

How Progressive is Pure Land Buddhism?  
A Review of Melissa Anne-Marie Curley's  
*Pure Land, Real World: Modern Buddhism,  
Japanese Leftists, and the Utopian Imagination*

GALEN AMSTUTZ

*Pure Land, Real World: Modern Buddhism, Japanese Leftists, and the Utopian Imagination.* By Melissa Anne-Marie Curley. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017. 280 pages. Hardcover: ISBN 978-0-8248-5775-2.

FOR WELL over a century, efforts by numerous thinkers both Japanese and Western<sup>1</sup> have continued to attempt to put the Jōdo Shinshū 浄土真宗 tradition into better conversation with global religious and philosophical traditions. Within this already complex history, Melissa Curley's book offers a series of sophisticated new excursions into some of the Japanese thought over the centuries that has interacted, in more and less loosely defined ways, with "the" Pure Land tradition. Curley opens her study with panache:

For a thousand years, Japanese Buddhists cultivated vivid images of utopia in the form of the Western Paradise. In defiance of common sense, they insisted on the existence of a world unlike our own—a place of perfect ease and unrestricted access to liberation. The Pure Land constructed by Amida Buddha, Buddha of Limitless Light and Limitless Life, was the most powerful picture of shared happiness in the premodern Japanese imaginary. To imagine this

<sup>1</sup> For example, Kiyozawa Manshi 清沢満之 (1863–1903) and the Seishinshugi 精神主義 movement, Alfred Bloom (1926–2017), and Dennis Hirota, among others.

utopia was also to make an assertion: things could be different; things could be better (p. 1).

From the outset this links the Buddhist Pure Land to the semantics of (Western) utopia. Thus, following in particular from the inspiration of German Marxist philosophers Theodor Adorno (1903–1969) and Ernst Bloch (1885–1977), Curley argues—working against an anti-utopian critique familiar among twentieth-century Western thinkers—that it is rather the case that utopias (and ideas of exile and negation with which utopias are associated) are not so much about withdrawal from the world as they are actually creators of imaginative openings to the transformation of the real world. In the Japanese context, this sort of positive evaluation particularly contrasts with the commonly more suspicious handling of the “trans-worldly” Pure Land concept displayed, for example, in the modernist Kiyozawa 清沢 school.

Starting with this framework, Curley’s first chapter offers a rich, selective overview of how Pure Land ideas in Japan historically provided a complex imaginary which served varied needs ranging from folk religion to death ritual and *ōjōden* 往生伝 biographies to garden design. Reviewing the versions of this mythos by Hōnen 法然 (1133–1212), Shinran 親鸞 (1173–1263), and Rennyo 蓮如 (1415–1499)—especially attending to ambiguities about the spatial location of the Pure Land because situating it in the present world becomes important to her argument—Curley draws out elements that can be linked to exile, political resistance, egalitarian community, and utopia. A summary of the *ikkō ikki* 一向一揆 movements<sup>2</sup> is accompanied by a long evaluation of the *ōbō buppō* 王法仏法 distinction<sup>3</sup> in Rennyo. Chapter 2 then takes up aspects of the movement known loosely as “Shin modernism.” Acutely aware of how new needs were created by the emergent Japanese nation-state, Curley develops a close reading of a key statement by Kōnyō 広如 (1798–1871), the twentieth hereditary head (*monshu* 門主) of Nishi Honganji 西本願寺, which explores the themes of privatization and separation of “religion” under conditions of coordination with the new state. The chapter includes a review of the effects of the Meiji 明治 Constitution, the contributions of Shimaji Mokurai 島地黙雷 (1838–1911) in forming the new legal structure, and the implantation

<sup>2</sup> This term refers to a diverse set of local, often-militarized actions in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that were seeking autonomy from the earlier political system; they were put down with the unification of the country at the end of the sixteenth century.

<sup>3</sup> This was a conceptualization of two domains of authority, the “kingly” or civil, and the “religious” or Buddhist.

of a transformed private versus public dichotomy in Japanese consciousness. Additionally, Curley surveys Kiyozawa Manshi, whom she likes for his exilic personal interiority, followed by discussions of other figures including Kaneko Daiei 金子大栄 (1881–1976), who treated the Pure Land in a new way inspired by nineteenth-century German philosophy, and Nonomura Naotarō 野々村直太郎 (1871–1946) and his deconstruction of the otherworldly Pure Land in the Nishi Honganji tradition; she then further provides some observations about Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎 (1870–1945) and Kurata Hyakuzō 倉田百三 (1891–1943). As in the first chapter, the author highlights elements in this diversity that can be linked to exile, political resistance, egalitarian community, and utopia.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 then deal in extensive detail with three twentieth-century figures—Kawakami Hajime 河上肇 (1879–1946), Miki Kiyoshi 三木清 (1897–1945), and Ienaga Saburō 家永三郎 (1913–2002)—who were all strongly invested in Western discourses but engaged with elements of Pure Land traditions in individual ways.

Kawakami was a famed economist described by Curley as a “special Marxist, special Buddhist” who became one of the few intellectuals to never collaborate with the fascist state. Among Japanese Marxists, what made Kawakami really distinctive was his interest in “religion.” He had no family background of engagement with Buddhism, but had early attractions towards Christianity, Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910), and Itō Shōshin 伊藤証信 (1876–1963), founder of the Muga-ai 無我愛 (Selfless Love) movement, in connection with which he had a pivotal “religious experience” in 1905 involving some kind of very personal ego-transcendence event. Later in his life during his prison episode in the 1930s, his attention returned to religion and this was related in his *Gokuchū zeigo* 獄中贅語 (Prison Ramblings, 1947). In this work, Kawakami posed questions about “religious truth” vis-à-vis science or how religious sectarianism could be bypassed. Determining that Zen 禅 and Shinshū 真宗 were essentially parallel despite their different languages of discourse, yet also that real religious truth was entirely different from, and maybe even opposed to, organized religion and its links to capitalism, he became convinced that the proletariat could be liberated *from* religion. Thus in Kawakami’s idiosyncratic, selective reading he saw Shinran as a political resister and interpreted the Pure Land as a free space within the self, in Curley’s analysis becoming Marxist on the outside but Buddhist on the inside, with both of these truths set against the state. In brief, through Pure Land he found a “self” at the bottom of no-self, which Curley identifies as a “private utopia” (p. 120).

In contrast, Miki was a more socially active intellectual whose political career and relationships with Marxism and the imperial state were ambiguous. Miki's interest in Pure Land thought emerged in an incomplete essay on Shinran found posthumously among his papers. Rather than representing an end-of-life turn towards a traditional religious orientation, however, Curley argues that the essay is primarily an interpretation of Marx. In Miki, Shinran was definitely a historical subject who had a close affinity with the proletariat; the progression of the ages of the Dharma described a dialectical history (*à la* Hegel and Marx); and the classical Pure Land three vows of Amida could also be given a dialectical reading. So Shinran was distinguished not only by his deep personal interiority (a quality echoed in figures like Kiyozawa Manshi or Kurata Hyakuzō) but also more unconventionally by his distinct embedment in a history with a progressive social potentiality. In this vein, Amida Buddha was an Absolute historical spirit uniting the individual and the universe (an especially Hegelian aspect), and through the *nenbutsu* 念仏 persons could become self-conscious historical subjects. The Pure Land best stood for the earthly fellowship of practitioners who, living in equality, actualized a new form of *kyōdōtai* 共同体 (*gemeinschaft*), in short, a "Pure Land for the people" (p. 121). Notably, Miki had a turn to ethno-nationalism in the 1940s which led critics to accuse his ideas of *kyōdōtai* of being in actuality a reflection of the Japanese imperial state.

The last figure highlighted is Ienaga, a non-Marxist thinker standing in contrast to both of the others, famed for court battles over textbooks, who maintained a stubborn sense of his own identity, understanding himself as "homeless" (without *furusato* 故郷). In that sensibility, Curley finds Ienaga's discourse closest to the European sense of exile expressed in Adorno. The most fundamentally anti-authoritarian of her three primary figures, Ienaga treated Buddhism, similarly to Marxism, as a kind of intellectual resource for the criticism of modern Japan. Ienaga's views about "the logic of negation," which became known in English via a notable mediation by Robert Bellah (1927–2013),<sup>4</sup> sprang out of an early encounter with a classical phrase associated with Shōtoku Taishi 聖徳太子 (574–622). Unlike Kawakami or Miki, Ienaga took a strong view about the need for a "negation" of phenomenal experience (i.e., in contrast to an emphasis on positive affirmation of such experience), locating in that way the real "transcendence"

<sup>4</sup> Bellah 1965. His essay mined a similar modern vein of accentuating the possibilities of "Kamakura Buddhism."

of the Pure Land, bringing him in this respect closer to conventional mainstream Buddhism. Again, unlike Kawakami or Miki, Ienaga was interested in the concrete historical situatedness of Shinran in the Kamakura period. He thought that era's instability opened up large audiences to the meaning of negation, expressed for example in the prevalence of *ōjōden* biographies, and maintained that Shinran represented a real radicalism. However, after the Sengoku 戦国 period (1467–1615) ended, he held that Japanese people became materialistic and lost much of their earlier critical sensibility, so that the subsequent Tokugawa 徳川 period (1603–1868) represented a total submission to power. Distinctively, a large part of Ienaga's writing was a *non*-nationalist critical dialogue with Japanese cultural nationalism in which Ienaga strongly connected Shinran's thought with a responsibility to dissent.

In her final overview, Curley reemphasizes that “Pure Land” in Japan had a long connection with dissent, resistance, and alternative community.

As a world set in opposition to this one, the image of the Pure Land retains a certain critical capacity. Each of the sectarian Shin modernists we have considered here interrogates this critical capacity in some way, whether restraining it or amplifying it. Their modernizing efforts not only shaped the institution, they also shaped the content of tradition in important ways. Thus when Kawakami, Miki, and Ienaga seized upon the Shinshū tradition at a moment of danger, they were working with both the affordances and constraints of Shin modernism, orthodox and heterodox. Reading the stock of Japanese Buddhist tradition against the present reality of the imperial nation-state, Kawakami, Miki, and Ienaga each attempted to imagine a Pure Land that had not been captured by the state; this act of imagination itself constituted a form of resistance to the totalizing impulse of imperialist nationalism. And although their resistance was informed by the modern utopianism of Marxist thought, putting the Pure Land to use as an image of resistance to the real was in its way deeply traditional (p. 190).

And:

If Mahāyāna Buddhism offers a valuable foundation for thinking about transindividuality, or relation-based doctrine, Shinshū offers a uniquely robust set of resources for thinking from the

periphery. It is a tradition deeply invested in cultivating an imaginative identification with the abject. Shinran's exile positions the founder as excluded from the center; his affirmation of himself as neither monk nor layman makes this exclusion permanent; and the doctrine of *akunin shōki* [悪人正機] makes the evil person's exclusion from liberation the pivot on which salvation turns (pp. 193–94).

Curley's conclusion mentions that her selected thinkers were not alone in the twentieth century in proposing "relationalist" hybridizations of Marxist and Buddhist ideas—other philosophers such as Michael Ryan (1951–), Étienne Balibar (1942–), and Hiromatsu Wataru 広松渉 (1933–1994) can be identified—and she proposes that the implications of such intersections between Buddhist ideas and Marxist critiques of nation-state capitalism might actively continue. Through them Japan might achieve a more just view of global socio-economics by regarding Asia (again, as once in the past) as a "periphery" from which it might be more possible to launch alternatives.

It is impossible to do justice to a work of this extreme richness in a review article. Perhaps the book can be described as a Western scholar's Marxist-inflected, personalized, creative, amalgamative exploration of intertwined ideas about the Pure Land, utopias, and exile, generated by selectively sweeping through historical topics in Japanese Buddhism fitted out with a wealth of reference to contemporary Western thinkers.

Yet as well as offering a quite challenging read in its own terms, the book stimulates reflection on the contingency of meaning. Stepping back a bit from the book's details, its key message—though handled rather implicitly (Curley is aware of the mobility and reassignment of symbolic values [pp. 7–11] but does not expand on this theme *per se*)—is the interpretability of Buddhist language. From a semantic point of view, the long-running historical treatment of "Pure Land" could be seen as a chain of floating significations, simultaneously accommodating the multi-directionality of historical ideas while claiming continuities of meaning. Now, certainly Buddhist studies has long been familiar with notions of hermeneutics—the drawing out and expansion of meanings from texts. However, in the context here, while hermeneutics is often associated with digging out one "essential" core meaning or another from a tradition of texts or discourses, on the farther end of the spectrum of interpretability and meaning exists something more radical which is now familiar in twentieth-century linguistics—

tics and critical theory. This “floating signification” puts the weight less on interpretability than on the arbitrariness, looseness, historical mobility, and contextuality of meanings that can be associated with given items of speech and imagination. Thus, regarding the Pure Land “tradition,” James Dobbins has written that “Pure Land has operated [in many cases] as an amorphous and open-ended collection of themes without a cohesive center. It is as if the Pure Land discourse can function as an open semantic field in which a wide variety of beliefs, doctrines, and religious claims can plant their meaning.”<sup>5</sup> Fluid signification becomes especially obvious when it crosses cultural boundaries. It is impossible to deal with the interactions of “Asian religions” with the West without this awareness. Actual religious traditions in history have tended to be three-way negotiations among some traditional line, or lines, of intellectual (and/or institutional) grounding, some floating signification processes (cross-cultural or otherwise), and some merchandising to a market (in which case the “grounding” aspect by no means necessarily has the upper hand).

With this perspective in mind, it might be suggested that there are wonderfully interesting tensions in Curley’s presentation. The author’s project of amalgamating meanings around utopia and exile involves a re-signification of Pure Land language around European philosophical ideas and Japanese who had engaged these ideas, more than around classical Buddhist thought or thinkers (the book contains almost nothing expounding what would be considered classical Buddhist philosophy). To say so is not necessarily a critique, but the project therefore contains a range of assumptions about undefined key terms which are heavily overdetermined in the English language: utopia, secularization, transcendence, and the modern. Outside of these, even the Pure Land is not really given plain exposition in its classical Buddhist context as a karmic transition zone (or as ultimate bodhi in Shinran). The ideal reader of the work needs an extraordinary fund of prior knowledge about all these matters.

Historically, at least at the behavioral level, there has existed a multidirectionality and ambiguity within the “core” Shinranian (and then Renyovian) discourse itself. Curley wants to highlight anti-authoritarianism and egalitarianism, but the core also contains a “responsibilityism” found in acute *hansei* 反省 (self-criticism), leading to a quietism within the individual, ambivalence about the social effects of karma, a heavy component of familial/ancestral consciousness, and especially the collective appeal which

<sup>5</sup> Dobbins 2006, pp. 417–18.



produced the deep commitments to the proprietary community institutions of the enormously successful two principal Honganji traditions. These institutions proceeded over the centuries to sometimes fight with, but most other times to collaborate and negotiate with, political power.

“Secularism” in the modern period problematized older Pure Land thought about the Pure Land but remains a fraught term. Often, secularization connotes some unproblematic “empirical science” which stands in some kind of contrastive or oppositional relation to religion, but this ignores longstanding debate (quite pertinent to Buddhism) to the effect that science (like reality, modernity, rationality, or the supernatural) can be as hard to define as religion and is the subject of a large field called philosophy of science. Otherwise, the term “secularization” is on firmest ground when used for a discussion of the effects of the formation of the nation-state, which produced the Meiji Constitution and the generation of categories such as *shūkyō* 宗教 (“religion”) and even *Bukkyō* 仏教 (Buddhism). In this relation, Curley’s close reading of Kōnyo excellently develops the idea that post-Meiji Shin became differentiated from politics in a different manner than in the Tokugawa period, as newly sharpened distinctions of private and social enter the picture, isolating and subordinating what becomes classified as religious.

That modern nation-state had a huge impact in restructuring epistemological and political fields. In this environment, Kawakami, Miki, and Ienaga operated in a twentieth-century environment in which the “existence,” and thus importance, of the “otherworldly” Pure Land was being discounted among intellectuals, and especially outside the traditional sect proper, this transforming environment—combined with the several kinds of potentialities which were already long since structured into the teaching—opened up the signifier of the Pure Land to new, unconventional appropriations by new interests. Yet what these men were seeking in Buddhism seems to have been primarily the ways it was *like* their twentieth-century Marxism or dissident anti-nationalism.

Hence, in short, claims for progressive potentialities in “Shinshū” seem to be highly ambiguous. As cited above, the author proposes that Shinshū “offers a uniquely robust set of resources for thinking from the periphery,” starting with Shinran’s exile and its identification with the abject and continuing with some elements of the tradition’s historical practice. However, this is a treatment of the record that is filtered for elements to support a broadly “political” reading which puts aside much of what actually happened in the history of “Shinshū.” The most “robust” manifestation of



Shin politics in early modern and then twentieth-century Japan has been what we would call today a center-right social conservatism. This was displayed most painfully in the strong collaboration of Shin Buddhism with the Japanese imperial project circa 1905–1945, something which has been remarkably underplayed in the non-Japanese perception of Shin. (In view of the activism in that twentieth-century experience, the description of even conservative Shin as generally “other-worldly” contains complex ironies.) So, while it is a fact of pre-1945 twentieth-century Japanese history that the leftists and communists were the significant political groups to push back seriously hard against militarism, it is obscure how Kawakami’s or Miki’s late-life ideas may be considered representative and/or important, or in terms of concrete events, as more than marginal in the stream of either Marxism or Buddhism.

The above points of tension may seem scattered. However, they each problematize the broad picture Curley aims to paint. The intensity of modern change in Japan tends to be obscured by the “invented tradition” quality of so much modern Japanese cultural depiction, depiction which may include notions that Shinran’s Buddhist discourse of the twelfth century can be unproblematically understood as providing some timeless continuities over the past seven hundred plus years—from Rennyo, to *sengoku*, to the Tokugawa-period *mibun seido* 身分制度 (status system), to modern transnational capitalism, to the pre-1945 *tennōsei* 天皇制 (emperor system), to postwar Shin-style “liberalism.” As an eminent historian, Curley is clearly aware of all these facts and factors. However, her creative project is different: it is to curate an optimistic intervention from North America into Pure Land thought. Yes, her productive thinkers layered their ideas onto several modern Japanese intellectual trends, which were layered (sometimes in an allergic manner) onto early modern Pure Land thought, which was layered onto Rennyo, which was layered onto Kakunyo 覚如 (1270–1351) and Zonkaku 存覚 (1290–1373), which was layered onto Shinran, which was layered onto pieces of earlier Pure Land (and Tendai 天台) tradition filtered through Japan, China, and India. But her goal is to tell a positive, nourishing, and reinvigorated story. That the story reveals cognitive dissonances in the potentialities which can be accommodated under the label “Pure Land Buddhism” is unavoidable.

This is an English-language book. What is the best audience for capitalizing on the malleability of signification in Pure Land? Perhaps Curley’s is an innovative project which despite being composed from North America is really aimed at making a contribution to *Japan*, inasmuch as something

about “Pure Land” continues to offer a “native” resource for Japan due to the simple fact of it being Japanese. For non-Japanese, on the other hand, as with other aspects of Asian Buddhist traditions that can be deemed somewhat “progressive,” the interest is usually in how it might be demonstrated that there is some significant advantage in discovering an alternative onto-epistemic basis in Buddhism compared to “the West.” However, if non-Japanese are seeking positively distinctive resources for social justice or something like progressive politics, it remains to be seen if “Pure Land” by any interpretation provides anything broadly unfamiliar or innovative to the mass of now *global* critiques of the modern nation-state, capitalism, consumerism, inequality, and so forth, which have developed over the past two hundred years. For a long time, the writer of this review himself pursued a notion that if only more non-Japanese people knew what the resources of the Japanese “Pure Land” were and are, significantly more of them would be interested in engaging and exploring it. But perhaps the non-philosophical sort of observers among non-Japanese over the last century and a half have not been entirely wrong to react to Pure Land as relatively uninteresting for the purposes of anyone outside Japan. Still, alternatively, perhaps Curley’s bountiful study can, after all, indeed energize and inspire the English-language world to reexamine these resources in Japanese Buddhism.

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