the result of his calculating the number of centuries that had passed since the Buddha. Rather, it derived from his own self-reflection and the awareness of his own limitations.

Because of Shinran’s distance from us in time and social context, it is hard to be anything but scholars as we read him. We want to know the texts he was using, the historical sources of his ideas, the subtle philological connotations of his terminology. That is all fine, but we must not forget to look inward into our selves as well. That is why it is important to stress how our own postmodern consciousness is like Shinran’s *mappō*-consciousness. The more we confront in our own lives the signposts of the postmodern

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Since it is with this heart and mind of all sentient beings that they entrust themselves to the Vow of the dharma-body as compassionate means, this shinjin is none other than Buddha-nature. This Buddha-nature is dharma-nature. Dharma-nature is dharma-body. For this reason there are two kinds of dharma-body with regard to the Buddha. The first is called dharma-body as suchness and the second, dharma-body as compassionate means. Dharma-body as suchness has neither color nor form; thus, the mind cannot grasp it nor words describe it. From this oneness was manifested form, called dharma-body as compassionate means.

Taking this form, the Buddha announced the name Bhikṣu Dharmākara and established the Forty-eight great Vows that surpass conceptual understanding. . . .  
(CWS I: 461)

situation—its rejection of absolutism, its recognition of human finitude, its acceptance of the role of social-historical-cultural conditions—the closer we come to seeing Shinran’s world and the more relevance his words have for *our* situation. Technically, *mappō* is post-*shōbō* (the time when systematic correctness was possible) and post-*zōbō* (the time when at least semblance of truth was possible).

In examining the purported reasons for thinking Shin Buddhism does not have a developed sense of ethics, we have already looked at Shinran’s emphasis on the *akunin* over the *zennin*. Let us turn now to the second reason we mentioned: Shin Buddhism’s basic anti-authoritarian stance. If there is no external authority, one might wonder, how can there be a basis for moral action? To answer that question we need to consider Shinran’s life as well as his thought. Shinran’s banishment from Kyoto put him originally into contact with the rural people and outcasts of the Kantō region. Yet, he did not leave those people as soon as the decree was revoked. Shinran brought the Pure Land teachings to those poor, marginalized peoples by not abandoning them, by being one of them, by relinquishing all clerical trappings that might suggest he was somehow better than them or more spiritually advanced than them. It was not that Shinran gave the people the truth, but rather he embodied the Pure Land Way and people discovered it through his person, just as Shinran himself had discovered it in Hōnen’s person. Shin Buddhism is a religion of compassion, not charity. There is no call to help others as a principle of action, but instead there is the confrontation and identification with suffering, whether one’s own or others’. Shin Buddhist ethics is not self-consciously doing good for others, but instead, of being there for others, sharing and responding to their suffering as indistinguishable from one’s own. If I am a person of *shinjin*, I feel gratitude not because *I* was able to alleviate the suffering of *others*, but because *our common* suffering has been alleviated through the compassionate working of Amida’s Vow.

This brings us to the third common reason we listed for overlooking the ethical dimension of Shin Buddhism: that from the Shin Buddhist perspective I am incapable of being a moral agent. Only Amida can act morally and I am merely the vehicle through which that compassion acts. This, however, is not a “do-nothing” ethics, but instead what I call an ethics that arises from “having nothing to do.” “To do nothing” means the intended rejection of action, a giving-in to the status quo, the kind of posture that can qualify as a “sin of omission” as contrasted with a “sin of commission.” “To have nothing to do,” on the other hand, is an openness to act. It is not inaction, but pre-

action. For the compassion of Amida's Vow to arise in me, I must be open to perceiving the suffering of others and identifying it as my suffering. In everyday life, we most often show no compassion when we are distracted from that basic perception of suffering in the world. We are so busy doing things, even planning how to do good things, that we do not have the time just to be aware of the suffering and to let Amida's compassion operate naturally with *jinen* in our actions. If I let myself have nothing to do, however, I will find that the power of Amida's Vow will work through me. We can see that this is an ethics of responsiveness rather than responsibility. Rather than being an ethics of *hakarai* that requires figuring out and evaluating a list of moral principles, it is an ethics of awareness and spontaneity.

In short, we have seen that we can discount all three common reasons for thinking that Shinran's religious philosophy lacks ethics or is even amoral. We may now analyze what Shinran said positively about ethics and speculate on how it might be as applicable to our postmodern consciousness as it was to Shinran's *mappō*-consciousness. As suggested in the preceding paragraph, the key to Shinshū ethics lies in Shinran's understanding of agency. So let us examine that more carefully.

Agency is related to the notion of causality: an agent is what causes something to be done or to happen. Shinran claims that we can understand human agency as operating in either of two dimensions. Let us begin with the more obvious dimension, the one that defines the domain of everyday life as lived by ordinary *bonbu* 凡夫 like us. We think of ourselves as independent agents: we schedule our days; we calculate our long-term goals and set out a path for reaching them; we use our knowledge and understanding to help us manage and take control of our lives. That type of thinking was paramount in the *Zeitgeist* of the early and middle Heian period. If there was a plague in Kyoto, just send Kūkai up Daimonji and his fiery thaumaturgy would save the lives of the people below. If you wanted to fathom the patterns and structures of the universe so that you could be a harmonizing force in reality, just study and practice the maṇḍalas. If you needed the extraordinary powers (*siddhi*) of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, just chant the right mantras. If you wanted to know the meaning of the text, use the Tendai classification of the text to match the meaning to an intended context or audience. Power was there to be harnessed and the great sages of the Heian period knew how to do it. The early Heian period, like the modern West's period of Enlightenment, was a time of extraordinary intellectual, spiritual, and cultural optimism. Through the personal agency developed via the Holy Path of Sages, the

material and spiritual could be bridged. I am in control of my actions and, therefore, of their karmic results as well. Such was the way of thinking before *mappō*-consciousness.

Shinran's *mappō*-consciousness focuses on another side to the karmic understanding of agency, however. If karma means our present actions will have future results, it is also true that our present actions are the karmic results from the past. Individual or personal agency comes to be understood as the result—not the cause—of karma. That sense of personal autonomy and freedom so strongly etched in Heian optimism was undercut by the Kamakura realism, a realism that approached fatalism. If everything is conditioned, then my own actions right here and now are conditioned. What I can do is determined by the confluence of various external processes and factors making me what I am. But what if those external circumstances have through the ages taken such a cumulatively negative turn that the process was no longer reversible? What if it became no longer possible to gain back that earlier, perhaps more naïve, sense of autonomy? Such was the pessimism (or was it realism?) that heightened the late Heian and early Kamakura sense of *mappō*. The age of the Holy Path of the Sages was over.

We can see the similarity to the postmodern situation. We thought science would find us all the answers. What science did not know, it would eventually find out. Even Japan's Meiji leaders thought they could control Japan's future. Technology has given us ever more choices and apparent freedoms: for vacations we can easily travel anywhere in the world; for entertainment we have readily available a variety of media for our immediate selection; we can study and choose among a wide variety of financial investments. This is comparable to the optimism and sense of self-control of the early Heian period. Yet, our postmodern consciousness moves us beyond that sense of naïve freedom. We find that as nations and as individuals, the system is more complex than we can understand. The technologies that were supposed to save us (nuclear energy, insecticides and chemical fertilizers for farming, widespread use of antibiotics, the chemical enhancement of foods, and so forth) now seem to be technologies that could destroy us. But nobody is in charge; no one is personally to blame. Complex social, economic, political, racial, gender, nationalistic, and class factors together make us do what we do. Our products are not just what we produce; they are also what make us what we are. We no longer feel as much a cause for the future as a result from the past. The problems are so complex—and with mass communication we know how complex they are—that as individuals we feel helpless. We no longer expect leaders in our society because we no longer believe in the personal sageliness



of leadership. Postmodernism's critical theory maintains that personal, free agency is an illusion. It is, in the terms of *mappō*-consciousness, simply the working of karma.

This analysis allows us to pose the problem of ethics in the following way. On one hand, there is the theory that I am an agent in control of my own situation. I am responsible for the consequences of my own actions and I have available to me the knowledge of reality that allows me to choose wisely and ethically. That is the position of both modernism and the Holy Path of the Sages. On the other hand, both *mappō*-consciousness and postmodern consciousness find that position untenable. From the standpoint of both *mappō* and postmodernity, I am not a free agent at all, but rather the interflux of a set of conditions I cannot control. For *mappō*-consciousness that means I am the result of past karmic activity. For postmodern consciousness, I am the result of external forces and conditions that dictate my position in the world, how I see things, and how I react to them. So, even if I try to see reality for what it is and respond to it with virtue, that view of reality and that expression of virtue are conditioned by the ideologies of which I am a part. There is no truth "out there" to be known or expressed; there is only the pragmatic engagement of people to listen to each other, recognize the difference of perspectives and ideologies, all the while working toward common practical goals. Anything else is false consciousness.

There remains a problem that such a postmodern consciousness cannot resolve, however. Namely, how is it possible to reflect on one's own position without false consciousness? Who is it who reflects on my ideologically immersed worldview? It cannot be the "I" of the false consciousness, because that "I" would only see what it has been conditioned to see and therefore would conclude that other peoples' consciousness may be false, but not mine. Yet, for postmodernity, that is the only "I" there is. There is no other agency because there is no really personal agency at all, according to its analysis. Some postmodernists have tried to elude this difficulty by placing a kind of agency in the shared, open dialogue across ideological stances. That is, false consciousness can be eliminated only by a shared context of conversation, interaction, listening, and responding. That conclusion follows from an unexamined and unfounded premise however, namely, that collectively we can be correctives on each other's false consciousness even though we cannot be a corrective on our own.<sup>12</sup> Who will listen to, who will be open

<sup>12</sup> We may also note in passing that such a postmodern model of communal discourse develops paradoxically out of modernism's faith in totality. That is, believing that the

to, who will share with, and learn from the opposing viewpoint? How can I ever know that my ideological and contextual standpoint is not going to prevent communal and collective engagement? The *mappō*-consciousness fully engages that question in its realization that not only am I corrupt and karmically entangled, but the system as a whole is corrupt and karmically entangled. There is no way out. There is no alternative. *Shikata ga nai*.<sup>13</sup>

It is at this point, simultaneously both in Kamakura's *mappō*-consciousness and our own postmodern consciousness, that Shinran's philosophy becomes most relevant. Shinran points us to another dimension of agency that was missed by the optimism of both modernism and the Heian period as well as by the pessimism of *mappō* or postmodernity. That dimension is the compassion that is as universal and alive as Amitāyus, as unhindered and bright as Amitābha. In analyzing the role of agency and efficacy in Shinran's ethics, it is important to bring in the importance of Dharmākara's (Amida's) Twenty-second Vow (the so-called *gensō ekō no gan* 還相廻向の願). If we want to approach Shinran's most profound statements about ethics, we need to look beyond his discussions of good and evil, which we have already analyzed, to his idea of *gensō*, the return from the Pure Land to help other beings. It is easy to stress the idea of birth in the Pure Land (*ōjō* 往生) or of going to the Pure Land (*ōsō* 往相) so much that the importance of *gensō* is forgotten. Yet, it is precisely at that point that compassionate engagement with others can occur, according to Shinran. In fact, in Shinran's interpretation (unlike some of the earlier Pure Land thinkers), *ōjō* and *gensō* are inseparable parts of the working of Amida's Vow.

One way to state Shinran's point is that there is an agency outside karmic conditionedness and the negative context of *mappō*. That agency for Shinran

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different viewpoints can fruitfully engage each other is more like modernism's metaphor of the blind men and the elephant than the postmodern metaphor of the blind men and the physically ideal woman, where nothing useful is accomplished by sharing different views. In that respect, the discourse is actually a denial of the postmodern situation rather than a solution posed within it.

<sup>13</sup> *Shikata ga nai* しかたがない is a colloquial Japanese expression meaning, roughly, "there's no alternative" or "what else can I do?" or "I've no choice." Similar to the function of those English phrases, Japanese commonly use "*shikata ga nai*" as a cop-out, a way of shirking responsibility, a hollow excuse for moral indolence. In this paper I play off its literal meaning of "[I] do not have something to do." So, I use the Japanese phrase not to imply the inactive "doing nothing" but the pre-active "having nothing to do, so. . . ." When I "have nothing to do," it is the opportunity to do something not previously planned. Because there is nothing to do, something can be done.

is, of course, the working (*gi* 義) of Amida's Vow. By relinquishing all sense of self-agency or of my own power (*jiriki*), a person relinquishes karmic conditionedness and its negative impact. As long as I intend to act morally, there is no escaping the fact of the conditionedness of that "I." My situation, my ideological and social context, my intellectual training, and my personal experiences influence what I am. If I give up that "I," there is only the working of the Vow, the "other power" (*tariki*). Yet, that *tariki* is itself compassionate and knows no bounds. So its working not only takes the person of *shinjin* to the Pure Land, but also in its expansive response to suffering, compassion returns that person to the world of suffering beings and in that way the person is a vehicle for Amida's compassionate agency. That is why Shinran could first encounter the Pure Land Way not through philosophical analysis or textual scholarship or Tendai practices, but only through his encounter with Hōnen. In turn, Shinran's followers encountered it in the person of Shinran. What they really encountered was not Shinran's wisdom or compassion. After all, Shinran was a self-proclaimed "slacker" (*gutoku*). No, what they encountered was instead the working of the Vow through Shinran. Shinran's moral and spiritual agency was not his own (*jiriki*), but that of someone or something else (*tariki*).

In a still deeper sense, however, there is no self-other or *ji-ta* bifurcation at all. Within the "just-so" (*jinen hōni* 自然法爾), there is neither Amida nor Shinran. That there is an Amida at all is only possible because of the fulfillment of Bodhisattva Hōzō's Vows and his Vows are only fulfilled if there is *shinjin*. That is why Shinran says Amida is a *hōben hosshin* 方便法身, an expedient manifestation of the true reality, the *hosshō hosshin* 法性法身. The *hosshō hosshin* is, like Amitābha's light, infinite and without discrimination. In that deepest sense, there is neither agency on the side of Amida nor on the side of Shinran. There is only *shinjin* itself as *jinen hōni*. That *shinjin*, Shinran explained in *Yuishinshō mon'i*, is itself buddha-nature, is itself dharma-nature, is itself dharma-body.<sup>14</sup> Such an explanation is, of course, metaphysical and abstract. So, the question arises as to what practical meaning it might have in daily life. Earlier we noted it is important to see Shinran's most difficult passages as not just claims about reality, but also as phenomenological descriptions of human experience. So experientially, what does this mean for us in our postmodern *mappō*?

*Shinjin* is what allows me to be other than myself, where "myself" means

<sup>14</sup> See full text of passage in footnote 11 above.

the self that is karmically and ideologically conditioned. When I am not myself, there is no *ji* of *jiriki* but only the *ji* of *jinen*. It is not *ji* in the sense of *jibun* (自分, “oneself”), but *ji* in the sense of *onozukara* (自ら, “spontaneously”). That is, “I” do not act, but action happens of itself in the form of the working of Amida’s Vow. In this postmodern context we do not need to set a moral agenda, either individual or collective. An “agenda” is Latin for “something that must be done.” We need, in fact, the opposite, a sense of “having nothing to do, so...” That is, I should not close myself to action, but instead open myself to responsiveness. I should not make a call to action, but instead let the situation call me to respond. I should not try to flee from the depressing reality that in the face of all the suffering in the world and in myself, I can do nothing. In fleeing from that reality, we only delude ourselves into thinking the answer is right around the corner if only we talk about it more, share our wisdom, include more voices. We cannot bring harmony to the cacophony by adding yet another different voice. *Mappō*-consciousness tells us that we can neither understand the dharma nor put it into practice. In this age of *mappō*, we need another alternative; neither theory nor praxis can be trusted to work.

By abandoning theory and practice, by leaving ourselves nothing to do, karmic results and ideological contexts become no more than reminders that I can do nothing. But that does not mean nothing will get done through me. If with true, genuine, heartfelt *shinjin* (*shinjin* as *makoto no kokoro*<sup>15</sup>), we can give ourselves over to the sense of nothing to do, compassion will arise of itself to relieve us from our personal anguish (*ōsō ekō*) and to bring us into the world as agents of a compassion beyond what I myself can be (*gensō ekō*). We will see the working of compassion, marvel at it, and feel gratitude for its working. Having discarded the self-conscious sense of ethical responsibility, we can manifest moral responsiveness to the suffering of self and others.<sup>16</sup> An example may explain the difference.

<sup>15</sup> The term “*makoto no kokoro*,” (“the genuine heart/mind”) deeply resonates with Japanese culture. It has strong Shintō roots (emphasized by such later *kokugaku* 国学 thinkers as Motoori Norinaga 本居宣長). It is also continuous with classical Chinese ideas about the inherent goodness of human nature (which will be manifest if one is genuine). By writing (in *furigana*) “*makoto no kokoro*まことのこころ” as a reading for *shinjin*, Shinran significantly expanded the meaning of *shinjin* (usually something like “entrusting heart/mind”) beyond the domain of technical Pure Land terminology. In that way, Shinran Japanized the tradition, perhaps doing so better than had any of the earlier Japanese Pure Land thinkers.

<sup>16</sup> This distinctive form of agency is reflected in Japanese syntax where the passive “it was done to/for me” is typically the same as the honorific active “[someone more honorable than

When waiting alone for my plane in an airport, my usual *modus operandi* has been to buy a newspaper or magazine to pass the time, to “have something to do” to distract me from all the activity around me. One time, however, I let myself have nothing to do. I did not simply pass over into a “zoned out,” autistic state of inactivity, but instead opened myself to what was happening around me. In that airport I saw a cross-section of humanity representing various classes, races, genders, and nationalities. Some were obviously waiting for arriving passengers; others for the boarding of their own planes. Some were joyous, some sad—travel can be a condition for either. Some acted like frequent fliers and others as novices. In the midst of all this activity, I saw a woman with a small child, a carriage, and two carry-on bags standing on the moving walkway in the middle of the concourse. She looked like she might have some problem negotiating everything when the moving walkway ended. I felt the difficulty of handling everything safely and I was uneasy. I spontaneously got up and walked toward the walkway. I arrived about the same time as she was going to get off and I helped her empty carriage find its way safely off the walkway so she could concentrate on her child and carry-ons. She thanked me and I said, “It was nothing.” It *was* nothing, the kind of nothing that makes spontaneous helpful action possible. If I had had an agenda, as in reading a magazine, I would not have seen her problem in time to help, if I would have seen it at all. Yet, because I had nothing to do, I saw her difficulty and identified with it. When the problem worked itself out naturally, I was grateful for the relief from our hassle.

Consciously trying to help others by figuring out the true ideology or true praxis is only another obstruction. Even trying to think through our problems by collective conversation and setting a common agenda despite our differences is still *hakarai*. It is a *hakarai* born of our collective karma and conditionedness by our social and ideological situation. To be compassionate is to not be able to distinguish whether the suffering is ours or another’s. In the Great Ocean of the Primal Vow, the distinction between *ji* and *ta*, the difference between self and other, disappears into the openness of *jinen*. How do I know this is so? In this postmodern age of *mappō*, I cannot know. I only know what Shinran has taught and I only know *shikata ga nai*. That special sense of *shikata ga nai*, the openness of pre-action, is the basis of *Namu Amida Butsu*.

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[I] did it.” That peculiar syntax allows the same phrase to be a rejection of *jiriki*’s activism and an affirmation of *tariki*’s activism.

## KASULIS: SHIN BUDDHIST ETHICS

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