
The aim of this volume is to treat in an analytical way a wide range of topics that can be subsumed under the general heading of the “social dimension” of Shin Buddhism. Ugo Dessì points out in his Introduction that, while Shin Buddhism is perhaps Japan largest Buddhist denomination, it has not received the attention that other aspects of the Japanese Buddhist tradition have. This volume adds to our knowledge of Shin Buddhism by focusing on the “intersection between Shin Buddhism and fields as diverse as politics, education, social movements, economy, culture and the media, discrimination, gender, secularization and globalization” (p. 2).

Although the volume’s primary concern is with Shin Buddhism, which traces its roots to Shinran (1173-1212), it begins with a chapter by Martin Repp on Hōnen (1133-1212), Shinran’s teacher, titled the “Socio-Economic Impacts of Hōnen’s Pure Land Doctrines: An Inquiry into the Interplay between Buddhist Teachings and Institutions.” Hōnen was the first to advocate sole reliance on faith in Amida as a way to attain birth in the Pure Land, and in the context of late Heian-early Kamakura Buddhism, which tended to accept a variety of approaches to Buddhist practice and belief, as well as an easy accommodation to the kami worship of Shintō, Hōnen’s teachings were a target of intense criticism. Repp notes the criticism of Hōnen teachings by Nichiren (1222-1282) as well as those presented in the Kōfukuji Petition of 1205, e.g., that his followers stopped giving to non-Pure Land temples or that other temples suffered loss of membership. Repp then considers in detail these and other socio-economic implications of Hōnen’s teachings. In general the effect of Hōnen’s teachings was to “level” hierarchies in contemporary society—between the ignorant and the wise, men and women, clergy and lay people, and rich and poor. Further, since birth in the Pure Land did not depend on merits gained through donations, Hōnen’s teachings also had clear economic implications. Repp concludes his chapter by noting that Hōnen’s concept of religious equality probably found greater expression in Shin Buddhism than Pure Land, for it was Shinran who stressed the concepts of dōbō, “fellow companions,” and dōgyō, “fellow practitioners,” “thereby drawing the religious idea of equality further into the social realm of religious communities” (p. 55).

Galen Amstutz’s contribution on “Shin Buddhism and Burakumin in the Edo Period” examines the close ties between the discriminated-against minority known as the burakumin or eta and Shin. In a footnote, Amstutz points out that in the 1980s it was estimated that the burakumin made up to 2 to 3% of Japan’s total population, and “in modern times, some 85% have been affiliated with Shin Buddhism” (p. 59). This special relationship began to form in the Edo period. Burakumin attraction to Shin was due in large part to Shinran’s teaching on the equality of all believers. Yet Amstutz points out that “burakumin remained to an important extent a ritually and socially discriminated-against group which was treated ambivalently and did not have equal privileges and prestige with other members of the religion” (p. 59). Amstutz briefly discusses the history of “social marginals” in Japan before the sixteenth century; however, the main concern of his research is with the place of the burakumin within Shin in the Edo period. Burakumin belonged in many cases to regular Shin temples, but they also belonged to temples in which they were the only members, so-called
etadera. Amstutz discusses the many types of discrimination that the burakumin were subjected to within the Shin establishment in both the Nishi Honganji (Honganji) and Higashi Honganji (Ōtani) branches. Yet Amstutz argues that the status of burakumin within Shin Buddhism was not static. By the end of the Edo period, “eta were steadily, if only slowly, improving their status, recognition, and expectations within the organization, suggesting an incremental growth of spiritual position, if not anything resembling later rights and justice theory” (p. 98).

Closely related in theme to Amstutz’s chapter is Jessica L. Main’s contribution, “To Lament the Self: The Ethical Ideology of Takeuchi Ryō’on (1891-1968) and the Ōtani-ha Movement Against Buraku Discrimination.” In comparison to Amstutz’s piece this is a more narrowly focused discussion of a single figure who worked over several decades in the twentieth century to address the issue of buraku discrimination. After a start in life as the son of a poor Ōtani-ha temple priest, Takeuchi was ultimately able to graduate in 1914 from Kyoto Imperial University with a major in philosophy. Not long after graduation, he went to work for the Shiga Prefectural government as its first director of “social improvement.” This entailed, among other tasks, working with buraku groups, who had participated in the 1918 Rice Riots. While the government saw the burakumin as a disruptive group, as a Shin priest, Takeuchi realized that Shin Buddhism had a responsibility for improving their status, and in 1921, he accepted a position within the Ōtani-ha as head of their “Society Department.” Main portrays Takeuchi as working amidst pressures from both burakumin within Shin Buddhism and from the Marxist-leaning main liberationist group, the Suiheisha. Some burakumin within Shin Buddhism saw the Shin leadership as corrupt and as contributing to their oppression, even while they looked to Shinran’s teachings as a source of inspiration. The Marxist leaders of the Suiheisha also saw the Shin leadership as corrupt; further they aimed for a more radical transformation of society than Takeuchi could philosophically embrace. Main introduces his position on the burakumin issue by translating and commenting on a memorandum he wrote in 1921 titled “Rationale for Establishing the Society Department.” The basis of Takeuchi’s ideology, as Main calls it, was Shinran’s commitment to live in the world and identify with the sufferings of ordinary people. From this starting point, Takeuchi argued that social activism was a natural part of a priest’s responsibility. “We must now seek a new road,” Takeuchi wrote, “engage in a variety of social work, cultivate a spirit of social service, withdraw from the material and turn towards the spiritual” (p. 151). Main points out that, through his writings and institutional supporters, Takeuchi remains influential in Shin circles today.

Melissa Anne-Marie Curley takes up the topic of education within Shin Buddhism in her chapter titled “Shinshū Studies and the Legacy of Liberal Thought in Japan.” Curley examines two philosophies of education within the Ōtani-ha. Specifically she presents the views of Kiyozawa Manshi (1863-1903) and traces their legacy in the thought of his student and Ōtani University professor, Kaneko Daiei (1881-1976). Kiyozawa came of age in the Meiji period (1868-1912) when Japan was engaged in a process of rapid industrialization and modernization. The aim of Meiji education as expressed in “The Imperial Rescript on Education” (1890) was to produce citizens who could support these efforts, people who embraced the values of “filial piety” and “loyalty” and who could “offer [themselves] courageously to the state.” Buddhism in general and Buddhist universities in particular were under pressure to