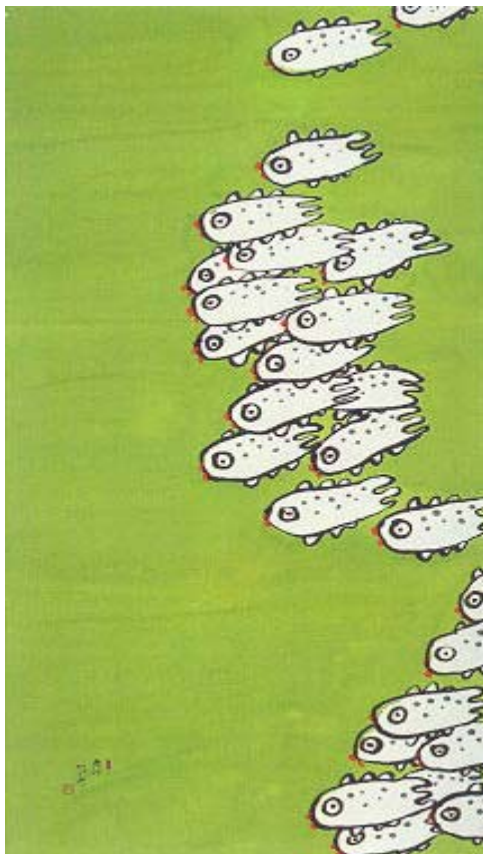


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Limited Engagements: Revisiting the Non-encounter between American Buddhism and the Shin Tradition

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

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Abstract

An apparent discrepancy exists between (on one hand) recent interests among non-Asian American Buddhists (that is, persons of European extraction, hereafter referred to as NAABs) in inventing a democratic, egalitarian form of the Buddhism and (on the other hand) the simultaneous, continuing disinterest regarding conversation with the large Shin Buddhist tradition in Japan. The discrepancy is not best explained by "Asian ethnicity" in the familiar sense. A better analysis considers the peculiar minority position of any relatively "communalist" religion in the USA. The sector of Americans who are currently communalist are Judeo-Christian and are not "shopping" for Buddhism; on the other hand the NAAB sector, which is looking for non-Christian alternatives, may express a surface interest in egalitarianism but at the same time favors individualistic, non-communalistic forms of religious practice. In the absence of deeper cultural shifts, the pattern suggests that social or "engaged Buddhism" in the USA will remain quite limited in scope.

"Do you think that *zazen* is fundamental?"

"I'll be radical and say 'no.' . . . I have met wonderful people who don't practice *zazen* who I think are enlightened. . . . If you mean, like the Sixth Patriarch, that the elimination of subject-object is indispensable, I would agree. But as simply sitting, it is not essential."

(exchange between Christopher Queen and Tetsugen Glassman Rooshi in Queen 2000, 122)

As the twenty-first century begins, Buddhism in the "West" (which will refer in this article particularly to Buddhism in the United States) can look back on about fifty years of striking development. The expansion since WWII has become so extensive that recently the Western Buddhist emergence per se has become an independent theme for academic research.(1)

This investigation starts with a problem exposed by these recent inquiries into the Buddhist-Western encounter: what appears to be a discrepancy between certain alleged goals of a "democratically" reformulated "American Buddhism" that have been enunciated by a number of non-Asian (non-Japanese-ethnic(2)) practitioners (persons of European extraction), and the reluctance of these non-Asian American Buddhists (NAABs) to learn from the important non-monastic tradition of Shin Buddhism that originated in Japan.(3) Since Shin can be viewed as one of the most important evolutes of traditional Buddhism in Asia, and since America plays a dominant role in the representation of the "West," this discrepancy might be considered a key feature of the entire Buddhist encounter.

Some Background Assumptions

The following perspectives serve as the background for the argument to follow:

1) From an information theory point of view, attitudes toward consciousness can roughly be identified as either "order-facing" (the universe involves some primary innate regime of fixed order) or "entropy-facing" (no such innate structure exists but rather fluctuation between order and entropy). Entropy-facing perspectives can be discovered, on an unsystematized basis, in a wide spectrum of human traditions. However, as a large-scale, long-term multicultural phenomenon, combining characteristically religious elements such as mythos, ritual, textual transmission, emotionality, social ideals, and organizational continuity, Buddhism is the chief cumulative resource. (It is the largest historical "memplex" (constellation of self-replicating ideas and practices) of its type.(4)) Buddhism can be assimilated broadly to the hermeneutical and network theories of knowledge, information science, and cognition that have emerged independently in the modern West, and in recent decades, non-foundational premises have been diffused throughout the humanities, often aligned via reevaluations of the "self" with psychology and symbolic anthropology.(5) "Buddhism" (merely) catalyzes these interests existentially around problems of "self" and "attachment."

2) Viewed from a sufficient distance, however, "mainstream Asian Buddhism" (the

monastic and/or gurucentric mode originating with the Indian mythic figure of "Sākyamuni" can be recognized as semi-arbitrary. Other, equally plausible entropy-facing religious "languages" or "memeplexes" might have evolved historically without the particularistic basis in ancient Indian ritualized ascetic practices.

3) In the past half century American religious explorers have often found the "Sākyamuni"-based mainstream Buddhism somewhat unsatisfactory. A de facto consensus has emerged that a reformulated "American Buddhism" would democratize the institutionalization and do away with classical monasticism.⁽⁶⁾ Because of the perceived absence of any substantial traditional nonmonastic approach as a resource from which to borrow, however, the reformulation of an "American Buddhism" has proceeded a bit experimentally.⁽⁷⁾

4) In fact, however, one old and highly developed Buddhist tradition has for long modified the monastic-gurucentric model of mainstream Buddhism. This has been Japanese Shin Buddhism (Jōdo Shinshū ("True Pure Land Tradition")). Although it has become less prominent in the post-WWII period, in earlier Japanese history (ca. 1500-1940) it was a major factor in Japanese life, and even today constitutes the largest single religious membership in Japan, affiliating (at least formally) about ten percent of the modern citizenry. That is, Shin remains, even in a certain state of dormancy, the largest single religious tradition in what is still the second largest world economy.⁽⁸⁾ Because of its theory of *tariki* (the ultimate uncontrollability of enlightenment) Shin has been routinely recognized as having certain roughly "protestant" qualities,⁽⁹⁾ and in theory, and to a substantial extent even in historical practice, it created an egalitarian "big tent" with an inclusive, communalist membership model.

5) Despite the persistence of exoticist representations of Japan, Westerners have increasingly accepted the idea of a Japan (in at least some fields of endeavor) as a world culture fully on a par with the Euro-American West. This makes Japanese cultural inventions at the beginning of the twenty-first century more open to world borrowing and sharing than ever before. (And it should go without saying that religious transplantation and borrowing is invariably reconstructive; complex processes of selective appropriation and recreation will always take place, and the forms of Buddhism are all always no more or less than "raw material.")

Discrepancy?

Nevertheless, against this background, up to this date, NAABs (white Americans who have not inherited the Shin tradition on an ethnic basis) have largely avoided having serious conversations with Shin Buddhism.⁽¹⁰⁾ As suggested, "a gap stands between the dissatisfaction with normal" monastic Buddhism and the simultaneous inattention toward the Shin tradition, although the Shin model seemingly provides opportunities that cannot be found as easily in other Buddhist models.⁽¹¹⁾ Even more generally, there is an apparent disconnect between the relative inattention to Shin and the friendly, generous, pluralizing rhetoric about global religious dialogue, intercultural communication, and social reform that circulates so freely in liberal American education and journalism. Consider the five hundred year history of Japanese contact with West, the wealth and size of Japan, the richness of modern Japanese intellectual life, the interest in religion among the global general public, the craving for new ideas and wholism in an age of anxiety, or the sympathy even to traditions as diverse and seemingly unmodern as Shintō and Confucianism. What has happened to Shin Buddhism in this picture?

Is Something Wrong With Shin Buddhism Itself?

An obvious hypothesis, of course, is that something must be crucially amiss with the resources of the Shin Buddhist tradition itself.

By far the most prominent objection that has arisen is that Shin is a narrowly "ethnic" tradition. According to this perspective, *Shin is essentially an ethnically bound form of tradition, linked inseparably to a racial/cultural minority in the United States*. In other words, the contrast between Shin and other forms of Buddhism is interpreted chiefly as a division of (often literally racial) interests between Asian ethnic Buddhists and white ethnic Buddhists. This construct has been adopted even among active proponents of Shin proselytization in the US.⁽¹²⁾

It has not been sufficiently noted, however, that any notion of Shin as uniquely "ethnic" in this way is illogical in view of what has happened creatively with other streams of Buddhism imported to the USA. Despite its connection with the historical experience of Japanese-Americans (discrimination and WWII relocation camps) Shin as a resource not inherently more ethnic than other forms of Buddhism opened up within America by the presence of immigrant Asian communities and from which nonethnic Americans have borrowed and naturalized ideas at will. Zen, Tibetan, and Sooka Gakkai streams, which

have been considerably more successful, began in America as "ethnic" traditions.

Furthermore, as American Buddhism has been more closely examined by social scientists, the overgeneralized, politicized early conception of "ethnic" versus "non-ethnic" Buddhism is breaking down and being superseded by more complex empirical evidence from actual communities. Increasingly, Buddhist groups cannot display neat boundaries of this kind.(13)

Regardless, "ethnicity" in the narrowest sense appears to be only one of a series of prevalent notions that Shin is unavailable (even simply as a flexible source of alternative ideas) just because it is associated with Japan.

The Shin institution is geographically and institutionally exceptional, its identity is too distinct and it is unacceptably "sectarian." Shin has been historically the most highly developed evolute of the *tariki* idea mentioned above. But this "strong" version of *tariki* was confined to Japan, was associated with only one primary thinker (Shinran), and was historically managed by only one large religious institution. This peculiar history manifests insufficient variety in showing how *tariki* ideas might be adapted and tested.(14)

Again, however, the argument is not quite logical. From a comparative historian's viewpoint, the so-called "uniqueness" of Shin is relatively transparent and is linked to the "uniqueness" of the political history that made Japan the only non-European country to be able to match the Euro-American sphere in rapidity and depth of modernization. It seems that in other contexts, such as technology, Zen, bonsai, anime, or film, Japanese "uniqueness" does not necessarily interfere with borrowing from Japan.

It should also be especially emphasized that an understanding of Shin as "sectarian" in the usual sense of dogmatic closure, as in the Christian context, is misleading because the proper effect of the *tariki* approach is actually to create an open, inclusive environment. Shin's critical edge has not so much to do with intellectual exclusivism in the Christian sense as with "dogmatic" egalitarianism.

In terms of its original institutional headquarters, Shin is foreign-owned, and foreign "ownership" involves supervision and advisement that non-ethnic Americans could not accept.(15)

Again, however, there is no particular contrast with other Buddhisms or with other imported

religions. Original foreign ownership of lineage authority in Zen, Tibetan, or Sooka Gakkai traditions does not seem to have posed a critical obstacle to appropriation of practices.⁽¹⁶⁾ And in fact, the Japanese-American Shin community itself pays relatively little attention to Shin in Japan, especially its more progressive aspects. Yet even supposing that one fantasized an overarching international "*tariki* Buddhist" institution that remained headquartered in Japan, successfully coping with a "foreign ownership" problem would not be improbable. Similar challenges have been dealt with by the Roman Catholic church and the Mormons, among others.

Shin is relatively stagnant today as a cultural force and offers no inspiring example. Shin achieved an "overestablished" or "overrespectable" mainstream status and social organization during the later stages of its development in Japan; it can suffer from a professionalization of clergy and a self-promoting organization-mindedness. The North American example created by Buddhist Churches of America temples and the Japanese-American ethnic community (and that community's middle-class bourgeois identity-seeking) has been unimpressive.

In response, however, while it may be true that Shin in Japan today is an established, conservative, noncharismatic tradition that has difficulty in communicating its conventional conservative message in high-tech consumer capitalist society, this is a trend that has affected mature religious traditions worldwide and hardly marks Shin out as distinctive. It remains a fact also that in actuality Shin is an important part of a vibrant larger modern Japanese culture that Americans have certainly not regarded as stagnant.

More essentially, though, the fascination of foreign explorers (especially NAABs) with Buddhism historically seems to have had very little to do with the actual state of energy or modernization of the various streams of Buddhism in their home or ethnic contexts. For example, in the twentieth century Theravāda (which has supplied *vipassanā*) has been deeply concerned with nationalism and other political issues of no concern to foreign religious seekers, and has recently been seriously affected by the growth of international consumer capitalism. Native Tibetan Buddhism has remained in social structure profoundly medieval. Postwar Buddhism in Taiwan has been vigorous but is almost totally ignored in the American press (unless there occurs, for example, a peripheral relationship to political fundraising scandals). Even in partial dormancy, Shin in the Japan in the twentieth century has always been bigger and more active than the more publicized Zen institutions.

It seems, then, that such "Japaneseness" explanations for non-communication with Shin are inadequate. But a number of other widespread preconceptions might be adduced to the hypothesis that the obstacle to communication has been some flawed character of the Shin tradition itself.(17)

Shin is not "real" Buddhism because it lacks the "Sākyamuni/meditation model and the corresponding correct linguistic/conceptual field. Formal, ritual meditation is the sine qua non of Buddhism. Shin thus also lacks a precept-observing monastic priesthood, which is typically a correlative sign of "the real thing."(18)

In practice of course it has been conclusively demonstrated that Americans are not actually much interested in the "Sākyamuni model and monasticism; the lack of a monastic leadership is indeed often claimed to be desirable in "American Buddhism." However, NAABs have been very interested in techniques of meditation. Yet here too, while Shin teaching distinctively espoused a *tariki*-based "leap" theory of the final movement to *satori*, its more sophisticated exponents have never simplistically excluded meditation from their approach. The specialized Shin discourse (the tradition of textual interpretation) is not about meditation, but on the other hand in the Shin oral tradition (which has always been easy to find out about) the value of meditative practice has always been recognized, and even recommended and honored.(19)

Shin's religious language is incomprehensible. Unlike Zen, which (at least stereotypically) purports to be a pure "textless" practice, Shin is overtly based in text appreciation; it relies for its structure on a specialized interpretation of an old Asian Buddhist mythos. This linguistic/mythic matrix has to be learned, and it does not automatically communicate with other linguistic/mythic matrices, even of other types of Buddhism. Especially, Shin discourse is apparently "monolingual"; it seems to coexist with a lack of alternative approaches to express *tariki* ideas.(20) (This contrasts for example with the much more diverse discursive developments of Protestantism in European Christianity.) Shin may seem to be a self-contained (and archaic) environment(21) that has not very successfully broken out of a distinctive confinement. Shin language can also be accused of excessive ambiguity, (22) misleading emotionality,(23) and superficial similarity to Christian language.

It can easily be argued, however, that "comprehensibility" is an arbitrary matter that is based on education and convention. When learned as a Buddhist "first language" in traditional

Japanese contexts, Shin was perfectly intelligible as the primary (not secondary) approach to Buddhism. In Japan historically, Shin became the largest Buddhist organization because its language was the *most* available, accessible and interpretable for the widest range of hearers. In a transplant context such as that in the United States, the "normal" monasticism-based Buddhist language (and the accidents of historical hegemony with which it is associated) are not necessarily any more inherently obvious than Pure Land language.

Indeed, every kind of traditional Buddhism in Asia has had its own identity and practices, its own idiomatic or monolingual quality: this is strikingly true for monastic Zen or for Tibetan Buddhism. But the fact of these traditions as initially alien languages for foreigners has been overcome when the foreigners are energized by some driving motivation to break their way inside. In the Shin case, it is only the shortage of NAAB fascination with the egalitarian "big tent" approach that has made Shin seem more incomprehensible than other streams.

Regarding the issue of ambiguity, an acceptance and exploitation of ambiguity, although not officially part of traditional Western religious practice, is supposed to be one of the hallmarks of the "postmodern" consciousness of educated Americans. As far as emotion is concerned, traditionally the ability of the Shin discourse to tie serious Buddhist ideas to passion in ordinary experience was a profound source of persuasive and communicative power. As in Christianity, deep emotive and deep intellectual aspects coexist, a principle that presumably applies to all sorts of religious languages.

And finally, the idea of a deep philosophical resemblance to Christianity has never upon serious examination been creditable.⁽²⁴⁾

Even if Shin teaching is construed as acceptably "real" qua Buddhism, the political issues embedded in it — of individual conscience, dispersed authority and anti-supernaturalism — are historically obsolete. In other words, from the standpoint of today's global secular society, "protestant" authority questions are issues of the past because the legal and moral independence of individual conscience has become universally established. In addition, because in its marginalization of the classic religious ascetic Shin tended to marginalize the exercise of supernatural powers obtained via religious practice, elite Shin became too rationalistic for modern consumption; it lacks the anti-scientific, charismatic, magical or "new-agey" flavor required of successful alternative religious movements in high-tech late capitalist society.

It can responded here that while in a certain sense liberal "United Nations" conceptions of human rights have become a kind of global legal standard, the conception that human struggles over authority and concentration of power are going to go away is implausible. (Even in the extremely narrow social subfield of Buddhist organizations in America, numerous incidents have arisen in which gurucentric forms of organization have encouraged exploitation of ordinary members by leaders, e.g. sexual exploitation of females by males.)

The issue of excessive rationalism is related to a much broader set of modernist questions that affects all kinds of religious traditions. But NAAB attitudes in these area are diverse and inconsistent (like those of the rest of the American population), and it is probably incongruous to understand Shin sobriety about the "supernatural" as an important source of American inattention.

Shin practice has been passive, antinomian, and short of ethics; it has lacked interesting engagement with a suitable range of socio-political issues.

This idea has been always inconsistent with empirical observation, for example by Christian missionaries.⁽²⁵⁾ Studies by some Japanese historians such as Masao Arimoto have indicated that traditional Shin Buddhism (in the Tokugawa period when it was strongest) was quite concerned about behavior. For Shin members (as could be argued for other kinds of traditional Buddhists as well) in everyday life intentional discipline and "grace" were merged and blurred. Under premodern economic conditions Shin was closely associated with the rigorous frugality of a nonconsumerist, low-tech economy, and popular Shin morality tended to be conservative and clear-cut and much oriented to matters of this world. The point here is not, of course, about whether this directly applies to the early twenty-first century, but rather that a notion of actual traditional Shin practice as antinomian is contradicted by the evidence.

Actually, Shin has had the largest history of social participation of any form of Buddhism in Japan, but most of the action has been somewhat low-key in its expression: ordinary community mutual aid, ordinary personal kindness, ordinary work in helping professions, ordinary consensus decision-making, the preference in many sectors of Japanese life for a degree of communitarian egalitarianism, and so on. It lacked the more dramatic model of the specialist religious renunciant found in Christianity or other types of Buddhism, and this pattern tended not to give rise to clear-cut routinized charitable traditions such as hospitals.

Nevertheless in the modern period in Japan, in part in response to the challenges set by Christian models, Shin has successfully managed schools and social assistance organizations. This kind of routine social maintenance activity is easily observable (like similar Buddhist social work in Taiwan or Thailand), but foreign religious seekers do not find such work sexy, and it may be hard to separate such activities from secular social assistance organized under modern governments.(26)

It should be added that in twentieth century Japan many of the most active Shin social thinkers have operated in an environment conditioned by leftist-socialist language.(27) However, this aspect of Shin has been, like Christian socialism in Europe, deeply unacceptable in mainstream American culture, and therefore unmanageable for (right-leaning) Japanese-American Buddhists, who have consequently tended to emphasize a passivist depiction of Shin in its place

Despite admirable ideals, Shin has displayed too many gaps between its ideals and its realities. These may include: its excessive admixture of its elite ideas with folk religion;(28) its involvement with twentieth century Japanese militarism and imperialism; incomplete gender, feminist and minority-group correctness in Shin's conservative cultural aspect;(29) and unresolved ambiguities about the traditional "imperial" authority situated in Shin's hereditary leadership.

Here it can be generally answered that gaps between ideals and realities are endemic to large religions. Criticisms against Shin focused too heavily on its performance gaps and internal inconsistencies suggest either double standards or the opening of the door to invidious comparisons with other religious traditions, not least with Christianity (not to mention other streams of Buddhism).

Regarding the specific points raised, however, one can start by noting that all the Asian Buddhist traditions, as they have traditionally existed "on the ground" without the intervention of preferences derived from modernization (including preferences from modern "puristic" Buddhology) have been loaded with folk elements that resonate on different wavelengths than the elite teachings. In practice, almost all the other Asian Buddhist streams are more loaded with such elements than Shin. In other cases, this fact does not prevent foreign religious explorers from excusing, tolerating and bypassing the (obviously) popular elements and selecting out the elite elements that fascinate them. (It should be

added that since foreign observers of Shin, along with its exponents in English, have always paid primary attention to the elite Shin doctrine, NAABs have never known enough about the folk side of Shin for it to be seen as an obstacle to approaching the tradition in the USA.)

The performances of all large religions in connection with wartime violence and injustice in the twentieth century have been inconsistent; in such a global context, Shin's pre-WWII nationalist behavior was not distinctively bad. Furthermore, since 1945 progressive elements of Shin (like many parts of the Christian traditions) have worked hard to overcome and expiate the errors of the past.⁽³⁰⁾ (Again though, as with folkish Shin, few Americans have never known enough about Shin history to have raised objections on these grounds.)

In the twentieth century both major branches of Shin have admitted women to ministerial status. Despite a grating rhetorical flaw in classical Shin discourse concerning the apparent "inferior" status of women, the difficulties of dealing with gender questions in a *tariki* Mahāyāna system are less than in Christianity or monastic forms of Buddhism. The handful of feminist NAABs have tended to ignore Pure Land, yet this subset of the NAAB community is too marginal to have exercised any special influence on the broader inattention to Shin.

Shin has a long record, dating back to the sixteenth century, of close associations with the *eta* (*burakumin*) "polluted caste" in Japan. This social history involved special religious support for *burakumin* that was also combined with structural acceptance of their social inequality. In the early twentieth century, the inequality resulted in much criticism, but in the post-WWII period, official Shin policy about nondiscrimination has become as progressive as similar religious rhetoric in liberal Western countries. (Once again, however, Americans have never known enough about Shin social history for obstacles to be seen in this area.)

Shin's traditional form of semi-charismatic hereditary "kingship" has retained a degree of its traditional power among the membership even in the late twentieth century, but it has also been sharply criticized in Japan itself. However, even at their most traditional, Shin attitudes about the hereditary head have not been as charismatic and cultish as those in new religions. Moreover, the headship system is a fairly transparent historical phenomenon that would easily be dealt with or bypassed by foreigners if they had other, deeper reasons to be interested in Shin. Meanwhile, of course, the highly sacerdotal nature of Tibetan Buddhism

has posed no barrier to NAAB fascination.

Due to an absence of energy, Shin has failed to publicize itself adequately in the USA and thus a potential audience has missed having adequate empirical knowledge about what the tradition might offer. Journalist Rick Fields, for example, who was otherwise sympathetic to Shin, revealed such a gap when he suggested that the interests of white Buddhists in an American Buddhism (democracy) "tend to run counter to Asian norms."[\(31\)](#)

Now, no doubt exists that Shin in the USA has been managed mainly to serve the interests of a nonpluralistic and often narrow-minded Asian-American community. (This is not to dismiss the courageous historical accomplishment of Japanese-Americans in managing to establish and sustain the tradition in a hostile US environment.) Out of this experience, the presentation of Shin even by its presumptive proselytizers has often suffered from a certain bad faith: although the opportunity has continuously existed to present Shin as a variant form of Buddhism that merely altered the standard theory of monastic authority and just happened by historical accident to have occurred in Japan, even exponents have instead tended to emphasize the ethnic aspect with all this implies in terms of American racial politics. (As would be predicted in this context, the evidence also suggests that Japanese-Americans themselves are not actually too interested in fully understanding the Japanese tradition, although it is well over six hundred times larger than the North American branch.)
[\(32\)](#)

Nevertheless, misdirection and obfuscation have always coexisted with a genuine effort at a relatively non-ethnic public exposure of the basic ideas behind Shin. Progressive elements in the Buddhist Churches of America have long been aware that any long-term survival of Shin Buddhism in the USA would have to depend on a transition to a non-ethnic membership and have addressed the problem at least sporadically even from within the ethnic institution.[\(33\)](#) Enough "seed knowledge" has long been scattered to have allowed the germination of a more extensive exploration of Shin resources by the broader American public if other conditions had been suitable.[\(34\)](#)

Shin has lacked the charismatic personal leadership that is a sine qua non for opening up a new form of religion to American audiences.

Without doubt the successes of Tibetan Buddhism, Vietnamese Zen, and SBI have been closely tied to the personal appeal of (respectively) the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, or

Daisaku Ikeda. On the other hand, there is plenty of evidence that the spread of religious ideas does not in every case need leadership with a high media profile; examples might include the Mormons or networks of evangelical churches. Even among the meditatively-oriented forms of Buddhism in America, a good deal of local institutionalization and routinization is taking hold without dependency on the internationally known charismatic figures.

Finally, "social Buddhism" along Shin lines is unnecessary since many such forms of social Christianity are already universally available for those who seek "social religion."

Especially, recently it seems that traditional Christian foundational metaphysics can be easily unplugged and swapped for Buddhism's nonfoundational theory of knowledge (*sūnyatā*). Because of this disconnectability between classical Christian foundationalism and the Christian mythos (the Jesus story), and of course because Westerners are already far more familiar with those elements of the Christian imaginative world, there is no persuasive reason for Americans to contemplate switching over to an alien Buddhist religious language for social religious reasons.

It is easily countered, however, that the trickles of modern Christian thought that experiment with quasi-Buddhist interpretations of Christianity are peripheral. For the vast majority of Americans the notion of merely "swapping out" one metaphysical system for the other is implausible; the traditional foundational ontology of Christianity and the Christian mythos cannot be separated. Therefore to explore the possibilities of a complex social tradition with deep nonfoundational assumptions along Buddhist lines one has no better option than to take a long look at the Asian heritage.

Toward More Adequate Explanation

As discussed above (very succinctly), many adequacies can be demonstrated in a hypothesis that the conversation with NAABs has been blocked by something crucially or uniquely wrong with Shin itself. Now, certainly, non-Japanese who have refused to take an interest in Shin have not been wrong to perceive some of the factors mentioned above as deterrents; and it is in some cases possible that the inattention to Shin is a irregular cumulative outcome, without any tight logic, reflecting the miscellaneous chilling effects from such factors.⁽³⁵⁾

However, it will be argued that a strong positive explanation for the phenomenon is

available that has to do systemically with the normative religious and social ecology of the United States. Three related facets will be taken up: mainstream "cryptocalvinism," the typical satisfactoriness of minority Judeo-Christian communalism, and the noncommunalism of NAABs.

The mainstream, "default," secular American culture is deeply influenced by a pattern of assumptions or an implicit ideology about persons and society that can be termed "cryptocalvinism."

Although the United States contains a huge population that manifests a great social complexity, for the crude purposes of this article some broad cultural generalizations will be ventured. Cryptocalvinism involves:

An absolutist sense of persons as permanent egos with monadic qualities and more or less isolation from other egos, and with a deep ambivalence about trans-individual social reality and socially-constructed experience. Accompanying is a tendency to celebrate personal fantasy and auto-constructed reality accomplished via the willpower of the monadic ego.

A fascination with the "hard-wiring" of individual potentiality (quasi-predestinationism) (which is reflected for example in the intense popular interest in genetic determinism). Accompanying is a tendency to presuppose a "natural" social hierarchy based on the hard-wired differences in the monadic selves and reflected in material economic success or prestige.

A tendency to understand "egalitarianism" as a sociopolitical order that allows for maximum free action and self-realization of the monadic egos.

De facto acceptance of the inevitability of a chronic freefloating anxiety which is rooted in the existential isolation of the monadic ego and in the relatively weak patterns of social support and

community that cryptocalvinist attitudes tend to reinforce in the socio-economic sphere.

The idea of US culture as deeply influenced by Calvinist-oriented attitudes is of course a truism, or even a cliché; and even a superficial survey (going very far beyond the scope of this essay) would have to touch upon medieval Christianity, Calvin and radical anabaptism, dissent and Puritanism in New England, Locke, de Tocqueville, R.H. Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, Karl Polyani's *The Great Transformation* (to marketized society), the dominance of US elites by New England culture after the commercial revolution and the Civil War, the American work ethic, the consumerist revolution, the pop psychology and self-help revolutions, libertarian political theory, the American rejection of European-style social democratic politics, and so on.

Because certain elements of the original strict Calvinist religiosity have obviously conspicuously changed with the ascendancy of mass consumer society (especially the older emphasis on material frugality and sexual restraint) it is often assumed in popular social commentary that the USA is no longer "calvinist." This dismissal seems, however, to be ahistorical and (in terms of the never-more-abundant global possibilities for comparative cultural evaluation) to reflect a pervasive American provincialism in self-understanding. What can serve as a single suggestive reference for this complex question is a recent book *Bobos in Paradise* (2000) by the journalist David Brooks. (The coinage "bobo" stands for "bourgeois bohemian," a member of the recent post-1980s American elites whose behavior and ways of thought Brooks understands as a kind of mediation between the left vs. right ideological extremes of the postwar era in the USA.)

Brooks examines the bobos through a series of thematic chapters. In business life, for example, the existential mission of Individual Personal Development is combined with capitalism (the "Higher Selfishness," 134). In intellectual life, there is a profound acceptance of the commercialization of punditry. In pleasure, a reregulation of the senses has occurred centering on the purposes of utilitarian benefit, health, and education (to aid the Life Mission of cultivation, progress and self-improvement). In spiritual life, bobos manifest a flexible, tolerant pursuit of multiple individual systems that suit the Life Mission, albeit with a rather schizoid tension between the goals of personal freedom versus those of rootedness. In politics the bobos' modest, genial, locally-oriented conservative decency is nicely compatible with major inequalities between the economic haves and have-nots. (Overall, money and

material comfort are taken for granted among bobos, but participants feel schizoid about the tension between worldly success and inner virtue.) And although it is supposed to be politely overlooked, bobos are thoroughly status conscious, although status derives from competition and meritocracy (both highly insecure) rather than from some fixed cosmic order.

From a historian's religious perspective, Brooks's "bobo" analysis suggests that the default, secular American cultural situation among middle elites circa the year 2001 is not so much an unexpected postwar hybrid of left vs. right American ideologies but rather a modified reemergence and renewal of much earlier calvinist-based structures of consciousness in American elite civilization that have both predated and continuingly underlain the twentieth century.

Although large "communalist" sectors of the American population exist that are not committed to cryptocalvinist ideology, boboist perspectives, or personal religions of self-help, they remain a cultural-political minority that is furthermore theologically satisfied.

No one, of course, could sustain empirically the suggestion that cryptocalvinist attitudes dominate the whole US population. Many American cultural and religious communities might be described roughly as "communalist" in contrast to cryptocalvinist. That means that their fundamental sense of self is more relational and less isolative, they expect a positive interplay of individual self and community to flourish, the social construction of individual potential is more favored than notions of hard-wired potential, the hierarchic importance of materialism is downplayed, and socially-oriented security is preferred to individually-oriented competition and anxiety. In this category can be placed Roman Catholicism, many Jewish communities, and many smaller or more conservatively serious Protestant Christian communities.

It should go without saying that Shin Buddhism is a type of communalist religion. However, among sectors of Americans who maintain communalist sensibilities, almost all individuals are satisfied with inherited Christianity or Judaism and are not looking for alternatives. The divergent motivations (whether psychological, political, social or intellectual) that cause a few Americans to seek out Buddhism, an unconventional imported tradition, are not present. Among other effects, the Judeo-Christian communalist orientation is thus not exported to other religious contexts.

NAABs tend to be religious searchers who more or less reject conventional perspectives, whether the secular cryptocalvinist or the Christian communalist. However, the typical NAAB perspective (at least up to this point) has within it three aspects that dominate potential interaction with Shin Buddhism.

First, *NAABs reject any religious language that has even a passing resemblance to theism.* The resemblance of Shin Buddhist terms to Christian or Jewish conceptualization may be entirely superficial but the surface is enough to be a powerful deterrent.(36)

Second, *NAABs are (despite certain rhetorical gestures made in connection with the reinvention of "American Buddhism") only marginally interested in socially-oriented or engaged religion.* Recent studies of the reception of Buddhism in the U.S. have revealed that this reception has already gone through more than one stage. In the nineteenth century, Americans who pursued Buddhism were looking for an element of social activism; normative Asian Buddhism was perceived as a form of asocial quietism or withdrawal.(37) Nevertheless, by the post-WWII period, it was clear that Americans had become much more interested in meditation techniques than in other aspects of Buddhism, and at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the weight of American appropriation has remained overwhelming located in the realm of mind culture and therapy. As Buddhist social thinker Ken Jones has commented, the dominant reception of Buddhism in the West has become "privatized, personal, quietistic, and asocial."(38)

To the extent that any "engaged Buddhism" or social Buddhism is practiced in the US, it has been understood almost entirely as a (secondary) outgrowth of meditation and related discipline.(39) Thich Nhat Hanh's well-know approach has been paradigmatic: he has tried to develop a rhetoric of social, engaged and even "family" Buddhism out of the resources of monastic Zen.

Out of this framework a number of American Buddhists have of course indeed been active in edifying social work. The most notable single arena is perhaps the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, but other instances include projects inspired by Thich Nhat Hanh and the modern Vietnamese experience, the San Francisco Zen Center's work (such as an AIDS hospice), Glassman Rooshi's "street Zen" in New York City, Naropa's program in Buddhist social action, the Zen Mountain Monastery programs, activities of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, and so on.(40)

Still, one can fairly be skeptical that risk-taking social action and engagement are more than marginal in the overall American picture despite the existence of a long history of awareness of the issues.(41) Despite a few hopeful signs(42) engaged Buddhism is theoretically weak and has added little of special interest to the body of social critical theory available in the U.S. discourse at large.(43) In this context, Western Buddhist theoretical work (on human rights for example) serves (regardless of its sincerity and sophistication) largely for conceptual place-holding; that is, it explores a position on an important issue in order to achieve respectability and intellectual roundedness for Buddhism, yet this process stands apart from much real world importance to any politically substantial community. Regarding issues such as wealth distribution and environmental depletion, some Buddhist theorists may have sharp awareness but so far have had little to say that stands out. Even where it may be more than marginal, engaged Buddhist position-taking is not necessarily distinctive. For example, "peace" as a moral theme in the post-cold war period is an unopposable ideal already shared as a common goal by the world beginning with the United Nations and the IMF.(44)

The implication is that most NAABs have tended to avoid the social commitments of communalist types of Christianity or Judaism along with the theistic religious language of those traditions.

Third, *despite their rejection of overt Christianity and their partial divergence from the mainstream, NAABs predominantly retain certain persistent attitudes of cryptocalvinism.* It is a well-known observation that the white or non-Asian-ethnic Americans who approach Buddhism tend (with the notable exception of SGI)(45) to originate from educated upper middle classes; these reflect the dominant strains of American self-construction. Now, the suggestion that this persistent form of elite American selfhood is not compatible with important aspects of Asian Buddhist life is scarcely an original perception, although this is not emphasized in most of the new research on Buddhism in America.(46) Exceptionally, Tamney noted that modern Western thought has ditched the theoretical concept of the isolate static self; "However, while western intellectuals may be ready to let go of the *idea* of the self, they continue to cling to cultural ideals built on individualistic assumptions" (italics added).(47) More sharply, the Zen scholar Victor Hori has noted that Americans tended to talk about the results of meditation in terms of getting in touch with themselves, getting strength to cope with the pressures of society, or assisting them with self-realization; in contrast, Chinese meditators tended to report that meditation made them

aware of their social selfishness and the need for repentance and shame toward others. Hori observed that the Western self tends to see itself as ontologically autonomous and independent of social roles and relations, whereas Buddhism developed in societies where (as in communitarian forms of Christianity or Judaism) the person was conceived more as having been created from social relations. Buddhism might not actually be compatible with the former concept of a person, for from a normal Asian perspective Buddhism is not about realizing the self and freeing its purity but rather about de-realizing the self by breaking habits of self to become socially open, responsible and compassionate. Hori was skeptical that that fundamental background attitudes about self, society and consciousness had significantly changed in NAAB society.(48)

Hori's picture may be a bit idealizing about Asian societies,(49) but the basic generalization about American elites is confirmed by the vast literature that already exists (and that needs no reference to Asian religion) to criticize how American consciousness remains troublingly enmeshed in isolating conceptions of the ego.(50) And despite the fringe emergence of alternatives such as the "back to simplicity" movement, in the daily run of things ordinary American thought remains quite limited in its ability to provide any fundamental rethinking of behavior. Educated Americans may express themselves like postmodernists rhetorically, and may declaim a routinized, schizoid rant about their own materialism, but they remain thriving cryptocalvinists in their *practical* economic, social and political everyday lives. In other words, the twenty-first century American intelligentsia remains unable to synthesize its fluid theories of knowledge with its moral culture; the linkages that traditional Buddhist teachings make between the ontological interdependence of reality on the one hand, and the critique of daily self-serious self-seeking on the other, are often beyond the allowable practical rules of everyday American existence. Behaviorally and emotionally, cryptocalvinist subconscious attitudes persistently trump theoretical *knowledge* about sociology, linguistics, philosophy, psychology, multiculturalism or the like.

In this broader context, Buddhism, with a long history of associations with antimodernism and romanticism, has often appeared to offer a new modality of escape from self and from the need for constant self-invention, a new way of dealing with anxiety and loneliness. Yet at root the problem of the self has not really been cut through, and as Tamney has suggested, NAAB Buddhism since 1975 has become largely secularized, psychologized and "medicalized" as a stress reliever along New Age lines. Perhaps the cryptocalvinist socioeconomic world leaves little room for much besides therapy.

Now, taking any kind of Buddhism seriously in a cryptocalvinist environment is already somewhat quirky. Shin Buddhist rhetoric, however, pushes the centrality of the self even further off-center than usual in Buddhism. The NAAB response to Shin might thus be seen as an interesting gauge of attitudes about the "self" that are enacted in American life, or even serve even as a litmus test for the degree of infiltration and colonization by cryptocalvinism of American attitudes toward Buddhism. The engaged Buddhist movement shows that Americans are not *solely* interested in Buddhism as therapy; but on the other hand, apparently few NAABs will tolerate language that pushes the self out of the center as much as Shin rhetoric does. Up to this point it seems for the most part that even the most thoughtful and sincere find some kind of unbridgeable gap between their craving for spiritual democratization and the peculiar *psychological* austerities of self-decentering and radical equalization of persons embedded in Shin rhetoric on the other.

Thus, despite Shin's apparent mundanity, perhaps no other major religious tradition in the world — with its "weird" combination of egalitarianism, rationalism and de-centered nonfoundational "self" — is so incompatible with crucial premises of elite Anglo-American civilization.

Corollary: The future of engaged Buddhism in the United States

In American popular journalism, a glossy Dalai Lama-oriented and *Newsweek* magazine-style account of Buddhist growth in the past decade in the United States has become familiar. However, even assuming that Buddhism is gradually becoming de-exoticized in the US, one can afford to be sceptical about the real implications for change in American culture. The increase in Buddhism probably does not reflect any major reevaluation of cryptocalvinist self or any incipient decentering of the self approaching that in traditional Asian Buddhist societies. Rather, it expands and refines a distinctive American elite's kind of partial appreciation of Buddhist resources. Any substantive changes in this pattern of reception would require at least the beginnings of a fundamental shift away from dominant forms of American behavior — "the postmodernist cryptocalvinist ordeal"[\(51\)](#) of high-tech consumer society — but this is a cultural challenge far more problematic, difficult and unlikely than what is usually discussed in treatments of "Buddhism coming to the West."

The future of engaged or social Buddhism must therefore be viewed more pessimistically

than is reflected in most of the current, apologetically-constructed literature on engaged Buddhism:

The creative appropriation of Buddhism in the US has probably already effectively reached its peak. Even though numerical participation will increase, the future inventive trajectory of Buddhist social ideas in America will be modest. The paradigmatic, primary engaged adaptation of Buddhist ideas is already in place, and will continue to involve therapeutic meditation for hospital patients, stressed middle classes and small religious groups. The de facto dominance of therapy Buddhism will tend to support discourses of America as a therapy society (one that treats symptoms) rather than the more activist discourses of America as a social justice society (one that fixes fundamentals).

Even when it operates in terms of a strong traditional social-service mode, following the bodhisattva paradigm, meditatively-oriented Buddhism will be socially conservative. This aspect of Buddhism provides a model for healing, service and the treatment of social pain (especially the symptoms of social pain), but its "*bodhisattva*" perspective embeds an essentially hierarchical element that does not provide a distinctive theoretical basis for a particularly egalitarian social vision or a strong version of social reform and justice. Engaged Buddhism may turn out to be most commonly like "philanthropy" in American mainstream culture. While this Buddhist philanthropy will certainly make significant social contributions, like other forms of American philanthropy, it is unlikely to seek to escape from ambiguities involving unequal power and status.

In its process of approximation to the mainstream, Buddhism will tend to lose its ability to be fundamentally critical of American society. (Cf. Hori 1994) It consequently will continue to fail to attract much serious intellectual attention from the far larger and more eclectic "prophetic" community of American social reformers. In a related effect, because of the pressure that American elite ideology and commerce exert upon world media culture, in the future the distinctively Americanized pattern of selectively appropriated Buddhism will press to dominate world media discourse about Buddhism.

Finally, when NAABs will talk about democratic" forms they will continue to mean the displacement of monastic authority but not the radical self-decentering and sociality of Shin communalism.

In sum, "cryptocalvinist Buddhism" (dare one say "bobo Buddhism"?) is not likely to

produce any strong reformist thought or action in the long run. Its ability to reenvision American society and to engage in ameliorative action is constrained by the extent to which it incorporates — as unexamined assumptions — so much of the paradigmatic, structurally embedded ambivalence about the relationship of individual self and society that is enshrined in America. By the same logic, the marginalization of the type of Buddhist approach represented by Shin Buddhism will likely continue for the foreseeable future.

This is not necessarily to insist, however, that the pattern is permanently carved in stone. Because of American religious freedom, possibilities for innovative adaptations of *tariki* ideas might gradually begin to emerge among small new groups of Americans. However, such adaptations will only be successful if they take sophisticated account — something not adequately demonstrated so far — of the complexity and tenacity of the tradition into which *tariki* ideas are being injected.

Note

(1) This article is based on a talk "Can Buddhist Thought Be Expected to Move in Any Creative Directions in the 21st Century? And Will the Global Village Be Justified in Paying Much Attention?" presented as the E. Dale Saunders Memorial Lecture on Japanese Buddhism, University of Pennsylvania, February 29, 2000. Special thanks to the sponsor Prof. William R. LaFleur for his kindness and encouragement and to Dr. Christopher Queen for a critical response that substantially clarified the argument.

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Endnotes

(1) Prebish and Tanaka 1998, Prebish 1999 (updated from previous 1979 monograph), Seager 1999, Williams and Queen 1999, Tamney 1992, and Fields 1992.

(2) *NB*: for practical purposes, this article simply ignores other kinds of Asian-American Buddhists and their reasons for non-interaction with Shin Buddhism.

(3) On other aspects of the interpretation problem, see Amstutz 1997.

(4) Blackmore 1999.

(5) For example, Tamney 1992, 109-134.

(6) According to journalist Rick Fields 1998a, 202, NAABs are seeking: 1) a layperson's movement; 2) sitting meditation (as in Zen or *vipassanā*); 3) an injection of Western psychology; 4) feminist leadership and insight; 5) impetus toward social action; and 6) a democratic, antihierarchical element. Prebish 1999, 251-254 summarized Fields's ideas as: 1) practice-oriented; 2) lay-oriented; 3) feminist-influenced; 4) in dialogue with psychology; 5) increased societal concerns; 6) democratic governance; 7) reevaluation of hierarchy and spiritual authority issues; and 8) emphasis on life-affirmation. *Vipassanā* teacher Jack Kornfeld has suggested: 1) democratization of authority; 2) feminization (most important); and 3) "integration" (world-affirming practice in daily life in the world of family people). (See Prebish 1999, 249-251.) Tibetan-based teacher Lama Surya Das emphasized: 1) non-dogmatism; 2) lay orientation; 3) a meditation base; 4) gender equality; 5) nonsectarian; 6) essentialized and simplified; 7) egalitarian, democratic, nonhierarchical; 8) psychologistic, rational, self-help-oriented; 9) experimental, innovatory; and 10) socially informed and engaged. (Prebish 1999, 263-265) History of religions scholar Christopher Queen has noted: 1) democratization (leveling of traditional institutional and spiritual hierarchies, with laicization and feminization); 2) pragmatism in ritual practice or observance; and 3) engagement (participation in family and community, politicization). (Williams and Queen 1999, xix, xxxii-xxxiv) Scholar and Shin Buddhist minister Kenneth Tanaka 1998 has suggested: 1) democratization (nonhierarchical, nonmonastic, egalitarian structures, with radical inclusion and nondiscrimination and acceptance of feminism and gay-lesbian interests); 2) strong practice (meditation or chanting, with self-direction, self-reliance, individualism); 3) social engagement; 4) adaptive eclecticism; and 5) optimism and activism. Prebish 1999, 57-93 also discussed the developmental issues in American Buddhism using Tanaka's categories.

(7) For example, Hershock 1996 or Jones 2000.

(8) That is, about 12.5 million people. For comparison, this is about twice the number of ethnic Tibetans; in terms of wealth, assuming that the Shin members are linked to about 10 percent of the modern Japanese GNP, then the wealth of the Shin membership in Japan has approached that of all the Theravaada countries together.

(9) Roughly as in Protestant Christianity, Shin stood by an authority argument claiming that no form of intentional practice (*jiriki*, self-power) guaranteed religious liberation; instead, liberation must come from an uncontrollable "external" source (in Shin language, "the working of the Buddha"). But on the many other limits to the Protestant comparison, see Amstutz 1998.

(10) An interesting example: in spite of a rather unambiguous title, the volume *Engaged Pure Land Buddhism* (1998) does not appear in the main bibliography of Queen 2000. The issue has been raised in most focused form in numerous writings by Dr. Alfred Bloom, e.g. Bloom 1995 or 1998.

(11) At first glance, it might even look like Shin might have the closest, not the most distant, relationship with core American "democratic" interests:

Shin demonstrates the possibility of an intelligible integrated gestalt linking metaphysical, political and religious views of twentieth-century importance. These views include a nonfoundational theory of knowledge, a concomitant concern with the contingent and relational nature of the individual self, a recognition that the contingent nature of the self poses problems that must be soteriologically addressed by a religious community, a political assumption that a community can be built on a leveling rhetoric which assumes that the goal can be equally realized by all, and a conviction that such a community must be non-totalizing and must protect the empirical individual and other such religious communities from the control of the state. Taken separately, each of these themes has a Western counterpart, but in the West they have not been adequately linked into a working whole in a manner for which Shin sets a model." (Amstutz 1997, 198)

(12) For example, Bloom 1998 and 1995; Tanaka 1998 and 1999; Prebish 1999, 57-63, 85-190, 128-129, 136-138; Seager 1999, 51-69

(13) Nattier 1995 and 1998. In Nattier's well-known analysis (1995) of "import Buddhism," her "ethnic" category does not fit serious Shin quite adequately. Nattier used three categories: "elite Buddhism" (transmitted to the US via deliberate importation by NAABs; characteristically focused on meditation but not on monasticism or ethical precepts); "evangelical Buddhism" (transmitted to the US via deliberate export; this category refers especially to the Sooka Gakkai movement), and "ethnic Buddhism" (transmitted as cultural

baggage with an immigrant community; the ethnic temple serves immigrant survival needs, but also offers in fact the most complex religious picture). However, Shin in its "protestant" guise is neither evangelical like Sooka Gakkai nor as distinctly rigid in ethnic structure as American Theravaada.

(14) This is not to say that Shin tradition was excessively simple or undisputed. Within its relatively limited confines, Shin developed a rich tradition of education, rhetoric, and analysis.

(15) The Japanese institution has its own flaws: factionalism; craving for "imperial" corporate control; and insufficient internal motivation to adapt more rapidly, especially under the current conditions in which Shin is deeply entangled with certain narrow services to its Japanese constituency, such as the provision of funerals to an aging society.

(16) In addition, the authority claims of the Honganji as the historical guardian of its *tariiki* version of Buddhism have been relatively quite modest. Instead of being in charge of the physical production of "licensed ascetics," Honganji has traditionally merely asserted protectorship over a form of language and ideas, a situation that would seem to be relatively diffuse, flexible, and negotiable.

(17) Such ideas are tentative, for only a small body of NAABs exists that has affiliated itself with or "converted to" Shin. Empirically it would be invaluable to know what makes this body distinctive, but no survey work has been done to date. (Personal communication from Dr. Alfred Bloom, April 2000) It is not clear whether the number of participants would even allow for statistically significant results. A leadership element of the American Shin community has already long reflected on the question of noncommunication. Taitetsu Unno (1998, 6-9, 17), citing from an unpublished manuscript of Bloom, reports on Bloom's most recent conclusions why Shin ideas have not succeeded with a larger American public: 1) Shin tends to make recourse to traditions other than Shin itself (e.g. Zen or psychotherapy) to explain the teaching; 2) Shin's critical political perspective is neglected; 3) Shin is anti-intellectual; 4) Shin lacks a core of intellectual members to lead dialogue and communication; and 5) Shin is other-worldly and inner-directed. Unno himself blames the orthodox Shin doctrinal system, especially of the Nishi Honganji branch, for a stultifying and dogmatic intellectualism. The counterargument offered in this article to such objections

is that Shin (especially as a potential starting place or basic resource) is not so different from other kinds of Buddhism that have drawn much more popular attention in the United States.

(18) Tanaka 1997, 100-112 or Nattier 1995. This renders the Shin leadership both nonexotic and nongurucentric.

(19) The caveat is that meditation *as such* is not regarded as, or given mythicized and ritualized authority status as, ultimately determinative of enlightenment, but it is instead decentered and subordinated, with practical focus placed instead on "awareness" and "practice," especially in social life. A process known in Shin as *sangan-tennyū* (evolving through the Three Vows, that is, from intensive meditation toward the insight into *tariki* spontaneity) has been integral to the fundamental mythos. It is also true, incidentally, that any dogmatic assumption that the technique of meditation is the sine qua non of Buddhism is (as is well known) at odds with much of normal Buddhist life in Asia, in which attitudes about "practice" have been not absolutistic, but instead rather diffuse, indeterminate, and individually adjusted. Furthermore, in elite Buddhist traditions, the "causal" force of formalized meditation in reaching enlightenment was always ambivalent; to a large extent meditation must be understood as ritual as much as technique. (This "hermeneutics of suspicion" even circulates in much of the Zen literature rendered into English.)

(20) Shin acquired this form historically due to the hermeneutical opportunism that led to Shinran's particular modalities of expression in early medieval Japan. Yet this "monolinguality" is not to be confused with authoritarianism ("grace" religions do not properly have this quality), or with simple exclusivism (Shin thinkers of course thought *tariki* was the correct final position, but their own theories embedded *sangan-tennyū*), or with an absolutist mantric "monologism" along Nichiren/Sooka Gakkai lines.

(21) Shin has become noncommunicative even in contemporary Japanese public culture. It may have approached widespread comprehension in the later Tokugawa period, but by the later twentieth century, it was decidedly not a broadly understandable "universal language" anywhere.

(22) In practice Shin depended on a traditional acceptance of ambiguity about "low" and

"high" levels of interpretation of concepts such as "Amida," the "Pure Land," and "salvation"; it was an ancestralist folk Buddhism that coexisted with intellectual Mahaayaana Buddhism under the umbrella of one medium of expression. Such a degree of multivocality is out of tune with Western expectations.

(23) Shin popular communication adopted an emotional and existential tone that could actually be quite sophisticated, but that could also obscure the intellectual core for persons who did not already know the language. Even presentations of Shin targeted at modern American audiences have been known to employ a disingenuously simplified style that only works properly if Buddhist premises are already established.

(24) Beyond the noting of certain vague resemblances in "grace" theories of religious experience and in social politics, this position was never held even by Christian missionaries. See Amstutz 1997.

(25) Amstutz 1997.

(26) And where modern Japanese Buddhists are concerned about contemporary problems (for example consumer society, the environment, or political practices in business or government), their discussion, however shrewd, does not offer anything that is radically unfamiliar to Westerners.

(27) See Mark Unno 1998. This of course is the background of the British Buddhist social thinker Ken Jones.

(28) Although presented officially and accurately as a sophisticated form of Mahaayaana, Shin in practice also has been a folk religion whose traditional support is rooted in ancestor religion and its motivations. This kind of religion is not of primary interest to modern Westerners.

(29) There is an incomplete realization of gender equalization, especially from the standpoint of the Western feminist challenge. That is, conservative associations between feminism and Marxism, or conservative concerns about child-rearing, or traditionalist commitments to ie-type lineages, all persist to some extent. Political correctness toward minority groups is also incompletely realized.

(30) Historically, moreover, in Shin tradition a church-state separation was enunciated in the fifteenth century and has continued (despite missteps and distortions between the Meiji Restoration and 1945) as the fundamental Shin political orientation. (In this development of a "nonestablished" coexistence of the two spheres, Shin preceded the prominent emergence of such ideas in the West by about 300 years.)

(31) Fields 1998a, 202.

(32) The generally excellent introduction of Tanaka 1997 is subtitled "in America." The recent anthology by Tanaka and Nasu 1998 contains (with the exception of a passage by Mark Unno) almost no mundane empirical description of what Japanese Shin institutions are supporting in late-twentieth-century Japan: school systems, universities, religious law lobbying, social service work, and ethical business traditions. Often, Shin has been emphasized more as a minor 100-year-old American experience than as a major 800-year Japanese experience, and apologists seem more interested in old-immigrant "Japanese America" (whose stereotypical cultural qualities tend to be fossil reflections of lower-class Japan only as it was circa 1880 to 1940) than in either historical pre-Meiji Japan or in the complex, richly educated contemporary Japanese society that has undergone extraordinary change for a century and a half. North American Shin Buddhists sometimes even seem to understand themselves as competing with Japan for legitimacy, that is, evolving beyond the Japanese-American ethnic identity problem (which was already enough of a barrier to communication) toward claims for independent religious uniqueness. Thus Japanese-American Shin views are not only ethnocentric in the most obvious sense, but America-centric in the more subtle sense that their own local type of ethnic experience is regarded as a standard. Japanese-American attitudes about de-ethnicizing Shin have been ambivalent to the core; they want Shin to be construed as a "respectable" form of liberal religion that has its place in the mainstream American social salad, but simultaneously as a "private" religion that "belongs to" an ethnic community. Perhaps this bias expresses, paradoxically, a frustrated urge toward universalism. Still, the crucial implication of "ethnic" is localist as contrasted to internationalist, and intentionally the North American Japanese-American community has not attempted to construct itself as internationalist in the way that Sooka Gakkai has done, or even in the way that the native Japanese Shin organization attempts at least rhetorically to do.

(33) For example, Kashima 1990.

(34) In his first study of American Buddhism, Prebish (1979, 69) actually thought that apparent similarities with Christianity made Shin the likeliest form of Buddhism to become "masterfully transnational." Fields 1994, 56, wrote: "If we could drop our self-centered striving for enlightenment we could see what is right in front of our eyes and nose: with nothing to define and no one to define it, a many-colored, multi-cultured, pluralistic Pure Land with room enough for all." (See also Fields 1998a and 1998b.) Prebish (1999, 132-138) has recently concluded that the failure of Shin to more effectively open up in the USA has not been due to inadequate publicity efforts.

(35) A couple of other explanations can be mentioned too. *The communications gap (although it persists after a hundred years of contact) might be the product of a kind of developmental delay in the uptake of Buddhist ideas.* In other words, the *tariki* approach is most comprehensible when it builds on a preliminary accumulation of experience with Buddhism; it is likely to be an orientation that emerges after discovering the limitations of other approaches. Alternatively, *Shin is too challenging to the "exceptionalist" self-conception of American religion.* All Americans are influenced, consciously or subconsciously, by perceptions of America as the "city on the hill," a nation with a superior moral destiny and leadership responsibility. Early in the transplantation of Buddhism to America, Americans latched onto the suggestion that Buddhism might be recreated in North America and then perhaps redistributed to the world. (See Fields 1992.) This approach does not work well with the Shin tradition, which is quite alive in Japan and is already substantially modernized (and postmodernized). Feinberg (1993) has noted that there is an American identity crisis involving concerns about democracy, modality of individualism, civic morality, equality, type of market capitalism, patriotism, education, and the meanings of postmodernism. Each question has points of strong resemblance with Japanese struggles over the same issues, yet this also causes confusion about the supposed "otherness" of Japan. But Feinberg suggests that Japan actually appears to have some potential advantages in dealing with such concerns, because it can mediate some problems via a more communal conception of the self (33). Yet because Americans really do not like to concede to Japan regarding anything of fundamental importance, taking the potentialities of Shin tradition too seriously would arouse an "anxiety of influence" among Americans in ways that the Tibetan or Theravaada traditions do not.

(36) Dr. Christopher Queen maintains that a clear "atheism" is a matter of crucial importance.

(37) See Amstutz 1997, 66-67.

(38) Jones 1989, 275. See also Kabat-Zinn 1998, Hershock 1999, 286, or the picture rendered by the entries in Morreale 1998.

(39) See, for example, Rothberg 1998: "engaged Buddhism" comes from a reenvisioning of traditional concepts of "*sīla* (precepts) and meditation. Linguistically, of course, the locution "engaged Buddhism" seems to imply that disengagement is primary and that engagement is a kind of secondary add-on. (cf. Hunt-Perry and Fine 2000)

(40) Overviews include Queen 2000, Prebish 1999, or Rothberg 1998.

(41) Layman 1976, 186-202, writing a quarter century ago when Shin in America was a more prominent part of the picture than it is today, already talked about the peace movement, ecology, civil rights, drug use, social welfare, citizenship, and family values.

(42) Jones 1989 and 1993, Edwards 1998, or Hershock 1999.

(43) For example, Rothberg 1998, 282-286.

(44) Kraft 1992.

(45) As is well known, SGI has become more ethnically open than other Buddhist traditions. (Chappell 2000) Soka Gakkai International is somewhat comparable to Shin as a form of discriminated-against non-monastic Buddhism operating in America. In terms of social engagement, Sooka Gakkai in Japan is heavily involved in peacemaking and social welfare, and its American side is trying to develop an engaged modern Buddhist social critical language that can be taken seriously. At the same time, however, sociologists have shown that the uptake of SGI still dominantly follows the American pattern of self-help and mind culture. (Hammond and Machacek 1999, Wilson and Dobbelaere 1994) In addition, because of its inherent doctrinal approach (the absolute primacy of Lotus chanting), SGI will continue to face an uphill battle to obtain serious intellectual recognition.

(46) Indeed, the recent studies of Buddhism in America do not reveal much influence from the study of American religious or intellectual history at all.

(47) Tamney 1992, 132

(48) Hori 1994. For similar observations expressed in the Shin literature, see Taitetsu Unno 1998, 18-20, Rogers 1986, and Bellah 1987. A property of the (unstable) cryptocalvinist self seems to be a preference for extremes in religious authority: either completely independent religious self-invention on the one hand or unbalanced reliance on gurus at the other. An older notion of the flexible but communally shared religious language seems to have waned. Thus an incongruity: the phenomenon of Asians adhering in their pursuit of "social Buddhism" to the more nongurucentric, congregational — in a sense, more personally autonomous — handling of Buddhism, and on the other hand the NAABs adhering (in their pursuit of meditation Buddhism) to the more authority-craving, charisma-seeking, and thus in a sense less personally independent handling of Buddhism.

(49) Apologists less scholarly than Hori have sometimes even been willing to play the "Japanese uniqueness" card, according to which "Asians" or "Japanese" as a broad category are presented as uniformly less ego-centered than Westerners, or are so to speak innately "Buddhist" in common sensibility. The Shin perspective is salutary here, for Shin teachers, who have traditionally constituted a mode of internal cultural opposition in Japan, never thought that the majority of the Japanese population took Buddhism seriously in any satisfactory way.

(50) See Moskowitz 2001.

(51) Phrase inspired by Delbanco 1989.