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The Pure Land as a Principle of Social Criticism

Introduction

One of the most distinctive features of Shin Buddhism (Jōdo Shinshū 浄土真宗) is the view according to which religious liberation cannot be achieved without a complete renunciation of “self-power” (*jiriki* 自力) and “calculations” (*bakarai* はからい). This approach derives from the thought of Shinran 親鸞 (1173-1262), who is considered the founder of Shin Buddhism, and has traditionally discouraged the use of normative language to connect the dimension of “other-power” (*tariki* 他力) to the concrete social practice of the believers.¹ Given such a doctrinal background, the simultaneous presence in contemporary Shin Buddhism of this diffidence towards normative approaches and of a lively debate on ethics is all the more striking to the external observer. Among such discussions noteworthy are those exploring, especially theoretically, the relation between Shin Buddhism and social criticism. This strand of the debate is indeed one of the most developed within the context of contemporary Shin Buddhist ethics. It is also linked to various doctrinal sources, has a tested reciprocal relationship with social activism, and is related to the equalitarian dimension of the teachings.

From these discussions various innovative views emerge, suggesting an approach to social ethics which goes beyond the traditional Shin Buddhist characterization of morality as a response in gratitude to Amida. In this connection, a typical way of articulating the discourse on social criticism is the recourse to the Pure Land as a critical standpoint on society. The expression “Pure Land as a principle of criticism” (*hiban genri to shite no jōdo* 批判原理としての浄土) was first introduced by Hishiki Masaharu 菱木政晴, and this interpretative approach is currently shared by various Shin Buddhist writers. Within this framework the qualities of the Pure Land, together with a few other selected doctrinal points, provide the standard to measure the inconsistencies of this world. This standard is one of the major premises for the realization of a society free of discrimination, oppression, and violence.

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1. See Dessi 2007: 22-77. Cf. CWS I: 413-421, 429, 525, 547-553, 663-668, 679; and SSZ II: 523-527, 531, 659, 682-691, 775-779, 792.

Modern Discourses on the Pure Land and their Legacy

The idea that the Pure Land is not to be considered merely as an afterdeath abode has been incorporated within Shin Buddhism at least since the Meiji period. The influence of this approach can be seen in Shin Buddhist official doctrinal expositions and in mainstream scholarship, even though the matter is not without ambiguities and is subjected to continuous negotiations especially at the local level.²

Within one of the two major branches of the Shin Buddhist denomination, the Ōtani-ha 大谷派, the demythologization of the concept of the Pure Land is strictly related to the legacy of Kiyozawa Manshi 清沢満之 (1863-1903). Kiyozawa's approach, which exerted a strong impact on modern doctrinal studies, meant a rediscovery of the conception that the "absolute" is not something transcendent located beyond this world. His personal experiential standpoint on faith finds typical expression in the famous statement, "It is not because of their existence that we believe in gods and buddhas, but rather, they exist because we believe in them."³ These ideas were further elaborated by influential scholars such as Soga Ryōjin 曾我量深 (1875-1971) and Kaneko Daiei 金子大栄 (1881-1976).

In distinction to this approach, within the other major branch of Shin Buddhism, the Honganji-ha 本願寺派, various writers emphasize the non-dualistic dimension of the Mahāyāna teachings. Significant here is the influence of philosophers such as Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎 (1870-1945) and Nishitani Keiji 西谷啓治 (1900-1990), and, more recently, of the scholarship of the Shin Buddhist thinker Ueda Yoshifumi 上田義文 (1904-1993). Diverse though their emphases may be, all these thinkers share the same view that the meaning of religious liberation lies in transcending *saisāra* in the "here and now," which presupposes the identity between the ultimate truth and the world of impermanence.⁴

The central concern of these formulations was not the clarification of ethical issues, but the affirmation of the spiritual dimension of the Shin Buddhist teachings and their soteriological value. It is interesting to notice, however, the implications that they also carry for the definition of the believers' social practice. In fact, the idea that the Pure Land is immanent in the present world in principle makes one responsible for adjusting one's religious commitment to instances

2. Cf., for example, Kuchiba and Funahashi (2000), Jōdo Shinshū Honganji-ha (2004: 86-93), and Kigoshi (1999).

3. "*Watasbi tomo wa shinbutsu ga sonzai suru ga yue ni shinbutsu o shinzuru no dewanai. Watasbi tomo wa shinbutsu o shinzuru ga yue ni, watasbi tomo ni taishite shinbutsu ga sonzai suru no de aru*" 私共は神仏が存在するが故に神仏を信ずるのではない。私共は神仏を信ずるが故に、私共に対して神仏が存在するのである。(Ōtani Daigaku 2003: 284)

4. Another far less influential approach to the demythologization of the concept of Pure Land within the Honganji-ha is found in the writings of Nonomura Naotarō 野々村直太郎, who published his *Jōdokyō hiban* 浄土教批判 (Critique of Pure Land Buddhism) in 1923.

emerging from social life. Also for this reason, such assumptions continue to provide the basis for many contemporary discussions on Shin Buddhist ethics.⁵

At least from the 1950s, with the starting of the *Dōbō* Movement first in the Honganji-ha and then in the Ōtani-ha, these basic assumptions on the status of the Pure Land have often merged in doctrinal formulations of Shin Buddhist ethics with the theme of the equality of all “fellow practitioners” (*dōbō* 同朋). Within this framework the mainstream approach considers morality as flowing spontaneously from the working of Amida’s Vow, or other-power, often as a sign of the attainment of *shinjin*.⁶ This view prevents any conflict with the formal doctrinal requirement to abandon self-effort altogether. Thus moral obligation characteristically assumes the form of a response in gratitude to Amida’s benevolence, in accordance to the traditional concept of “return of benefits” (*bō-on* 報恩). As it may be easily observed, this approach is deeply indebted to both Buddhism and Confucianism, and in the past it has allowed itself to be exploited by the ideologies current in various historical periods.⁷ As such, therefore, it does not necessarily establish a direct and exclusive link with the ethical dimension of Mahāyāna teachings. The same may be said of the activist striving for an acceptable ethical standard in Kiyozawa Manshi, for example, who understood worldly effort mainly as a path for entering the dimension of *shinjin*. On the other hand, also the adoption of a non-dualistic point of view does not seem to guarantee in itself that living in the “here and now” (of *shinjin*) will make concrete the ideal of Mahāyāna compassion. This is clear, for example, in formulations such as those made by Nishida (1987: 122-123) during World War II claiming that “the nation is the fountainhead of morality” and “the mirror image of the Pure Land in this world.”

Shin Buddhism and Social Criticism

On the background of the aforementioned modern interpretations and the equalitarian implications of the teachings, one can also see other formulations which emphasize the critical dimension of Shin Buddhism. As a whole, these formulations may be seen as an attempt to construct the discourse on social ethics

5. See, for example, Terakawa (1994), Hirose (1978), Yasutomi (2003), Kigoshi (2002), Ueda (1984a; 1984b), Futaba (1985), Shigaraki (2001), Hirota (2000), Ōmine (1993), and Tokunaga (1989). For a general overview on contemporary Shin Buddhist ethics, see Dessì 2007.

6. *Shinjin* 信心 (sometimes translated as “entrusting faith” or “entrusting heart”) is the central religious experience of Shin Buddhism, through which the practitioner, though still an ‘ordinary being’ (*bonbu* 凡夫) attached to blind passions, is ‘grasped’ by Amida Buddha and assured of final liberation.

7. Cf. Davis (1992: 157, 300). Winston Davis distinguishes in traditional Japanese Buddhism four types of duties based on the “Four Benefits” (*shi-on* 四恩), which are received respectively “from 1. parents, 2. the sovereign, 3. the Three Treasures (Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha), and 4. all other sentient beings.” See also Bellah (1957: 70-71).

within the limits posed by the teaching of other-power. However diverse the approaches to this subject might be, within this context it is possible to identify some recurring topics. Quite common, for example, are references to Shinran's rejection of *kami* worship found in the *Kyōgyōshinshō* 教行信証 (Teaching, Practice, *Shinjin*, and Realization). Here also appears Shinran's own description of the events relating to the suppression of the exclusive practice of the *nenbutsu*. This is typically taken to indicate that the ideas of Hōnen 法然 (1133-1212) and his disciple Shinran were perceived by the authorities as a threat to the nexus of religion and power of those times. Further evidence for this is also found in other passages, among which Shinran's reference in his *Letters* to the necessity for the practitioners to "reject the world" (*yo o itou* 世をいとう), that is, the evil in society.⁸

Another relevant perspective commonly found in the abovementioned contemporary discourse is the consideration that the internalization of the experience of *shinjin* tends to facilitate the emergence of authoritarian views. For many authors this is evident in the Two Truths (*shinzoku nitai* 真俗二諦) theory, which is blamed for having compromised the ethical potential of *shinjin* with the values that the secular authorities have proposed as a model for social relations.⁹ In this connection, other voices have instead valued approaches like that of Kiyozawa Manshi, which are thought to achieve a weakening of the claims of secular morality due to the heightening of spiritual awareness.¹⁰

Still another form of Shin Buddhist social criticism is worth mentioning here. This is provided by contemporary Shin Buddhist criticism of "humanism" (*hyūmanizumu* ヒューマニズム), which is apparent at the official level in a text such as the the *Joint Declaration for the Thirtieth Anniversary of the Foundation of the Shin Buddhist Federation* issued in 2000. As I have noted elsewhere, this approach is characterized by a severe critique of the self-centred personality, here identified with the "spirit of humanism," which manifestly overlaps with the rhetoric of occidentalism. (Dessi 2006: 116-121; 2007: 131-140)

Some of these themes have often provided the doctrinal foundations for forms of Shin Buddhist social activism. It is interesting to note, however, that they also contribute to the current official self-representation of the Shin Buddhist denomination. This is true not only of the critical approach to the issue of the Yasukuni Shrine by part of the religious institutions, which ultimately rests on a very basic doctrinal formulation, namely, Shinran's rejection of *kami* worship. But,

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8. Some influential elaborations of these topics can be found, for example, in Futaba (1988), Shigaraki (1994), and Wada (1997). Cf. CWS I: 255, 547; and SSZ II: 175, 682-683.
 9. While the expression 'Two Truths' is related to the two truths of Mahāyāna, that is, the 'Ultimate Truth' or *shintai* 真諦 (Sk. *paramārtha-satya*), and the 'Mundane Truth' or *zokutai* 俗諦 (Sk. *saṃvṛti-satya*), within the Shin Buddhist tradition, following a more general trend in Japanese Buddhism, the two terms came to indicate the concepts of *ōbō* ("Law of the State") and *buppō* ("Buddhist Law"), and the prescription for all practitioners to conform to existing social norms. Cf. Rogers and Rogers (1991: 314).
 10. See, for example, Yasutomi (1999), and Ama (2001).

perhaps even more significantly, it can also be seen in the critical reappraisal of Shin Buddhism's past history of collaboration with imperialism and war in the last two decades.

Mirroring the Pure Land in this World

The aforementioned discussions generally operate within the framework provided by the equalitarian dimension of the teachings and the demythologization of the Pure Land. Some of the authors participating in the debate, however, not only put emphasis on the non-substantial status of the Pure Land, but also on its potential to provide a standard to measure the injustice of this world. Thus, the theme of the Pure Land as a "principle of criticism" is characteristically merged with other selected critical aspects of the Shin Buddhist teachings in the attempt to promote a society free of discrimination, oppression and violence. The expression "Pure Land as a principle of criticism" (*bihan genri to shite no jōdo*) was first used by Hishiki Masaharu in the late 1980s, and indicates an approach which can be seen currently at work in various other Shin Buddhist thinkers. Nonetheless, one can see various ways of articulating the social dimension of the teachings and the focus on the Pure Land, like in the cases of the following authors.

Tamamitsu Junshō 玉光順正 (2004b: 141), from the Ōtani-ha, calls his own understanding of Shinran's thought "critical thinking" (*bi no shisō* 非の思想). He argues that the reflection on the Pure Land provides the practitioner with a principle for a truly independent standpoint which does not passively accept the current dominant views. For Tamamitsu, this is the real meaning of the expression, the "sign of rejecting the world" (*yo o itou shirushi* 世をいとうするし), which is found in Shinran's *Letters*.¹¹ This standpoint is also evident, he argues, in Shinran's independent attitude towards the authorities, when Shinran chose autonomously to be "neither a monk nor one in worldly life" (*hisō hizoku* 非僧非俗), and insisted that the practice of the *nenbutsu* did not need any external justification.¹² However, Tamamitsu has also characterized a selection of the vows (from the fifth to the tenth) uttered by Dharmākara¹³ which describe the "six spiritual powers" (*roku jinzū* 六神通) as another indication that the Pure Land teachings carry a valuable critical potential. According to him, in fact, these six vows refer respectively to the understanding of the historical and social context, the overcoming of narrow perspectives, the need to listen critically, the yearning for a life of interconnectedness through the sharing of sadness, spiritual independence, and the exhaustion of all the blind passions.¹⁴

11. Tamamitsu (2004a: 9; 2004b: 135-137). Cf. the *Mattōshō*, in CWS I: 551; and SS: 563.

12. Tamamitsu (2002: 12; 2004a: 3; 2004b: 139). Cf. the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, in CWS I: 289; and SS: 398; and the *Shinran Shōnin go-shōsokushū*, in CWS I: 568; and SS: 576.

13. Hōzō bosatsu 法藏菩薩, the mythical bodhisattva who is later presumed to have become the Tathāgata Amitābha (Amida Nyorai 阿弥陀如来).

14. Tamamitsu (2003: 7; 15-17; 26-32). Cf. Gómez (1996: 166-167).

Anzai Kenjō 安西賢誠 (1998: 80, 106), another Ōtani-ha writer, has especially insisted on the liberative potential of Shinran's denial of the worship of *kami*, and on the absence in his thought of other-worldly tendencies. For Anzai the Pure Land is not another world separated from the present one, since, as found in the *Jōdo-ron* 浄土論, it surpasses the state of existence of the three worlds, namely, the past, the present and the future.¹⁵ This is not to say, however, that the Pure Land is a mere utopia. Rather, for Anzai (1998: 126-127, 133) it represents a principle which allows for a critical approach to social reality (*bihan genri* 批判原理). This is clear, for example, in the anti-discriminatory meaning expressed in the Fourth Vow of Amida, where it is stated that humans and gods will share the same appearance in the Pure Land.¹⁶

According to the Honganji-ha writer Honda Shizuyoshi 本多静芳 (1996: 77, 97), the Two Truths theory is a major factor behind the reduction of *shinjin* to an exclusively inner experience, which neutralizes Shin Buddhist potential for social criticism and opens up the way to authoritarian views. For him, like Tamamitsu and other scholars, this potential is clearly expressed in Shinran's *Letters*, where he indicated the "rejection of the world" (*yo o itou*) as a characteristic of life in the *nenbutsu*. (Honda 2003: 257; 2004: 155) However, Honda also makes reference to the first four vows of Amida (Dharmākara) listed in the *Larger Sūtra* (*Muryōju-kyō* 無量寿經), which are interpreted as an implicit call against violence and oppression.¹⁷ He also makes explicit reference to Hishiki Masaharu, and to another Shin Buddhist scholar from the Ōtani-ha, Obata Bunshō, who has developed this theme in close relationship with other passages found in the *Jōdo-ron*. (Honda 2004: 157)

Obata Bunshō 尾畑文正 has lamented the tendency in Shin Buddhism to leave social reality unquestioned, which is often linked to a radically subjective understanding of the teachings. (Obata 1994: 117) In his attempt to relate the doctrinal discourse to the current pressing issues of contemporary society, notably war and social injustice, Obata quotes various sources that can also be found in the writings of the above mentioned authors. He refers, for example, to the social significance of Hōnen's and Shinran's claim that salvation is open to all,

15. Anzai (1998: 134). The Treatise on the Pure Land (Ch. *Jingtu-lun*; Jp. *Jōdo-ron*), traditionally attributed to Vasubandhu, delineates the structure of the Pure Land. Cf. Gómez (1996: 119-120), and Matsumoto (1986).

16. The Fourth Vow listed in the *Larger Sūtra* reads: "May I not gain possession of perfect awakening if, once I have attained buddhahood, the humans and gods in my land are not the same in their appearance and are either beautiful or ugly." (Gómez 1996: 166)

17. The first three vows read: "(1) May I not gain possession of perfect awakening if, once I have attained buddhahood, my land should still have hells, hungry ghosts, or animals. (2) May I not gain possession of perfect awakening if, once I have attained buddhahood, any one among the humans and gods in my land return to one of the three unfortunate paths of rebirth after their normal life span has ended. (3) May I not gain possession of perfect awakening if, once I have attained buddhahood, the humans and gods in my land are not all the color of genuine gold." (Gómez 1996: 166)

and to Shinran's critical attitude towards the authorities on the occasion of the suppression of the *nenbutsu* movement. (Obata 1994: 118, 124) Elsewhere, he also refers to the call for "prayers for peace" in Shinran's *Letters* and to the injunction against killing found in the *Dhammapada*. (Obata 1994: 135)

A central place in Obata's work is occupied, however, by his interpretation of the "adornments of the Pure Land" (*jōdo shōgon* 浄土莊嚴) of Dharmākara found in the *Jōdo-ron*. Here, he argues that through the two related aspects of the "purity of the world" (*ki-seken shōjō* 器世間清浄) and the "purity of the inhabitants" (*shujō-seken shōjō* 衆生世間清浄), a Mahāyāna unity of the environment and the subject, and a way to take others and the world into account while one acts in daily life, are clearly illustrated. (Obata 2004: 45-46) Moreover, Obata focuses on the meaning of the vows of Dharmākara from the first to the fourth, where the absence of "hells," "hungry ghosts," and "animals," and the equality in appearance of "humans and gods" refer, he claims, to the absence of discrimination and oppression, thus offering the key for a critical approach to this world. (Obata 1992: 44; 1997: 16, 19-20; 2000: 78) In this sense, he agrees with Hishiki Masaharu that the Pure Land provides a standard to measure this "defiled world," allowing the practitioner to question the absoluteness of values in secular society. (Obata 1994: 134) This is a role which is possible for the Pure Land, Obata argues (similarly to Anzai), since it does not correspond to the "other-world" (*ano yo* あの世), but instead, as explained in the *Larger Sūtra* and in the *Jōdo-ron*, it "surpasses the paths of the three worlds" (*shōga sangai dō* 勝過三界道), the three modes of time. And, ultimately, this is possible because the Pure Land was established by Dharmākara as the place to save all sentient beings, one from which war, oppression and discrimination are necessarily absent. (Obata 1997: 17, 19)

The Pure Land and "Liberation Buddhism"

Obata Bunshō has acknowledged the influence of Hishiki Masaharu upon his formulation of the Pure Land as a principle of criticism. While Obata has emphasized the doctrinal side of this approach through his combined references to the adornments of the Pure Land and the vows, Hishiki's writings are mainly characterized by his attention to historical factors and his critical approach to the Buddhist tradition. In view of the fact that he was the first in the debate to introduce the expression "Pure Land as a principle of criticism," his search for a "Liberation Buddhism" (*kaibō bukk'yō* 解放仏教) also deserves to be illustrated here in some detail.

Hishiki, a scholar from the Ōtani-ha who has long been engaged in social activism, has related his idea of the "Pure Land as a principle of criticism" to the concept of the Pure Land as found in the writings of Kaneko Daiei. According to Hishiki, however, despite Kaneko's understanding of "the Pure Land as a concept" (*kannen to shite no jōdo* 観念としての浄土), he was not able to develop the underlying critical potential of this idea and to relate effectively the Pure Land to the social sphere. (Hishiki 1998: 207-208) Thus, although Kaneko's scholarship, along with

other contributions offered by modern doctrinal studies, is important for negating the substantial reality of the Pure Land, it remains confined to the level of subjective faith, which is sometimes activist but sometimes not. For Hishiki, such approaches based on the rethinking of the relationship between Amida and the individual can only provide a standard for one's interior life. (Hishiki 1998: 197-198, 200-201)

Hishiki's main concern is to delineate a "religion of liberation" (*kaibō no shūkyō* 解放の宗教), which might promote both theory and practice against discrimination and oppression. He thinks that Buddhism carries this potential because, despite the emphasis historically placed on individual suffering, it can be also characterized as focusing on "social suffering." (Hishiki 2005: 67, 80-81) Referring to the early history of Buddhism, Hishiki observes the following:

If on the one hand in the scriptures there are approaches that implicitly see desire as the cause of suffering, on the other hand in the co-dependent origination doctrine there was also a tendency to focus on practical, social, and historical issues related to the cause of suffering. This is apparent, for example, in Śākyamuni's words quoted in the Pāli Canon, "you shall not slay, you shall not cause to slay." The expression "you shall not cause to slay" is not an individual mental attitude, but rather, it is referred to concrete social reality. (Hishiki 2005: 87)

Hishiki notes that this practical approach was still at work in the allegory of the "poisoned arrow" told by Śākyamuni to Malunkya-putta, where "the focus was on what "could extract the arrow," namely, whether there was a way to effectively overcome suffering." (Hishiki 2005: 89) However, later developments of Buddhism emphasized an "ontological view of the co-dependent origination doctrine, which seeks the cause of suffering in the cravings of the individual," at the expense of "personal involvement and responsibility along the path of liberation from suffering." (Hishiki 2005: 93-94) At the same time the basic ideas of no-self and impermanence, which negate transmigration and the Brahman-*ātman* doctrine (the rationale which supported the caste system), underwent significant adaptations. In this connection, Hishiki argues that the adoption of the belief in the afterlife represented a return to the doctrine of transmigration expressed in the *Upaniṣad* and a "deviation from the doctrine of no-self." (Hishiki 2005: 96-98) The religious identity of Buddhism "was then preserved by postulating rebirth not only in a comfortable world, but also in an environment (a Pure Land) which could be suitable in order to achieve awakening and become buddhas." (Hishiki 2005: 111)

On the other hand, the tendency to focus on "absolute experiential states" through the practice of meditation opened the way to further metaphysical elaborations within the context of Mahāyāna, such as those of Zhiyi (538-597), Xuanzang (600-664), and Fazang (643-712), emphasizing the idea that "the one is the many." (Hishiki 2005: 98-99) For Hishiki,

all these thinkers claimed that "this world is characterized by multiplicity, but for the awakened person everything is fine." In doing so, they were accepting reality as it is and endorsing an unreflective form of Buddhism. This type of Buddhism

was hardly understandable by common people, but created a facade of depth. As such, from the point of view of social history, it provided a solemn complement of justification to the system of social control. (Hishiki 2005: 99)

Thus, while the most basic social implications of Buddhism were neglected throughout its development and transmission to East Asia, it became in time “the protector of the nation.” (Hishiki 2005: 95) The inclusion of elements of “magic” and popular beliefs which could appeal to the masses perfected its function as an ideology of control. Following the scholarship of Kuroda Toshio (1926-1993), Hishiki observes that in Japan this led to the formation of the “exoteric-esoteric system of Buddhism” (*kenmitsu bukkuyō taisei* 顯密仏教体制), which still represents the mainstream form of Japanese Buddhism.¹⁸ The leaders of “exoteric-esoteric Buddhism,” he writes, “assimilated Japanese animistic worship of nature” and “provided to the masses a simple form of magic as a way of salvation through amulets and worldly benefits,” while reserving “for themselves the sphere of sublime transcendent knowledge.” (Hishiki 2005: 100)

While the belief in birth in the Pure Land “was generally embraced by the lower layers of society who did not enter monkhood,” Hishiki notes, among the Pure Land scriptures only the sophisticated *Meditation Sūtra*, which “came to be seen as a manual to achieve birth in the Pure Land,” attracted the attention of orthodox scholars. (Hishiki 2005: 113) The orthodoxy was later challenged by Hōnen on the basis of Shandao’s 善導 (613-681) interpretation, according to whom “practices such as meditation and reading the sutras were secondary and auxiliary,” while “uttering the name of Amida Buddha was the right practice explained in the *sūtra*.” For Hishiki the importance of Shandao’s interpretation lies in the fact that “he maintained that ‘the lowest of the lowest’ were not different from those of ‘upper grade and birth’ who could afford to follow meditation practices. They were not inferior by birth since all human beings were ordinary people (*bonbu*.)” (Hishiki 2005: 113-114)

Hōnen’s approach, which was followed by Shinran, was revolutionary in that it questioned the entire structure of *kenmitsu bukkuyō*, and the intimate relation between religious rituals and political power. Both Hōnen and Shinran, Hishiki (2005: 107-114) notes, claimed that nothing else was required besides the selected practice of the *nenbutsu* in order to achieve birth in the Pure Land. This position was first expressed by Hōnen in a passage of the *Senchakushū*, which Hishiki paraphrases as follows:

If the condition for birth in the Pure Land were offerings for votive lanterns or building images of the Buddha, and for erecting temples and stupas, the poor would be excluded from birth. If transcendental meditation were necessary, this also would be beyond the reach of the average person. If strict obedience to the precept of ceasing desire were necessary, this could be achieved by none. All these requirements are against the universality of Amida’s Vow. Therefore,

18. Hishiki (2005: 99-100). Cf., for example, Kuroda (1996).

for Amida, offerings for votive lanterns or building images of the Buddha are not necessary, and practices other than the *nenbutsu* which are not accessible to anyone are to be abandoned.¹⁹

In this way, Hishiki affirms, the question whether the cause of suffering is rooted in the individual sphere or in society first came to the surface with the rise of the Pure Land school. He also notes that this signalled the emergence, from within the framework of Japanese intellectual history, of the idea of individual self-independence, and of a Buddhist tradition autonomous of external authority, significantly different as such from the officially sanctioned Tendai and Shingon schools. (Hishiki 2005: 110, 114-115)

This critical potential of the Pure Land teachings emerges, Hishiki claims, especially from two articles of the Kōfukuji petition (*Kōfukuji sōjō* 興福寺奏状), through which this powerful temple in Nara demanded in 1207 the suppression of the *nenbutsu* movement. Here Hōnen was charged with the “errors” of “not revering the emperor” (*kokuō furai* 国王不礼), and “denying worship to the *kami*” (*jingi fubai* 神祇不拜), which were later polemically reaffirmed by Shinran in the *Kyōgyōshinshō*. (Hishiki 2005: 108) However, according to Hishiki, though in both Hōnen and Shinran the social context is highly regarded, in their writings are found also references to the Pure Land as an other-worldly dimension, which implies the acceptance of the transmigration doctrine and a deviation from the early Buddhist teaching of no-self. (Hishiki 2005: 115-116) For Hishiki, this factor contributes to the displacement of the solution to human problems in an ideal heavenly sphere, and ends up in concealing the injustices of this world. Therefore, he insists, “those theories which would like to solve in the other life what cannot be solved in this world are basically religion as ideology of control.” According to Hishiki, Hōnen’s and Shinran’s religious views cannot serve, just as they are, as a religion of liberation. (Hishiki 2005: 115)

What is needed then, for him, is a different approach which accounts for the lack of the dimension of the “other” (*tasha* 他者) in modern doctrinal studies while taking the “Pure Land” not as a substantial reality, but rather “as a principle of criticism.” This implies not only an internal critique of the individual, but a critical approach to society starting from the model of the Pure Land. (Hishiki 1998: 197-199, 201) This attitude, according to Hishiki, can be emblematically seen “in Shinran’s reflections following the suppression of the *nenbutsu* movement,” where “the main stress is not put on birth in the Pure Land but always on the [social] meaning of that suppression.” (Hishiki 2005: 116)

Another starting point for this “Liberation Buddhism” is provided by the Pure Land itself when it is understood, similarly to the Christian idea of the Kingdom of God, as “a principle of criticism against discrimination and violence in society,” and as a way to overcome the established dominant ideologies. (Hishiki 2005: 116) Hishiki claims that this dimension is generally found in Amida’s vows, which,

19. Hishiki (2005: 110). Cf. *Senchakushū* English Translation Project (1998: 77-78).

being the rule for the establishment of Amida's Pure Land, regard the world around us highly. From this standpoint, ignorance of external factors and any individual approach to awakening are denied as "illusions." (Hishiki 2005: 115)

However, he thinks that this principle is eminently expressed in the first four vows of Dharmākara as found in the *Larger Sūtra*. With reference to the first of these vows Hishiki writes:

In the first of the forty-eight vows made by Amida Buddha in the *Larger Sūtra* for the establishment of his Pure Land, it is made the solemn promise that there will not be any of the three evils, that is, hells (*jigoku* 地獄), hungry ghosts (*gaki* 餓鬼), and animals (*chikushō* 畜生). I think that if we translate these expressions into modern language, the vow means that there will be no domination, discrimination, oppression, and aggression. There are different versions of this *sūtra*, including a different number of vows, but the First Vow is always included. (Hishiki 1998: 210)

Similarly to Obata, also Hishiki conceives the first four vows in close connection to each other. He thinks that as a whole they illustrate no less than Amida's prominent concern, that is, "the establishment of a land where there is no discrimination and killing" (*sabetsu to satsuriku ga nai kuni o konryū suru koto* 差別と殺戮がないくにを建立すること).²⁰ As such, they are taken by Hishiki to summarize significantly, together with the Eighteenth and the Seventeenth vows, the main features of the overall Pure Land scriptural tradition. (Hishiki 2005: 259) It is interesting to note that the first four vows, though mentioned by Hōnen in his *Senchakushū*, were not included by Shinran among the "true vows,"²¹ thus holding only a provisional status. For Hishiki, however, the aforementioned interpretative line can be easily traced back to various Buddhist texts such as the *Mahā-prajñāpāramitā-sāstra* and the *Abhidharma*, and ultimately stands for the realization of an ideal of social justice which awaits to be mirrored on this world.

Conclusion

The positions expressed by Hishiki and other authors mentioned above can be defined as attempts to mobilize the Pure Land as a "principle of criticism" within the broader context of a Shin Buddhist critically-oriented approach to social ethics. The authors engaged in these discussions share with mainstream doctrinal studies both the emphasis on the community of fellow practitioners (*dōbō*) and the denial of the other-worldly status of the Pure Land, which is the premise for the adoption of a subjective standpoint on faith. However, in distinction to mainstream

20. More precisely (and similarly to the other aforementioned authors), Hishiki distinguishes between the vows 1-2, focusing on hells ('bloodshed'), hungry ghosts ('poverty'), and animals ('submission'), and vows 3-4, focusing on the shared features of humans and gods in the Pure Land ('equality'). Personal communication, 1 April 2007.

21. The five 'true vows' are for Shinran the eleventh, the twelfth, the thirteenth, the seventeenth and the eighteenth.

formulations, they also manifest an extremely guarded attitude towards the internalization of the religious experience, given its potential to facilitate the emergence of authoritarian views.

The Pure Land, both as portrayed in the vows and as enacted in the exclusive practice of the *nenbutsu*, is credited by these authors to provide a standard not only for the inner religious life of the individual, but above all for social relations. Thus, the concept of the Pure Land comes to play a role quite similar to that of the Kingdom of God found in Christianity, when this idea is interpreted as a standard for social justice. Within Shin Buddhism this approach is quite significant, because it contributes to formulations of social ethics which go beyond the traditional characterization of morality as “a response in gratitude to Amida.”

Another major feature of these discussions should be remembered here also, that is, their tested reciprocal relationship with social activism. It is not incidental that various of the above mentioned authors have been, or still are, directly involved in distinctive forms of Shin Buddhist social engagement. Just to mention a few examples, Tamamitsu Junshō is a leading figure in Shin Buddhist activities on behalf of former Hansen’s disease patients, subjected to segregation in Japan until recently. Anzai Kenjō and Hishiki Masaharu are also well known for their leading roles in various lawsuits against government engagement with the Yasukuni Shrine and similar local shrines in violation of articles 20 and 89 of the Japanese Constitution.²² Another characteristic of this approach to Shin Buddhist ethics is therefore that it is also related to broader discussions within the Japanese intellectual milieu. Indeed, the critical engagement of Shin Buddhist scholars concerning the Yasukuni Shrine takes up an issue which has long been on the agenda of progressive political groups, citizens’ groups and intellectuals within Japanese society in general.

The link between these discussions on the Pure Land and the Yasukuni Shrine also assumes here an emblematic value. The Yasukuni Shrine was until the end of World War II the centre of Japanese militaristic propaganda through the enshrinement and deification of the war dead as “glorious [war] spirits” (*eirei* 英靈). Such practices are generally rejected by Shin Buddhism on the basis of Shinran’s negative attitude towards the worship of *kami*. Still more interesting for the present discussion, however, is the historical background. A series of nexuses between death on the battlefield, birth in the Pure Land, the *kokutai* 国体 (“national essence” or polity, Japanese wartime ideology), the emperor, and Amida provided the basis for those doctrines elaborated within Shin Buddhism to support Japanese imperialism.²³ That the Pure Land and its virtues might represent for the Shin Buddhist community, and for human beings at large, a model for a peaceful coexistence and a just society is now one of the major concerns and challenges of the authors engaged in such discussions focusing on the Pure Land as a “principle of criticism.”

22. For an overview of social activism within the Ōtani-ha and the Honganji-ha, see Dessi 2007: 141-190. Cf. Ina (1994: 112), Anzai (1998), and Hishiki (2003).

23. Cf. Rogers and Rogers (1991: 331-333), Tokunaga and Bloom (2000: 200-201), and Ives (1999: 89-90).

Abbreviations

- CWS = *The Collected Works of Shinran*. 2 vols. Kyoto: Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha, 1997.
- SS = Shinshū Seiten Hensan Iinkai 真宗聖典編纂委員会, ed. *Shinshū Seiten* 真宗聖典 (Shin Buddhist Scriptures). Kyoto: Higashi Honganji Shuppanbu, 2002 (1st ed., 1978).
- SSZ II = Shinshū Shōgyō Zensho Hensanjo 真宗聖教全書編纂所, ed. *Shinshū shōgyō zensho* 2, *shūsobu* 真宗聖教全書二, 宗祖部 (Collected Shin Buddhist Scriptures, Vol. 2: The Founder). Kyoto: Ōyagi Kōbundō, 2003 (1st ed., 1941).

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