

World Rejection and Pure Land Buddhism in Japan

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The aim of this paper is to discuss the role of Pure Land Buddhism in one particular phase of Japanese religious history. It is well known that Japanese religious history exhibits a dramatic shift from a Shinto to a Buddhist world view between the sixth and the twelfth centuries A.D. Buddhism was introduced to Japan in the sixth century, and the culture of elite society had already undergone a remarkable Buddhification by the ninth century. But Japanese Buddhism of the ninth century had not yet become an authentic mode of Buddhism and moreover was limited in scope to the elite classes. It is the thesis of this paper that Pure Land Buddhist faith played a crucial role in converting Japan by the twelfth century to a Buddhism that was both authentic and broadly inclusive of all social classes, the folk as well as the elites.

What do we mean by "authentic" Buddhism? We mean, first and foremost, world rejecting. Early Indian Buddhism, which we take as our standard, rejected as imperfect and painful the natural, unenlightened person and the empirical world as seen and experienced by that person. Both were considered *dukkha*, "suffering," "disease." Gautama's dramatic and thorough renunciation of the householder's life is archetypally expressive of this world rejection, and the Buddhist monastic community was developed as a spiritual alternative to those communities left behind by world renouncing Buddhists.

This stands in striking contrast to the world affirmation of the Shinto tradition throughout its history. For Shinto the locus of life's generative power, the dwelling place of the kami, is the given world. The kami are inseparable from natural

phenomena and human communities. In revering and regaling the kami, people affirm the natural environment and human institutions as both immediately satisfying and ultimately fulfilling.

I should hasten to add that I use neither of these characterizations pejoratively. I do not mean by "world rejecting" life-negating or pessimistic. Nor do I intend to imply by "world affirming" a superficial or naive spirituality. A religious world view is founded on a community's life-experiences and should be judged only in relation to its adequacy for that community.

WORLD REJECTION AND JAPANESE RELIGIOUS HISTORY

Before proceeding to a discussion of some moments in the early development of Pure Land Buddhism in Japan, let us look somewhat more closely at religious world rejection.

The term "world rejection" was coined by Max Weber. In his *Sociology of religion* (1963, chap. 11) and elsewhere (Gerth and Mills 1946, chap. 13), he formulated a fourfold typology of religious withdrawal from the world. He distinguished two basic types of withdrawal, ascetic and contemplative, and subdivided each into a world rejecting and an innerworldly variety. By "world," Weber meant institutional orders in a broad sense, such as political and economic institutions, but also the family and the aesthetic and erotic spheres of life.

One of the most useful adaptations of Weber's analysis has been that of Robert Bellah. In his 1964 article, "Religious evolution," Bellah provides a more elaborate differentiation of world accepting and world rejecting types of religious views and does this within an "evolutionary" or broadly historical framework. Bellah distinguishes five stages of religious evolution, or five types of religious symbol system: primitive, archaic, historic, early modern, and modern. He finds one of the crucial turning points in this evolutionary process to be

the emergence in the first millenium B.C. all across the Old World, at least in the centers of high culture, of the phenome-

non of religious rejection of the world characterized by an extremely negative evaluation of man and society and the exaltation of another realm of reality as alone true and infinitely valuable (1970, p. 22).

This development marked the earliest appearances of what Bellah calls the historic stage out of the archaic. Whereas archaic symbol systems are characterized by cosmological monism, that is, by a single cosmos which includes both men and gods, historical religions he finds dualistic in that they posit "an entirely different realm of universal reality"—heavens or paradises, nirvana, etc.—which entails a denigration or rejection of the empirical world. With regard to religious action, we have in the historic religions for the first time the possibility of, or need for, salvation, that is, for a radical solution to the intolerable inferiority of the empirical self and world, a solution often experienced as bestowed by a transcendent or otherworldly power, God, Amida Buddha, etc. In archaic religion, typical religious action seems to be ritualistic rather than ethical, concerned with integrating the human community into the procreativity and harmony of the sacred cosmos.

If we consider the history of Japanese religion in the light of Bellah's schema, it becomes apparent that in the period from the sixth to the twelfth centuries Japanese religion was in general shifting from the archaic to the historic type, that is, from an affirmative world view to a world rejecting religious view. Buddhism, and especially Pure Land Buddhism, was the vehicle for this shift. From the late twelfth century, Japanese of all social levels and in large numbers came to accept the Buddha's dictum that life is suffering and to seek a radical salvation, thus propelling Japan into one of the most interesting periods in her religious history.

BUDDHISM IN THE MID-HEIAN PERIOD

Let us now review some of the moments in the history of the conversion of Japan to an authentic and inclusive Buddhism.

We will examine two stages in that process: its early phase in the mid-Heian period, and its culmination in Hōnen.

By the middle of the Heian period, that is, by approximately 1000 A.D., the elite classes of Japan had apparently been thoroughly converted to Buddhism. Imposing monastic establishments dominated institutional religion and the daily life of the aristocracy was punctuated by Buddhist ceremonies and permeated with Buddhist notions and observances. Yet the Buddhism of the aristocracy remained, with few exceptions, a superficial, theurgic cult. The religious attitude of the aristocracy was fundamentally world affirming. Buddhist rites and ceremonies were used to manipulate this-worldly forces, both divine and demonic, for utilitarian ends. Institutional Buddhism, which had opened the age with a great religious reform, by the middle of the Heian period had assumed as its primary function the task of supplying the aristocracy with the magical and aesthetic means to achieve its goals of power and pleasure. In fact, the clergy itself had come to seek, by and large, these same goals.

The folk, on the other hand, who were in any case of little concern to either the clergy or the aristocracy, still maintained, for the most part, a close and fulfilling relationship with their village kami.

INSTITUTIONAL BUDDHISM—THE ŌJŌYŌSHŪ OF GENSHIN

It was exactly at this time, about the turn of the tenth century, that the Pure Land movement began to develop momentum among all three of these social groups—the Buddhist clergy, the aristocracy, and the folk. Within institutional Buddhism, the prevailing secularism at the monastic centers sent clerics with a genuine vocation into retreat. One such monk was Genshin (942–1017), who in 985 at his Yogawa retreat composed the most important Pure Land work of the Heian period, the *Ōjōyōshū* [A collection of essential teachings on Pure Land re-birth].

The preface to the *Ōjōyōshū* clearly reveals its religious stance

(Hanayama 1937, p. 1; cf. Ienaga 1977, p. 10):

The teaching and practice for rebirth into the Land of Utter Bliss are the eyes and limbs of this defiled latter age. Cleric, layman, noble, or commoner—who is there who does not seek refuge in it? Moreover, the texts of the exoteric and esoteric teachings are not few, and their practices, both for relative and ultimate realization, are many. Those who are intelligent and diligent may not find them difficult, but how can one as dull as I dare even attempt them? Thus I have collected a few essential passages from the scriptures on the single way of *nenbutsu*. When one studies these and practices according to them, they will be easy to understand and easy to carry out. Altogether there are ten chapters in three volumes:

1. Despising the defiled realms
2. Longing for the Pure Land
3. Authorities for the Pure Land
4. The proper practice of *nenbutsu*
5. Aids to *nenbutsu*
6. *Nenbutsu* for special occasions
7. Benefits of *nenbutsu*
8. Authorities for *nenbutsu*
9. Sundry practices for rebirth
10. Interpretation of problems

This is a clear, we might say a classic, example of religious world-rejection. Man and society as Genshin knew them are thoroughly rejected, especially because he thought that they participated in the “defiled latter age,” otherwise known as *mappō*, and the pure Buddha-land of Amida Buddha, *Sukhāvātī*, the Land of Utter Bliss, is held up as a refuge from that defiled world. *Nenbutsu*, “Buddha-reflection,” is urged as the means of calling forth the saving compassion of the Buddha.

In its first two chapters, “Despising the defiled realms” and “Longing for the Pure Land,” the *Ōjōyōshū* elaborates this dualistic world view with vivid descriptions of the sufferings in our world of *samsāra* and of the beatitudes of Amida Buddha’s Pure Land. The “defiled realms” consist of the six realms of transmigration, that is, hell and the realms of famished ghosts or

preta, of beasts, of wrathful demons or *asura*, of human beings, and of heavenly beings or *deva*.

The realm of hell lies in a vast region beneath Mount Sumeru and consists, we are told, of eight chambers arranged in layers, one beneath the other. The first chamber is called the Hell of Revival. Sentient beings who have taken life in any form fall into this chamber where they incessantly hack and claw one another to death, only to be revived and returned to life by the cries of the wardens of hell. Having been revived, they proceed again to hack and slay one another, only to be revived again and again for a near eternity of one and one half trillion years.

Below this hell, in order of increasing dreadfulness, are the hells of the Black Cable, of Striking and Crushing, of Wailing, of Great Wailing, of Scorching Heat, of Great Scorching Heat, and finally the Unremitting Hell. The sufferings in this last chamber are said to be so horrific as to be virtually indescribable, and that to hear even an approximation of them would be fatal. Those who have committed one of the so-called irredeemable evils—patricide, matricide, slaying an *arhat*, disrupting the *samgha*, or injuring a Buddha—are incarcerated in this hell for a full cosmic eon.

The chambers of hell are of course only the first of the six transmigratory realms. Into the realm of famished ghosts are reborn beings who in previous lives were excessively avaricious. With grotesquely bloated bodies and small skull-like heads, they haunt burial grounds and refuse heaps in search of something to quell their ravenous hunger, but in vain, for things which they would feed on prove too large for their minute mouths or turn to flames, burning out their entrails.

The wrathful demons, as we might expect, are beings who in previous lives were excessively ill-tempered. They live in continual fear and terror of one another and constantly engage in bloody pitched battles. The realm of human beings is characterized by impurity and, as in the classic Buddhist formula, by suffering and impermanence. In its impurity the human body

is compared to a painted jar filled with dung. It suffers the internal pains of countless diseases and external pains of weather, insects, injuries, etc. And because human life is impermanent, we are told, it inevitably entails old age and death. Even the fortunate man must leave behind his seeming pleasures and possessions and proceed to yet another rebirth in the six realms.

Existence as a heavenly being also proves undesirable in the end. For though the lives of the deities are extremely long and blissful, when their good karma becomes exhausted and they approach death and rebirth elsewhere, their regret is said to be more painful than even the sufferings of hell. In short, of all these defiled realms it can only be said, "There is no place of repose anywhere in the three Worlds, thus, above all else, one must detest and depart from them (Hanayama 1937, p. 2; cf. Ienaga 1977, p. 11).

Contemporary man, and academicians especially, may find it difficult to take seriously these highly imaginative accounts. Yet is it not exactly because they are so richly mythical that they produce so intense and thorough an expression of world rejection, more intense and thorough, perhaps, than we find in the well reasoned formulas of the Pali *suttas*? And it was of course this colorful mythical mode of expression that enabled these descriptions to grip the imagination of the folk and thus to contribute to the popularization of an authentic form of Buddhism in Japan.

As Bellah's analysis implies, every religious world rejection is accompanied by an affirmation of values that transcend the empirical world. For Pure Land Buddhism, these values are symbolized by the Pure Land of Amida Buddha. Genshin selects ten aspects of that Land as those beatitudes toward which we should aspire. The first is being welcomed on death by the Buddha and his holy retinue. Rather than a deserved descent into hell or another of the six realms, the faithful will be met at the moment of their deaths by Amida Buddha and his host of bodhisattvas, who will descend from the western sky on purple

clouds, place the believer on a huge lotus blossom dais or throne, and sweep him away to the Land of Utter Bliss.

The second beatitude is that of beholding the Land and its Buddha when the lotus blossom opens and one is reborn into the Pure Land, the third is receiving a golden Buddha-like body and the five supernormal powers (that is, the five *siddhis*), the fourth is the bliss of beholding the adornments of the Pure Land, the fifth is the uninterrupted *permanence* of the bliss of beholding these, the sixth is the beatitude of being able to find, instruct, and enjoy the company of all former friends and relatives, wherever they may have been reborn, the seventh is the bliss of being able to commune with all the bodhisattvas and other holy beings in the Land, the eighth that of being able to continually behold the Buddha and hear his discourses on the Law, the ninth the joy of being able to worship and make offerings to Amida Buddha and to all the other innumerable Buddhas of the ten directions of the universe, and finally, the tenth beatitude, pointing toward the Ultimate transcendent value, is the satisfaction at making progress toward full buddhahood in that Land where all conduces to equanimity and enlightenment.

The remaining eight chapters of Genshin's work are mostly practical in nature. Summarizing the Pure Land teachings of virtually the entire Buddhist canon, they set out the means of achieving rebirth into Amida Buddha's Pure Land, the cultivation of *nenbutsu*. They describe the various forms of *nenbutsu* practice, such as contemplative *nenbutsu*, vocal *nenbutsu*, and *nenbutsu* for the hour of death, and also the faith, aspiration and diligence that should accompany *nenbutsu*. The *Ōjōyōshū* emphasizes contemplative *nenbutsu*, that is, meditative visualization of Amida and the Pure Land, but it also asserts that for those incapable of the more difficult *nenbutsu*, simple invocation of Amida's name is adequate for salvation.

This work became the outstanding authority for Pure Land theory and practice in the succeeding two centuries of the Heian era and brought compellingly to laymen and clerics alike the

Pure Land vision and way.

ARISTOCRATIC BUDDHISM—THE TALE OF GENJI

Let us now shift our attention to the Heian aristocracy. We will look briefly at the greatest literary work of the age, Murasaki Shikibu's *Genji monogatari* or *The tale of Genji* (Waley transl. of 1935). In this work, composed only two decades or so after the *Ōjōyōshū* and thought to reflect fairly accurately the court life of its time, we will be able to see another crucial turning point in Japanese spiritual history, a turning away by the aristocracy from youthful world affirmation toward a world rejection growing out of an authentic Buddhist experience of life.

This transition is apparent first of all in the plot of the *Genji monogatari* as a whole. The hero, Genji, "The Shining Prince," is a great connoisseur and paramour in his youth, but as he grows older gradually becomes disillusioned with the world. In the closing chapter of part four, on the death of his protégée and mistress, Murasaki, he sighs, "Seek not in this domain the gladness of the year; for gone is she with whom 'twas joy to praise the shining boughs of Spring" (1935, p. 736).

This transition can be discerned, moreover, in those frequent and characteristic passages of the *Genji monogatari* which reflect a poignant ambivalence between joy and sorrow, between appreciation of some aspect of the world's beauty or glory, and regret at its ephemerality or painfulness, that is, in those passages which reflect what the Japanese call *mono no aware*. For example, after the death of Genji's wife, Aoi, in childbirth, Aoi's mother says of her grandson: "New tears, but tears of joy it brings—this blossom from a meadow that is now laid waste" (1935, p. 173). At times it seems that the world is all the more treasured by these courtiers exactly because of its impermanence and pain. Thus Genji whispers to Aoi's father at her funeral,

Because of all the mists that wreath the autumn sky I know
not which ascended from my lady's bier, henceforth upon

the country of the clouds from pole to pole I gaze with love
(1935, p. 169).

We see here a romantic disillusionment which has not yet genuinely rejected the world to seek for values beyond it. On the whole this probably reflects the furthest degree of authenticity that Heian aristocratic Buddhism achieved.

Exceptions there were of course. In her diary Murasaki Shikibu writes,

In any event... I shall now abandon my old reliance upon prayers and abstinence. I shall simply recite fervently the invocation to Amida Buddha. I no longer feel the least attachment to any odious worldly things, yet I shall doubtlessly vacillate till I ascend to the clouds. Thus I hesitate (cited in Sansom 1958, p. 227).

There is nothing particularly romantic about Murasaki's disillusionment as expressed here, yet it again reflects the ambivalence of the Heian aristocracy at this crossroads between affirmation of the world and religious world rejection. As we know, the spiritual history of Japan was soon to leave them behind.

FOLK BUDDHISM AND KŪYA

Turning to the religious life of the folk in this period, we find that here also Pure Land faith had begun to develop. Buddhism had of course exercised influence on the religion of the folk since the Nara age. Unordained shamanistic folk practitioners, the so-called *ubasoku* (Skt., *upāsaka*) and *shami* (Skt., *śrāmaṇera*), had long been bringing to the folk simple Buddhist teachings and appealing rites and incantations, and *shinbutsu shūgō* ("Buddhist-Shinto amalgamation") had become fairly widespread. By the mid-tenth century, however, a new kind of practitioner, the so-called *nenbutsu hijiri* or *nenbutsu-saint*, began to appear among the folk. These holy men (Hori 1958, pp. 131–132) differed from earlier types of Buddhist practitioners in that they urged the folk to reject this world and seek salvation by rebirth



THE KUYA IMAGE OF ROKUHARAMITSU-JI TEMPLE (KYOTO)

into Amida's Pure Land through calling on his holy name. Their *nenbutsu*, no doubt, was incantational, involving ecstatic chanting and dancing, and their ministry shamanistic in that they probably sought to cure illness and drive out evil spirits as well as to make available a transcendent salvation. Nevertheless, these *hijiri* clearly represent the beginnings of a movement toward devotional Buddhism and religious world rejection among the folk.

One of the earliest and best known of the *nenbutsu hijiri* is Kūya (903–972). In 938 he appeared in the streets of the capital urging faith in Amida Buddha and his Pure Land and teaching a so-called dancing *nenbutsu*. Enshrined in the Rokuharamitsu-ji temple of Kyoto is a striking wooden image of Kūya which illustrates well his religious character and probably that of other *nenbutsu hijiri* also. He is depicted standing with shaven head thrown back, ecstatically uttering the *nenbutsu*. With the most remarkable surrealistic effect, six little wooden Buddhas, suggesting the six ideographs of *namu Amida Butsu*, are depicted proceeding from Kūya's mouth. From his neck, however, there hangs a drum-like gong, over his priest's robe is thrown a deer hide, and in his left hand he holds a staff tipped with a deer antler. Drums and animal symbols are of course some of the standard equipment the shaman uses in curing, protecting, and otherwise serving his clientele. This sculpture, traditionally ascribed to the thirteenth century artist Kōshō, cannot be considered as conclusive evidence of the shamanistic character of the *nenbutsu hijiri*, but it seems consistent with the Kūya legends and is suggestive of the nature and appeal of these popular *nenbutsu*-saints (cf. Hori 1971, pp. 195–196).

SYNTHESIS OF FORMAL AND POPULAR PURE LAND BUDDHISM IN HŌNEN

At the close of the Heian Period, like a mountain watershed between two great ages in Japanese religious history, stands Hōnen. Hōnen was able to complete the shift from a world affirming to a world rejecting religious view by synthesizing and

bringing to fruition two of the three Heian period developments we have been discussing: the clerical, doctrinal Pure Land tradition exemplified by Genshin, and the popular Pure Land movement led by *hijiri* such as Kūya.

First, we can see that though he was a highly respected cleric and scholar, Hōnen also reveals characteristics of the *nenbutsu hijiri*. This is especially so in his rejection of established, institutional Buddhism and his efforts to popularize Pure Land faith. Ironically, the monastic institution developed so many centuries earlier as a refuge from the world had become in Hōnen's time so worldly as to be inimical to an authentic Buddhist faith. Early in his career, Hōnen left the Tendai monastic center on Mt. Hiei to cultivate *nenbutsu* under the *hijiri* Eikū, and in the second half of his life he withdrew entirely from the Tendai sect and settled in a suburb of Kyoto where he ministered to the religious needs of laymen and taught a group of disciples who had also disaffiliated themselves from temple Buddhism. The simple message he taught was exclusive faith in Amida as the only way of salvation in the age of *mappō*, and the exclusive cultivation of invocational *nenbutsu* as the most effective, easiest, and most broadly available practice.

Hōnen can thus be seen as an evangelistic popularizer in the tradition of the *nenbutsu hijiri*. Yet we can also say that he helped purify the popular Pure Land movement of its world accepting, theurgic characteristics. Convinced of the utter futility of life in the world of suffering and transmigration, he unwaveringly directed his aspiration toward the Pure Land of Amida. In his mature teachings he rejected as unnecessary all practices and rituals other than *nenbutsu* and any merely utilitarian, this-worldly goals of *nenbutsu* cultivation.

Concerning Hōnen's role in relation to the doctrinal Pure Land tradition of the Heian period, Hōnen's major work, the *Senchaku hongan nenbutsu shū* [Treatise on the selection of the *nenbutsu* of the original vows], clearly succeeded the *Ōjōyōshū* as the new age's first summation of popular Pure Land principles

and practice. The influences on Hōnen's thought in the *Treatise* are various and complex, but here we can distinguish two major influences, the *Ōjōyōshū* itself and continental Pure Land thought, especially that of Shan-tao (613–681).

What was the importance of the *Ōjōyōshū* for Hōnen? It is usual to stress Hōnen's departures from Genshin, especially his rejection of the *Ōjōyōshū*'s contemplative *nenbutsu* and eclectic practices, and his reliance instead on continental thought. These departures were important, for they enabled Hōnen's teachings to appeal to the folk and thus to contribute to the popularization in Japan of an authentic Buddhism. However, without his thorough grounding in the *Ōjōyōshū*'s clear and comprehensive organization of Pure Land thought, it is doubtful that Hōnen could have so successfully comprehended and utilized continental Pure Land thought. While studying under Eikū, Hōnen underwent a thorough training in both the doctrines and practices of the *Ōjōyōshū*. Not only did he become convinced of the necessity to "detest and depart from" the defiled realms, but the basic doctrinal distinctions set out by the *Ōjōyōshū*, such as those between difficult self-reliance and easy other-power salvation, between contemplative and invocational *nenbutsu*, between assisted and non-assisted cultivation, etc., became for him the basic categories and principles around which his own thought took shape. This is revealed in the *Treatise* where his terminology occasionally departs from that of his continental sources and reverts to that of the *Ōjōyōshū*.

It was in the thought of the continental Pure Land thinkers, however, that Hōnen found the most precise formulation of his own faith. In China, a popular Pure Land Buddhism had already developed by the seventh century. Drawing on the most radical of its thinkers, Shan-tao, Hōnen developed a concise doctrinal system centering on the assurance of Pure Land salvation for even the most karmically burdened of sentient beings through the sole cultivation of easy invocational *nenbutsu*.

Thus in his role as cleric and scholar, Hōnen's contribution

was to articulate and legitimate popular Pure Land faith. Standing firmly in the great Buddhist intellectual tradition, Hōnen gathered up popular Pure Land faith, formulated its principles and methods into precise and cogent doctrines, ascribed to it a scriptural authority and a line of continental patriarchs, and directed it uncompromisingly to the transcendental goal of an authentically Buddhist salvation.

What had been an inchoate, underground counter-current now assumes a role in the mainstream of Japanese religious history. Here for the first time a major movement of Japanese Buddhism becomes both truly authentic and broadly inclusive. The general character of religious life in Japan thus manifests, for this particular period, a crucial shift from world affirmation in the archaic pattern to the world rejection characteristic of what Bellah calls religious systems of the historic type.

GLOSSARY

Amida Buddha 阿弥陀仏	<i>Ōjōyōshū</i> 往生要集
Eikū 叡空	<i>Senchaku hongan nenbutsu shū</i>
Genshin 源信	選擇本願念仏集
<i>hijiri</i> 聖	<i>shami</i> 沙彌
Hōnen 法然	Shan-tao (Jps., Zendō) 善導
Kōshō 康勝	<i>shinbutsu shūgō</i> 神仏習合
Kūya 空也	<i>ubasoku</i> 優婆塞
<i>nenbutsu</i> 念仏	

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