INTRODUCTION:
SHIN BUDDHISM AND JAPANESE SOCIETY

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Until recently most of the relatively few studies on Jōdo Shinshū 真宗 (True Pure Land denomination), or Shin Buddhism, published in the English language have reflected a sectarian approach, namely, the interest of Shin Buddhist believers in their own tradition and their concern about promoting their religion within a wider audience of readers, or have attempted to develop forms of interreligious dialogue with Christianity and philosophical discourses. While these approaches are respectable in their respective fields, it is noticeable that there has been a relative disinterest in this topic by modern religious studies. One of the reasons for this, as has been suggested by Galen Amstutz and others, is probably the fact that Shin Buddhism substantially lacks many of those 'exotic' features, such as focus on meditation and mystical experiences, that have attracted the interest of generations of orientalists.¹

Despite the marginalization to which Shin Buddhism has been subjected in ‘western’ (but not in Japanese) religious studies, this religious tradition has had a significant presence in Japanese history and culture at least from the fifteenth century onward. It was in this period that the proselytizing work of Rennyo 鶴巋 (1415–1499) successfully attracted most of the communities of nenbutsu practitioners which had developed from the earlier preaching of the ‘founder’ Shinran 観世 (1173–1262), and masses of new converts as well, to form one of the most powerful religious communities in Japan. In the following century it was the Ishiyama Honganji, the headquarters of Shin Buddhism (the Ikkōshū) near Osaka Bay, which offered perhaps the

¹ Among the few monographs on Shin Buddhism written in European languages from the viewpoint of religious studies it is worth mentioning here James Dobbins’ research on the formative period of Shin Buddhism (Dobbins 1989) and Eshinni (Dobbins 2004); Minor and Ann Rogers’ volume on Rennyo (Rogers and Rogers 1991); Galen Amstutz’ work on the impact of orientalism in Pure Land studies and other aspects of Shin Buddhism (Amstutz 1997); Simone Heidegger’s study on gender issues in contemporary Shin Buddhism (Heidegger 2006); Ugo Dessi’s analysis of Shin Buddhist social ethics (Dessi 2007); and Elisabetta Porcu’s work on aspects of Pure Land and Shin Buddhism in modern Japanese culture (Porcu 2008).
fiercest resistance to Oda Nobunaga’s (1534–1582) attempt to unify the nation. Later in the Meiji period the Shin Buddhist institutions were among the financiers of the new government and strongly supported the colonization of Hokkaidō and Japanese militarism at home and in the colonies until the end of World War II.

Today, Shin Buddhism is probably the largest denomination of Japanese Buddhism. Its two main branches based in Kyōto—the Jōdo Shinshū Honganji-ha 真宗本願寺派, and the Shinshū Ōtani-ha 真宗大谷派—possess about one-quarter of all Buddhist temples around the country, and it is likely that more than 10 million Japanese are affiliated, however weak their average religious consciousness might be, to one of these institutions. Japanese-language publications on Shin Buddhism abound, and the Tani-shō 慈異抄 (A Record in Lament of Divergences), one of the key texts in this tradition, is one of the most popular religious books in Japan. Shin Buddhist influence on various aspects of Japanese culture is still enduring, and from the 1960s attempts have been made by the religious institutions and groups of practitioners to find new ways to cope with the missteps of the past and the problems of a highly industrialized, rapidly changing society. The Honganji-ha and the Ōtani-ha, although weakened in many ways by secularization, continue to be a stable and significant presence in Japanese society, as is emblematically shown by the very symmetrical position of their imposing head temples (the Nishi and the Higashi Honganji, respectively) in the center of Kyōto, and by the pharaonic projects for their renovation on the occasion of the 750th memorial for Shinran in 2011–2012.

The present volume addresses the need for more academic research on Shin Buddhism, and is specifically directed at describing and analyzing distinctive social aspects of this religious tradition in historical and contemporary perspective. The contributions collected here cover a wide range of issues, including the intersection between Shin Buddhism and fields as diverse as politics, education, social movements, economy, culture and the media, social ethics, discrimination, gender, secularization, and globalization. The focus is mostly on the modern period, which has been so far especially under-examined. However, the book opens with two contributions by Martin Repp on the socio-economic impact of Hōnen’s 法然 (1133–1212) teaching, and by Galen Amstutz on Shin Buddhism and the burakumin 部落民 in the Edo period.
Given the emphasis customarily placed on Shinran in Shin Buddhism, it may seem unconventional to start this volume with a chapter on Hōnen and his movement for the exclusive practice of the nenbutsu (senju nenbutsu 専修念仏). Indeed, Hōnen was Shinran’s revered master and is acknowledged in Shin Buddhism as one of the patriarchs praised daily by multitudes of practitioners when they chant the Shōshinge 正信偈 (Verses on True Faith). However, there is at least another good reason to place emphasis on Hōnen here. That is, Hōnen’s work provides the background for a deeper understanding of the interconnection between religious consciousness and social behavior in the Shin Buddhist context and of the concept of dōbō 同朋 (fellow companions) later developed by Shinran, which is crucial for the analysis of modern Shin Buddhism.

In his essay in this volume, Martin Repp examines the social and economic impact that Hōnen’s teaching had on contemporary monastic institutions. Repp takes his cue from the criticism that Nichiren and the Kōfukuji directed at Hōnen for causing monasteries to be deserted and many followers of traditional Buddhist denominations to join the senju nenbutsu movement, and for a lack of economic support, such as donations for building temples and fashioning statues of Buddha. The background of such criticism is that in traditional Buddhism various forms of donations play a crucial role since they contribute to the ultimate liberation from suffering, and form the economic basis of monastic institutions. When Hōnen introduced his teachings and practice of the sole nenbutsu as the only condition for attaining religious liberation, other practices such as donations ceased to be a necessary precondition for attaining ultimate liberation. On the other hand, Repp argues, the prominence of individual faith and the nenbutsu in the salvational process, as well as Hōnen’s notion of ‘birth into the Pure Land in equality,’ had the effect of leveling the qualitative difference between religious specialists and lay practitioners. All this, Repp concludes, provided the background for further developments by Shinran, such as the introduction of the religio-social terms of dōbō and hisō hizoku 非僧非俗 (neither monk nor layperson), which deeply influenced the subsequent social formation of Shin Buddhism.

Following the 1205 petition of the scholar-monks of the Kōfukuji against the senju nenbutsu movement and its banishment, Shinran was among the disciples of Hōnen to be exiled together with his master in 1207. Shinran did not claim to have founded a separate school. For
him. Hōnen was the founder and the revered master who “emanated a radiance which he always revealed to his followers, without discriminating between the wise and ignorant, or between those of high station and low.” Shinran also considered the nenbutsu to be the sole practice leading to the Pure Land, but he strongly emphasized Amida’s work to awaken all beings without discrimination through tariki (other-power). The concept of mappō (Last Dharma-age) deeply influenced Shinran’s own understanding of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The decline of the Buddhist teachings having reached its lowest point, birth in the Pure Land was achievable only by abandoning one’s own self-power. This entrusting faith in Amida’s Primal (18th) Vow was called by Shinran shinjin, the meaning of which for the construction of a community of equals clearly emerges from this passage of the Tanni-shō:

...however precious a treasure one may offer before the Buddha or give to a teacher, it is meaningless if one lacks shinjin. And even though one may not make a donation of even a single sheet of paper or half a penny to the sangha, if one yields one’s heart to Other Power and one’s shinjin is deep, one is in accord with the essential intent of the Vow (CWS I: 677).

For Shinran the idea of religious equality naturally flows from the fact that all believers “say the nenbutsu having received the working of Amida.” This is why he thought it would have been unreasonable to call them ‘disciples,’ and acknowledged instead those followers who formed the first congregations as fellow companions (dōbō), or fellow practitioners (dogyō 同行). On the same basis, he could identify himself with the discriminated in society, the ‘hunters and peddlers’ mentioned in the Yuishin-shō men’i 唯信鈔文意 (Notes on ‘Essentials of Faith Alone’). Indeed, Shinran’s emphasis on the community of fellow companions and practitioners and the warmth of their relationships continues to provide the standard, together with his guarded attitude toward the worship of kami, for the current self-representation of the Shin Buddhist institutions.

As is quite common in religious history, the institutionalization of Shin Buddhism also implied a process of selection and adaptation of the original teachings. In time, a religious lineage was established, Shinran

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2 See the Kōsō wasan, in CWS I: 389.
3 See the Tanni-shō, in CWS I: 664.
was raised to the status of founding father and his mausoleum became the central temple, the Honganji 本願寺 (Temple of the Primal Vow). At the time of Rennyo, the accommodation of Shinran’s teaching to folk religious practices and Confucian morality was consolidating. Shinran’s prescription to his followers that in case of persecution they should move to another place without relying on powerful supporters was superseded by Rennyo’s principle of the defense of the Dharma (gohō 護法), namely, the use of military means to protect Shin Buddhism. At the same time, Rennyo’s formulation of the ōbō-buppō 王法・仏法 (Imperial and Buddhist Law) dichotomy ambiguously oscillated between the acknowledgment of the complete autonomy of the religious sphere and the conception that the laws of the state were fundamental. This paved the way for later formulations, such the shinzoku-nitai 真俗二諦 (Two Truths) theory, which implied the prescription for all practitioners to conform to existing social norms and other doctrines elaborated to justify Japanese militarism from the Meiji period onward.

On the other hand, the egalitarian aspect of Shin Buddhism as a path of liberation open to all was preserved by Rennyo. For him, to receive other-power faith “there is no need at all for wisdom or learning, for wealth and status or for poverty and cistress; it does not matter if one is good or evil, male or female,” and “we are one another’s companions and fellow practicers” (Rogers and Rogers 1991: 181, 143).

However, it is not necessarily the case that in Shin Buddhist history religious equality is synonymous with social equality, as may be seen in the attitude of the Shin Buddhist institutions toward the burakumin cultural minority in the Edo period (1600–1868). This is the topic of the second essay in this volume by Galen Amstutz, who investigates the intricate relationship between Shin Buddhism and the burakumin in premodern Japan, when a large majority of the latter came to be affiliated with Shin Buddhist temples. Amstutz illustrates how the burakumin remained in the Edo period a discriminated-against minority that was treated ambivalently and did not have equal privileges and prestige with other members of the religion. On the other hand, he argues that while this history of past ‘discrimination’ within the religious community may also reveal the limited applicability of Shin Buddhist ideals to social reality, it should be more accurately understood as one particular manifestation of the socio-cultural climate of the Edo period and its mitbunsei 身分制 (status system). Despite these historical constraints, Amstutz suggests, Shin Buddhism as a social phenomenon was able to operate in another dimension of experience,
occupying a ‘halfway position’ between the interiority of religious life and the realities of the ‘sociopolitical environment of subordination’ of the time.

Despite the split between the Nishi and Higashi Honganji head temples, which was shrewdly facilitated by Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542–1616) and formally completed in 1619, Shin Buddhism soon emerged as the largest and richest Buddhist denomination under the mandatory temple registration system (terauke seido), successfully preserving a considerable degree of organizational and economic autonomy. Also for this reason, the two Honganji avoided major damage from the anti-Buddhist persecution (haibutsu kishaku) of the early Meiji period (1868–1912). They were, however, compelled to face the dramatic changes in Japanese society that followed the treaties imposed by the western powers in the last years of the Tokugawa regime and were exacerbated by the Meiji Restoration and the rapid process of modernization. Shin Buddhism became progressively entangled with nationalism, the values and the ideology of the 1890 Imperial Rescript on Education were incorporated, and loyalty to the nation and pragmatism led to active cooperation with the Japanese war effort, starting with the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895). Among the many responses to modernization emerging from within Shin Buddhism in those years, one finds the activities of the Ōtani-ha thinker and reformer Kiyozawa Manshi 清沢満之 (1863–1903). In his search for a deeper ‘spiritual awareness’ through other-power, Kiyozawa elaborated a new meaning of the shinzoku nitai structure, and the place of social behavior in the life of the practitioners. For Kiyozawa, the worldly truth does not exist “in order to compel people to uphold standards of human behavior or by extension to benefit society and the nation,” but rather to accept the paradoxical realization that one cannot in fact perform these moral tasks and to abandon altogether self-effort, thus entrusting oneself to other-power (Kiyozawa 1989: 107–108). It may also be seen, however, that Kiyozawa’s strict distinction of the ethical (the worldly truth) from the religious (the ultimate truth) led him to incorporate uncritically elements of the dominant morality and official ideology of his time and to manifest a passive attitude toward social inequality. Kiyozawa’s subjective standpoint on faith, which implied the demythologization of the concept of the Pure Land, provided the basis for the highly influential current of modern shinshūgaku 真宗学 (doctrinal Shin Buddhist studies), which was further elaborated by other
prominent scholars at Ōtani University in Kyōto, such as Soga Ryōjin 曽我量深 (1875–1971) and Kaneko Daiei 金子大栄 (1881–1976).

In her contribution on the function of Shin Buddhist education in the modern period, Melissa Curley examines the work of Kiyozawa and Kaneko. Curley’s main argument is that the ideas of these thinkers provided an alternative to the understanding of education as the inculcation of loyalty to the emperor and the state, which was promoted by the Meiji government especially through the Imperial Rescript on Education. In her examination of this controversial topic, Curley focuses on Kiyozawa’s self-awareness as a reformer, and the ways in which his project may be interpreted both as following the current of the times (modernization of the Ōtani-ha), and as running against the current of the times (positioning of the Ōtani-ha at some distance from the state). She then contrasts the educational plan of the Meiji government with Kiyozawa’s approach to the education of priests aimed at realizing the subject’s independence and autonomy on the basis of faith in the other-power of Amida. Curley also discusses Kaneko’s 1922 lectures on Shin Buddhist studies and argues that his program for sectarian studies reflects a liberal legacy as transmitted by Kiyozawa.

One of the distinctive responses of Japanese Buddhism to modernization was represented by social engagement. Especially following the persecutions of the early years of the Meiji period, the major traditions of Japanese Buddhism, including Shin Buddhism, felt the need to present themselves as forces useful to society. The Shin Buddhist institutions took the lead in educating, but social work in general was strongly promoted, although these activities remained largely uncritical of Japanese imperialism until the end of World War II. Within this context, one can find the efforts of Takeuchi Ryō’on 武內了溫 (1891–1968) within the Ōtani-ha to address the issue of discrimination toward the burakumin. This topic is examined by Jessica Main’s contribution to this volume, which specifically focuses on Takeuchi and the activities of his faction. Main illustrates how Takeuchi rooted his ethical thought and concrete social action on distinctive Shin Buddhist ideas without, on the other hand, overlooking the social dimension of discrimination. She further analyzes the relationship and interaction of Takeuchi’s faction, whose legacy is still present in the Ōtani-ha, with contemporary Marxist-liberationist approaches to buraku discrimination.
The process of forced democratization that followed Japan’s defeat in 1945 deeply influenced also the development of social movements within Shin Buddhism. The spreading in postwar Japanese society of modern values such as those enshrined in the 1947 Japanese Constitution provided a stimulus for new articulations of the ideal of dōbō within the two major branches, and in 1950 the Honganji-ha formed the Dobō Undō 同朋運動 (Fellow Companions' Movement) that merged in 1978 with the Monshintokai Undō 門信徒会運動 (Lay Followers’ Association Movement) to form the Kikan Undō 基幹運動 (Central Movement), presently committed to activities dealing with buraku discrimination. In a similar vein, in 1962 the Ōtani-ha started the campaign called Dobokai Undō 同朋会運動 (Fellow Companions' Association Movement), and in 1977 the Dōwa Suishin Honbu 同和推進本部 (now renamed Kairō Undō Suishin Honbu 解放運動推進本部, Head Office for the Promotion of the Liberation Movement) was founded as a further attempt to cope with the burakumin issue. It is within the context of the dōbō movement in both the Honganji-ha and the Ōtani-ha that a process of rethinking of past war responsibilities by the Shin Buddhist community was started, leading to the issuance of anti-war declarations by both major branches starting from the 1980s. And again, these reform movements also provided the framework for the development of a gender equality movement within Shin Buddhism, which is analyzed by Simone Heidegger in her essay.

Mainly focusing on the processes of reform in gender issues that have taken place since the 1980s, Heidegger deals with the forms of gender discrimination that have been the focus of the debate and with some of the arguments used by the reform-oriented and the conservative sides. In the Ōtani-ha, a ruling that explicitly excluded women from becoming temple chief priests (jūshoku 住職) caused protests and petitions by a group of temple chief priests’ wives. Discriminatory remarks by representatives of the Ōtani-ha administration in reaction to these petitions were an impetus for the formation of an association against gender discrimination in the Ōtani-ha in 1986. As for the Honganji-ha, Heidegger notes that although the religious institutions had formally accepted female temple chief priests since 1946, their percentage was traditionally extremely low, and their role in practice was to fill the gap when there was no suitable male. At the same time, the role of the ‘temple keeper’ or ‘temple guardian’ (bōmori 坊守) was defined as the temple chief priest’s wife, suggesting hierarchical gender roles. Heidegger shows how this situation, together with other related
problems, has led to gender discrimination issues in this branch since the 1990s. Here, too, women priests, daughters, or daughters-in-law were leading activists, as well as parts of the Honganji-ha Kikan Undō.

Another relevant aspect of contemporary Shin Buddhism is examined by Elisabetta Porcu in her article, which focuses on the use made by the institutions of modern media and their communication strategies. As Porcu illustrates, recent Shin Buddhist productions in the field of the so-called popular culture (including manga and anime) and the Internet show a considerable institutional concern in ‘up-to-date-ness’ and proselytization. She notes that Shin Buddhism tends to be presented here as a lively tradition not limited to funerary rites, able to reach young people (thus enlarging its ‘traditional’ audience), and functioning as the solution of contemporary social problems (a well-experimented pattern of Japanese Buddhism in times of crisis). Moreover, while the potential of such popular formats to minimize the distance between the tradition and the individuals is exploited, this modern image of Shin Buddhism is also used to enhance the institutions’ prestige and religious authority. This process, Porcu notes, also involves an ‘updated’ mix-up of religion, media and commercialization, and a certain emphasis on forms of religious entertainment in the attempt to satisfy the demands of a consumerist society.

The relationship of Shin Buddhism with a secularized society is further analyzed by Ugo Dessi in the last contribution to this volume. Starting from the working assumption that within secularization and globalization religion is challenged by the predominance of other societal subsystems and the relativization of religious values, he focuses on Shin Buddhist responses to these dynamics, mainly in the areas of politics and pluralism. As far as the organizational level is concerned, Dessi illustrates, there are signs that Shin Buddhism is leaning to a positive attitude toward globalization, as in the case of the Yasukuni Shrine issue and the revision to the Fundamental Law of Education, the emphasis on equality and peace, and the capacity to look at the tradition in a critical way. On the other hand, in the case of the critique of ‘humanism,’ globalization tends to be seen as a danger to be opposed through the reassertion of traditional values. As for the individual level, Dessi presents the results of his recent survey on Shin Buddhist followers. With regard to the differentiation of politics and religion, the strong emphasis found at the organizational level is not confirmed by the attitudes of lay followers. Similarly, only a minority
of the latter oppose the adoption of religious elements in public education. In terms of the relativization of religious values, there are significant variations concerning pluralism. Religious liberation outside Shin Buddhism is not acknowledged by a considerable number of temple chief priests, while such a strict sectarian attitude is adopted by only a small number of lay followers. Dessi shows that this tendency is even more evident in the issue of the critique of ‘humanism,’ where it emerges that more than half of the temple chief priests might see Buddhism as the only source of salvation for humanity, while only a small minority of lay followers shares the same view.

As this cursory discussion suggests, there are various elements indicating the strong historical presence of Shin Buddhism in Japanese society, and its diversified reactivity to the challenges of modernity, secularization, and globalization. In this connection, the essays included in this volume represent a collective attempt to address the significance of the social dimension of Shin Buddhism from various angles through the lenses of religious studies, understood as the publicly testable explanation of religious phenomena as empirical and historical data. At present, many other distinctive aspects of the social history of Shin Buddhism still await extensive research. In the meanwhile, the editor and the authors wish that their secular approach might make a positive contribution to redressing this imbalance in the study of Japanese religions.

REFERENCES


