

Research Article

Journal of Global Buddhism 13 (2012): 31-59



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Amida Buddha": Jodo Shinshu Buddhism
and Same-Sex Marriage in the United
States*

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R e s e a r c h A r t i c l e

"All Beings Are Equally Embraced By Amida Buddha": Jodo Shinshu Buddhism and Same-Sex Marriage in the United States

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Abstract

Ministers in the Buddhist Churches of America (BCA) began performing same-sex marriages approximately forty years ago. These were among the first clergy-led religious ceremonies for same-sex couples performed in the modern era, and were apparently the first such marriages conducted in the history of Buddhism. In this article, I seek to explain why Jodo Shinshu Buddhists in America widely and easily affirmed same-sex weddings in the later 20th and early 21st centuries. My argument is that there are three factors in particular—institutional, historical, and theological elements of American Shin Buddhism—that must be attended to as contributing reasons why ministers were supportive of same-sex marriage.

Introduction

While same-sex marriage has become a topic of major dispute in many American denominations, Jodo Shinshu Buddhists have handled the matter quietly and easily, without rancor or even much in the way of debate, for nearly forty years. Ministers in the Buddhist Churches of America (BCA) began performing same-sex marriages approximately forty years ago, not long after the June 1969 Stonewall uprising in New York City (often cited as the origins of the gay liberation movement). These were among the first clergy-led religious ceremonies for same-sex couples performed in the modern era, regardless of location or religion; furthermore, they were apparently the first such marriages conducted in the history of Buddhism, as well as the first by a predominantly Asian-American organization, Buddhist, Christian, or otherwise. Since that time, the BCA and its Hawaiian sister organization the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii (HHMH) have become increasingly willing to not only conduct same-sex ceremonies in their own temples, but also to take prominent public stands on behalf of such relationships/ceremonies.

In this article, I seek to explain why this particular Buddhist tradition, among all the other religious groups in the United States, widely and easily affirmed same-sex weddings in the later 20th and early 21st centuries. I begin by offering context through a brief discussion of the historical relationship between Buddhism and homosexuality, followed by a survey of American Buddhist same-sex ceremonies. I then proceed to an extended record of same-sex unions performed by BCA ministers specifically, most of which have never before been documented, and discuss two important resolutions related to same-sex marriage issued by the BCA and HHMH. My argument is that there are three factors in particular—institutional, historical, and theological elements of

Jodo Shinshu in America—that must be attended to as fundamental contributing reasons why ministers were supportive of same-sex marriage.

Buddhism and Homosexuality

To contextualize the American Buddhist situation, it is necessary to begin with some brief background information about Buddhist attitudes toward homosexuality. As Buddhistologist José Ignacio Cabezón has noted:

Buddhism has been for the most part neutral on the question of homosexuality. The principle question for Buddhism has not been one of heterosexuality vs. homosexuality but one of sexuality vs. celibacy... The fact that Buddhism has been essentially neutral in this regard does not imply that the *cultures* in which Buddhism arose and flourished have always been neutral. Some, at certain times, have been tolerant of same-sex relations; others have not. However, because of the essential neutrality of the Buddhist tradition in this regard, it has adapted to particular sociocultural norms, so that throughout its history we find a wide gamut of opinions concerning homosexual activity, ranging from condemnation (never to the point of active persecution) to praise. (Cabezón, 1998: 30)

Contemporary scholars sometimes differentiate between two approaches to Buddhism, the monastic and lay orientations. Monks (both male and female) live by a large number of traditional rules of conduct that minutely govern their behavior. Among the most important ones are rules that forbid sexual behavior. Homosexual actions are forbidden to monastics and in some cases can result in expulsion from the monastic order—but that is equally true of heterosexual actions, and no homophobic justification is attached to these rules. It is the fact that they are sexual actions based in desire, rather than their homosexual nature, that makes them forbidden (Cabezón, 1998). Monks and nuns are to cultivate detachment and equanimity as they seek to acquire merit, achieve insight, and liberate themselves from the painful cycle of birth and death.

Lay people, on the other hand, are enjoined to live by a handful of general rules of morality. The third Buddhist lay precept warns against sexual misconduct, but what constitutes misconduct differs between cultures and traditions. Homosexuality receives only passing attention in the traditional sources, and sexual misconduct—whether heterosexual or homosexual—does not result in expulsion from the religious group. As actions motivated by attachment homosexual acts are subject to the law of karma, but they do not produce greater demerit than heterosexual ones. Japan, from whence Jodo Shinshu comes, is unusual in that it has not only tolerated same-sex relations but even has some minor cultural traditions that exalt older male-younger male relationships as superior to male-female love and sexuality (Cabezón, 1998; Schalow, 1998; Cabezón, 2011).¹

¹ Tibetan monks sometimes indulged in homosexual affairs with *drombos*, passive male partners who were not necessarily themselves homosexual in orientation. We should note that both in Japan and Tibet such liaisons, while tolerated and even occasionally valorized, did not receive

In the modern world, attitudes toward homosexuality, especially as expressed by traditions or teachers important to Buddhism in North America, cover a wide range. Attitudes derived from Asian cultures and religions sometimes relate to homosexuality in different ways or with unfamiliar logic compared to ideas more commonly encountered in North American religion. For example, opposition to homosexuality sometimes derives from theories about energies that circulate in the body, whose proper balance and flow is essential for health and in some interpretations to proper spiritual practice as well. These ideas exist in both India (and places influenced by Indian culture such as Tibet, Burma, etc.) and China (and cultures influenced by Chinese traditions such as Korea, Japan, etc.). Such ideas actually predate Buddhism and occur in various religious contexts, including Buddhism, which has in some cases absorbed and transmitted them. S. N. Goenka, a major leader of the Vipassana movement, has been reported as stating that homosexuality is dangerous because it mixes male and female energies (Corless, 1998: 255). But in a later interview with *Tricycle* magazine, Goenka denied that his organization had refused to allow homosexuals to participate in advanced retreats, and went on to point out that his organization has lesbian and gay teachers, and that he has had homosexual students (Tworkov, 2000). Likewise, a Zen teacher in the United States was reported to believe that "energy between lovers was supposed to come from 'opposite poles,' and that energy from the 'same poles' was 'incorrect'" (Gwynn, 1992: 37). Importantly, as in the case of Goenka, this attitude was expressed at an earlier time period (the 1970s) and by a later time (the 1990s) the Zen teacher was described as now "open toward gay people" (Gwynn, 1992: 37).

A second source of opposition to homosexuality is the belief that homosexual actions are manifestations of excessive or misdirected lust and/or constitute improper use of physical organs, and thus result in negative karmic consequences. In this vein we find the important 20th century Chinese teacher Hsuan Hua, who said that homosexuality leads to negative rebirths (Corless, 1998: 255). Perhaps best known are the remarks of the 14th Dalai Lama, who has at times said that same-sex relations between consenting persons are not an issue, while at other times has indicated that anal and oral sex are at all times improper actions (whether in heterosexual or homosexual contexts) because they are inappropriate uses of the organs (Peskind, 1998; Cabezón, 2009). Such views are sometimes encoded in premodern monastic commentaries, while at other times they reflect unwritten cultural norms.

A third source of opposition to homosexuality is fear of the effects that it may have on a community. These include concern that it will lead to a breakdown in discipline in sex-segregated monastic communities, that it may encourage monastic rivalries, or that it may alienate heterosexual Buddhists. The latter seems to have been the case surrounding some homophobic comments made by Sojun Mel Weitsman at the San Francisco Zen Center that caused concern in that community (Corless 1998: 332). Weitsman allegedly feared that "flamboyantly" gay members were potentially driving away potential heterosexual members and patrons. He was confronted by students at the center and a dialogue about such attitudes occurred, apparently resulting in a

ritualized religious sanctification (i.e. marriage or similar ceremonies). See Goldstein, 1964; Murray, 2000.

change to his attitude (Kinst and Roberts, 2011).

One of the more interesting cases is that of Soka Gakkai International. Like Jodo Shinshu, Soka Gakkai is a large Buddhist organization from Japan, though it represents the Nichiren Buddhist tradition and was organized much more recently, in the 20th century. First established in America in 1960, the organization that came to be called SGI-USA maintained for decades a policy that homosexuality should be conquered and transformed into heterosexuality through assiduous practice of chanting the mantra "Nam Myoho Renge Kyo." This is in line with SGI's general approach to Buddhism, which stresses the efficacious nature of its mantra in bringing about any life change that one desires. Gays and lesbians were encouraged to marry opposite sex partners and chant vigorously, with the assumption that this would eventually result in the removal of their homosexual tendencies (Corless, 1998: 256). This policy changed in 1995, when SGI-USA reversed course and declared that it would allow same-sex unions to be performed at its community centers (Dart, 1995).

Looking specifically at the Buddhist Churches of America and the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii, there is little evidence of public homophobia. Instead, all references to homosexuality in the publications of these groups and their member temples appear to be neutral or, most often, affirming. The Buddhist Churches of America made a financial grant in 1988 to the Hartford Street Zen Center (established by a gay man in San Francisco's Castro District) to help establish the first Buddhist AIDS hospice (Anon, 1989). In 1997 Kenneth Tanaka, a BCA minister and professor at the denomination's seminary (the Institute of Buddhist Studies), published the book *Ocean*, designed to teach young Jodo Shinshu members about their tradition. Chapter twelve specifically mentioned homosexuality:

Homosexual Orientation: Not condemned. No doctrinal grounds exist for a judgmental attitude by others. All beings are equally embraced by Amida Buddha, the symbol of understanding and caring.

Homosexual Acts: Not condemned; keeping of the three principles are encouraged.

Same-Sex Blessings in Churches: Accepted.

Ordination of Homosexuals: Not prohibited. No doctrinal grounds exist for barring candidates for this reason. (Tanaka, 1997: 217)

This book was warmly received in the BCA and excerpts, including this brief discussion of same-sex marriage, were circulated approvingly in temple newsletters. A further indication of attitudes may be seen in programs held by the BCA. For example, at the 2003 BCA Annual National Council a supportive workshop was held entitled "Enlightenment and Homosexuality." On April 10, 2009 the Institute of Buddhist Studies (IBS) presented a panel called "Strangers to Each Other: Names Without Faces or Stories" (Institute of Buddhist Studies, 2009b). This panel was designed to connect area ministers (not only Buddhist) to the experiences of religious LGBT persons in the Bay Area.

Beyond the official printed record and actions of the institutional leadership, there is

the matter of attitudes in the Buddhist Churches of America temples themselves. Although rarely a matter of any dispute, individual opinions range from full welcoming to intolerance. Anecdotally, there appears to be a degree of low-level homophobia on the part of some individuals. This appears to relate to certain Japanese cultural attitudes toward masculinity, honor, and privacy, or sometimes to American cultural homophobia, but is never connected to Buddhist religious ideas. Many temples have openly homosexual members and couples. A typical anecdote comes from the Tacoma, Washington temple. This is an older temple, considered relatively conservative by some in the BCA, but no one expressed any discomfort when a gay couple joined. One of the men liked to cook so he was admitted to the Buddhist Women's Association (!), which traditionally does most of the work around food preparation for the temple's many events (Koyama, 2011). David Matsumoto, minister of the Berkeley Buddhist Temple and professor at IBS, put the matter this way: "We don't have any rules or prescriptions. There's never been any hint of a discussion of gays and lesbians being seen in a negative light or talked about pejoratively. We can't say there is absolutely no prejudice at all in any individuals, but on an institutional level there has never been any issue. We've all made efforts to present Jodo Shinshu and Buddhism in general as accepting and tolerant" (Matsumoto, 2011). This statement seems accurate. At the same time, it should be recognized that because little in the way of systematic effort has been undertaken to address prejudice, BCA institutions tend to operate with default heterosexist assumptions. Thus widespread acceptance but a lack of visibility or awareness of their particular needs, rather than active persecution, is the situation LGBT persons face in BCA temples.

Same-Sex Marriage in American Buddhism

Much of the history of same-sex marriage in North America is shrouded in mystery; as such relationships were intentionally hidden from public view until recently. Individual clergy in the Unitarian and Universalist denominations began to perform same-sex marriages or analogous services (holy unions, blessings, etc.) in the late 1950s, followed by certain Episcopalian and United Methodist ministers in the late 1960s (Pipes, 2011; Cromey, 2011; Wake, 2011).² Depending on the situation, these services may or may not have been known by the churches these ministers served, and even in those cases where the congregation was aware, upper levels of the relevant denomination were typically unaware of these ceremonies. Also, during this time period the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) was established specifically to minister to homosexuals, and began offering holy unions in late 1968 (Zerilli, 2011). In the 1970s these tentative beginnings evolved into the first public same-sex marriages/unions that attracted attention from both the media and the denominations (Jordan, 2005: 15). Leaving aside the MCC, which was a new religious movement, the first historic denomination to affirm same-sex union ceremonies was the Unitarian Universalist Association in 1984 (in 1996 they affirmed full legal marriage equality as well). A few other denominations, such as the United Church of Christ, certain Quaker groups, and Reform Judaism, have

² These and similar citations come from interviews collected in the process of documenting early same-sex marriages by various North American religious groups.

reached a position affirming same-sex marriage, but generally it is a matter of extreme conflict in American denominations, including the Episcopalians and Methodists. Among Christians particularly, denominational support for same-sex marriage is the exception, far from the rule, in the United States.

Jodo Shinshu and Soka Gakkai have been the most frequent performers of same-sex marriages in America. Same-sex marriages have occasionally been performed by other Buddhists, but not in large numbers. The pioneering teachers Shunryu Suzuki, Taizen Maezumi, and Chogyam Trungpa all had gay and bisexual students from quite early on, but there are no known instances of them performing same-sex ceremonies. In the early 1980s Robert Aitken, who had a gay son, became an advocate for gays and lesbians in American Zen Buddhism (Whitney, 2000: 97). He helped support the first gay and lesbian groups set up in the San Francisco Bay Area, but in 1995, shortly before his retirement, he had not yet performed a same-sex ceremony (Aitken, 1995). Sarika Dharma (born Renee Gail Richmond) of the International Buddhist Meditation Center in Los Angeles is known to have conducted approximately ten same-sex marriages. Ordained in Taiwan in 1977, she died in 1996 (Dart, 1995). The exact dates of her ceremonies are unclear. Lesbian activists Pat and Karen Norma were married in 1984 in a ceremony co-presided over by James Sandmire (a well-known MCC pastor) and "a Buddhist priestess," who may have been Sarika Dharma, or perhaps a Jodo Shinshu minister or member of yet another Buddhist organization (Sherman, 1992: 213). Same-sex ceremonies have occasionally been performed at Zen Mountain Monastery, established in 1980, but it is not certain when the first one was held (Hudson, 1996: 6).

Better documentation begins in the 1990s. In 1992 two men were married in a Denver Unitarian-Universalist church in a wedding co-presided over by the Unitarian-Universalist minister and Judith Simmer-Brown, a senior teacher in the Shambhala lineage and professor at Naropa University (Logan-Olivas, 1992: 21). This was the first same-sex ceremony she had performed (Simmer-Brown, 2011). In 1994 Theravadin monks chanted a sutta (Buddhist scripture) during a same-sex ceremony held at a Quaker meetinghouse in the Washington D.C. area (Hudson, 1996). Lama Kunzang Palden married two women in 1997 at a ceremony held in St. Helena, California (Corless, 1998: 333). Wendy Egyoku Nakao of the Zen Center of Los Angeles held her first such ceremony in 1999 (Nakao, 2011). A gay marriage was performed in 2003 at the Greens restaurant, affiliated with San Francisco Zen Center, and priests of that center have conducted same-sex weddings at Green Gulch Farm Zen Center and various places in the wider community, though apparently not at City Center (the group's primary location) or Tassajara Zen Mountain Retreat (Silderman, 2009). Other groups have surely held such ceremonies, but many Buddhist groups are not very involved in performing weddings in the first place, so the practice should not be considered widespread.

Record of Same-Sex Unions in the Buddhist Churches of America

The Buddhist Churches of America are the largest and most important North American representative of Jodo Shinshu, often called Shin Buddhism. Founded by Shinran in

1224, it is the largest school of Buddhism in Japan. Jodo Shinshu is a form of Pure Land Buddhism, one of the dominant mainstream Buddhist traditions of the last 1,500 years in East Asia. Japanese immigrants brought Shin Buddhism to Hawaii in the 1880s, and established the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii in 1889. The Buddhist Church of San Francisco was the first Shin temple in North America, founded in 1898. The following year the Buddhist Churches of America (at that time called the Buddhist Mission of North America) was founded in San Francisco as the umbrella organization for all of the continental North American temples (Hawaiian temples are affiliated with the HHMH, and the Canadian temples have had their own bishop since the late 1960s). The BCA headquarters, where the American bishop has his office, is next to the San Francisco temple. After its sister organization the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii, the BCA is the oldest Buddhist organization in America (there are a handful of individual temples that are older), and for most of the 20th century it was the largest Buddhist organization outside Asia.

The Buddhist Church of San Francisco is located on Pine Street about a mile and a half northeast of the Castro District, the city's best-known gay neighborhood. The exact date when the Buddhist Church of San Francisco held its first same-sex wedding is unknown. There are rumors at the temple that the first such ceremony was held as far back as the 1950s. It is impossible to confirm such rumors, and while they seem unlikely, they cannot be fully rejected even at this early date: after all, by 1958 Rev. Harry Scholefield at the First Unitarian Society of San Francisco (just a quarter mile from the San Francisco temple) had performed a same-sex marriage (Wilson, 2012). What we can say is that the first verifiable same-sex weddings were carried out by Rev. Koshin Ogui, who was assigned to the San Francisco temple beginning in 1970 (Ogui, 2011). He served there until 1976, and performed several weddings for male couples (exact dates are unknown). Even if these were performed at the latest point on this range, in 1976, they would still be early in the American history of religious same-sex ceremonies, and the first documented Buddhist ones.

The men in these partnerships already attended the temple regularly, and approached Ogui to marry them. One of these couples was Japanese-American, while the others were Euro-American. Ogui did not have any objections, so he conducted the weddings in the temple's main sanctuary, carrying out the services in the same manner as he would opposite-sex ceremonies—the only change was to the pronouns used in the service. Because they were not legally-recognized weddings Ogui did not record them in the official temple register, but neither did he make any attempt to hide them from the temple membership or wider public.

Ogui was not the only BCA minister performing same-sex ceremonies in the 1970s. In 1977 Rev. Joren MacDonald of the Seabrook Buddhist Temple in New Jersey was approached by two Euro-American women in their 30s (MacDonald, 2011). They were not Buddhist and did not attend the temple, but they felt that Christian churches in the area would not accommodate them. MacDonald was willing to help them. She later explained, "The Buddha says that all living things are equal. I'm equal to a carrot, a tree, a rock, which is alive in a way." She performed the ceremony at the ladies' house. That was her only such ceremony for some time until she became the minister at the Visalia

Buddhist Temple in California. Starting in 1996, non-Buddhist same-sex couples began approaching her for unions. Word got around that she performed these services, and she did ten such ceremonies before retiring. Only one of these was a legal marriage ceremony, performed on the Fourth of July, 2008, when a lesbian couple from the Idaho-Oregon Buddhist Temple traveled to Visalia to have her marry them. As with Ogui, MacDonald did not alter her ceremonies significantly when performing them for same-sex vs. opposite-sex couples. But whereas Ogui performed his services in the worship hall of the temple because the couples were Buddhists, MacDonald performed her services for her non-Buddhist clients offsite in homes, wineries, rented halls, outdoors, and so on.

Ogui and MacDonald were the first BCA ministers known to perform same-sex unions. In the 1980s, Taitetsu Unno performed at least one same-sex marriage (Unno, A., 2011). Unno, a former BCA minister serving as a professor of Buddhist Studies at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, was approached by an HIV-positive Buddhist couple (Euro-American) who wanted a ceremony. Unno often turned down marriage requests by heterosexual couples, but he agreed to perform the ceremony in this instance because they had no one else to do it. His wife, also a fully-ordained minister, served as the witness. Both men passed away within a year. The mid-1980s is also when Rev. Hiroshi Abiko performed his first same-sex wedding, while he was serving the BCA temple in Palo Alto (Abiko, 2011). A Euro-American couple affiliated with a Buddhist meditation lineage (i.e. not Jodo Shinshu) came to him for a service. He performed it exactly the same as an opposite-sex marriage. Abiko has done other same-sex services since, most recently at the Buddhist Church of San Francisco in 2009. He had recently left there to head the downtown Los Angeles temple but returned to co-officiate this service with Ron Kobata, current head minister of the San Francisco temple, and a rabbi (Kobata, 2011).

By the 1990s, the gay and lesbian community had undergone profound changes since the late 1960s. Significantly, the community had become less countercultural and now contained a growing number of people interested in marriage rights rather than rejecting marriage as a heterosexual and/or outmoded model of partnership (Warner, 1999: 87). Multiple factors led to this shift, including the AIDS crisis (which led to greater engagement with the legal and medical establishments) and the aging of the Baby Boom generation (which led to a greater emphasis on domesticity and longer-term partnerships). This greater demand for same-sex marriages seems to have affected the number of BCA ministers doing same-sex ceremonies. Rev. Gerald Sakamoto of the San Jose temple did his first same-sex ceremony in 1991 (Sakamoto, 2011). The couple was not Buddhist but felt they had nowhere else to go, and they wanted some sort of religious recognition of their union. He offered to perform it in the temple sanctuary but they decided to hold it at a community center. As with other such ceremonies, the only alteration was to minor language elements such as pronouns. Explaining his decision, Sakamoto said, "In Buddhism there is a built in recognition of the value of everyone. Most Buddhist traditions wouldn't have difficulties doing same-sex marriages. And Shin especially is more egalitarian."

Rev. T. Kenjitsu Nakagaki performed a couple of same-sex weddings at the New York

Buddhist Church, the first one in 1999 (Nakagaki, 2011b). The women were from Japan, but were not members of the temple (Nakagaki, 2011a). Rev. LaVerne Sasaki did a wedding for a male couple at the Buddhist Church of San Francisco in 1999 (Sasaki, 2011). One of the men was a prominent Euro-American lay member of the temple. Sasaki considered such services a natural part of Jodo Shinshu, explaining "There is no scriptural statement or authority against it. Buddha never said he was for heterosexual marriage only. He didn't say much about marriage at all, in fact."

One of the more interesting cases was in April 2000. Rev. Masao Kodani of Senshin Buddhist Temple in Los Angeles performed a ceremony for two women, one of whom (a member of his temple) was a male-to-female transsexual (Kodani, 2011). Kodani was willing to do the service but inquired about it through channels to hear what the head temple in Kyoto thought about it. The Kangaku (highest doctrinal experts) of Nishi Honganji replied that there was no reason for concern. So long as the couple had a legitimate reason to seek a Buddhist service, and the event was not merely a publicity stunt, they had no objections to marriages involving same-sex couples and/or transsexuals. Given that Nishi Honganji is the headquarters for more than 10,000 affiliated Shin temples throughout the world, this is an important statement to note. Kodani performed the ceremony, though apparently with some worry (groundless, as it turned out) that he might receive backlash from the community (Kammerer, 2011). The only change to the ceremony was the use of the word "spouse" instead of "husband and wife." Though not involving a same-sex couple, that same year Rev. Mark Unno officiated at a lay ceremony in a Seattle dance hall. The wife was bisexual and had had a prior relationship with a woman, and the couple formulated their wedding vows in such a manner that the marriage was "open," allowing the spouses to potentially be involved with additional persons (Unno, M., 2011).

In 2004 Rev. Donald Castro of the Seattle temple was called upon to do a wedding for a female couple (Castro, 2011). One partner was Japanese-American from Hawaii; the other was Euro-American. Just days before the service was scheduled, the Hawaiian fiancée died, so a funeral was unfortunately performed instead. In 2005 Rev. William Briones of the Nishi Hongwanji Los Angeles Betsuin (the downtown Los Angeles BCA temple) did a same-sex wedding at an Episcopalian church in Pasadena (Briones, 2011). An Episcopalian priest co-officiated with him.

The practice became widely public in 2008, when California—where the majority of BCA temples are located—legalized same-sex marriage. Rev. Gregory Gibbs performed one such wedding at the elegant Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in downtown Los Angeles for a mixed Japanese-American and Euro-American couple (Gibbs, 2011a). There was a huge party, quite swanky since one of the grooms worked for Gucci. But this was not the most publicized same-sex wedding performed by a BCA minister in Los Angeles that year. That distinction indisputably belongs to the marriage of George Takei, best known as Lieutenant Sulu from the *Star Trek* television series.

Takei grew up in the Buddhist Churches of America, where he did some of his first acting for temple plays. As *Rafu Shinpo*, a Japanese-American newspaper based in Los Angeles described: "With a splash of Broadway and 'Star Trek,' George Takei married

Brad Altman, declaring themselves partners for life in a moving ceremony at the National Center for the Preservation of Democracy in Little Tokyo on Sunday... Standing within a ring of yellow orchids and roses, Takei, 71, and Altman, 54, exchanged vows in the Democracy Center in a Buddhist ceremony presided over by Rev. William Briones, Nishi Hongwanji Buddhist Temple" (Muranaka, 2008). The guests included Senator Daniel Inouye, Los Angeles Councilwoman Jan Perry, civil rights leaders, and many others. Nichelle Nichols (Star Trek's "Uhura") and Walter Koenig ("Chekov") served as best woman and man. The gala event attracted international media attention, and mention of the Buddhist nature of the event appeared in *Time*, *People*, *The New York Daily News*, Fox News, and elsewhere.

Also in Los Angeles, Rev. Patricia Usuki of the San Fernando Valley Hongwanji Buddhist Temple performed a legal wedding for two women in 2008 (Usuki, 2011). The women were Euro-American members of her congregation, and the ceremony was held at their home. Rev. Robert Oshita married a Euro-American lesbian couple from his temple in Sacramento in October 2008 (Oshita, 2011). As he put it, "There's something about Buddhism that's open about these things. There's a sense that nondiscrimination is essential." And in Berkeley, Rev. David Matsumoto performed a same-sex wedding in 2008 for a couple who were not members of his temple (Matsumoto, 2011).

In all, thirty-six current or retired Buddhist Churches of America ministers were interviewed for this project. Fifteen had performed same-sex ceremonies already. Of the other twenty-one ministers, all indicated that they were willing to perform them if asked to do so. Ministers who had actually carried out such weddings included men and women, Japanese, Americans (including Japanese-Americans, Euro-Americans, and Latinos), and Canadians, older and younger ministers, temple ministers and solo ministers. They took place on both the East and West Coasts. Ceremonies were performed for Japanese, Japanese-American, Euro-American, and mixed couples, for male and female couples, for transsexuals and non-transsexuals, for bisexuals, temple members, Buddhists of other lineages, Christians, Jews, and non-religious persons. Both legally-recognized and purely ceremonial weddings were carried out, in temples, homes, secular spaces, and non-Buddhist churches. From all of this it appears that there is no true pattern in terms of who performs or asks for such ceremonies—rather, same-sex marriage is widely affirmed by ministers of all types, for people of all types, and has been available within the BCA for at least 35–40 years.

Public Support for Same-Sex Marriages

Aside from the marriage of George Takei, same-sex ceremonies performed by Buddhist Churches of America ministers have generally been affairs involving only the minister, the spouses, and invited guests. Some were done more or less in secret, while others were public but not actively publicized. For the ministers involved, it has always been a matter of supporting others, affirming the love between two people, and providing Buddhist guidance in life. Thus these ceremonies have typically been seen as religious, not political acts. This does not mean, however, that BCA ministers have been unwilling to take official public positions on same-sex marriage. The most important such

incident occurred in 2004, when the Buddhist Churches of America Ministers' Association issued a resolution on the subject.

The origins of the resolution lie in Multnomah County, Oregon, where Rev. Gregory Gibbs of the Oregon Buddhist Temple lives. In 2004 Multnomah began issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples. The issue had not arisen previously at the Oregon temple, so Gibbs called Rev. Koshin Ogui (who by that time was the bishop of the entire Buddhist Churches of America) for clarification of the BCA's position (Gibbs, 2011b). Ogui told Gibbs that he had been doing same-sex marriages for thirty years or so, and that the BCA's position was that ministers preside at marriages for whoever asks sincerely, regardless of such details as sex. Gibbs decided that it would be useful to educate the other ministers who, like him, might not have known this, and to create a statement that could be issued in opposition of the various anti-same-sex marriage bills that were being created in the lead-up to the November 2004 election season.

The annual Ministers' Association meeting was held August 18, 2004. Gibbs submitted a resolution supporting same-sex marriage, and asked for debate on the issue. There was almost none (Gibbs, 2011b). Ogui mentioned that he had been doing same-sex marriages since the 1970s. Rev. Masao Kodani described the ceremony he did in 2000 and that the Kangaku had approved it. Rev. Gerald Sakamoto, who had done a same-sex ceremony in 1991, was chairman of the Ministers' Association. No one spoke against the resolution, and less than ten minutes after it had been raised, the proposal was passed unanimously.³ In contrast, the resolution issued the previous year had generated far more debate. In 2003 Gibbs had proposed a resolution opposing the invasion of Iraq by the United States. The debate over that resolution dragged on for over two hours, with two senior ministers supporting the invasion and a number of other ministers opposing any political stand by the BCA. The resolution (modified to speak against preemptive attacks in general) passed, but with opposition. Same-sex marriage, however, even as an overt political stand by the BCA, failed to arouse any ministerial qualms. The only indication of possible disagreement was never-confirmed speculation that an older minister who had already returned home from the meeting might have left early in order to avoid the resolution vote.

The same-sex marriage resolution was released to the media and sent to President George Bush, but no reply was received. Gibbs returned to Portland and spoke about the resolution with his temple community (Gibbs, 2011b). He declared that he intended to perform same-sex marriages if requested, but that it was up to each individual temple member to make up their own minds about the issue, and furthermore that he would only hold them at the temple itself if the congregation decided that they approved such

³ The final text of the resolution was:

WHEREAS, there is no negative judgment of homosexuality in the Buddhist religion,
WHEREAS, a number of BCA ministers have been performing same-sex weddings for a period of at least thirty years,
WHEREAS, we wish to affirm the worthiness of all persons independent of sexual orientation.
NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, that the Ministers Association of the Buddhist Churches of America oppose any governmental prohibition of same-sex marriage.

ceremonies. For several months he actively solicited feedback through the temple newsletter and by making announcements during the weekly Sunday service. He eventually received fifty responses: forty-eight were positive, with comments such as "I feel so proud that our temple could be a place for these ceremonies." Two people indicated opposition. One was a case where the person, already self-conscious of Buddhism's minority status, feared that outside homophobes might cause trouble for the temple. The other was a woman opposed to homosexuality, who withdrew her membership. No other disaffiliations occurred, and Gibbs concluded that the temple was clearly in support of the resolution and his performance of same-sex marriages.

Since the 2004 resolution, the BCA has repeatedly reaffirmed its public support for same-sex marriage. In September 2007 the BCA signed an interfaith "friend of the court" brief sent to the California Supreme Court declaring that same-sex marriage is a civil right and its denial violates religious freedom (California Faith for Equality, 2007). The brief mentioned that BCA ministers had been doing same-sex ceremonies for more than thirty years. In the years since the 2004 resolution *Wheel of Dharma* (the official monthly newspaper of the Buddhist Churches of America) has published many articles supporting same-sex marriage, offering detailed Buddhist theological reasoning for such ceremonies. It has also published photographs of Revs. Joren MacDonald and William Briones performing marriages for same-sex couples who belong to the BCA (Anon, 2008; Briones, 2008a). That these articles and pictures appeared in *Wheel of Dharma* is interpreted by BCA members as indication of the official position of the denomination (Institute of Buddhist Studies, 2009a).

Opposition to this official stance has been very thin. Of the dozens of ministers and a number of laypeople queried for this article, only one had a relatively recent story to tell. In 2008, the same older minister (by then retired) who was rumored to have skipped the 2004 resolution vote attempted to collect signatures in support of California's anti-same-sex marriage Proposition 8 during a function at a temple (Koyama, 2011). Another minister confronted him, declared his actions to be inappropriate (not because they contradicted BCA policy, but because laypeople should not be pressured politically by ministers), and prevented him from continuing. He also refused himself to sign the petition, as he supports same-sex rights. Other than the actions of this now retired minister (who, it should be noted, nonetheless allowed the junior minister at his temple to perform same-sex weddings) and the sole congregant in Portland who withdrew her membership, no other incidents of opposition to same-sex marriage are known. This does not mean that there was no resistance, or that disapproval was not expressed privately in various situations. The point is that public opposition was so attenuated, especially in comparison with the contentious debates in many other American religious groups.

The Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii has also gone on the record in supporting equal rights for same-sex couples. The earliest suggestion of underlying support came in 1995, when Hawaii was in the midst of a debate about legalizing same-sex marriage in the state. The Commission on Sexual Orientation and the Law heard testimony from various religious figures on the subject. Diana Paw U of the Hawai'i Association of International Buddhists (an ecumenical Buddhist group that received much of its initial

support from Jodo Shinshu temples) testified that Rev. Yoshiaki Fujitani had told her that Shin Buddhism performs same-sex marriages, commenting that "Amida Buddha in his infinite compassion accepts all of us as we are" (U, 1995). Fujitani was bishop of the Hawaiian temples from 1975–1987. Another Hawaiian bishop, Chikai Yosemite (bishop from 1996–2007), when asked at a ministers' meeting whether it was acceptable for HHMH ministers to perform same-sex marriages, answered "Yes, of course!" (Bloom, 2011). In 1997 the HHMH's Ministers' Association held a workshop, "Should Same-Sex Marriages Be Legal?" (Nakamura, 1997). While no specific position was pushed on the attendees, the debate was framed in terms of compassion toward all, interdependence, and opening the gate of Buddhahood as widely as possible, with no implication that same-sex relationships were different or inferior to opposite ones. In 2001 the Hawaii State Federation of Honpa Hongwanji Lay Associations passed a resolution opposing the Boy Scouts of America's policy against gay scoutmasters. Same-sex marriage was not mentioned, but the affirmative attitude toward homosexuals was clear. As a reporter for the Honolulu Star Bulletin was told, "We believe in inclusiveness. The Buddha made forty-eight vows in achieving enlightenment. Number eighteen, titled the Primal Vow, is to include all sentient beings. The concept is that we should not be excluding anyone" (Adamski, 2002). More discussion of this Primal Vow and its implication for Shin Buddhist attitudes toward homosexuality is provided below.

With this background, it is not surprising that the HHMH eventually made a very public statement about same-sex rights, stimulated in part by the success of the BCA's 2004 resolution and the publicity around George Takei's 2008 BCA wedding. The immediate cause was a bill passed by the Hawaii state senate in early 2010 designed to create same-sex civil unions. Many Hawaiian religious groups vocally opposed the bill, and the Shin Buddhists decided their voice should be part of the debate (Gee, 2010). During the February 12–13 annual legislative assembly of the HHMH, the Social Concerns Committee proposed a detailed resolution supporting equal rights for same-sex couples. Entitled "Establishing the Rights of Same-Gender Couples," the resolution was passed and sent to the government and media.⁴

⁴ The full text of the resolution was:

WHEREAS, the Dharma (universal teachings) provides guidance on how to live mindfully with an awareness of universal compassion which embraces and uplifts each and every person; and
 WHEREAS, in order to truly realize universal compassion, we need to cultivate a profound sense of responsibility for the welfare of all beings; and
 WHEREAS, the Buddhist ideal of universal compassion does not discriminate between good and evil, young and old, rich and poor, gay and straight; and
 WHEREAS, Buddhism affirms the inherent worth and dignity of all persons independent of gender; and
 WHEREAS, families today are composed of many combinations and what connects individuals as a family is a conscious commitment to share in the responsibilities of life; and
 WHEREAS, the Dharma (universal teachings) affirms and celebrates human expressions of love and partnership, guiding us to strive for responsible, faithful, and committed relationships that recognize and respect the Buddha-nature (potential for Enlightenment) in all people; and

It should be noted that technically the resolution affirmed civil unions, since that was the actual issue being debated in the legislature (same-sex marriage is not allowed under the Hawaiian constitution), but comments in HHMH temple newsletters and the media made it clear that most interpreted it as actual support for full marriage rights. It is possible that some ministers or laypersons privately disagreed with the resolution, but all mentions of it in temple publications during the following year were affirmative. In recognition of the resolution, the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii was honored in October 2010 with a Distinguished Service Award from the Japanese American Citizens League, Honolulu Chapter (JACL, HC, 2010). In accepting the award Bishop Thomas Okano and President Alton Miyamoto both referred to the parallel between WWII –era persecution of Japanese-Americans and the need to stand up for the rights of sexual minorities.

The 2010 resolution enjoined the HHMH to pursue educational opportunities around same-sex issues in Buddhism. This was acted on in numerous ways. Many temple newsletters publicized and supported the resolution. On July 27, 2010, the Mililani temple held a service dedicated to gay and lesbian issues (Kawamoto, 2010). A film was shown, followed by a panel that voiced the experiences of gay and lesbian persons, as well as some parents with gay or lesbian children. The moderator, Rev. Mary David, told the congregation that "Amida Buddha accepts us just as we are. Therefore the sangha should accept by affirmation other peoples' different sexual orientation and not just passively accept gays and lesbians." A second forum was held on August 30, 2010, at the

WHEREAS, Shakyamuni Buddha, the founding teacher of Buddhism, encouraged people to carefully reflect on all situations and to find truth for themselves by teaching that all beliefs, even the Buddha's own words, should not be accepted unless they have been tested through objective observation, careful logical analysis and positive life experiences; and
 WHEREAS, Shinran Shonin, the founder of Shin Buddhism, affirmed the inherent equality among all people whose lives are karmically (causally) bound and interconnected by teaching that the great Wisdom and Compassion of Amida (ultimate reality) embraces all beings equally and unconditionally without exception; and
 WHEREAS, some Shin Buddhist ministers and Sangha (congregations) have held commitment services to honor the relationships of gay and lesbian couples for some time; and
 WHEREAS, the rights of same-gender couples is an issue deserving of serious and mindful discussion by faith communities;
 NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii, a Shin Buddhist organization, affirms that same-gender couples should have access to equal rights and quality of life as conferred by legally recognized marriage; and
 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that same-gender unions shall be considered equal to opposite-gender unions in ceremonies officiated by its ministers; and
 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii shall pursue opportunities through which its members, friends and the general public can better understand Shin Buddhist teachings in relation to same-gender unions; and
 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that copies of this resolution be transmitted to all temples and organizations affiliated with the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii, other Buddhist organizations in Hawaii, the Governor of the State of Hawaii, members of the Hawaii State Legislature, and members of the Hawaii news media.

Buddhist Study Center in Honolulu. The film "Anyone and Everyone" was shown again, followed by speakers, including the incoming bishop (Eric Matsumoto) of the HHMH and the head of the Pacific Buddhist Academy, the only Buddhist high school in America (Anon., 2010).

Institutional Factors Supporting Same-Sex Marriage

Thus far, this article has discussed the historical fact of American Jodo Shinshu Buddhism's support for same-sex marriages. But it is necessary to also analyze this support and discern *why* Shin Buddhism supported these ceremonies. This is especially true when we consider that other religious denominations (especially Christian and Jewish ones) have experienced and continue to experience tremendous conflict over same-sex marriage, a conflict absent from the Buddhist Churches of America and the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii. And we should note that while some other American Buddhists have been willing to perform same-sex marriages, it is the Shin Buddhists who provided them first and have continued to be one of the primary performers and public supporters of such services. A further significant observation is that whereas affirmation of rights in other denominations were typically achieved through the long-term efforts of openly gay and lesbian activist members, the BCA and HHMH resolutions and practices came about primarily through the efforts of heterosexual members. How can we account for all of this? There are multiple factors, but three in particular seem especially relevant: institutional, historical, and theological elements of Jodo Shinshu in America. Each will now be discussed in turn.

The Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii and the Buddhist Churches of America are, respectively, the two oldest Buddhist organizations in the United States. Established in the late 19th century, they served as the primary community institutions for generations of Japanese immigrants and their descendants. This meant that they had to provide more than just traditional Buddhist functions—in fact, they had to serve both religious and non-religious, social functions (Kashima, 1977). Operating under these circumstances, Shin Buddhist temples transformed themselves into full-service organizations, providing everything from Japanese language and culture classes, to dances and beauty contests, to Boy Scout troops, to marriage ceremonies.

Weddings were not a typical ritual for Buddhism in Asia, whether in Japan or elsewhere. Historically speaking, marriage in Buddhist cultures was a civil matter, with the couple optionally receiving a perfunctory blessing afterwards by a monk, an action not interpreted as actually joining the participants in any way. In Japan specifically, marriage was a civil affair, or in some cases carried out at Shinto shrines. A few reformist monks, looking to compete with foreign Christian missionaries, created Buddhist wedding ceremonies in the late 19th century, but these were rare and by no means part of the Buddhist mainstream (Jaffe, 2001: 169). Buddhism's role in the life cycle had always been to preside over funerals and memorial services. Buddhist clergy dealt with death as ritual specialists, largely leaving other life cycle milestones to the Shinto priesthood to deal with. This division of spiritual labor more or less held true for all traditions in Japan.

When Buddhism left Japan and came to the West, however, it encountered a very different cultural situation. Shinto institutions were extremely rare in America, and marriage in a Christian church required conversion. Furthermore, Christianity in the West provided the model of a full-service religion that catered to all rites of passage. Facing a new situation, Jodo Shinshu Buddhists early evolved a rationale for wedding ceremonies, which became a basic service of their temples. The first recorded wedding at the Buddhist Church of San Francisco was in 1916, performed by then bishop of the BCA Koyu Uchida, and these became basic services performed regularly by ministers at all the temples (Kastritsis, 2011).⁵

Shin Buddhist ministers slipped rather easily into performing marriages because, unlike other Asian lineages, Jodo Shinshu was founded in the 13th century with married, non-celibate clergy. It is through the direct lineal descent of the founder Shinran that the Honganji tradition traces its legitimacy, so that the current head of the school is always a blood descendant of Shinran and his wife Eshinni. Shin ministers in both Japan and abroad are nearly always married, and celibacy is not considered important in this form of Buddhism. Thus when Shin Buddhism arrived in the West family life had always been a central feature of their temples, and compared to celibate monks of other traditions, Shin ministers were intimately familiar with marriage, sexuality, and procreation. They lived lives similar in crucial respects to those of their parishioners, and thus at times could relate more easily and respond more swiftly to changing social needs. While they had not traditionally performed marriages in Japan, as married ministers themselves there was no significant difficulty in adopting Buddhist marriage ceremonies.

Meditation-oriented Buddhist traditions that primarily arrived much later, such as Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, had to go through a similar process of cultural adaptation to America, a process that was still in its infancy in the 1970s. These traditions mainly arrived with solo missionaries or Americans who had studied abroad, rather than in the midst of a large immigrant community with families and a wide range of generations like Jodo Shinshu had been.⁶ They thus were less immediately impacted by family issues such as the demand for marriage ceremonies, though these did sometimes occur in the new communities they built. Furthermore, these traditions were historically based on celibate monastic orders, which were relatively ill-fit to organically develop wedding ceremonies and perform them frequently. In the late 19th century Zen and other non-Shin Buddhist traditions in Japan began to move away from celibacy, and by the 1970s married monks were common in all Japanese traditions. But they nonetheless were not typically involved in wedding rites in Japan, and while many Buddhist missionaries were themselves married, schools such as Zen still retained an official orientation toward celibacy. On the Tibetan side, some teachers such as Chogyam

⁵ Weddings for Japanese living in America were performed in Japan prior to 1916 (during the so-called "picture bride era"), with proxies standing in for the groom.

⁶ A small number of immigrant-based Zen temples began to appear in America (first in Hawaii and then on the mainland) around the turn of the 20th century, but Zen was very much a minority tradition among Japanese-Americans. Tibetans formed an immigrant community in the later 20th century but their numbers were small.

Trungpa had renounced celibacy, but Tibetan Buddhist leadership was dominated by celibate lamas. Newer immigrant communities who began arriving after the 1965 removal of racist immigration laws—such as the Thai, Chinese, and Cambodians—maintained strict monastic celibacy, and as recent arrivals (many of them refugees) their concerns often focused initially on maintaining some continuity with Asian traditions, rather than rapid innovation or concern for sexual minorities in America. It is also important to note that converts to Zen and Tibetan Buddhism in the 1960s and 70s were often predisposed to counter-cultural anti-institutionalism, which diminished the demand for ceremonies such as marriage and retarded the growth of institutions empowered to perform them. Even today, the average cleric in these traditions has likely never performed any wedding, heterosexual or otherwise.

All of these general trends contrast with the situation of the Buddhist Churches of America, which had an orientation toward accommodation with mainstream culture and already had two full generations worth of opposite-sex weddings performed in America, carried out by married ministers in a Buddhist tradition that was inherently accepting toward the fact of human sexuality. Indeed, by the early 1970s BCA ministers and their counterparts in Hawaii had performed thousands (probably, tens of thousands) of Buddhist weddings. Thus at the time when the gay liberation movement was taking off and an expanded sense of the possibilities of gay and lesbian life in America (including perhaps marriage) was dawning, the Jodo Shinshu organizations were certainly among the best situated Buddhist groups to offer same-sex marriages.

Historical Factors Supporting Same-Sex Marriage

To put it simply, the Japanese-American members of Buddhist institutions experienced intense prejudice during the 19th and 20th centuries, and this made them disinclined to approve of prejudice against others. From the beginning, Japanese Buddhist immigrants faced intolerance based on both race and religion. Laws prevented Japanese-Americans from owning land, voting, and eventually choked off Japanese immigration. Japanese-American individuals, businesses, and temples faced intimidation, harassment, and violence. This culminated in the internment of Japanese-Americans during WWII. The concentration camps were a profoundly traumatic experience, and the sudden and long-term removal caused economic dislocation which cost many families nearly all of their possessions (many temples, meanwhile, were vandalized, burglarized, or burnt down) (Kashima, 1977).

Experiences of discrimination do not always lead groups to affirm tolerance as a general principle or to express tolerance toward other groups. In the case of the BCA and HHMH, their experience of oppression did bring about an aversion to intolerance seen clearly in the attitudes and actions of many members. Referencing their own history of discrimination, Buddhist Churches of America members have advocated for the rights of African-Americans, American Muslims, Native Americans, and other groups, both in their denominational publications and through lobbying the government. This can be seen as part of a long history of pioneering work on social issues by Shin Buddhists, including the creation of the first American Buddhist prison

ministries, hospital chaplains, charitable organizations, women's groups, schools, and so on (Anon., 1998).

When gay and lesbian rights became a major public issue beginning in the early 1970s, Shin Buddhists once again looked to their own history for guidance. Articles by and interviews with Jodo Shinshu ministers who support same-sex marriage frequently cite the internment experience and extrapolate from the suffering of the Japanese-Americans to reject any form of discrimination. For example, Rev. John Iwohara, minister of the Venice Hongwanji Temple, wrote in his temple's newsletter:

Recently, the issue of equal rights for people who are Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, and Trans-gender (LGBT) has come up again because of the issues surrounding same sex marriage rights. This is an issue that should not simply be ignored. Perhaps Martin Luther King, Jr. expressed it most eloquently when he stated, "*Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.*" Because of this, although at first it may not appear that prejudice against the LGBT is my issue, as a Japanese-American man—as a person who had to experience discrimination himself—and a person who has both friends and family who are gay, for me to blindly turn away would be to support and maintain the fact that *when the shoe is on the other foot, it kicks just as hard.* (Iwohara, 2010: 1)

Ministers in Hawaii likewise drew on the history of oppression, as in this excerpt from an article on same-sex unions by Rev. Bruce Nakamura:

This internment marks a very dark chapter in our national and constitutional history. Out of that period of racial, social, and political injustice, the integrity of the American judicial system was later tested as Japanese Americans demanded remuneration and our government's official apology for having committed a grave betrayal against its own citizens. The shared experiences of the Japanese Americans subject to the war years and its aftermath on all fronts deserved not only an honest retelling; it demanded a reclaiming of human truth and justice to safeguard equal protection under the law, not just for most Americans but for all Americans. This tragic drama taught our communities and our nation that no person or group can or should abridge, deny or circumvent the broader right, privilege, and responsibility for equal protection under the law of any person or group based upon race, creed, religion, or gender. (Nakamura, 2010, pp. 1–2, 11)

Laypeople too recognized this pattern, as noted in this quote from Blayne Higa, chairman of the HHMH Social Concerns Committee: "It's funny, our older members were some of the biggest champions [of the pro-same-sex civil unions resolution]. The really older members remembered a time when Japanese-Americans were discriminated against or interned during the war. For them it really was a no-brainer, it was really just common sense" (Gee, 2010).

Thus in the 1970s Shin Buddhists, who had already developed an ethos of non-discrimination and a suspicion of government interference with any minority, were well-prepared to react with acceptance to the emerging needs of a group facing

prejudice. Even those ministers who had not experienced the internment (Ogui, for example, immigrated to America in 1962) lived and worked in an environment profoundly shaped by the historic oppression of the Japanese-Americans, and all ministers had numerous members in their congregations who had experienced the camps. Part of the fundamental narrative of the Buddhist Churches of America, the camp experiences and related discrimination undercut the logic for any form of prejudice that might be advanced in the denomination.

Theological Elements that Support Same-Sex Marriage

Institutional and historic factors impactful on the Buddhist Churches of America and Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii are only part of the reason that these groups have been able to affirm same-sex marriage. There are also specific theological elements of Shin Buddhism that have to be attended to, and which help explain why ministers at BCA temples were sooner and more consistently affirmative of same-sex marriages than Christian churches, including Japanese-American ones whose members also experienced discrimination and which had a long history of opposite-sex marriage.⁷ There are three Shin Buddhist teachings in particular that are important to this project: the lack of black-and-white rules, the concept of interconnection, and the teaching of Amida Buddha's all-embracing Primal Vow.

Jodo Shinshu is a type of Pure Land Buddhism, based on the legend of Amida Buddha. According to the Pure Land sutras, while training to become enlightened Dharmakara Bodhisattva (the future Amida Buddha) made forty-eight vows to create a pure realm of happiness and peace where everyone could swiftly attain buddhahood (Nagao, 2009). From the Shin Buddhist perspective, the most important of these is the eighteenth vow, wherein Dharmakara vows to save all beings who call on him, without discrimination. This is typically referred to as the Primal or Original Vow of Amida. Jodo Shinshu practice is based on trust in the power of Amida's vows, rather than in merit-making, individual meditation practice, or strict personal morality (Unno, 1989). Thus while Jodo Shinshu is the largest Buddhist tradition in Japan and one of the most important traditions in America, it also has some distinctive elements that separate it from other denominations. Buddhist Studies professor Taitetsu Unno has asserted that the story of the Primal Vow makes Pure Land Buddhism such as Jodo Shinshu "historically the most inclusive Buddhist salvific scheme" (Unno, 1996: 313).⁸

In explaining their justification for same-sex ceremonies, BCA and HHMH members consistently raise the point that Buddhism has no rules against homosexuality, and that Jodo Shinshu in particular is (in their opinions) the least moralistic form of Buddhism. Here for example is the explanation of Rev. Hiroshi Abiko, who presided over a

⁷ In the Buddhist context, use of the term "theological" denotes cosmological, metaphysical, and philosophical ideas—technically, there is no "theos" in Buddhism as Jodo Shinshu, like other traditions, does not promote belief in God.

⁸ This should not obscure the fact of historic discrimination against women, *burakumin*, and others. But as a general comparative rule, Unno's observation is defensible.

same-sex wedding at the Buddhist Church of San Francisco: "The criteria for being a Jodo Shinshu Buddhist is so wide: you just have to be a living being. . . Jodo Shinshu is not about following any rules or doing any required practice. It's about getting the meaning of life for yourself and appreciating this life that you are living. In that way, it doesn't matter if you are heterosexual or homosexual, does it? Everyone has a precious life" (Abiko, 2011). Rev. William Briones went into greater detail on this topic:

Since the California Supreme Court issued a ruling granting gays the right to marry, I have been approached on several occasions and asked what the Buddhist stance on gender-neutral marriage is. My standard response is... "no problemo."... As Buddhist[s] our primary concern is our own personal awakening to the spiritual truth of wisdom and compassion. In Buddhism we are taught that there are no black and white answers concerning ethical/ moral matters that apply to all people and all circumstances. As Buddhist[s] we are encouraged to think for ourselves in arriving at our own conclusion based upon our own spiritual insights. The teachings are not about one's adherence to a rigid moral set of absolute right and wrong. Shakyamuni Buddha said that he himself was only a teacher ... simply someone who shows the way. He did not insist that he had any right to enforce on others what they should do. A Buddhist does not discuss issues of right and wrong, nor should we be judgmental of others. In Buddhism there are no doctrinal grounds that exist for a judgmental attitude by others. Buddha encouraged people to be reflective and find truth for themselves. (Briones, 2008: 1-2, 4)

In 2004, before the BCA ministers' association issued their resolution, Rev. Jerry Hirano of the Salt Lake Buddhist Temple put his opinion on the record via his temple's newsletter:

The third precept of avoiding sensual misconduct is where the question of gay marriage would fall. In Buddhism, there is no basic difference between homosexuality and heterosexuality... There have been countless studies showing that homosexuality is natural for the homosexual individual. Homosexuality is a natural response for some human beings and animals, just as heterosexuality is for others. If we agree that sexuality is a natural part of the human psyche, we must ask what is natural about celibacy, which is encouraged by the Catholic priesthood? ... If we were to use the Buddha's words from the Dhammapada to judge homosexuality or in this instance homosexual marriage: "The deed which causes remorse afterwards and results in weeping and tears is ill-done. The deed which causes no remorse afterwards and results in joy and happiness is well done." What do you believe to be the result? I have only observed tears of joy from those couples that were finally recognized as a couple. Why would you deny them that because of your own personal prejudice or discrimination? ... For myself, I have found that I have broken each of these five precepts many times. I try not to break them, but I am weak. As Shinran says, "Immeasurable is the light of Wisdom. Of all beings with limited attributes, none is there unblessed by the Light. Take refuge in true illumination." With my limited attributes I can only try to be mindful of my actions and to try to act without causing harm to others and

myself. I really don't have time to be judging others, while trying to be mindful of my own actions. I am grateful that Amida Buddha accepts me as I am. This doesn't mean that I can or will do that for myself or others, only that I will try. As a result, all I can do is to deeply respond with a grateful *Namo Amida Butsu*. (Hirano, 2004)⁹

This discussion can be usefully analyzed because it adeptly lays out a basic American Jodo Shinshu approach to ethics, demonstrating a pattern that can be seen in Shin discussions of homosexuality, as well as many other issues. Hirano begins by denying that Buddhism has any strong moral position concerning homosexuality, establishing thereby that the tradition is not homophobic and that Buddhist precepts are not explicit universal commandments to be obeyed. He then lays out an implicit ethical approach to his subject. First he declares that homosexuality is normal, and that sexuality in general is natural and healthy. Next, he draws on Buddhist scripture to suggest a situational ethics: that which brings good results is good, rather than rigidly defined set codes of conduct. He then asserts an implied set of moral guidelines: it is the person who seeks to discriminate, rather than the homosexual, who is the wrongdoer. In a distinctive Jodo Shinshu move, however, he then immediately turns the finger of accusation to point at himself. Following Shin Buddhist theory, which asserts that human beings are incapable of truly good behavior and therefore must rely on the liberating power of Amida Buddha, Hirano admits to his own inability to follow the various precepts and places himself on the same level as both the homosexual breaking social mores and the bigot violating Buddhist tolerance. From this humbled viewpoint, he asserts that just as he is, he is saved by the Light of Wisdom (a synonym for Amida) precisely because Amida Buddha reaches out to all weak and limited beings. He communicates his moral message to potential homophobes that judgmentalism is wrong, but does so not by directly critiquing them, but by pointing out his own flaws and thus providing them with a model of proper Shin Buddhist humility in relations with others. In fact, he says that he too may not be able to live without judging, but he will try, and will be accepted either way.

Thus without ever overtly blaming homophobes, in a few short lines Hirano flips the issue so that the real moral violation is intolerance rather than homosexuality, and then pastorally assures those guilty of such ethical lapses that he too is imperfect, and since his imperfect self is accepted by Amida, there is still a place for them as well. He concludes with the determination to continue reflecting on his own evils rather than others' and to respond to his grateful awareness of Amida's benevolence by saying *Namo Amida Butsu*.¹⁰ Analyzed in this way, we can note that Jodo Shinshu is indeed devoid of firm rules—meaning that it is open to the possibility of tolerance toward homosexuality—and that it nonetheless affirms an underlying ethical stance that values reasoned investigation of each potentially unethical act, concern for whether harm is done, and holds up tolerance, humility, and gratitude as the moral guides for Buddhist

⁹ This article was reprinted in the denominational newspaper as Hirano 2006.

¹⁰ Known as the *nembutsu*, *Namo/Namu Amida Butsu* is a chant that forms the core of Shin religious activity. Uttered as a praise of Amida Buddha, doctrinally it is understood as a form of thanksgiving for all that one has received, especially the grace of the Buddha.

life. This lack of explicit ethical rigidity and appreciation for tolerance made acceptance of same-sex relationships relatively easy for many BCA and MMHM ministers.

A second key Buddhist teaching is the doctrine of interconnectedness. Particularly in the Mahayana stream of Buddhism, which includes Pure Land forms such as Jodo Shinshu, Buddhism stresses that all beings and all things in the universe are interrelated with one another. This tends to create a sense of mutuality between self and other, and in the Shin tradition specifically is used to provoke humility in the face of how all other people, animals, plants, and elements work together to bring about one's life and liberation.

Interconnectedness is raised often in American Shin discussions of same-sex marriage. Explaining why he performed same-sex marriages in the 1980s, Taitetsu Unno said his motivation was "based upon my understanding of the Buddhist teaching of interconnectedness, brought about by deep karmic conditions beyond rational comprehension, which should be cherished, celebrated, and strengthened with the passage of time" (Corless, 1998: 256). Following his assertion that Buddhist morality is not black-and-white, discussed above, William Briones justified his performance of same-sex marriage in his temple's newsletter:

In the *Tannisho* it is written that Shinran said, "All beings have been fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, in the timeless process of birth and death. When I attain Buddhahood in the next birth, each and everyone will be saved." In other words we are all karmic bound, our lives are interconnected. All beings are equally embraced by Amida Buddha...everyone is included...everyone. As a Jodo Shinshu Buddhist, our goal is to awaken to this spiritual truth of interdependency and equality. (Briones, 2008b, pp. 1-2, 4)

Note how *inter-connection* is depicted here as *inter-dependency*, and is evoked in emotional descriptions that depict all beings as kin in a single great family, which (in Shin Buddhist attitudes) one is dependent on and indebted to. This idea of a great family of all life was also referenced by Koshin Ogui when discussing his early performance of same-sex marriages: "We focus on life itself. We care about all sentient beings. Buddhism goes beyond human beings, we include cats, dogs, flowers, even mountains and trees. All life. We don't see any [reason for] discrimination" (Ogui, 2011).

A final factor that impacts the Shin discussion of same-sex marriage is the core idea of Amida Buddha's all-embracing Primal Vow. Virtually all discussions of same-sex issues in BCA and HMMH publications bring up the importance of Amida's Primal Vow. In the interpretation favored in the West, the belief that Amida saves all beings without exception means Jodo Shinshu leans in an egalitarian direction, within which no group has the right to judge another—more to the point, all people are saved together in the universal embrace of Amida Buddha, and therefore many ministers teach that it is the duty of Buddhists to always look for ways to become more inclusive and supportive of one another. Once again, William Briones provides a good example of Shin Buddhist reasoning:

Within our teachings of Jodo Shinshu Buddhism there are no doctrinal grounds that exist that prohibit neutral-gender marriage. Within the Compassionate Light of Amida Buddha all beings are equally embraced. . . It was out of compassion for all suffering beings that the Bodhisattva Dharmakara established the Forty-eight Vows and became Amida Buddha. Of the Forty-eight Vows the Eighteenth Vow became the most important to Pure Land Buddhists, since it promised Birth into Amida's Pure Land for those "sentient beings of the ten quarters, with sincere mind entrusting themselves aspiring to be Born in my land and saying my Name perhaps even ten times." However, many of us find it difficult to accept this cosmological story, which took place several kalpas ago. For myself, my understanding of the Dharmakara story is that it represents the deepest aspirations of the human heart that some day all of us will be free of suffering. Amida is a symbol of reality and points to our interdependence to all things and the need to share with others. When the Dharmakara [*sic*] made his Vows he said: If, when he becomes Buddha, all beings do not experience the same realization, then he would not accept the highest enlightenment. The Dharmakara [*sic*], points out that salvation is not just for himself. Jodo Shinshu, as the way to enlightenment must include others, or else there can be no meaning to the Vow. And this I take to heart. Amida's Primal Vow does not discriminate between the young and old, good and evil, ... the rich and poor, Japanese and American, Black and White, gay and straight ... if it doesn't include them ... there can be no meaning to Amida's salvation. It is within Amida's Primal Vow we become aware of the intimate interconnectedness with others. To truly realize this interdependence, one can only manifest a profound sense of responsibility for our fellow human beings. (Briones, 2008: 6)

Importantly, we can see here that a non-literalist reading of the Shin tradition leads nonetheless to the same conclusion that Amida's compassionate light reaches all beings, and that therefore there can be no possible grounds for discrimination. The Buddhist Churches of America are a big tent, with many interpretations accommodated among the ministers and laity, but liberal approaches appear to dominate. In interviews carried out for this project, ministers with a more literalist-leaning view also affirmed that the teaching of the Primal Vow means that same-sex marriages are acceptable Shin Buddhist practices.

Another example sheds further light on the issue:

In the first chapter of the *Tannisho*, Shinran is quoted as saying: "Know that the Primal Vow of Amida makes no distinction between people young and old, good and evil; only shinjin is essential. For it is the Vow to save the person whose karmic evil is deep and grave and whose blind passions abound." ... From this, we can see that the compassionate vow of Amida Buddha is intended for all sentient beings ... Taking the spirit of this accepting teaching, we will be accepting of gay marriage and any and all life styles, but at the same time, we need to be accepting of all of those who are strongly against these as well. In today's world we would have to expand upon the examples that Shinran gives and include, gay and straight, liberal and conservative, war-mongers and peace freaks, pro-life and

pro-choice, and so on. We need to be accepting of bigots, racists, terrorists and any other thing that we may personally despise, but exists.

As with the previous quote from Jerry Hirano, this excerpt from Rev. Ken Fujimoto tries to speak pastorally to homosexuals, homophobes, and those caught in the middle. The teaching that Amida accepts everyone means that homosexuals must be brought in to the community, and from there it is a natural further step to honor their relationships with the blessing of marriage. But the same teaching also means that homophobes cannot be cast out of the community: Shin Buddhists view them as imperfect beings—like everyone else, themselves included—who need to be cared for, taught a more Buddhist way of being, and affirmed in the universal human family.

Thus the concept of Amida's Primal Vow accepting every person may be the most important key to both why the BCA so easily accepted the performance of same-sex marriages and why the denomination was not rent by major turmoil over gay and lesbian issues as so many other American religious groups have been. It would be foolish to imagine that Shin Buddhists lack prejudices, always live up to their ideals, or produce perfectly harmonious temple communities devoid of strife or personal animosities. But there is nonetheless a basic and pervasive theological understanding that no one has a firm basis upon which to self-righteously persecute anyone else. Therefore there is little foundation for affirming the exclusion of socially oppressed groups, and little foundation for activists to strongly and publicly castigate their opponents.

To conclude, a variety of forces influencing American Shin Buddhists, including adaptations made to the non-Buddhist culture of the United States, a history of cultural exclusion and governmental oppression, and internal theological elements, all combined in the 1970s to produce the world's first documented Buddhist same-sex wedding ceremonies. Since then, the number of Shin ministers performing same-sex unions and weddings has expanded dramatically and the Buddhist Churches of America (and the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii) have become consistent supporters of marriage equality. They serve as an interesting example that at least some historic religions in North America may be naturally open to acceptance of homosexuality, and that support for same-sex marriage need not necessarily produce internal strife for religious organizations.

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