

THE SHINRAN REVIVAL OF THE LAST YEAR

IT was quite a remarkable phenomenon in the recent Japanese history of culture that the teaching of Shinran and his personality attracted so much attention and were made the subjects of earnest study in various fields of thought during the course of the past year. We have had many religious movements in the past, but from a purely spiritual point of view they were not of much significance. The sudden rising a few years ago of the Ōmoto-kyo was not to be regarded as strictly religious; the popularity of the Nichiren which lasted for some time was more of a patriotic and militaristic nature, there was not much of purely religious interest. On the contrary, the so-called Shiuran movement which swept over the cultured people of Japan during the past year, was truly a manifestation of the spiritual yearnings of the modern man. Trained in science and deeply interested in the utilitarian side of modern life, he was not much inclined to take such a religion as Shinran's seriously. But there was something in him after all which could not fully be satisfied with things of the moment. Especially, when that unexpected prosperity which followed in the wake of the war among certain classes of people had run its natural course, there was a feeling of vacancy left in their hearts. How to fill it was a great problem, and finally they found the way to save themselves in Shinran's religion as the most rational thing they could do in modern conditions.

The Japanese minds during the war may be considered to have run into two channels. The one was individualistic and sensual which expressed itself in decadent literature and centred around sex. The other was social and humanistic, and its motto was freedom, emancipation, equality, reconstruc-

tion, and democracy. But as these movements are of a temporary nature as the products of an extraordinary event and have their reason of existence in an economic disintegration, they cease to claim one's attention when the financial pendulum swings back. A period of depression soon followed the heels of elation and prosperity. They could not but be impressed strongly with the impermanency of human affairs. In haste they now embraced religion hitherto so completely ignored. The Buddha's warning, "All things are impermanent, they are subject to birth and death," was at last heard by them. But it was not yet theirs to negative the claims of life. Even when they were complaining of the transitoriness of things, they were still strongly attached to the world. Not only the after-taste of material pleasure tenaciously clung to them, they had scientifically trained minds, which, though irrationally, kept them away from things spiritual. They thought, Shinran's teaching would be the very thing they would want.

What did they see in Shinran's teaching? It did not advocate celibacy, it did not request them to be homeless. They showed great sympathy to Shinran's utterance, "While my body sinks ever deeper into the turbulent waters of passion and desire and gets confused in the mountain paths of gain and fame, my inmost mind enjoys the perfect happiness of the Pure Land." They also found their hearts voiced in his democratic statement that "I have none to be called my disciples, we are all friends and brothers before the Buddha." His further expression of love was, "When you are alone and feel happy, think there is another person with you who feels your happiness. When two of you feel happy, think there is a third person with you. One of them is always myself." How they fell in with such expressions as these!

There was some reason for their thus acclaiming the sayings of Shinran; for Shinran himself was the product

some seven hundred years ago of an historical atmosphere similar to that of the present era, as regards these two tendencies already referred to. Whether they properly understood or not the true spirit of the religion of Shinran, they hastened to embrace it according to their light.

The most prominent figures of recent years in the propagation of Shinran's teaching were Manshi Kiyozawa and Kōjūn Shichiri; both are dead now. Of their followers the most active and representative ones, still living, are Gessho Sasaki, Bin Akegarasu, Ryoshin Soga, Kanaye Tada, Taiye Kaneko, Chizen Akanuma, Shugaku Yamabe, Shinryu Umehara, Jokwan Chikazumi, and others. Priests belonging to the Shin sect whose number exceeds 30,000 no doubt did their parts in promoting the general interest in their founder, Shinran; nor were the Eastern and the Western Hongwanji backward in doing their shares as the largest and most influential organisation of the Shin sect.

But what I wish to describe here is not the work of the professional followers of the Shin sect, so to speak, but that of those who are outside the official circles of the Shin; for it was mostly due to these people that we saw that unusual phenomenon of the Shinran revival during the the past year.

In this revival movement two tendencies are noticeable: the one is the popularisation of Shinran by means of belle lettres, and the other is the propagation of the Shinran faith which has more directly to do with his religion proper. To illustrate. Of the first aspect of the revival we must first of all mention Hyakuzo Kurata's *Priest and His Disciples*, which was published as a drama some years ago. It was very well received then, but it was not until last year that the work and its dramatisation were acclaimed with outburst of enthusiasm. The next popular literary productions on Shinran were Baigwai Ishimaru's drama, *Human Shinran*, and a novel, *Shinran in Passion*. After these, dramas and novels relating

to Shinran's life and teaching followed rapidly from the pens of such writers as Ken-ichi Kaharu, Minetaro Yamanaka, Kataya Yebara, Doryu Kayaba, Kwanzo Miura, Namiroku, and others.

I have no time to review these works except making a few remarks about the mood of the times as was reflected in these literary products. First of all their treatment of this historical figure was bold and free, that is, they were not sticklers to the facts of his life, even historically worthless materials were unhesitatingly utilised, sometimes they were manufactured by the poets. But on the other hand there is not much of authenticity in all the biographical records we have of Shinran, which naturally helped emboldening those men of letters.

As to the delineation of Shinran's character, they have not entered into the depths of his religious consciousness, but more or less superficially they seem to be trying to depict his human side which made him break away from monastic ideals. These modern writers seem to forget what a deep insight Shinran had into human nature and what an ardent seeker of the truth of life he was. The one thing they have significantly failed to understand was Shinran's attitude towards prayer, which with most people is expressive of material and ego-centred desires. He was strongly against this, but our modern narrators of his life have ignored or not at all understood it.

These misunderstandings or the failures to rightly interpret the *motif* of Shinran's inner life vexed the orthodox followers of his teaching. A critical review of *The Priest and His Disciples* as to its religious value was published by Professor Junjiro Takakusu; a heated controversy was raised between the author of *Humam Shinran* and Rev. Shuntai Ishikawa; and lastly the Acting Abbot of the Western Hongwanji, Rev. Sonyu Otani, himself came to the front to criticise the general

tendency of irreligion shown in those literary works. This was quite an unusual thing as was noticed by the editor of this magazine in the last issue in the orthodox circles of the Shin sect, which were hampered in many ways by tradition and rigid formalism.

Among the popular movements based on faith, we have to mention two outstanding figures, Shūichi Noyori and Minetaro Yamanaka. Noyori is the editor and proprietor of a magazine called *The Business World* (實業の世界). He was sent to prison twice owing to his not strictly legal methods of attacking some prominent men of business. While he was spending for a second time a hard, lonely, and monotonous life in jail, his mind turned to religion, which he had not hitherto given much thought. He was converted into the Shin sect. As he was strongly inclined towards a worldly life which was to him all in all before he was forced to reflect soberly on it, the reaction was also strong. When he was released from confinement after four years' forced meditation on the value of life, he turned into one of the most ardent and energetic propagandists of the faith through which his dark soul was saved. The more he thought of his past life, the darker it grew to him, and the feeling of shame and gratitude was intensified all the more for the love of Amida who will not reject even such a sinner as he. His magazine which had been carried on by his staff while he was in prison was now taken up by himself who gave to it a strong missionary colouring. Not satisfied with it, he has undertaken the publication of two more magazines exclusively devoted to the propagation of the Shin faith: the one goes under the name of *The World of the Shin Sect* and the other *The Women of the Shin Sect*. In these he has no monetary considerations and frequently issues extra editions composed of authoritative articles from the pens of scholars, public men, and orthodox Shin followers. He also makes extensive missionary tours all

over Japan. He is the chief director of the Society for Propagating the Shin Sect which was organised by himself for the purpose. His activities are remarkable.

Of Minetaro Yamanaka, a similar story of conversion is told. He saw once also the inside of a penitentiary, where faith in Amida was kindled in him. As he has no means to support his ideas like the former who is apparently well supplied with funds, his activities are not so brilliant. But his faith is just as strong as Noyori's, perhaps even stronger. His views are occasionally published in the periodicals, he has also a few books devoted to the subject of his conversion, one of which is a drama on Shinran.

There are also other noted writers who have published sympathetic views on Shinran: Kōshi Mitsui writes on "Shinran as the Japanese who realised the historical life of the people"; Yu Fujikawa on "Shinran as the only religious leader who can maintain his spiritual dignity before science"; and Tenko Nishida on "Shinran as a man who truly realised in himself absolute and universal love." All these three writers have their own magazines to promulgate their respective views of Shinran, and they are some of the most noteworthy periodical literature published in Japan on the Shin sect teaching, the number of such monthlies amounting to over sixty.

The above is a rough survey of what may be designated as the Shinran revival in the past year, and what was remarkable about this was that it had no connection with the orthodox and ecclesiastical circles of the Sect, but that it was essentially popular and non-professional if we could call it so. Formerly, religious subjects were almost deliberately excluded from general literature, and a few years ago nobody would ever have imagined such subjects as Shinran could awaken a general interest among the self-styled educated classes. Strange indeed it was to see all these dramas,

novels, or essays as were mentioned before attracting readers, some of them, it is said, went through over one hundred editions. Such facts all indicate the direction where the popular mind is now mainly tending.

Besides purely literary works on Shinran, we have also had plays and moving pictures of Shinran's life. Various editions, both scholarly and popular, of Shinran's complete works are being published by different firms.

When this magazine is out a commemorating festival will be going on of the seven hundredth anniversary of the publication of *The Doctrine, Practise, Faith, and Attainment*, which is Shinran's chief work and explains the philosophical foundation of the Shin sect. The ten branches of the Sect are united to celebrate the occasion on a grand scale. This is perhaps a most desirable opportunity for the younger generation to rise and carry out a sweeping reformation not only in the intellectual and moral interpretation of the Shin principles, but in the institution itself whose essential reason of existence is based on feudalistic tradition. If this could be accomplished, the unexpected rising of the Shinran enthusiasm during the course of the last year may be of some signification.

KOGETSU MINO