

BOOK REVIEWS

pressions of a human being's attaining truth/reality.

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THE MAJOR WRITINGS OF NICHIREN DAISHONIN. Nichiren Shōshū International Center, Tokyo. Volume I, 1979, pp. xxxvii + 345; Volume II, 1981, pp. viii + 375. With appendixes and glossary.

Nichiren (1222–1282) holds an important and unique place in the history of Japanese religion. He is unparalleled not only in his strength and courage, but also in his antagonism, vehemence and exclusivism. Though he had only a small, albeit devoted, following during his lifetime, shortly after his death the tradition began to expand rapidly. Since that time the Nichiren tradition has given form to the faith of large numbers of Japanese.

Nichiren gave expression to a side of human nature which rarely saw light in the traditional value structure of Japan. In a society which treasures harmony and conformity, he alone made antagonism into a religious principle, progressively defining his own image in terms of the antipathy he aroused. But this antipathy emerged in part from the force and painful accuracy of his caustic criticism of the social, political and religious institutions of his day. It is probably due in large part to these characteristics that the Nichiren tradition has had a strong appeal, especially to those on the lower rungs of the hierarchical ladder of Japanese society who lack prestige, power, wealth or respect.

One characteristic of Nichiren's teaching was its claim to hegemony in the political realm. The shift of the seat of the bakufu, the military government, from Kamakura to Kyoto in 1336 was undoubtedly one of the factors which gave impetus to a strong proselytization movement there in the Muromachi period. Strong support was garnered among the merchants and artisans who, in spite of the rise in their economic power, still lacked the prestige and privilege of the nobility. The remarkable growth of the Nichiren faith at this time is noted in several contemporary sources.¹

After recovering from harsh suppression at the hands of both Enryaku-ji,

¹ "Development of the Nichiren Sect in Kyoto: Formation of *Monryū* or Subsects and their Organizational Structure," p. 6; paper delivered by Itohisa Hōken of Risshō University at the International Conference on the Lotus Sutra in Japanese Culture, University of Hawaii, December 1984.

² "The Thought Based on the Lotus Sutra," p. 22; paper delivered by Tamura Yoshirō at the conference listed in footnote 1.

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the powerful Tendai center on Mount Hiei, and the powerful warlord Oda Nobunaga during the sixteenth century, the faith recovered much of its strength. Included among the ranks of Nichiren believers in the Edo period were the artists Kanō Tan'yū, Hon'ami Kōetsu, Katsushika Hokusai, Andō Hiroshige, and the writers Chikamatsu Monzaemon and Ihara Saikaku.²

In more recent times, Nichiren has been the most important source of inspiration for the many new religions which have radically altered the face of the Japanese religious world. Among the most prominent of these are Reiyūkai, Risshō Kōsei-kai and Sōka Gakkai. The last of these, an affiliated lay group, has brought Nichiren Shōshū 日蓮正宗 from a postwar group of minor significance to one which has eclipsed the mainstream Nichiren sect in terms of the number of members and its prominent profile. The Nichiren sect is a more moderate organization comprising a number of subsects and has its main temple at Mount Minobu, where Nichiren lived the last decade of his life and is buried.

Considering the important role Nichiren has played in Japan, there is still little information on him available in English. The amount of his letters and treatises which has been translated comprises only a fraction of the voluminous writings which he left. *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* is a welcome contribution to the literature. In preparing these two volumes, the staff on the committee for the translation of Nichiren's works at the Nichiren Shōshū International Center have devoted many years to the study of the materials. They have collaborated with, among others, the well-known translator Burton Watson. This combination has borne fruit in smooth, highly readable and at times elegant translations of fifty-three works written by or attributed to Nichiren. They make available in English much that is centrally important to the life and thought of Nichiren, and give us glimpses of many dimensions of this fascinating man and his teachings: his intense faith; his unparalleled courage; his fiery indignation; his tender compassion; his towering self-confidence and (reading between the lines) his troubling doubts; his remarkable intellectual capacity and philosophical acumen, and his ability to relate with the common people.

As *Major Writings* is obviously intended for a popular rather than a scholarly audience, the technical terms have been rendered rather freely and the translation is sometimes slightly extended to clarify the meaning. While this is not a problem in itself, some problematic uses of this device will later be discussed.

Included in *Major Writings* are many of Nichiren's most important works, for example, *Risshō Ankokuron (On Establishing the Truth and Bringing Peace to the Nation)*, *The Opening of the Eyes (Kaimokushō)*, *The True Object of Worship (Kanjin Honzonshō)*, *Letter from Sado (Sado Goshō)*, *Letter*

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to the Brothers (*Kyōdaishō*), and *Lessening the Karmic Retribution* (*Tenja Keiju Hōmon*), all of which are based on autographs. The title *Major Writings*, however, should be understood to mean those works which are of central importance to the Nichiren Shōshū, and the selection, translation and commentary all reflect their beliefs.

First and foremost among the principles of the Nichiren Shōshū is the belief that Nichiren is the “original Buddha,” the be-all and end-all of the Buddhist tradition which was introduced by Shakyamuni Buddha. Nichiren is the Buddha who was destined to appear in the age of the decay of the Dharma (*mappō*), reveal the true cause of enlightenment for all beings (i.e., *Namu Myōhō Renge-kyō* 南無妙法蓮華經, Homage to the Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wondrous Dharma), which is self-identical with Nichiren himself, and to establish the true object of worship.

While the intonation of *Namu Myōhō Renge-kyō* is a constant throughout the Nichiren tradition, its function is subject to various interpretations. The beliefs upon which Nichiren Shōshū is based were systematized by the Edo period priest Nichikan 日寛 (1665-1726) in his *Rokkan-sho* 六卷抄, but undoubtedly a good many of its elements existed prior to that time. Central to his thought was the idea that *Namu Myōhō Renge-kyō*, while not explicitly stated, is “submerged” or “hidden” in the “Life-span of the Buddha” chapter (*Juryō-bon*) of the *Lotus Sutra*. It is the fundamental principle of the universe, which is given concrete, physical form in the *go-honzon* 御本尊, that is, the calligraphic mandala written by Nichiren himself. In Buddhism generally the term refers to either a Buddha or some other object of worship such as an image of a Bodhisattva. In most other branches of Nichiren Buddhism it can refer to the calligraphic mandala, Shakyamuni Buddha, or the *Lotus Sutra*.

These elements of Nichiren Shōshū’s doctrine stand out very prominently in *Major Writings*. Where it may not be clear from the translation itself, it is often spelled out in the commentary and notes. If mistranslation for failure to handle the linguistic difficulties of the material is not a major problem, the reader must keep a sharp eye out for spurious interpolations and manipulation of the language in service of the editors’ beliefs. An instance of this practice is seen in the manner in which two of the titles are translated: *On the Buddha’s Behavior* (I, 173) and *On the Persecutions Befalling the Buddha* (I, 239). In both cases “Buddha” renders the term *shōnin* 聖人. Ordinarily translated as “sage” or “saint,” here “*Shōnin*” clearly refers to Nichiren. The interpolation of the editors’ beliefs regarding Nichiren’s status is not altogether fair to the unsuspecting reader.

One of the more conspicuous instances of the idiosyncratic reading Nichiren Shōshū gives to the Japanese edition of Nichiren’s works reads,

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“Now is when the Bodhisattvas of the earth will appear in this country and establish the supreme object of worship on the earth which/Shakyamuni Buddha of the essential teaching attending the true Buddha” (I, 81). A less contrived reading of the same passage might read, “Now is when the countless bodhisattvas of the earth will appear, and as attendants of Shakyamuni Buddha establish in this country the supreme object of worship for this world (STN, 720).³ The difference here is whether Nichiren is Shakyamuni’s attendant or vice versa. There are many instances where Nichiren clearly refers to himself as Shakyamuni’s messenger, but the inverse relationship can only be posited through this type of questionable interpretation of the original text.

The translation often takes advantage of very minimally ambiguous passages to press the point. “When an evil ruler in consort with heretical priests tries to destroy Buddhism and banish a man of wisdom, those with the heart of a lion will surely attain Buddhahood as Nichiren did” (I, 35). Laurel Rodd, in her excellent (though brief and not easily available) study, *Nichiren: A Biography*,⁴ more accurately translates this as, “At a time when evil kings take heretical monks as their allies and try to eject wise men in order to destroy the True Teaching, he who has the heart of a lion will surely become a Buddha. This is true in my case” (50). Nichiren would seem to be offering himself as an example of a person of great courage. Rodd’s translation, I feel better reflects the slight ambiguity of the original passage. The translation in *Major Writings* removes all ambiguity while interpreting the passage in a somewhat strained manner to say that Nichiren is referring to himself as a Buddha. Adhering to the principle that Nichiren is the “True Buddha,” the editors are perhaps naturally reluctant to criticize or contradict any of his views.

The Daishonin [Nichiren] points out the difficulty which later scholars had in believing the Buddha’s new revelation in the Lotus Sutra. The Buddha himself predicted this saying that among all sutras, the Lotus Sutra is “the most difficult to believe and the most difficult to understand.” People tended to believe the mass of sutras preached during the forty-odd years rather than the one solitary sutra which contradicted all the others. [II, 217]

³ I have used as a reference the most recent and widely used standard reference work: Risshō Daigaku Shugaku Kenkyūjo, ed., *Shōwa Teihon Nichiren Shōnin Ibun* 昭和定本日蓮聖人遺文, 4 volumes (Minobu: Minobu Kuon-ji, 1959-1965); hereafter cited as STN.

⁴ Laurel Rasplia Rodd, *Nichiren: A Biography*, Occasional Papers No. 11, Center for Asian Studies (Tucson: Arizona State University, June 1978). A more recent, and also excellent work by the same author is *Nichiren: Selected Writings* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1980).

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This passage contains the assumption that the *Lotus Sutra* was actually preached by Shakyamuni Buddha, and treats the five period classification of the Buddhist sutras, attributed to Chih-i, as a historical fact rather than a hermeneutical device. Historically these views are totally untenable. Further, in the Kamakura period when Nichiren lived, it was generally accepted that the Buddha was born about 950 B.C. The idea of *mappō*, which was central to Japanese Pure Land thought and Nichiren's later thought, was calculated based upon that date. The editors of *Major Writings* go so far as to say that Shakyamuni "lived about 3,000 years ago in India" (I, 333; II, 362).

One other important effect of the interpretation of Nichiren in these volumes is the suggestion that Nichiren's final vision was the nature of his mission from the start, thus denying one aspect of the dynamism so central to his appeal as a human being. This is reflected in their selection of writings which contains only one letter (and that of questionable authenticity) from the first seven years after he proclaimed his teaching. During this period we see no mention of *mappō*, Japan, Jōgyō Bodhisattva, or Jōfukyō Bodhisattva, items which are generally considered to characterize Nichiren's teachings.

I have dwelt at some length on the aspect of the criticisms in part because I feel that there is still a great deal to be gained from reading these volumes despite sectarian bias. But, there is another reason. It is precisely the shortcomings of the book as a source for studying Nichiren, i.e., the distinct and unreserved allegiance to a certain interpretation of his life and teachings, which makes it a very valuable resource for the study of contemporary Japanese religion. It can throw light on such subjects of study as the relation between faith and logic and modern-day religious hermeneutics.

It should be noted that volume one has an introduction supplying background information against which to read the letters. The general historical, cultural and religious background is concise and accurate. Each volume has several appendices. Those in volume one include a chronology and a map of places related to Nichiren, both very helpful. Volume two includes an appendix giving the Japanese titles of the works included. Unfortunately volume one lacks this particular feature. Also listed in the table of contents are the page numbers of each work in *Nichiren Daishōnin Goshō Zenshū*,⁵ an edition of Nichiren's collected writings published by Nichiren Shōshū which is the source for these translations. It is also regrettable that the admittedly painstaking task of compiling an index has not been undertaken.

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⁵ Hori Nikkyō, ed., *Nichiren Daishōnin Goshō Zenshū* 日蓮大聖人御書全集 (Tokyo: Sōka Gakkai, 1952).