

## BOOK REVIEWS

*INTERPRETING AMIDA: History and Orientalism in the Study of Pure Land Buddhism.* By Galen Amstutz. SUNY Series in Buddhist Studies. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997, pp. xii + 248, with preface, appendix, notes, bibliography, index.

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THIS LIVELY STUDY of the history of interpretations of the Pure Land tradition in Japan offered primarily by foreigners, but including also major contributions by Japanese scholars, covers a lot of ground in its 121 pages of text, supplemented by copious notes, extensive bibliography and other back matter of about the same length. Galen Amstutz is bright and bold and, perhaps, a whit hurried, one might say, in his engaging study, far more comprehensive and weighty than one might, on first blush, think, which will serve us all well in awakening some of us to, while reminding others of us of, the need for what Wilfred Cantwell Smith urged us all to seek in our comparative studies: a disciplined self-consciousness. Had we developed this critical, reflective self-awareness of assumptions in cross-cultural studies, we might have avoided what has been called “orientalism,” a buzzword of the past two decades, which appears in the subtitle of Amstutz’s book. About “orientalism,” Amstutz writes,

For the purposes of this book, ‘orientalism’ and ‘occidentalism’ refer broadly to the shaping of perceptions of ‘the Other’ in hermeneutic encounters into unacceptably narrow, oversimplified, unempirical, reified forms which lack adequate self-consciousness about the special interests (especially those of economic, political, or academic elites) which encourage the shaping. (note 5 to the Preface, p. 142)

This book, like so many important works, begins by asking “Why?” Why has the study of a magnificent religious heritage, which has contributed mightily to the religious and cultural history of Japan, which has played a major role in the socio-economic development in Japan, which has maintained a subtle and complex intellectual heritage replete with the delicate and creative ten-

## BOOK REVIEWS

sions that engender and enliven the religious dynamics of the Buddhist reflective enterprise, *not* become widespread? Why has the study of the Pure Land tradition become marginalized? Amstutz asks,

In religious studies, why have monastic, Zen, or gurucentric (tantra) conceptions of Buddhism dominated Western thinking since the nineteenth century? Why, in historical studies, if Shin played a vital role in East Asian and Japanese cultural history (even reflecting political values relatively friendly to Western political values), has it been excluded from the standard narrative of that history? (p. x)

His answer is framed in what he calls the central argument of the book, which is

that these gaps have occurred because of the strongly political nature of the Shin tradition: on both Western and Japanese sides the marginalization of Shin has been a natural by-product of a polemical struggle to control world conceptions of Japanese culture, a struggle in which the Shin aspect of Japan has had little usefulness. The difficulty has been, in a word, a remarkable pattern of orientalist (and occidentalist) interpretation. (p. x.)

There is a bite to these questions for one who has seen, even a little, of the significance of the Pure Land heritage for Pure Land Buddhists, for Japan, and for humankind.

Amstutz approaches his study by means of the historical method, beginning, in his first chapter, with a kind of general introduction, in broad strokes, to the Pure Land tradition in China and, more thoroughly, in Japan. He then considers, in his second chapter, contributions to “modernizing” trends made by the Pure Land tradition in Japan from the Tokugawa period right up to the time of the Allied Occupation. By the close of the first two chapters, Amstutz has set the historical background and the framework by which he interprets it—sociological, economic, political, and religious—for the shifting ideological postures developed by the Pure Land tradition through history.

Next, the move is more carefully focused on interpretations while maintaining a chronological structure: interpretations of the Pure Land tradition before the 19th century constitute chapter 3, and Amstutz leads us through a consideration of interpretations from the 1870s through World War II in his 4th chapter. Following chapter 5, in which he discusses interpretations in the postwar period, Amstutz offers “Interpreting Pure Land in the Future: A Concluding Prognosis,” the title of his 6th chapter. Some keys to understanding Amstutz’s work, and gems that reflect moments of insight in our common enterprise of understanding, are found (buried?) in the very thorough notes.

Amstutz sets about his work demarcating a number of categories of scholars/interpreters. And one might say at the outset that the more one pegs a scholar in one or another of the categories, the more one will tend to see that scholar letting a point of view determine, to a considerable degree, the approach taken, areas of consideration chosen, and conclusions proffered. Here are some of the categories: Christian scholars, general academics, non-Japanese existentially oriented writers on Japanese Buddhism, persons in comparative religious studies, in Buddhology, and non-Indological Japanese Buddhist scholars, sociologists, folklorists, political scientists, economists, anthropologists, and Marxist historians.

Given all of these categories representing basic orientations, Amstutz offers a general analysis of "the overall reaction to Shin in the twentieth century," the century in which we are doing our work. This reaction, he says,

suggests that the Western approach to world thought has been controlled by foundationalist theistic views (or counter-theistic 'humanistic' views), by Christian conceptions of history (or their secular counterparts), by cultural competition of 'the West' versus 'the Other,' by American civil religious visions of American superiority and uniqueness, or by orientalism and the search for the exotic; but it has not, however, been motivated by any truly universalized interests in egalitarianism, in popular conservative religious morality, in education, in forms of church-state separation (all matters in which Shin has been unambiguously strong). (p. 107)

What has gone wrong in the various studies? Well, it seems they have been neither adequately comprehensive nor sufficiently thorough. Those persons who focus on the Kamakura period miss out on the tremendous growth of the Pure Land tradition in the Tokugawa period. And when one moves into a consideration of the social context of the Pure Land tradition, one apparently runs the risk of presenting a kind of social idealism without interpreting the deep religious sensibilities involved in Pure Land thought (so Hajime Nakamura, pp. 96-97). Or, take a person who focuses on a psychological study of the Buddhist case. Such a person runs the risk of it being said,

from the Shin perspective the psychological study of Buddhism to the neglect of the sociopolitical side is, if not orientalist, still surely an example of selective intellectual colonization. (so Nathan Katz, at note 92 to chapter 5, p. 190.)

And, alas, another approach is said to have "separated philosophy and religion from institutional and political history." (so Zennosuke Tsuji, at note 93 to chapter 5, p. 190.) And theologians have "bypassed the fundamental

## BOOK REVIEWS

political issues” (p. 87). Joseph Kitagawa “overlooked the influence of Shin social history.” (p. 88) Even Jan Van Bragt,

one of the best informed of living Christian scholars, never formulated the Christian-Buddhist similarity as a sociopolitical one; his usage was always abstract and theological. (note 1 to chapter 5, p. 177)

This study by Amstutz is not an interpretation of Amida, as its title initially suggests. It is an interpretation of interpretations, a consideration of limitations in approaches and analyses by Western and Japanese scholars in seeking to understand, or in failing even to notice, aspects in the development of the Pure Land tradition.

Some intriguing questions remain unanswered in this study. A key marker for alien conceptualization in the study of the Buddhist tradition in Japan over the past four centuries would be the rise and use of the term “Buddhism.” Amstutz, no doubt, is aware of this, but does not address it. For that matter the use of the term “Shin” (meaning “true”), Amstutz’s preferred term, to refer to “Shin Buddhism,” also a favorite, needs careful study. The development of these terms and the clusters of associated concepts that revolve around them can, themselves, structure hermeneutical sorties from the start. A scholar with Amstutz’s wide-ranging knowledge would know how important it would be to study the shifts in meaning of these terms (even when he writes, “Shin was created and made necessary by the limitations of the aristocratic traditions in Japan” [note 6 to chapter 6, p. 197]). A reader catches the author’s awareness of this but not an elaboration, i.e., a shift in the meaning of *buppō* from “the Buddhist monasteries and their practices” to “Shin Buddhism” (p. 15) when, one should have thought, *buppō* was more comprehensive than either, and both.

Amstutz is quite right, it seems, to urge upon his readers the importance of contextualizing the Pure Land heritage in Japan, to highlight the life situation in which persons experience and responded in the spirit of the times in which they lived, and to draw deeply upon the instruction provided by careful analyses of socio-political and economic developments within the heritage to understand more fully the actual life context of religious men and women (in the fashion of H. Richard Niebuhr, Reinhold Niebuhr, and James Luther Adams in the Christian case) who, within the purview of Amstutz, were Jōdo Shinshū Buddhists.

I mentioned above that Amstutz might be perceived as being a whit hurried in this study. A reader notes sparkling observations, sharply articulated asides, important insights, and significant conclusions, with only general reference citations or oblique reference comments, without quite having been presented, in a carefully structured and sustained way, evidence supporting

the argument. Again and again, for example, Amstutz draws our attention to the significance of the Tokugawa period. It appears that one is getting a kind of preview in this book or more to come with more scholarly depth and exactitude. We eagerly look forward to his forthcoming study, *Shin Buddhism in the Early Modern Period, 1500–1800* (indicated in note 64 to chapter 3, p. 164).

What of the future? Amstutz is not cheery about the possibility of major changes in approaches or shifts in interpretations of the kind he criticized in his study. He hopes, however, that this study might make a valuable contribution by enhancing a creative global colloquia dealing with issues, first raised by Daniel Bell, involving “the interrelationship of human appetites, wealth creation, sociopolitical justice, and ultimately visions of spiritual harmony. . . .” (p. 121) We heed his observation.

*MADHYAMAKA THOUGHT IN CHINA.* By Ming-Wood Liu. Sinica Leidensia Vol. 30. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994, pp. xiii, 288. ISBN 90 04 09984 0

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MĀDHYAMIKA philosophy, or the philosophy of emptiness, has been of fundamental importance to Chinese Buddhism, ever since it was transmitted from India in the late second century A.D. In this new study, Ming-Wood Liu presents a detailed study of the doctrinal systems of four thinkers and schools he believes are representative of the Mādhyamika tradition in China: Seng-chao (374–414), Chi-tsang (549–623), the T’ien-t’ai school founded by Chih-i (538–597) and the Niu-t’ou or Oxhead school of Ch’an (Zen).

According to the received academic wisdom of Buddhist studies, Chi-tsang 吉藏, the founder of the San-lun (“Three Treatises”) school, is the orthodox representative of Chinese Mādhyamika. This view derives from Chi-tsang himself, who portrayed himself as the true heir of the Mādhyamika tradition tracing itself back to Nāgārjuna in India. Buddhist scholars have been deeply influenced by Chi-tsang’s self-image, and even modern studies devoted to Chinese Mādhyamika are invariably centered on Chi-tsang and his system. Moreover, the main thrust of such studies is frequently focused on showing how Chi-tsang’s thought is prefigured in the writings of earlier thinkers, such as Seng-chao. This sectarian bias leads to a narrow diachronic view of Chinese