

## Missing Hongan-ji in Japanese Studies

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*Shin Buddhism (Jōdo Shinshū) is the largest of the traditional Japanese Buddhist institutions. In the late nineteenth century it included about a third of the entire Japanese population, and it possesses unique qualities. Shin, however, has not been given its due in studies of Japanese religious history. Some reasons for this relative neglect include modern nationalism, the biases of Buddhist studies, the limits of Western interest in new religious ideas, and general friction between Japan and the West. Yet no aspect of Japanese culture or Asian Buddhism opens up more possibilities for creative interaction with the West in the future.*

Japanese scholars have shown an enduring predilection, in thought, for transcendent ideals.... In institutions, Japanese scholars have emphasized the imperial universities, and in class, either the crême de la crême or the workers and peasants. Until quite recently a vast middle ground—pragmatic compromise, private institutions, and the middle class—has been left untouched.  
(NOLTE 1989, p. 333)

Historians, like journalists, are apt to concentrate on news and to forget that there is a complex and broad situation which remained unaffected by the events of the moment.

(From Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought*,  
cited in LOEWENTHAL 1976, p. 1)

It is more of a job to interpret interpretations than to interpret things....

(Montaigne, "Of Experience," cited in LEITCH 1983, p. 167)

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AS EVERYONE IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY presumably knows, history is not a science. Interpretation, or at least the focusing of attention, depends enormously on the flux of current political and social interests. Furthermore, as anyone in Western Japanese studies knows, few subjects are more fraught with the collision of aggravated cross-cultural twentieth-century political and social interests than Japan. A primary example of this is provided by Hongan-ji, the religious tradition called Jōdo Shinshū 浄土真宗, or True Pure Land Buddhism.<sup>1</sup> Although it was unquestionably the largest and most powerful of the later traditional Japanese Buddhist institutions—and perhaps one of the half dozen or so most important elements of premodern Japanese cultural history—most Westerners remain unaware of it, and even Japanologists and Buddhologists tend to discount its importance in evaluating Japanese or Buddhist cultural history.<sup>2</sup> Yet from a cross-cultural point of view at least some Westerners may have reason to feel an affinity with Shin: in many of its aspects, and especially in its political and social ideals, it has long been recognized to approach Protestant Christianity (especially as it exists in the United States) more closely than any other religion in world history. It is intriguing to review what was known about Shin Buddhism in the early twentieth century:

[Shin] faith is for everyone, even for women—an unheard of innovation in the world of Buddhism. We shall not be sur-

<sup>1</sup> Institutionally Shinshū consists of Nishi (west) and Higashi (east) Hongan-ji and a number of minor branches. The tradition regards Shinran (1173–1262) as founder; it was consolidated under Kakunyo (1270–1351), and in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries became a major social movement through the work of Rennyo (1415–1499). The political activities of its *ikkō-ikki* 一向一揆 (organizations of militarized Hongan-ji members) were suppressed by Nobunaga in the battle over Ishiyama (1575–1580); the institution was split into the Nishi and Higashi factions in the early seventeenth century because of internal divisions. A period of tremendous growth took place in the seventeenth century; the two Hongan-jis associated themselves with the Bakufu governments, reaching the peak of their influence sometime in the late eighteenth century, when they included up to thirty percent of the entire Japanese population. In the twentieth century, Higashi and Nishi together still claim more members than any of the other traditional Japanese Buddhist institutions (approximately fifteen percent of the Japanese population).

<sup>2</sup> A succinct discussion of this issue from a Buddhological point of view is given in DOBBINS 1989, pp. 157–61. A gap is evident between the Western and the Japanese awareness of this feature of Japanese culture. Although Shin has probably received more attention outside Japan than any other aspect of Japanese Buddhism except Zen, the non-Japanese awareness of Shin does not remotely approach the Japanese level. Outside Japan, Shin has been seen primarily as an oddball variant of normal Buddhist thought. Not only does this view miss the intellectual sophistication of elite Shin, it has also obscured the most sociologically important aspect of the tradition: its establishment of a significantly different field of social and political ideals in Japan. These ideals were not always met—in what religion does actual performance perfectly match the ideal?—but they engendered a constant dialectical exchange with generic Japanese religion.

prised, then, to learn that Yodo-Shin-Shu [*sic*] knows nothing of...prayers, magic formulas and actions, amulets, pilgrimages, penances, fasts and other kinds of asceticism, monasticism.... Its priests have no mediatorial significance. Their function is to instruct believers and to carry out the practices of the church.... They are subject neither to special laws of food nor to celibacy. Great emphasis is laid upon their activity in the way of instruction, preaching and edifying popular literature. The effect of faith in Amida, inculcated into the laity, is morality of life in the framework of family, state and calling. They are “to exercise self-discipline, to live in harmony with others, to keep order, to be obedient to the national laws, and as good citizens to care for the welfare of the state”.... As distinct from the other Japanese sects Yodo-Shin-Shu has never let itself be supported legally or financially by the government. From the outset it has been completely free from the state, its main activity being in the large cities. We are not really surprised that St. Francis Xavier, who was the first Christian missionary to live in Japan...thought that he recognized in Yodo-Shin-Shu the “Lutheran heresy.” (BARTH 1936, pp. 340–41)<sup>3</sup>

The specific source here was *Church Dogmatics*, by the leading twentieth-century theologian Karl Barth, who is not generally regarded as an apologist for Japanese Buddhism. Another early description of the tradition was written by William Griffis, perhaps the most important of the early American visitors who afterwards promoted information about Japan in the United States (see ROSENSTONE 1988, pp. 39–53, 87–118, 186–256).

We now look at what foreigners call “Reformed” Buddhism, which some even imagine has been borrowed from Protestant Christianity—notwithstanding that it is centuries older than the Reformation in Europe....

It is the extreme form of the Protestantism of Buddhism.... At thirty years of age [Shinran] began to promulgate his doctrine. Then he took a step as new to Buddhism, as was Luther’s union with Katharine von Bora, to the ecclesiasticism of his time. He married a lady of the imperial court....

Penance, fasting, prescribed diet, pilgrimages, isolation from society whether as hermits or in the cloister, and generally

<sup>3</sup> Barth used early twentieth-century reference books, which contained several errors (confusion of Xavier with Valignano as the source of the Lutheran comparison, some misconceptions in unquoted sections about Shin doctrine), but the main judgments about the tradition were correct, showing that twentieth-century Western thinkers have had access to sufficient material to form accurate evaluations of Shin had they been so minded.

amulets and charms, are all tabooed by this sect. Monasteries imposing life-vows are unknown within its pale. Family life takes the place of monkish seclusion. Devout prayer, purity, earnestness of life and trust in Buddha himself as the only worker of perfect righteousness, are insisted upon. Morality is taught to be more important than orthodoxy....

The special writings of Shinran are in the vernacular. Three of the sutras, also, have been translated into Japanese and expressed in the kana script....

The high priests of Shin Shu have ever held a high position and wielded vast influence in the religious development of the people. While the temples of other sects are built in sequestered places among the hills, those of Shin Shu are erected in the heart of cities, on the main streets, and at the centers of population,—the priests using every means within their power to induce the people to come to them....

Liberty of thought and action, and incoercible desire to be free from governmental, traditional, ultra-ecclesiastical, or Shintō influence—in a word, protestantism in its pure sense, is characteristic of the great sect founded by Shinran....

To their everlasting honor, also, the Shin believers have probably led all other Japanese Buddhists in caring for the Eta, even as they probably excel in preaching the true spiritual democracy of all believers, yes, even of women.

(GRIFFIS 1905, pp. 270–75)<sup>4</sup>

Documentation like this (of which much more exists) shows that until World War II Western visitors to Japan understood that Shin Buddhism was rich, powerful, and pervasive, that its intellectuals were philosophically sophisticated (and were among the Japanese most open to and engaged with Western culture), that its doctrines involved gender neutrality, that its language was a systematic revision of earlier Buddhist rhetoric, that its worldview separated religion and state, and that its practice reflected roughly the same kind of soteriological structure as Protestant Christianity—in short, that Shin was significantly different from the other forms of Japanese Buddhism they witnessed.

Most current students of Japan have never encountered this information. Why is Shin not accorded the degree of recognition

<sup>4</sup> These are images of Shinshū as it was in the Tokugawa period even after it had lost much of its revolutionary, nonmainstream character. Not all of Griffis's praise was accurate—turn-of-the-century Shin continued to discriminate against the *eta*, for example, and women tended to have restricted roles, as elsewhere in Japanese society—but his remarks never seem to have attracted attention outside of Japan even for purposes of refutation.

commensurate with its apparent importance? The present amnesia has come about because the Hongan-ji tradition has since the early twentieth century been ignored in the Western encounter with Japan. Accounts of Japanese cultural history, especially since World War II, have tended to be constructed by Japanese and foreign scholars alike in ways that resulted in Hongan-ji and Shin Buddhism being completely dropped. What are the reasons for this historiographical and interpretive gap? This article (a foray into the developing area that we might call the intellectual history of Japanese studies) offers three sets of suggestions about the case of the missing Hongan-ji: the first set is jocular, the second attempts to list academic blind spots in the study of Japan as they affect Shin Buddhism and thereby identify reasons why Shin Buddhism does not fit the map of the prevailing constructions of Japan, and the third spells out the moral challenge created by Shin's dissonance with the postwar orientalist commitment of many ideologists of Japan to the unreachable Otherness of traditional Japan.<sup>5</sup>

Let the jocular set of suggestions be disposed of quickly: The reason so few foreigners have been seriously interested in Shin Buddhism is that late twentieth-century world culture has nothing to learn from Mahāyāna Buddhist thought and its ideas of radical interdependence (codependent origination), compassion, selflessness, and so on, or from Shin Buddhism's distinctive religious ideals of universal unmediated liberation and egalitarianism, its nonmonastic organization, its relative rationalism, its gender neutrality, and its separation of church and state. The underlying reason for this lack of interest is, of course, that modern Western societies have so completely mastered the arts of interdependence, universal compassion, equality, and separation of religion and state that this aspect of Japanese Buddhism fills no intellectual or religious need.<sup>6</sup>

The next set of suggestions concerns academic blind spots in the historiography and interpretation of Japan. One set of historiographical

<sup>5</sup> Jacqueline Stone emphasizes that many of the following points also apply to the neglect of the Nichiren tradition (the other major "anomaly" in Japanese religious history). Although major differences between the traditions do exist, both Shin and Nichiren emphasize an unmediated approach to religious liberation that suspends the need for the traditional sangha, and both traditions bind this concept with a populist resistance to conventional sociopolitical authority, with a spiritual and social egalitarianism, with a privileging of Buddhist worship over local customary worship, and with a self-definition against normal *honji-suijaku* religion and the governing regime.

<sup>6</sup> Various postmodern critics of modern society hold that the need to be passionately interested in these problems is passé: according to authorities such as James Hillman or Robert Jay Lifton, we are reaching a stage of commonplace radical flexibility of personality in which we are all becoming protean persons with no existential problems.

problems can be classified under the heading of traditions of prewar intellectual encounter, and has a four-hundred-year provenance. The West's sharpest early encounters with Buddhism anywhere in the world occurred in sixteenth-century Japan and heavily involved Shinshū. However, during the "Christian century," from the arrival of St. Frances Xavier in 1549 until the expulsions of missionaries in the 1620s, Jesuit reporting minimized the role of Shin in Japanese society, and this initial paradigm influenced everything that followed. During the entire Tokugawa period (when Hongan-ji reached the height of its influence on Japanese life) almost no reporting on Japan by Europeans took place.<sup>7</sup>

Buddhism came under enormous pressure after Japan opened to the West in the mid-nineteenth century, first as the country commenced its drive to create a modern state and afterwards as nationalist sentiments increased (KETELAAR 1990). The well-known *haibutsu kishaku* 廃仏毀釈—the "persecution" of Japanese Buddhism that started immediately after the Meiji Restoration—severely damaged many of the monastic institutions, and in its aftermath there was a sharp dropoff in the number of people living under monastic rules (COLL-CUTT 1986, pp. 160–63).<sup>8</sup> The Shin institution was much less affected, possessing as it did a popular base of religious and financial support, an activist and thus more serviceable ministerial posture, and a doctrine that during the Tokugawa had been less subject to the usual Confucian objections to Buddhism.<sup>9</sup> Shin was nevertheless subject to multiple pressures during the early Meiji, resulting from the takeover of the government by *kokugaku* ideologues with a hostile political agenda, the challenge of aggressive Christian missionizing, and, in the background, the overwhelming intellectual pressure from an outside Western world that had independently constructed a unitary view of a "Basic Buddhism" at odds with the traditional Japanese view of Buddhist diversity.

From about 1871 the Buddhist institutions, led by Shin, began to react to the new situation, which they saw as a threat to the very exist-

<sup>7</sup> Of course, in the traditional Sinological and Confucianist mode of East Asian studies (the indigenous historiographical tradition), mention of Pure Land Buddhism is wholly omitted.

<sup>8</sup> The *haibutsu* events were caused by a confluence of two forces: the public's pent-up resentment against the temple establishment, which for centuries had conducted surveillance of the population for the Tokugawa Bakufu, and which had in many cases imposed an unpopular religious tax; and the *kokugakusha*'s 国学者 pent-up resentment towards Buddhism, which had been condemned in the *kokugaku* polemical literature since the late eighteenth century as a "non-Japanese" religion. *Haibutsu kishaku* riots occurred primarily because police control over the expression of resentment was suspended in 1870 and 1871.

<sup>9</sup> In some areas the Shin membership defended itself when attacked by local governments; in other areas no rioting occurred at all.

tence of Japanese Buddhism. Motivated by the fear resulting from the *haibutsu* events, Buddhism embarked on a surge of modernization.<sup>10</sup> The Shin survival response manifested itself in two ways: doctrinal reconfiguration and political realignment. On the doctrinal front Murakami Senjō 村上専精 (1851–1929), an intellectual trained in Shin temples, took the lead among Buddhist leaders in initiating a fundamentally new view of Buddhism that dealt with the intellectual pressures of modernization and Western expectation by focusing on the essential similarities among the different Mahāyāna schools (STAGGS 1979).<sup>11</sup> This marked a move away from the institutional independence stressed in Tokugawa Buddhism and toward the acceptance of the alien concept of a “basic Buddhism” or “original Buddhism.”<sup>12</sup> In these ways Shin helped create a generic public discourse about Buddhism that complemented the traditional discourse in the public context.

On the political front Buddhism aligned itself with the resurgence of Japanese nationalism and cultural confidence, helping it counter the attacks of Christianity. Here again a Shin figure, Inoue Enryō 井上円了 (1858–1919), was a leading figure (STAGGS 1979, 1983). During the entire period from late Meiji through 1945 Hongan-ji became so supportive of the Japanese government that it has been described as “the guardian of the state” (ROGERS 1990). While some of the traditional Shin rhetoric reflected the traditional distancing of religion from the state (for example, HOLTOM 1947, p. 129), much prewar thinking about religion and politics became irrevocably intermixed and muddled.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> The nineteenth-century Christian-Buddhist encounter had a tremendous impact on the Buddhists, a development that in the larger perspective was yet another reflection of the forcible Meiji reorientation of Japanese thought. The overwhelming challenge for the intelligentsia was to build a new identity—especially a new political identity—that would help the Japanese regain confidence vis à vis the West. Yet Shin Buddhism, in spite of its brief entanglement in violent cultural politics during the revolution and the *haibutsu kishaku*, was basically isolated from the leading Japanese political developments after 1868. George WILSON has described the nineteenth-century struggle for the soul of Japanese politics in terms of four contending groups, with four contending patterns of paradigms and metaphors; Shin is nowhere to be found (1992). If Shin had a basic political orientation it was only in its dispersal of power, a characteristic of the traditional Bakufu politics to which it had become almost perfectly adapted during the Tokugawa period.

<sup>11</sup> Murakami’s lead was followed by other leaders such as ANESAKI Masaharu (1982).

<sup>12</sup> A later, more nationalistic expression of the theme of unity was a shift of attention among Japanese scholars towards *hongaku shisō* 本覚思想 (original enlightenment theory) as the Buddhist rhetoric preeminently characteristic of Japan. This shift is expressive of an attempt to be “universalistic” and not sectarian in conceptualizing Japanese Buddhism, now increasingly seen as the highest development of Mahāyāna in Asia.

<sup>13</sup> The intermixing of Shin thought and prewar Japanese fascism reached its height in the rhetoric of Tanabe Hajime, a member of the Kyoto school of modern Japanese philosophy

Whatever the intellectual and political justifications for these moves among Shin Buddhists, the cumulative effect was to subordinate Western perceptions of diversity in traditional Japanese culture—especially political culture—to a newly invented vision of a unitary Japan.<sup>14</sup> Although it is common to decry the previous sectarian narrowness of Tokugawa Buddhism, one should be cautious of too easily applauding these efforts—which became overwhelmingly influential among secular intellectuals—to create a free-floating “ecumenical” Buddhism. Ecumenical Buddhism was the product of a modernizing environment; as this form of Buddhism took hold the distinctive character and sensibility of Shin and other schools became obscured, along with their traditional pluralist, relatively decentralized politics.<sup>15</sup>

In spite of their success in coordinating themselves with the modern government by 1900, Shin Buddhists found themselves marginalized in depictions of Japanese history and culture; among Westerners any potential interest in Shin’s social and political history disappeared as secular views of Japanese history became increasingly politicized.<sup>16</sup> In the late nineteenth century a right-wing paradigm of Japanese history emerged at Tokyo University, the product of a combination of Confucian, nativist, and European nationalist (especially Prussian) political theory. According to this view a creative reformation of Japanese Buddhism occurred in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (“Kamakura Buddhism”), but it contained within itself the seeds of

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who was influenced by Shinran’s thought. As Andrew Barshay has noted:

The time was yet to come when learned and politically independent syntheses of “Western” and Japanese thought and culture, or, alternatively, attempts to argue for Japan’s unique contributions to world culture, could be written without the taint of cultural imperialism.... In some cases—for example, Tanabe Hajime’s articles on the “logic” of social and national existence—the question was not one of cooptation so much as virtual, albeit unintended, prostitution.

(BARSHAY 1988, p. 30)

<sup>14</sup> This was a remarkable intellectual phenomenon; it was almost as if within a period of about thirty years the leaders of the various denominations of American Christianity started claiming—at least publicly, but with utter seriousness—that the earlier history of diversity should be superseded and that now all American Christianity had common roots and common features. The only force that could cause such a reconfiguration of political consciousness in the United States would be—as in Japan—external political pressure.

<sup>15</sup> Thus Japan was one of the pioneers in Asia in the conversion of traditional religion into a vehicle for modern cultural nationalism, promoted by the leadership of the countries. Compare the construction of a generic modern “Hinduism” in India.

<sup>16</sup> Although the emerging right-wing quasi-Confucianist ideological discourse in Japan was unfriendly to Japanese cultural politics as represented by Shin Buddhism, some of the politicization of views was also external to Japan. Christian missionaries found it convenient to pick up on Buddhism’s own internal polemics of reform and on its own self-critical observations of shifts underway in Japanese religious sensibility to declare—despite the evidence in front of their eyes—that Buddhism was already a dead religion.



schism and strife that soon led Buddhism into spiritual decline (REISCHAUER 1917, pp. 131–36). The Tokyo University paradigm was harshly critical of Shin history, presenting Hongan-ji and its members as notable mainly for the *ikkō-ikki*<sup>17</sup> and their irrational resistance to Nobunaga’s unification of Japan between 1570 and 1580.<sup>18</sup> English language writing on Shin came to reflect this view. The fact that the Shin institutions reached the height of their influence in Japanese history sometime in the mid- or late Tokugawa period and were quite active in the early twentieth century was ignored in this description, fostering the impression, still normal among historians, that Hongan-ji religion after 1500 was either a strange nuisance in the forward progress of modern Japanese history (SANSOM 1961, p. 282; McMULLIN 1984, esp. the conclusion)<sup>19</sup> or a simpleminded tool of the Tokugawa Bakufu state.<sup>20</sup>

A second set of historiographical problems can be classified under the heading of traditions of prewar religious encounter. Western ideas about what Buddhism “should” be had an enormous impact on the perception of Shin. The reports of visiting Westerners (such as those mentioned above) were superseded from the nineteenth century by Western intellectual constructions of Buddhism in general. This construction—which Philip C. Almond has called “Victorian Buddhism”—was based on nineteenth-century European contacts with India and Sri Lanka almost entirely without empirical reference to any kind of

<sup>17</sup> This term refers to the complex pattern of rebellion, self-government, and resistance to warlord authority by organizations of militarized Hongan-ji members in certain areas of Japan during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

<sup>18</sup> The politicization of views about *ikkō-ikki*, which was essentially internal to Japan, was rooted in the historiographical traditions of the Tokugawa period. These traditions served both the Tokugawa authorities (who under the influence of Chinese thought attempted to develop Chinese-style depictions of Tokugawa history, e.g., the Mito school) and the nativist ideologues (who propounded restorationist fantasies of Japanese society that in many ways resonated with utopian Confucian visions). Both groups developed political images of Japanese society that were profoundly out of touch with what historians increasingly understand as the Japanese social reality of diversity, pluralism, contest, and conflict.

<sup>19</sup> The paradox was illustrated by Sansom: the sixteenth century was full of profound liberalizing energy among the peasant and commercial communities, and Japanese politics was to a great extent propelled from the bottom up, but insofar as these same people resisted Nobunaga in connection with Hongan-ji religion they were “fanatics.”

<sup>20</sup> The Tokyo University version was fixed in English by Anesaki’s *History of Japanese Religion*, which provided only an opaque surface description of Shin doctrine, devoted only a few sentences to sixteenth-century developments (which were put in the context of religious irrationality), depicted Tokugawa-period Shin as obsessed with mere dogma, and caricatured modern Shin—against the facts that even Christian missionaries had observed—as a moral antinomianism (ANESAKI 1930, reprint 1963, pp. 181–86, 229, 304–305, 380–81, 384, 398–400). Anesaki’s picture of Shin was a shrewd piece of ideological propaganda directed at naive foreign audiences.

East Asian Buddhist tradition. Victorian ideas about Buddhism varied widely, but shared the presupposition of a pristine “original Buddhism” as the fundamental basis of the tradition. There was also an attempt to use Buddhism as an alternative or foil to Christianity by emphasizing its supposed rationality, a feature palatable to Victorian intellectuals.

Victorian Buddhism strongly contributed to the early neglect or denigration of Mahāyāna developments in the tradition (ALMOND 1988). Western Buddhologists have never taken Shin seriously because of their Indocentrism, their assumptions about the essentiality of origins, and their general orientalist urge to dominate Buddhist discourse.<sup>21</sup> Nor was Hongan-ji adequately served by comparative religious studies, perhaps because it was a primarily political variation in Buddhist history. The discipline of comparative religions has tended to avoid dealing with the unbearable conflicts over religious authority that fill European religious history, with the result that it is weaker in comparative religious politics than in other areas.<sup>22</sup>

A further factor was that Westerners interested in alternative religions seldom became interested in Hongan-ji. Western interest in alternatives followed highly structured preestablished patterns based on binary opposition or complementarity with Christianity; Shin violated these preconceived expectations by mixing Buddhist metaphysics with a “Protestant” religious doctrine and even in some respects an “American-Protestant” politics.

Although post-Meiji Western observers (including many missionaries) correctly assessed the importance of Hongan-ji, the encounter soon resulted in open confrontation and hostility between Christians and Japanese Buddhists. Buddhists perceived the early Christian successes as direct threats to their own turf and to the stability of Japan; for several decades a state of cultural war existed between the parties (THELLE 1987). By the time a truce was called circa 1900, fixed polemical positions had been taken, marked by the achievement of a limited

<sup>21</sup> It is emblematic in the history of Japanese-Western cultural relations that Shinshū and Western Buddhism had a direct encounter with each other via two Hongan-ji students who were sent to study with the famous philologist Max Müller, who was disinterested in Shin tradition from the beginning (THELLE 1987, pp. 216–17). As a result, despite Shin’s own early and strong interest in cross-cultural communication the early potentials were scotched and Shin throughout the twentieth century has had almost zero influence on either Buddhology or comparative religion outside of Japan.

<sup>22</sup> The current field of Christian-Buddhist dialogue ignores issues of authority and institutionalization when it sets up its discourse. The irony is that no one could ever deal with European and American history without concluding that political issues of religious institutionalization are of enormous importance.

degree of sophistication about Shin on the Western side, but, at the same time, the acceptance of a good deal of Victorian obtuseness about Buddhist variation on the Japanese side.

A number of serious Hongan-ji writers tried to represent their tradition in English, and the amount of writing on Shin in English in the early part of the twentieth century exceeded the amount available on Ch'an or Zen (HANAYAMA 1961 and BANDO 1958). Some knowledge of Shin reached even the European intelligentsia. The French novelist Romain Rolland (1866–1944), winner of the 1915 Nobel Prize in literature, called a dramatized account of Shinran's life by Japanese playwright Kurata Hyakuzō 倉田百三 (1891–1943) the greatest twentieth-century work of religious literature (AKIZUKI 1990, p. 143).<sup>23</sup> However, despite attempts to render Shin meanings into English throughout the twentieth century, an impasse developed in finding ways to mediate and translate the tradition in ways that could express its combination of moral seriousness, philosophical depth, existential accessibility, and deeply rooted social praxis.

A final chilling factor in the prewar religious encounter was the political aspect of Hongan-ji missionizing among Japanese immigrants in Hawaii and North America. An irony of the Western interpretation of Shin was that although Shin, of all the Asian Buddhist traditions, had the longest physical representation in America because of the presence of large Japanese-American communities, it was linked with an oppressed Asian minority group and with war-era pro-Japanese nationalism among immigrants (especially in Hawaii), setting it sharply against mainstream American life.<sup>24</sup>

The prewar traditions of intellectual and religious communication were both extended and reshaped in the postwar period. On the intellectual front, postwar Western studies of Japan came increasingly under the influence of the modern folklorist tradition begun by Yanagita Kunio, whose folklorism lent itself to cultural nationalism. Like European folklorists such as the Brothers Grimm (by whom he was directly inspired), Yanagita was responding to the destruction of the diversity of local "folk" cultural life by the forces of economic and political modernization. At the same time he sought in that same local diversity a common essence for the Japanese ethnic group to serve as spiritual compensation for the losses caused by modernization. Yanagita, as might be expected, showed virtually no interest in Shin

<sup>23</sup> Kurata, a prolific author, also wrote a novel about Shinran.

<sup>24</sup> The conflicts in Hawaii were quite severe; see HUNTER 1971, pp. 88–104, 159–97. The history of Shin Buddhism in the USA has been narrated several times; see TUCK 1987 and FIELDS 1981.

Buddhism, even though Shin was by all accounts the single most widespread form of religious imagination among ordinary rural Japanese in the nineteenth century. Even though in its own way traditional Shin was fairly antimodern (and even full of folkish religious practices), Shin violated Yanagita's fundamental preconceptions about "folk" religion: it was highly adapted to Bakufu politics (which was not representative of *das Volk*), its ultimate interests were not ethnic nor nationalist in nature, and its response to modernity was pragmatic and survivalist rather than romantic. Indeed, Yanagita broadly identified all Buddhism as something extrinsic to the "essential" Japanese identity, a precedent followed by folklorists for decades.<sup>25</sup> Folklorism has had a determinative impact on the twentieth-century discourse on Japanese culture and has promoted the compartmentalization of religious studies in modern Japan.

The effacement of the traditional dispersed cultural politics represented by the Shin institutions was accelerated by the growing development of the rhetoric of cultural nationalism (*nihonjinron*, Japanese uniqueness theory).<sup>26</sup> Like other Japanese traditions, prewar Shinshū participated in nationalism as part of its attempt to reshape Japanese Buddhism; postwar *nihonjinron*, however, was hostile to any serious religious perspective whatsoever. The conception in Shin and other Buddhist traditions of Japanese society as somehow "Buddhist" was overwhelmed by interpretations that left little room for alternate descriptions.<sup>27</sup>

Shin Buddhism suffered other difficulties in the postwar era. The

<sup>25</sup> This characteristic modernist confusion—searching for spiritual solutions in the traditions of *das Volk* while demanding the type of ethnic solidarity seen only in the modern nation-state—makes Yanagita the *Vorgänger* of all modern cultural critics. On Yanagita see KAWADA 1993, KOSCHMANN 1985, MORSE 1975, and TAKAYANAGI 1976.

<sup>26</sup> *Nihonjinron* has come under extensive scrutiny by both foreign and Japanese scholars. There is agreement that *nihonjinron* is the demilitarized continuation of prewar nationalism, that it has to do with the achievement of a kind of ideological hegemony in Japan by certain Japanese elites, that its main political point is to convince the modern Japanese of an essentialist consensus model of their political culture (one minimizing the interests of class, religion, and other sources of fundamental conflict), that it has strong racialist overtones, that it avoids conceptualizing Japanese society according to traditional religious parameters, that it is highly commercialized and secularized, and that it reflects the weakening of other approaches (such as mature and relatively universalistic religious approaches) by which members of the Japanese public might think about their society and its relation to others (YOSHINO 1992, esp. pp. 9–67, 123, 185–226).

<sup>27</sup> As YOSHINO notes, one of the main features of *nihonjinron* argument is a logical paradox of the simultaneously *a* and *not-a* type: Japanese culture has historically been more flexible and adaptive than others (uniquely open), which is what distinguishes Japanese culture from others (uniquely closed). Some writing on Shin has followed the same format: Shin is the most universally encompassing Mahāyāna Buddhist mythos (uniquely open), which is what distinguishes it and makes it a Buddhism "especially for Japanese people" (uniquely closed).

tradition increasingly came to realize that it was not as well adapted to twentieth-century Japanese society as it had been to Tokugawa society. Despite their relative success in coming to terms with the externalities of prewar Japanese politics, the Shin institutions were handicapped, like other Buddhist institutions, by slow institutional change.<sup>28</sup> The entrenchment of existing models of authority and hierarchy led to battles that continued until major legal restructurings were carried out in the wake of World War II. Conflict over internal governance was conjoined with financial instability. Although the Hongan-jis had been the richest of the Tokugawa institutions, modernization presented them with financial demands (primarily for educational and social services) that could not be met through the traditional dues structure, leading to increased pressure on the membership for donations. Financial scandals at about this time worsened the situation, engendering press hostility and public cynicism. The Hongan-ji institutions were also injured by the demographic side effects of modernization. Shin's traditional base of support in the agrarian regions of Japan was eroded as the growth of the industrializing urban areas accelerated rural depopulation. Financial hardship meant that ministers had to struggle for financial survival, with consequent effects on religious sensibility (SUZUKI 1985).

Moreover, in the immediate postwar period a crisis of legitimacy occurred in Hongan-ji, as in all of the established Japanese denominations. Because Shin had accepted and even collaborated with the expansionist policies of the prewar Japanese regime, the disaster of WWII seriously damaged—at least among the intellectuals and the young—the Hongan-ji leadership's conventional moral authority. Within Higashi Hongan-ji disputes erupted that reflected internal political factionalization energized by left-wing politics and a determination to confront entrenched authority; these were exacerbated by ensuing financial scandals and mismanagement (SUZUKI 1985, THELLE 1976, COOKE 1978, 1989). Such embarrassments—many brought about by failures of imagination within the conservative Shin tradition itself—created among the nonmember Japanese public a pervasive postwar skepticism, a skepticism only deepened by the tendency of postwar Japanese newspapers to put as negative as possible a slant on reports of such problems.

<sup>28</sup> There was in Shin tradition a tension between the doctrine of “no mediation between Buddha and person” and the reality of a sophisticated religio-philosophical structure that required an established and ineluctably hierarchical organization to maintain it. An effective working balance between the two aspects was achieved in the Tokugawa period, helping to make the Shin institutions the most stable and unified of Japanese organizations up until the modern period. However, the need for a new balance emerged after the feudal period.

Beyond this, Japanese postwar society underwent a myriad of changes that tended to weaken traditional Japanese culture, on which the Shin institutions, despite their relatively progressive nature, continued to depend. Consumerism, materialism, and secularized education all contributed to a pervasive spiritual malaise yet at the same time hindered the ability of the Japanese to participate in a serious religious tradition. Instead of seeking a rapprochement with traditional Buddhism, many people turned to the New Religions with their strong thaumaturgical flavor, a flavor sometimes taken as normative for all Japanese religion. Hongan-ji leaders felt the decline in the tradition among their own membership; they felt the New Religions indicated a frustration, vulgarization, and retrogression in late twentieth-century Japanese religious sensibilities.<sup>29</sup> This atmosphere—a typically modern blend of religious frustration and cynicism—was another reason why postwar foreign interpreters, lacking a historical perspective, have been unable to see the Shin tradition’s continuing background presence on the Japanese scene.

Complementing the postwar delegitimation, resurgent Marxism came to dominate the Shin academic community. Marxism’s relationship with Hongan-ji was tense: Shin agreed with Marxism in its populist resistance to authoritarianism, but diverged in its view of religious imagination as an experiential and institutional necessity. A prominent faction of secular Marxists (represented by, for example, Ienaga Saburō) saw the founder Shinran as a great liberal individualist, but dismissed the entire Hongan-ji tradition that came afterwards (IENAGA 1965).<sup>30</sup> Other historians influenced by Marxism made great advances in the study of the sixteenth-century *ikkō-ikki*, but, like earlier historians in the Tokugawa Confucian historiographical tradition, they tended to lose interest in Hongan-ji developments subsequent to the cessation of armed resistance in the 1580s.<sup>31</sup>

Marxism strengthened the mid-century notion of “Kamakura Buddhism” as the Japanese Basic Buddhism. Where the prewar ten-

<sup>29</sup> DAVIS (1980) has called this trend the “cunning of magic” and argued that it represents a response to the increasing malaise and powerlessness that many Japanese feel in an increasingly technologically driven society.

<sup>30</sup> Ienaga’s studies of Shinran were reflected in BELLAH 1965 and 1974. But Ienaga, like other Marxist scholars in Japan, really knew little about the workings of Buddhist doctrines in a classical sense.

<sup>31</sup> Such historians took an interest in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and the *ikkō-ikki* because these movements could be viewed as signs of popular democracy and resistance to the negative forms of authority that, lumped together under the blanket term “feudalism,” were understood in the postwar period to have characterized Japanese political life deep into the twentieth century.

dency had been to focus on *hongaku shisō* as the essence of Japanese Buddhism, the Marxists favored Kamakura thought for its political correctness. Thus postwar presentations of Shin most commonly treated the tradition entirely under the rubric of Kamakura Buddhism, ending the discussion in the fourteenth century.<sup>32</sup> In terms of cultural impact, however, Shin was really “late Muromachi Buddhism,” and its mass success and influence were linked to sociopolitical conditions in the sixteenth century and later.<sup>33</sup> “Kamakura Buddhist,” right-wing, and Marxist interpretations all failed to address the question of why Hongan-ji became the largest Japanese Buddhist institution only after the sixteenth century.<sup>34</sup>

The postwar period saw even less of a movement towards reevaluating Shin on purely religious terms. Victorian Buddhism and the unitary, unempirical Japanese construct of Basic Buddhism from the late Meiji period continued their hegemonic influence throughout the twentieth century.<sup>35</sup> The Tokyo University perspective on early modern Buddhist decadence formed the basic perception in the magisterial historical work of TSUJI Zenosuke (1951, 1952). Shin Buddhists themselves remained unable to generate a self-description directed at a non-Japanese audience that clarified the compelling nature of the tradition in Japan. Within Japan the ever more complex encounters with modernization (which indicated how large, important, and sophisticated the tradition really was) distracted Shin scholars from the task (for their purposes, quite secondary) of making a more adequate representation of the tradition for foreign consumption.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>32</sup> This is the approach (still) taken by, e.g., *The Cambridge History of Japan* (ŌSUMI 1990).

<sup>33</sup> On the Muromachi factitude of “Kamakura Buddhism” see FOARD 1980. Western scholars have tended to uncritically accept postwar Japanese scholars’ treatment of Japanese Buddhism. The low level of interest seems related to the distaste of Western students for the “sectarian” politics of later Japanese Buddhism, which reminds them (however erroneously) of religious history in the West (BIELEFELDT 1991, MORRELL 1987).

<sup>34</sup> Postwar Hongan-ji-affiliated scholars have not been very helpful in generating any revisionist perceptions of the institution. The conservative sectarian scholars have put aside the large synthetic question of why Hongan-ji doctrine thrived in the sixteenth century and afterwards; moreover the postwar pressure of Marxist scholarship has been universal, so that even sectarian scholars who have become involved in sixteenth-century studies have tended to operate in terms of class analysis and feudal interpretations of Hongan-ji (FUTABA 1985).

<sup>35</sup> For an example see the small introduction to Japanese Buddhism by HANAYAMA Shinshō (1960). Hanayama was professor at the University of Tokyo, a representative of Shin Buddhism, and—interestingly enough—a one-time bishop of the Buddhist Churches of America. His short account focuses almost entirely on ancient Nara, Heian, and Kamakura Buddhism, disposing of the period from 1334 to 1960 in ten pages. Virtually no attention is given to the special political role played by Shin.

<sup>36</sup> Although Shinran’s works have gradually been appearing in useful and excellent translations from two projects sponsored by the Nishi Hongan-ji in Kyoto, they remain peripheral to English consciousness about Japan.

In the West, the postwar discourse on Japanese Buddhism was completely captured by writers who emphasized Zen. From a historical perspective, these writers were sustaining the preestablished Victorian patterns of alternative religious search in the West. The most ironic feature of the postwar Orientalist Buddhism was that the single most important writer in opening Mahāyāna Buddhism up to the English-language public in the postwar period—D. T. Suzuki—was a Japanese cultural nationalist.<sup>37</sup> Suzuki's English-language writing on Shin was not negligible; he published some prewar translations of basic Shin material, essays, studies of the late Tokugawa *myōkōnin* 妙好人 (“saints”), and, just before his death, a translation of a large part of the *Kyōgyōshinshō* 教行信証 (Shinran's main technical work). In spite of this effort, Suzuki's writing did very little to open up Shin to English readers. His work offered the pietism (of a wholly mysterious character), some of the Mahāyāna philosophical content (mainly in his final translation), and (as might be predicted from his background ideological agenda) almost none of the real political history of Shin—the aspect that was crucial to its understanding and appeal.<sup>38</sup> Under Suzuki's influence, Alan Watts, the beat poets, Thomas Merton, and a host of other popularizers promulgated solely the Zen perspective on Japanese Buddhism.

Scholars of Japanese religion—even those specializing in Buddhism—did not start to work with an effective paradigm of “Japanese religion” until fairly late in the century, when it became clear that the dominant Japanese pattern was always a mixture of kami-religion and Buddhism (*honji-suijaku* or *shinbutsu shūgō* 神仏習合). The most interesting intellectual tension in traditional Japanese religion was between *shinbutsu* religion and the relative purism of Shin, which was unfriendly to it. However, the recent trend in scholarship in both Japan (a phenomenon not unrelated to folklorism and *nihonjinron*) and the West has preferred the exploration of *shinbutsu* religion and its modern offshoots, the New Religions.

<sup>37</sup> Recent interpreters have increasingly recognized how Suzuki spoke out of the full complexity of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Japanese experience with nationalism and the reconstruction of Buddhism (SHARF 1993).

<sup>38</sup> One result was that the considerable number of postwar American thinkers who saw resemblances between Buddhism and pragmatism (or various nonfoundational aspects of modern Western thought) were almost completely subject to Zennist, monistic, or monastic versions of Buddhist rhetoric and had no access to Mahāyāna as filtered through the Shin political perspective. Even late in the twentieth century, English-language literature reflected confusion about “sectarian” differences in Japanese Buddhism and the significance of these differences to foreigners. AKIZUKI 1990, for example, is not about general Mahāyāna at all but rather about monastic Zen, which in actuality (if not in Western expectations) has had much more difficulty than Shin in maintaining its premodern support and credibility in twentieth-century Japan.



Shin also attracted little attention from academic disciplines outside the spheres of history and religion. Few sociologists turned their attention to Hongan-ji.<sup>39</sup> Japanese scholars almost never applied their interest in Weberian theory to Shin Buddhism, although Weber himself displayed a shrewd awareness of Hongan-ji in one passage of his works (WEBER 1921, pp. 303–305; on Weber in Japanese scholarship see HAYASHI and YAMANAKA 1993). The most influential postwar English-language study of Japanese religion and society, Robert BELLAH's *Tokugawa Religion* (1957), picked up the less important Shingaku movement. Virtually no attention was devoted to the essential theoretical question of whether “sect theory” and its repertoire of assumptions from European Christian history really applied to Japan.

Because of the separation of the religious and political fields of discourse in the Tokugawa period, Hongan-ji was invisible from the secular standpoint of Tokugawa social history after the sixteenth century. Hongan-ji did not fit with peasant studies' Great and Little Tradition analysis; it did not even appear as an element of the “arts of resistance” (as discussed by J. C. Scott) because the Marxist perspective of the latter omitted religious life as a form of resistance. Nor were literary studies, despite their tremendous postwar increase in range and sophistication, of particular help in dealing with Shin; the partial separation of Hongan-ji teaching from the normal Japanese imaginative world, which mixed Shinto and Buddhism freely, meant that Hongan-ji was relatively invisible from the standpoint of Japanese belles lettres.

Finally, the Japanese roots of Shin continued to be deadly to any increased awareness outside Japan. The politics of ethnicity in twentieth-century America meant that communications between Shin and the larger American culture were overwhelmingly disadvantaged by the ethnic tie, because of racism against the Japanese and counter-racism by the Japanese themselves, who used the religious tradition to create a refuge of ethnic closure in an environment perceived as hostile.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> The chief exception here was the Japanese sociologist Morioka Kiyomi, who wrote abundant studies on Shin, some in English (MORIOKA 1975).

<sup>40</sup> Scholars, concluding that Japanese and other Asian immigrants have been the third most oppressed ethnic grouping in America history (after the Native Americans and Afro-Americans), now approach Asian-American history from at least four different perspectives: assimilationist, celebratory (of contributions to pluralism), victimist, and agentive (Asians as in control of events; CHAN 1991, p. xiii). In the case of Shin Buddhism among Japanese-Americans it is implausible to speak of full assimilation (which in the U. S. implies Christianization) or of the celebration of Shin contributions to the mosaic of American cultural pluralism, and it is impossible to conceive of the full empowerment of Japanese-Americans before the 1990s. This left victimization as the primary mode of self-perception, a mood—though entirely nonrepresentative of the established status of Shin in Japan—that was hardly conducive to the presentation of a positive public image.

Japanese-American representations of Shin were inseparable from a deep-rooted psychological struggle for confidence. Thus ethnic, mainstream, and countercultural Americans were all equally content to identify Shin Buddhism as a special ethnic tradition for Japanese people.<sup>41</sup>

Stepping back from these many (but highly abbreviated) details, the irony is that it was precisely the strength and importance of traditional Shin and the intensity of its collision with European modernity that led to its near disappearance in the foreign consciousness. The dimensions of the collision included the Meiji political regime, Christianity, and Western preconceptions about Buddhism; the collision was followed by intense conflict, adaptation, and eventual public effacement. The same dynamics were played out abroad when Japanese emigration led to direct contact between Shin and Euro-American society. The outcome may be summarized in another way: in the interface between Shin Buddhism and modernizing Japan there was not a single significant interest group on either the Japanese or the Western side that was motivated to build a serious bridge of communication between the Shin element of Japanese culture and the West.

This brings the discussion to the third and concluding set of suggestions regarding the case of the missing Hongan-ji. Though related more or less explicitly to the above historiographical gaps, these suggestions involve a deeper problem: the instrumentality of the concept of Japan's Otherness to many of those engaged in Japanese-Western cultural relations.

It should be emphasized that no scholar who encounters Shin Buddhism in its real Japanese setting comes away with a simple positive view of the tradition. The institution has defects: twentieth-century Japanese intellectuals have heavily criticized it for its lack of intellectual imagination, its incomplete separation from folk religion, its wartime nationalism and stubborn political conservatism, and its traditional system of hereditary *iemoto* authority (still mismatched with the needs of the late twentieth century). Even after these defects are taken into account, however, overwhelming evidence shows that Shin Buddhism represented a distinct kind of religious, social, and political praxis in Japan that was effectively idealistic and that had, and continues to have, a major impact on the society. Intellectually it has been a diverse and flexible resource in twentieth-century Japan, embracing politics ranging from the far right to the far left and religious moods ranging from emotional piety to stripped-down existentialism. In Japan its

<sup>41</sup> This was, from a somewhat more imaginative perspective, like identifying Roman Catholicism as a special ethnic religion for Italian people.

moral affinities with Christianity are taken for granted. There is no reason in the late twentieth century for non-Japanese to take Shin any less seriously than many Japanese do when they consider the resources of the Japanese tradition.

No reason, and yet many Western students are not interested in Shin. Efforts to direct the attention of Western audiences to this kind of Buddhism usually lead to puzzlement, boredom, or embarrassment. Some of the difficulty is informational: there is a basic lack of knowledge about this subject because what was known about it before the war has been forgotten. However, one also encounters a deeper annoyance with the facts, since information about Shin Buddhism disturbs the received map of Japanese culture.

The most plausible explanation for this disturbance is sheer Orientalism: the commitment of many students of Japan, Westerners and Japanese alike, to the unreachable Otherness of traditional Japan.<sup>42</sup> The trouble with Hongan-ji is that it represents an aspect of traditional Japanese religion and praxis that is not altogether alien to Judeo-Christian ideals: even if its philosophical base is Mahāyāna Buddhism (so unacceptable to the theistic assumptions that Western intellectuals still secretly cling to via their dialectical rejection of theism), the political goals of Hongan-ji teaching have been explicit and hard to ignore: spiritual egalitarianism and individualism; gender neutrality; religion-state separation; the practice of mundane morality and good citizenship in daily life—in short, the goals that Western observers have (albeit loosely) regarded since the sixteenth century as “Protestant.” If these ideological products of the largest traditional Japanese religion are regarded objectively, does it not become harder to construct a picture of all of traditional Japan as radically Other?

And yet the construction of Japan as radically Other is still one of the most widely played games in Asian studies, a game that benefits both Japanese and Western players. For Japanese players it provides a modernist, essentialist, pseudo-traditional way to construct Japanese identity without having to rely on real Japanese cultural resources like Shin Buddhism. For Western players it allows access to the classic motivation of the Orientalist: the reification of the exotic, which is based on the colonization of the Other according to the interests of the colonizer rather than upon a wide-open hermeneutical encounter (SAID 1978, pp. 1–28). It is of course unfair to indiscriminately accuse all disciplines of Japanese studies of this exaggerated view of Japan’s

<sup>42</sup> Traditional Japan must be specified because there are, of course, a multitude of things about modern Japan that Western students feel quite at home with, e.g. computers, fast food, comic books, alienation and anomie, pornography, etc.

Otherness: no single community of Japanese studies exists, and where cultural studies are often committed to Otherness economic studies may not be so at all. However, no significant Western scholarship on Japan, especially in the postwar period, has attempted to use the Shin tradition as a lever to reduce the sometimes exaggerated gap between Japanese and Western cultural discourses.

This degree of misunderstanding is unacceptable, however imperfect the reality of the Shin tradition may be and however disagreeable modern Westerners may find the philosophical worldview of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Japan and the West have too much at stake to ignore possible channels of cultural communication. Whether or not Shin ever serves as a resource for religious thought in a world context, better recognition of the Shin tradition ought at the least to lessen the alienation. In the twenty-first century it would be well for the currently dominant interest groups to quit playing simplistic games of radical Otherness with traditional Japan. What is becoming clear to the more perceptive moralists and hermeneutical thinkers is that all cultures are hybrids—it was true in the past, it has been true in the twentieth century, it will be ever more true in the future. Hybridity is not an easy condition for anyone, but we have a lot to learn from the sobriety, existential realism, and practical sense of the traditional Buddhist response to the stubborn difficulties of apprehending the codependent origination of knowledge. Can we afford to go on ignoring Shin as a resource for understanding Japanese culture? Can we afford to go on ignoring this distinctive Asian Buddhist rhetoric that has re-narrativized Mahāyāna compassion—the very praxis of ontological hybridization—in the most open and flexible way?

Some might call such expectations too idealistic. Others, however, might follow the Buddhists in regarding the deepening of cultural hybridization and the concomitant struggle to achieve the critical moral awareness that comes from awareness of the fluidity of boundaries and of our simultaneous resistance to them, as the most coldly realistic approach of all.

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