



**Martin Repp**, *Hönens religiöses Denken. Eine Untersuchung zu Strukturen religiöser Erneuerung* [Hönen's Religious Thought. An Investigation into Structures of Religious Renewal]

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WITH THE PUBLICATION of this monumental volume the German academic world now disposes of two first-class studies on Hönen, a Japanese religious figure rather neglected up to now in Western scholarship—something the English-speaking world may rightly be envious of.

The other great work on Hönen, published nine years ago, is Christoph Kleine's *Hönens Buddhismus des Reinen Landes: Reform, Reformation, oder Haresie?* The happy thing about this is that, while the earlier work does not make the later one superfluous, the later one does not supersede the earlier one. They rather complement one another nicely. While Kleine centers his study on Hönen's life and treats Hönen's doctrine only in a subdivision in the history of Hönen's "conversion," Repp focuses completely on Hönen's thinking (its contents and method). Kleine does not study in detail the history of the Pure Land movement up to Hönen, but Repp fully examines the Jōdo movement in China and Japan. Kleine does not investigate Hönen's different works (and the possible evolution in them), but Repp does that, in

function of his main work, the *Senchakushū*. Kleine compares Hōnen to the other Kamakura reformers and discusses their so-called common traits, Repp prefers to see Hōnen against the social background of his time (the transition from the Heian to the Kamakura era). Kleine briefly treats Hōnen's disciples and the various sects born from them, but Repp stops his study with Hōnen himself.

As to the picture that Repp paints of the history of Pure Land thinking up to Hōnen, it may first be remarked that Repp does not really extend his investigation into India, but only inquires about the three sutras which Hōnen himself singled out as the "Pure Land Sutra Triad" (*Jōdo sanbukyō*): their origin, contents, and problems involved. But, even so, Repp's study provides the first systematic exposition of the history of the Pure Land movement, especially in China, in any Western language. Indeed, studies on single figures existed: on Tanluan (Jp. Donran) by Roger Corless, on Daochuo (Jp. Dōshaku) by David Chappell, on Shandao (Jp. Zēndō) by Julien Pas (in addition to the studies of the *Ojōden* [chronicles of people who obtained Birth] by Whalen Lai). But the book which seemed to promise the general overview of that history, namely, the collection of articles edited by James Foard under the title, *The Pure Land Tradition: History and Development*, did not in fact live up to the promise contained in its title

The overview that Repp de facto delivers shows the following interconnected characteristics:

1. Repp does not limit himself to analyzing the figures that are generally considered by Japanese Pure Land Buddhists as their "patriarchs," the bearers of their lineage.
2. He consciously revises the usual picture of that history, by carefully "debunking" the ideas of later Japanese Pure Land thought that have been anachronistically attributed to the Chinese masters.
3. In this history, Repp pays special attention to the relationship between recitative (invoking) nenbutsu and meditative nenbutsu (*nenbutsu samādhi*). And the conclusion is loud and clear: nowhere in the tradition up to Hōnen does recitative nenbutsu appear as an independent (let alone, exclusive) practice. It always appears together with and in function of *nenbutsu samādhi*.

Turning our attention, next, to what is evidently the central part of Repp's book, the presentation of Hōnen's doctrine, we may first remark that the author effects that presentation in a dual way. First through an analysis of Hōnen's creative interpretation of Genshin's *Ojōyōshū*, the ripe fruit of Pure Land thinking within the Tendai tradition. This enables him to summarize what he had already been indicating all along in his overview of the Pure Land thinking in China: the originality and revolutionary character of Hōnen's thinking, which leads him beyond the sphere of Tendai thought. In his analysis, Repp finds eight points of difference, which, unfortunately, space does not permit me to go into here. I cannot omit, however, to pick up Repp's second point; while Genshin always stays in the sphere of Tendai metaphysics, according to which the Pure Land cannot be seen as an objective realm, but must finally be seen as a product of the mind, "Hōnen's concentration on the concrete reality, the religious

existence, on the urgent quest for a rapid and certain liberation from the cycle of life-death apparently left him no room for metaphysical speculation” (309). Or, as he will formulate later in the book, “[As in Luther one finds] in Hōnen a stepping down from a metaphysical system to a practically and existentially directed doctrine” (538). This may account for the fact that, at a first reading, the *Senchakushū* strikes some as rather “simple-minded” or overly dualistic.

In a second move, Repp investigates Hōnen’s doctrine by an unbelievably thorough analysis of what is generally considered to be Hōnen’s main systematic work, the *Senchakushū*. This analysis, in its dual structure, appears to me as a *summum* of German *Gediegenheit* and, by the way, requires a great deal of courage to read through to the very end.

In a first part (313–72) Repp presents the contents of each of the sixteen chapters, with ample and very helpful annotations, wherein the differences between Hōnen and Shandao (his “only master”) are carefully indicated. In a second part (373–489), entitled “Commentary to the *Senchakushū*,” the author goes over each chapter once again, after indicating what this commentary should accomplish:

1. A summary of the chapter that should remind the reader of the thought process involved;
2. An analysis that should bring to light the thread of the argumentation and the peculiarity of Hōnen’s way of thinking;
3. A comparison with texts from Hōnen’s earlier works, revealing the context and possible evolution in his thinking;
4. Show the effect Hōnen’s teaching had, especially from the reactions of his main critics, Jōkei and Myōe.

Following this agenda faithfully, Repp comes to the following characterization of Hōnen’s way of thinking: “Hōnen always again builds up a polarity of two elements, then elaborates their oppositional and irreconcilable character, and finally decides for one and against the other” (page 596, note 56). And again: “The basis for his dialectical-exclusivist way of argumentation is to be found in the idea of choice (selection), which demands the either/or” (412).

Repp indicates that this “confrontational” way of thinking stands in sharp contrast to the way of thinking of the Pure Land tradition before Hōnen and, more generally, with the Asiatic predilection for harmony, but finds it in harmony with the new warrior ethos of the Kamakura era, which expects decision by power struggle. The culling of texts from Hōnen’s earlier works is certainly to be admired, but does not, insofar as I can see, reveal a clear-cut evolution in Hōnen’s thinking. As to the reaction of the Buddhist establishment, Repp remarks that it is not surprising that Hōnen’s rejection as “simply obsolete” of the Buddhist tradition, incorporated in that establishment, “provoked an extremely vehement reaction” (page 458, note 184). There may be reason to say so, but I for one can still not escape the feeling, which I have had all along that, after all, that reaction was relatively mild and short-lived. What if such a thing had happened in medieval Christendom!

Repp finally summarizes Hōnen's thought as follows: "Hōnen's spiritual evolution took place in three steps; the quest for certain liberation from suffering, the answer in the certain Birth through the exclusive nenbutsu, and finally the basis for this in the concept of the selection in Amida's Primal Vow." (490) He then stresses that the motive, the driving force behind Hōnen's radical reinterpretation of the Pure Land tradition, behind his "absolutization" of the recitative nenbutsu practice was the demand for *certainly* of liberation. "For Hōnen, the question of the certainty of Birth constituted the point of departure and the center of his religious thinking." (page 104, note 244); "What really matters for Hōnen in his interpretation is the question which practice and which attitude are the necessary [sufficient] conditions for a wholly certain Birth" (302). And a second motive is his demand for religious equality in the chances for liberation, with rejection of the traditional hierarchical systems. A very convincing analysis, indeed.

I find it truly regrettable that space does not permit me to comment on Repp's comparison of Hōnen and Luther as religious renovators, or on the many valuable insights strewn throughout the pages of the book. To name here only one: the remark, made in connection with the strong link found in Japan between the nenbutsu and the ceremonies for the dead, that Pure Land religiosity changed, at least partly, Japan's this-worldly religiosity, by bringing a dualism between this world and the "after-world."

If there is anything I regret in Repp's book, it is that, owing to Repp's strict adherence to Hōnen's doctrine, the *person* of Hōnen Shōnin does not really come to life, with his personal despair before the traditional requirements of Buddhism, and (supposedly) his struggles to believe the radical conclusions he came to in the face of the Buddhist tradition he was educated in. But this does not in the least change my sincere admiration for the major achievement this book represents.

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