

Of two kinds of deep belief

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Mahayana Buddhism is called the religion of grace. In other words, the very core of its teaching is dependent on the compassionate work of Amida Buddha, the Saviour of all sentient beings. In this article I, who am today a Christian, would like to show how, through the Jodo Shinshu teaching which was established by Shinran (1173—1262), and which very fully embodies the essence of Mahayana Buddhism's teachings, I came to understand the doctrine of 'Nishu Jinshin' ('Two kinds of deep belief'), and why this doctrine has been so important in my religious development.

To do this I must first write about the beginnings of my knowledge of Christianity. When, for the first time, I heard the name of Jesus Christ, from my elementary school teacher, Miss Yamano, I was just six years old. One day, in her class, we were talking about the greatest people in the world, and she told us the stories of Buddha, Hideyo Noguchi and Jesus Christ, among others. I still clearly remember what she told us about Jesus Christ: 'Jesus Christ is the man crucified on the cross for all people's sake.' I remember it because I was deeply impressed by this, and wished to meet this man. However, since I was a small boy, I did not know anything at all about an institutionalised Christianity. Nevertheless, from that time onwards, Jesus Christ became a great man for whom I longed. He was also the first person to teach me the value of self-sacrifice for the sake of others, something the consciousness of which grew steadily stronger in me under the influence not only of people whom I met but also people whom I knew through their writings.

When I was twelve years old, I learned from another elementary school teacher, Mr Azumaya, a poem, 'Amenimomakezu', written by Kenji Miyazawa (1896—1933). It goes as follows:

Bending neither to the rain
Nor to the wind
Nor to snow nor to summer heat,
Fire in body, yet
Without greed, without anger,
Always smiling serenely.
Eating his four cups of rough rice a day
with bean paste and a few vegetables,
Never talking himself into account

But seeing and hearing everything,
Understanding
And never forgetting.
In the shade of a pine grove
He lives in a tiny thatched hut:
If there is a sick child in the east
He goes and tends him:
If there is a tired mother in the west
He goes and shoulders her rice sheaves:
If there are quarrels and litigation in the north
He tells them, 'Stop your pettiness.'
In drought he sheds tears,
In cold summer he walks through tears,
Everyone calls him a fool.
Neither praised
Nor taken to heart.
That man
Is what I wish to be.¹

I was very moved by this poem since it illuminated so much in myself. In it I imagined my future life and I wished to be such a person. Through this poem I began to take an interest in the life of Kenji and to read his writings. I found that he had been a teacher and then a farmer. He was a man very devoted to others; until just before his death he dedicated himself to the peasants as an agricultural engineer, despite being constitutionally infirm throughout his life. His selfless life was, for me, a school boy, an admirable example from which I ought to learn.

Later in the same year my teacher, Mr Azumaya, took several of us in our class to one of the oldest Catholic churches in Hakodate, our city. In it I saw, at last, the image of the crucified Jesus Christ. I was not afraid of seeing that, but, rather, profoundly impressed by his way of life, dedicating himself for other people's sake, as symbolised by his death on the cross. Jesus was indeed the person whom I had been expecting for a long time. He was crucified for all people's sake; he was a selfless person ... this was my impression of him at that time.

And then, a few years later, I had to face a family calamity: my dearest sister's divorce from her husband. I could not believe that such a thing could happen to my sister, who had been so happy on her wedding day. I had held the idea that marriage was something absolute and holy, but my sister's divorce completely smashed that idea. I felt all was in vain and there was nothing to be trusted in the human world. Human beings seemed to me insecure and treacherous, and it was becoming hard to trust them and believe in the absoluteness of love. In this situation, I took the Bible in my hands, for I was searching for something absolute and for inner tranquillity. My father strongly objected to my reading it, but my divorced sister supported me; she was also seeking something ultimate in her life.

All the same, when I began to read the Bible what I first felt was—contrary to my expectation—‘dread’. It was indeed ‘dreadful’ to read what Jesus was saying, because he seemed to me unsparingly to point out to me my wretchedness, ugliness and miserableness, that is to say, my shadow-side. Because I could not continue to read it, since it was so ‘dreadful’ to see my shadow-side, I threw the Bible away somewhere. Yet I could not deny the feeling I had when I was reading the Bible: that Jesus was the absolutely holy, and that I was an awfully ugly and miserable man. The word of the prophet Isaiah clearly describes my religio-psychological situation at that time: ‘I am a man of unclean lips among people of unclean lips.’ (Is. 6:5). And the words of Peter penetrated my mind: ‘Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.’ (Lk. 5:8)

Rudolf Otto called this religio-psychological situation ‘self-disvaluation’². He explained what ‘self-disvaluation’ is:

(Isaiah) makes this confession not by reason of any theory of original guilt, but from his own spontaneous guilt it is an immediate, almost reflex, expression of feeling with which theory has nothing to do. What he (Isaiah) expresses is primarily the feeling of his own profanity, which keeps him apart from the godhead, and this not by reason of any individual transgression, and not in any moral sense, but through his impurity in the religious sense, so that the godhead becomes unapproachable and untouchable and he himself stands in need of expiation and consecration.³

This religio-psychological description of absolute profanity concretely describes my own way of reacting to the word of Jesus, which led me to keep away from the Bible until I became a university student in 1972.

In this strange way the word of Jesus Christ began to stay with me, although I was consciously keeping myself away from the Bible since I did not want to have that dreadful experience again—the experience of seeing my shadow-side.

Even today, whereas Christ is for me the absolutely holy, when I look at myself I always see a man altogether a sinner; in God’s presence I still feel I am somebody utterly unworthy of Christ and his salvation—as nobody. The seeing of myself as nobody is rooted in that ‘self-disvaluation’ brought by the sense of being absolutely profane. An important point here is that I, only I myself, am profane, not others. So the consciousness of being absolutely profane appears primarily as a ‘first-person-singular’ problem, a problem for ‘me’, not for ‘you’ or ‘her’ or ‘him’. Only ‘I’ experience my own absolute profanity as my shadow-side, since in the world existing as a human being is always something very personal, somebody’s *own* existence.⁴ I am still, I believe, living like a person who is far from Jesus Christ, in other words from his salvation, yet by grace I see the certainty of my salvation in the middle of my absolute profanity. My main concern here is to try to explain how

this change in self-understanding took place.

During my university life my religious sensibility was getting stronger, particularly through the influence of Mr Tsuchiya, who was a pastor of an independent Protestant church and an assistant professor of English literature at Keio University, and I finally returned to the Bible, from which I had been keeping myself. But the decisive event through which I was able to return to the Bible and Jesus Christ was an encounter with Shinran, the founder of the Jodo-shinshu.

Shinran's *Tanni-sho* ('A Note on Lamenting Differences') taught me that we can find the way to God in the middle of our absolute profanity. A particularly remarkable point in his teaching was the doctrine of 'Nishu Jinshin' ('Two kinds of deep belief'). The doctrine of what is called 'the Pure Land School' teaches that salvation is possible for sinners, central to it being an emphasis on Amida Buddha's unconditional compassion. It also teaches that sinners have to become aware of the reason why they need to be saved, acknowledging their absolute profanity by the grace of Amida Buddha's power. In short, the sinner has to hold two strong religious convictions: that the self is a hopeless sinner (what is called 'Ki no Shinjin'), and that only by Amida Buddha's unconditional love can one attain salvation (what is called 'Ho no Shinjin'). Shinran's important contribution is his teaching that acknowledging the real state of the human being in this world is itself an occasion through which sinners may be enlightened. He says:

(If) even a good person is born in the Pure Land, how much more so is an evil person! However, people in the world usually say, 'If even an evil person is born in the Pure Land, how much more so a good person!' At first sight this view seems to be the reasonable one, but it is contrary to the purpose of Amida Buddha's Original Vow. The reason is that, as those who practice good by their self-power lack the mind to rely wholly on the Amida Buddha's Power, they are not in accordance with the Original Vow of Amida. However, if they cease to trust in their own power and trust in Amida's power, their birth in the True Land of Recompense is assured. ... Since the purpose of Amida's Vow is to have the evil person attain Buddhahood, the evil person who trusts the Amida's Power is especially the one who has good cause for birth in the Pure Land.⁵

Through Shinran's teaching I was able to realise that acknowledging my absolute profanity in the presence of God revealed to me that we are not saved by the correctness of our attitudes, but by the unconditional, utterly free grace of God. Therefore seeing my absolute profanity was itself a grace. Through grace I could embrace my shadow-side as a part of myself.

In this way Shinran's religious insight helped me to find the vision of Christ's salvation. The value of his teaching is not to be found in the

moral dimension but in the religious dimension, and especially by those who can find no grounds for self-justification or who recognise that it is hopeless to try to attain salvation by their own resources. Despairing of a self that is very egocentric is itself a grace by which we can enter the religious dimension of humanity.

However, when I reflect on my life as a Christian, I can see that not every day of my life is now joy-filled. In the words of Shinran, I am still 'a sentient being burning with grave sins and fiery passions.'⁶ How does Shinran respond to this situation? His reply to the question posed by his disciple, Yuen-bo, is noteworthy:

'Even when I, Yuen-bo, utter the Nembutsu, the Amida Buddha's name, I rarely enter a state of rapture and joy, nor do I have the desire to be born quickly in the Pure Land. Why is this so?' I asked. 'I, Shinran, have also asked myself the same question,' answered Shinran Shonin. Now, Yuen-bo, you are in the same state of mind! If we reflect upon the matter again and again, we should realise that our birth in the Pure Land is all the more assured, because we cannot rejoice at what we ought to rejoice at so much as to dance on earth and in heaven. ... The Buddha, knowing this already, called us "common mortals filled with evil passions." Therefore, realising that the Compassionate Vow of the Amida is for the benefit of evil people like us, I feel it all the more trustworthy.'⁷

Shinran's understanding of the salvation offered by Amida Buddha is extremely profound. Responding to his disciple, Yuen-bo, Shinran shows us what a mind enlightened by faith is. His teaching is logically paradoxical. However, in that paradox he is clearly showing us how to see human nature and this world within the religious dimension. If there were no such paradox, there would be no need for religion since everything would be fulfilled through human moral understanding. Shinran's religious understanding showed me a brilliant analogy by which I could enrich my understanding of Christianity: faith is for sinners, not for the righteous. Therefore, gladly listen to the words of Jesus:

Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners. (Mt 9:12—13)

Although I am now a Christian, I will always, until my death, be aware of my absolute profanity in the presence of God. Yet that will be 'my happiness' in the religious dimension. Now that absolute profanity makes me aware that I should stay as 'nobody' throughout my life in order to arrive at 'Being at all'—in other words, absolute holiness. The consciousness of being a hopeless sinner, which I came to understand through Shinran's thought, has had quite an important place in my life

as a Christian because that consciousness teaches me to empty the self—as Christ emptied himself—so that I may travel towards a life in which there will be no discrimination.

Through Shinran's teaching, especially the teaching of 'Nishu Jinshin' ('Two kinds of deep belief'), I have learned that the righteous and the sinner both stand as equal in the eyes of the God who works our salvation.

- 1 'November Third' by Miyazawa Kenji, from *The Penguin Book of Japanese Verse* translated by Geoffrey Bownas and Anthony Thwaite, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1964, copyright (c) Geoffrey Bownas and Anthony Thwaite 1964. Reproduced here by permission of Penguin Books Ltd.
- 2 Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, Oxford University Press, 1958, p. 50.
- 3 Rudolf Otto, *Religious Essays*, Oxford University Press, 1931, pp. 25–6.
- 4 Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, Tubingen, 1984, pp. 11, 12f.
- 5 Here I follow, with minor changes, Professor Kakus Miyaji's translation, *Tannisho*, Ryukoku University Press, Kuoto, 1980, ch. 3. I am grateful for Professor Miyaji's tuition at the Institute of Buddhist Studies, Berkeley, in 1988.
- 6 *ibid.* ch. 2.
- 7 *ibid.* ch. 9.

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