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Global and Domestic Challenges Confronting Buddhist Institutions in Japan

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

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Abstract

With the rise of globalization in the past twenty years, the positioning of religious belief and activity worldwide has become increasingly complicated due to new information technologies, immigration flows, corporate restructuring and transnational finance. This paper identifies five factors that not only characterize late modern societies but also create conditions to which religions must adapt, or ignore at their peril. Using Buddhist temples, priests, and their surrounding communities in Japan as case studies, the paper traces how social forces such as 1) a “crisis of orientation,” 2) corporate and bureaucratic restructuring, 3) consumer culture, 4) individualization within a “risk” society, and 5) experimental approaches to spirituality impact religious practice and institutions. Without a perspective that incorporates the global into the local (but still acknowledges the power of individual agency), our analysis of religious activities remains parochial and sociocentric.

The goal of this paper is to highlight several of the principal forces—some domestic and familiar, others global and invasive—shaping religious institutions in Japan today. The challenges of a new world order apply equally to Shinto shrines, Christian churches, and even Islamic mosques, but the focus here will be on contemporary Buddhist temples. Significant changes, such as the gradual decline of a centuries-old temple parishioner system (*danka seido*), are already well advanced and are obvious to both scholars and the general public. But there are other dynamics affecting religious institutions which are harder to identify because they are more culturally diffused. Nonetheless, these forces will have equally destabilizing consequences for Buddhist temples and all mainstream religious institutions in the coming decades. With innovation and adaptation, however, some Buddhist denominations in Japan may once again become relevant to the lives of millions of people in ways different from how they are currently perceived: as sites for funerals and memorial services.

I will sketch briefly four primary forces influencing contemporary religious traditions and then expand upon each one in the following pages. My assessment of these dynamics is based on archival research coupled with fieldwork totaling eight months over a period of four years (2006 to 2010). After speaking with around forty Buddhist priests at temples scattered all over central Japan, as well as conducting numerous conversations with individuals representing a wide spectrum of religious affiliation (or lack of it), the following four dynamics now seem glaringly obvious for their impact on Japanese society and the religious traditions embedded therein. First, there is a growing tolerance for pluralism and diversity. This openness is aided by a second dynamic: a steady flow of information available via new communication technologies that span the globe. A third major influence is a restructuring of corporate and

decision-making processes, brought about in part because of instantaneous communication systems. Finally, there is a greater personal agency evident among Japanese in general, which functions interactively with all of the above. Each one of these dynamics is significant and could be discussed at length for their impact on Japanese society. My purpose is here is to see them as a mutually reinforcing and interactive web of relations and consequences, both for the Japanese people and the religious institutions in their midst.

If we are to understand the ongoing interaction between social change and religious adaptation, we have to identify how this encounter is situated within local communities as well as a part of broader global and transnational networks. By doing so, we can redirect attention towards the interdependent nature of local effects and ever-expanding causes at work on these institutions and the social roles they play in the lives of contemporary Japanese. It may be fascinating to report on the involvement of priests and lay practitioners in feeding homeless populations, manning suicide prevention hotlines, operating cafés at temples, and so on, but these are provisional reactions to more pervasive and systemic trends at work within Japanese society. A theoretical map of the interactive territories of this social moment within Japanese Buddhist institutions will not only better situate scholarly research and analysis to extend its reach, it may also assist religious leaders to better navigate unfamiliar yet consequential economic and social circumstances.

The first case study will highlight how a temple in Kyoto in the mid-1980s was destroyed by a devastating fire. While fueled by the physical structure itself, the cause of the fire is more complex and includes a combination of domestic and international forces generated by expanding economies. Temple officials then tried to reconfigure their religious enterprise to align with rather than resist these forces, achieving mixed results. The second example at the end of the paper profiles an initiative that aims to create new alliances between temples and their surrounding communities by engaging fully both new technology and the realities of an increasingly secular society. The discussion framed by these two examples will survey evidence of a variety of forces and trends that have proved both influential for and often detrimental to the organization and practice of Buddhism in Japan today.

Thus have I heard...

"It was hours before dawn when the smell of smoke, and not the sound of a temple bell, roused the Buddhist priest from his sleep. His worst fear was that his family's 400 year old Kyoto temple and its treasures would suffer damage by fire, a fear that snapped into a panicked reality as he jumped out of bed and raced from his sleeping quarters down a long corridor. The smoke thickened as he approached the main hall of the temple, and he heard the popping sound of combustible wood. When he flung aside the sliding door to the sanctuary, he saw its tatami floor, multicolored silk banners, black lacquered main altar with its drums, bells, and sutra books all engulfed in flames. Giving no thought to personal safety, he plunged barefoot into the hall to try and rescue the most valuable object of all: a precious wooden statue of Amida, the Buddha of the Pure Land. Less than a minute had passed since he awoke from his sleep; in another few seconds, the priest would be badly burned and later die from these injuries. The temple and its lovely Buddha, its hand-painted sliding screens,

numerous spirit tablets (*ihai*) so important for venerating ancestors—all would be completely destroyed."¹

Police investigators would later concur (but be unable to prove) that the fire had been arson. This shocking assessment seemed to further reinforce a general public perception that, beginning in the late 1960s, Japan had entered a new era when anything was possible—even the willful destruction of a Buddhist temple. Although evidence could not be found that would lead to an arrest and prosecution, it was well known in the neighborhood that a dispute was ongoing between the middle-aged priest and local vendors providing food and drink from portable wagons (*yatai*). With the temple's prime location in the heart of one of Kyoto's main shopping and entertainment districts, the vendors wanted to lease space in the temple's open yard to store their carts during the day and then mobilize them to ply their trade at night. However, concerned what his dwindling number of parishioners might think, the priest refused these repeated requests. The temple could certainly have used the additional revenue, but he maintained that carts covered with blue plastic and parked on temple property during the day would be an eyesore.

The details, settings, and actors involved in this incident might appear, at first reading, to represent fairly predictable oppositions: religious and secular interests, rapid social change and tradition, a once-stable community in the heart of Kyoto besieged by rootless economic forces that tear apart and reshape neighborhoods into entertainment or commercial districts. While these pairings are valid up to a point, they cannot fully explain the tensions in play. To do so, we need a network of cause and effect extending beyond Kyoto, one encompassing a transnational scale shaped by new communication technologies, global systems of finance, shifting political alliances, and corporate and bureaucratic restructuring. Had Japan's economy not been booming when this incident occurred, it is unlikely that the center of Kyoto would have become such a magnet for speculative real estate transactions, increased consumerism, and recreational sites. The area was flooded nightly with young people, corporate and blue collar workers, even university students—all with disposable income or expense accounts looking for momentary reprieve from their place within an increasingly unforgiving socio-economic order.

The small temple, along with many others, had been moved to its present location in the late 1500s by order of one of Japan's three unifiers, Toyotomi Hideyoshi. In some respects, the temple remained continuous with its premodern history through the memorial and funeral services it offered, its faith-based emphasis on salvation in the Pure Land, and an economic reliance on parishioner donations. But as land prices began to rise and families that had lived in the neighborhood for centuries sold their property and relocated, the temple and its priest found themselves under siege from forces they could neither control nor which they completely understood. Kyoto's economy was expanding rapidly, but how could their temple benefit? The city's mayors, many of them members of the communist party since the end of World War II, were being replaced with politicians loyal to and supported by the wealthy

¹ This story is a composite of three interviews carried out at or in the vicinity of the rebuilt temple. For reasons of confidentiality, one source comes from inside the temple, one is a parishioner, and one is a resident of the immediate neighborhood unaffiliated with the temple (but a member of a nearby Nichiren temple).

Liberal Democratic party and its policies favoring rapid economic development. Kyoto was being transformed.

After the fire and death of the head priest, although there was no physical structure remaining, the temple still existed as a legal entity run by its board of trustees. To generate some income, the temple leased parking spaces on the open ground while maintaining the sanctity of the graveyard at the rear of the property. It is customary in the world of post-war Japanese Buddhism for the eldest son to take over from his father upon retirement. But in this case, with no temple to administer, the eldest son was asked by the parishioners and trustees of a regional temple in the same denomination some three hours to the northwest to become their head priest. A consensus was reached between the two temples, and the young man left Kyoto.

Faced with what seemed to be a hopeless situation, a senior trustee proposed a new solution, one radical and experimental, that was more in tune with the times. He promoted a "tenant building," with shopping, eating, and drinking establishments on seven floors and the temple on top, marked by a high golden spire. This novel configuration would allow the temple to keep its original "footprint" yet generate income from diverse quarters. A local architect drew up plans for the structure, which was approved by both the headquarters of the Pure Land denomination as well as other temples in the area. Anticipating criticism that the temple would be dependent upon human suffering through the alcohol served at its tenant bars, pubs, and restaurants, the trustees stated that there have always been businesses in the areas in front of temples (*monzencho*). They also emphasized to reporters that while many other temples simply sold their land to developers and then headed for the suburbs, they wanted to protect their ancestors' peace by preserving the cemetery.

By the time plans were formalized to rebuild the destroyed temple and construction started, the deceased priest's second son had graduated from a local Buddhist university and was named head priest. He and the trustees did their best to rally supporters for what was being portrayed as a phoenix-like rebirth of the temple. But during the years it had taken to get this far, the temple's parishioner base had further deteriorated. A number of *danka* families had not wanted to assume even a part of the costs of rebuilding through increased membership fees. Following the gravy-train of real estate speculation, they sold their property at sky-high prices and moved out of the neighborhood. With fewer than 90 families remaining, the income from membership fees and donations could not be relied upon to provide much more than a fraction of the rebuilding cost.

Additionally, the agreement brokered between the temple and the bank providing funds for rebuilding was complicated. Timely repayment depended in part on each tenant in the building assuming responsibility for a percentage of the loan (*kenchiku-kyōryoku-kin*). Thus, the temple's present and future financial stability depended on a wildly fluctuating variable: whether or not the building's tenants managed to turn a profit. When a business closed, there would be no rental income to the temple until another tenant was located, a contract signed, and their establishment opened. On several occasions when revenue streams from tenants faltered, there was a high risk of having the property repossessed by the lender.

At first, the novelty of the rebuilt temple, the first such vertically-oriented, tenant-temple in the long history of Kyoto's Buddhist institutions, garnered considerable attention and media coverage. The young priest gave countless interviews to both print and television reporters about the innovative solution to the temple's tragedy and resulting dilemmas over parishioner loss and the changing nature of the neighborhood. An initial surge of curious neighbors and individuals from other parts of the city and region did not, however, translate into new parishioners. Over time, it was becoming clear that trying to replace parishioner support with revenue generated by the building's tenants was a shaky proposition.

Additionally, the vertical structure of the temple's building convinced the young head priest that another essential aspect of the original temple had been lost. In a traditional Japanese Buddhist temple, there is a short path (*sanrō*) from the main gate facing (and sometimes barring) the outside world. As a person approaches the main sanctuary, they have time to reflect on the setting: the carefully tended gardens, elegant bell tower, symmetry of architectural lines, and a sense of calm. A temple visitor can thus prepare themselves mentally and spiritually for encountering and, in most cases, petitioning the Buddhas and bodhisattvas within the main hall.

In a vertical structure, one steps from the street into an elevator which, a few seconds later, then opens directly to the sanctuary on the seventh floor. The current priest noted that he makes an effort to have people fresh off the street settle down and chant the *nenbutsu* prayer to the Amida Buddha before a service, but he says "there is too much of the modern world" in this kind of approach, and people tend to exhibit less respect and seriousness than in more traditional settings. He hopes the building will last another fifty years and generate enough income to finance what he calls "a real temple" in a more suitable location. "We tried something new which has worked for other temples in large urban areas, but even after twenty years, we're still adapting. I get a headache thinking about all the changes that have taken place, and those which are yet to come."

Positioning the Present of Japanese Temple Buddhism

We've just seen how a single temple in downtown Kyoto first suffered a kind of collateral damage from, and then later tried to integrate with an economy that has since stagnated domestically. It is a rather extreme example of how religious institutions of all sizes and locations, many originating in the feudal period (or before), now have to adapt to a society influenced by a transnational economic order, as well as the consequences of trying to domesticate that order. Local conditions are still important of course, but, as "inherently fragile social achievements," they are constantly "informed, interfered with, and shaped by regional or global forces" (Appadurai, 1996: 196). The 1980s in particular marked the beginning of an age of free markets, speed stock trading, instantaneous data transfer, junk bonds, and so on—all features that accelerated the economic dimensions of what has come to be called "globalization." For many Japanese, however, they see globalization as a force originating outside Japan and acting like another version of the *kurofune*, the "black ships" of Commodore Perry that, in 1853, began pressuring Japanese society to make fundamental changes in how it operates (Iyotani, 2002: 49).

There are few guidelines to follow within Japan's traditional Buddhist denominations in dealing with these social and economic complexities. Teachings of causality are central to Buddhist traditions, but there seems to be a disconnect in applying these teachings to the way social and economic systems operate on people's lives. Priests may still reference the doctrines, hierarchies, and religious networks of their denominations, but their institutional autonomy means they will succeed or fail largely on their own initiatives. They are being forced to adopt a more experimental approach to their traditions in order to accommodate incremental yet significant changes in worldviews, technology, demographics, and culture.

The four dynamics identified in the introduction are shaping not only the cultural and social orders of Japan and its temples, but the consciousness of its citizens as well. Each of these dynamics is worthy of extended discussions, but here I will only summarize their salient points as a framework for analysis. The first global trend affecting Japanese temple Buddhism is a greater social and political tolerance for pluralism and diversity. The reasons behind this development are complex, encompassing fallout from the long projects of multiple modernities, two world wars, colonial agendas, the Cold War, and increased immigration (to name only a few important influences). In this period of "late modernity"—which is strongly influenced by science, bureaucratic systems, consumerism, and urbanization, and framed by the language of human rights and democratic principles—Charles Taylor (among others) believes we have ended up with "historically unprecedented networks" of new practices and institutional forms (Taylor, 2002: 91).² Both pluralism and diversity are essential to the democratic principles of human rights and freedom of religion, where (try as they might) no single religious or political organization has a monopoly on religious "truths."

The second global trend shaping religious practices worldwide are new communication technologies. These have allowed the common person, via a cell phone or computer connected to the internet, to have access and interactivity with all kinds of information. Religious teachings, appeals, and activities can now reach a global audience on the world wide web, but they must compete in a noisy forum of diverse approaches, as well as challenges, to religious belief and practice. Additionally, the rise of digital publishing and networking has helped to de-centralize traditional centers of authority and control over information. Major denominations still have doctrinal authority, of course, but the world has "flattened" so that any person or organization with rudimentary computer skills can make their religious and political views heard, and sometimes challenge or subvert mainstream agendas.

Since data, money, and communications now move more seamlessly, a third globalizing force has been the restructuring of corporations and decision-making processes which utilize the speed and range of new technologies. Financial, manufacturing, service-related (especially

² While some scholars insist on using the term "postmodern" to characterize this new era, we have not left "modernity" behind as the prefix "post" would suggest. Just as Eisenstadt argues for "multiple modernities" (2000), there also appear to be as many continuities as there are disruptions between the earlier periods of certainty and today's increasingly globalized world. James Beckford (2003: 201) has pointed out that many of the fastest-growing and most dynamic areas of religion are those where "clear doctrines, conservative ethics, tradition-centered lifestyles, and authoritative patterns of leadership are dominant." We must remember these conservative movements shape their doctrines, ideologies, and institutions as a form of resistance to the relativism of cherished "truths" required when living in a multi-ethnic and pluralistic world.

NPO and NGOs), and distribution systems have all been affected. The result has been oftentimes wrenching contortions as companies, societies, and individuals adjust to a more competitive and faster-paced market. A 75-year-old quip from American humorist Will Rodgers aptly describes this restructuring trend: "Even if you're on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there."³

The final global trend of this list is perhaps the most consequential for Buddhism in Japan: a greater personal agency to determine one's "unique" life course. Traditional identities oriented around family, community, and occupation have wilted in the seductive allure of opportunities offered by a globalizing world. In both western societies and Japan, the grip of class, gender, religion, and local culture has loosened and thus transformed the consciousness of contemporary individuals into an ongoing struggle with the questions of "who am I?" and "what do I want?"

This newly developed sense of individualism is not to be conflated with mere personal choice, characteristic of consumers in a crowded marketplace and influenced by advertising, status, and product availability. The trend to commodify religion is, of course, influenced by personal choice but it is part of a larger, more interesting process at work. Personal choice is a dimension and expression of individual agency, which in turn has among its powerful motivations the imagination itself. Like education or immigration, the imagination has become a social force in late modernity, "a powerful form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility" (Appadurai, 1996: 31). Today, even the son of a poor farmer in Japan's depopulated regions can, with initiative and intelligence, imagine a very different life for himself.

But there is a shadow side to personal agency that must also be noted. With so many once-reliable blueprints for how to live now considered passé or restrictive, a person may stumble in finding ways to move forward and become frustrated with the "freedom" to determine her own biography. The need to continually "think, plan, adjust, negotiate, define, revoke and then start all over again" (Beck, 2002: 6) can lead to a profound sense of alienation from sociocultural norms that are elevated in advertising and the media as examples of success. While the cheerleaders of globalization portray its benefits as positive, we have seen a great number of ideologies and organizations react strongly against the speed of change. They want to preserve what they feel are essential values structuring morality, lifestyle, and even worldviews they perceive as being threatened by globalization and pluralism. As a result, globalizing forces not only reify class divisions based on wealth, they have also fostered new forms of nationalism, racism, religious fundamentalism, and sexism as defensive reactions to forces perceived as being beyond one's control (Iyotani, 2002: 49).

When we assess the interactivity between these four global dynamics and temple Buddhism in contemporary Japan, we begin to see more clearly a number of cause and effect relationships between local and global trends. Thanks to a greater tolerance for pluralism and diversity, and with increased access to information, higher education, travel, and new ideas generally, individuals have become empowered to explore a range of religious possibilities, or avoid

³ <http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/272.html> (accessed August 20, 2008).

religion altogether. Japan's discerning consumers of religious services are now able to seek what *they*, not their parents or a temple priest, consider to be optimal benefits for investments of their time and money. This tendency has destabilized the financial affairs of many temples, as parishioners leave or pass away and are not replaced. But a greater selectivity and range of personal choices have also aided other temples which have been able to attract new members through innovation and activism. Now that nearly every temple has a homepage, there is a more market-driven model for choosing religious services.⁴ The world of temples is slowly being restructured because of these dynamics, but in most cases, the leadership of major denominations has yet to implement policies that will help to address the concerns of smaller temples.

One of the most dramatic domestic challenges to Buddhism (that surfaced continually in my interviews with priests around central Japan) is the "weak relationship" between priests and parishioners.⁵ Loss of *danka* households is perhaps the major force affecting the future of temple Buddhism simply because fewer families making contributions impacts a temple's financial stability. This loss is usually attributed to a variety of factors, including a shift in demographics, changed economic circumstances, shrinking families, and the inertia of Buddhist institutions to keep pace with social change. Although all these situations play out locally and regionally, they remain interactive with global economic and cultural trends influencing the privatization and individuation of religious affiliations. A number of priests whose *danka* membership was shrinking said they rarely knew the specific reason why a family ended up leaving their temple. They generally did not make any follow-up inquiries because they wanted to respect the confidentiality and privacy of the family, and because they feared any questioning would be interpreted in a negative way.

When I asked priests of modest means in both rural and urban areas how they would try to add new parishioners, many interpreted the question to imply proselytizing (*fukyō*)—something they felt they could not do because of the lingering repercussions of the Aum Shinrikyō incident in 1995, in which poison sarin gas was released into the Tokyo subway system by cult members. Thus, a second important test for religious leaders in Japan is a general suspicion of religious institutions and specialists that remains high among the general public and mainstream media. Inoue Nobutaka's multi-year survey from 1995-2001 among university students nationwide indicates more than half found religion "suspicious, with nearly 80% holding negative opinions about religion in general (Inoue, 2007). A number of priests said they felt like they could not advertise temple services or activities because they

⁴ We should not assume that internet access to temple services magically creates new members and financial solvency. A 2006 *Japan Times* profile of temple-run cafés and events ("Temples Grope for Gimmicks," <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20061101f2.html>) highlighted the work of a single priest in a Tokyo-suburb, and listed his website, <http://www.higan.net>. However, the article notes the café at his temple has not led to new members. Also, when one surveys his well-written and interesting blog, there are, in most entries, zero responses. Several other young priests I spoke with in the greater metropolitan area of Osaka, Kobe, and Kyoto said they had tried but then discontinued on-line counseling, prayers, or other "virtual" temple services.

⁵ Research conducted intermittently over a three year period from 2007 to 2009 throughout central Japan has taken me thus far to forty five temples where I interviewed priests, but also (when possible) the wife of a priest, local parishioners, and, residents of the area not affiliated with the temple. The manuscript that will encompass this research is titled *Experimental Buddhism: Innovation and Activism in Contemporary Japan*.

did not want to adopt tactics used by new religions and cults, nor did they feel existing temple members would look favorably on this type of activity. Even though their temple's financial viability was at risk, several informants indicated they needed to find other sources of income not linked to proselytization. Most typically, they become employees of a local government or find a position as a part-time teacher.

A third domestic challenge is a mood among the general population best described as a deep anxiety about the future and life in general. Some cultural historians of Japan will argue there is nothing new in ascribing this feature to a people whose society has been upended any number of times over the centuries because of geological, climatic, political, or military causes. But the current version of anxiety is decidedly different. More people than ever before are much better informed about the details of any crisis situation, yet they lack resources and power to do much other than try to minimize their own discomfort and, if altruistic, the suffering of those more directly involved. Additionally, the once-pervasive worldviews of Japan's Buddhist traditions no longer provide most educated people with credible explanations for dramatic events and crises. In a sense, people are on their own to construct meaningful narratives for the events that shape their lives, which is one of the "freedoms" characteristic of late modern societies that is destabilizing to traditional temple Buddhism. Finally, there is a structural dimension to the current global economic system that gives rise to vague feelings of anxiety. According to Richard Sennett, "uncertainty is woven into the everyday practices of a vigorous capitalism...it exists without any looming historical disaster" (Sennett, 1998: 31).

If we factor in domestic incidents and situations from the past fifteen years, the cumulative effect on the general mood of society becomes more tangible. With public confidence already shaken by the burst economic bubble in 1992 and the loss of control over the government by Japan's dominant political party in 1993, the mood of the public was uneasy. The January 1995 Hanshin earthquake (centered in Kobe and killing nearly 6,000 people) further undermined confidence in public authorities to respond quickly to disaster, whether financial or natural. Two months later, in March 1995, the attack on Tokyo subways by members of the Aum cult—itsself a late-modern example of how educated but isolated and disillusioned individuals seek meaningful community—raised public suspicion about all kinds of religious organizations in Japan, with elected officials passing new laws in 1996 to more closely monitor activities and finances.

During the continuing recession (ca. 1992 to 2004), there were other social and cultural trends that contributed to feelings of unease and anxiety among contemporary Japanese:

- an increasingly sensationalized and growing crime rate characterized by shocking and sometimes random murders
- bullying and ostracism in schools and workplaces
- a resurgent nationalism that jeopardized relations with China and Korea for six years (2001-2006), as well as stigmatized foreign workers and illegal residents as responsible for much of the recent crime wave.

- increases in temporary employees with no benefits or job security—common to many economic restructuring efforts elsewhere in the world—leading to issues of self-esteem and ambiguous social status for millions of workers. As pointed out by Kelly and White, these conditions represent a significant change from what is considered a "proper" life course not only for Japanese males but for women as well (Kelly and White, 2006: 13-16). The total number of workers in nonregular or unstable jobs rose 80,000 to 1.78 million in 2009 (Honkawa Data Tribune).
- a rising suicide rate which surpassed 30,000 deaths for eleven years in a row. It was the highest on record in 2009 at 32,845 deaths, with 71% of them male. Suicide prevention workers and Buddhist priests involved in this effort I spoke with in Tokyo say the number is actually much higher since many deaths, especially among the elderly, are not reported to authorities as suicides.

The list could go on. For each aspect of the late modern period that has extended popular understanding—a more cosmopolitan worldview that respects human rights, a greater sense of tolerance about religious truths and practices, increased information about and exposure to other cultures and ideas, more chances for social mobility—the above summary of dramatic incidents in society indicates there are consequences as well. Results from a 2008 survey by the highly-regarded Institute for Statistical Mathematics (*Tōkei Sūri Kenkyūsho*) showed that 57 percent of 3,302 respondents (aged from 20-79) expected their lives to get worse, with only 11 percent expecting some improvement. These results are nearly the mirror opposite to the same question asked thirty years ago (ISM, 2009). Using a much larger sample, a 2008 Cabinet Ministry poll of over 100,000 men and women—taken *before* the global economic crisis of fall 2008—reflected high levels of uncertainty and anxiety about "everyday life" in over 70% of responses.⁶

These survey results indicate that societies trying to adapt to and domesticate the dynamics of global economic systems "generate anxiety because (they) place people within the reach of forces which are, or seem to be, outside the range of conventional forms of political and social control" (Pieterse, 1997: 79). A sense of powerlessness, whatever its cause, frequently leads to cognitive and emotional anxiety. The surveys indicate this feeling is especially widespread in Japan, where conventional frames of reference have been challenged and undermined without alternatives that are hospitable and welcoming (Pieterse, 79).

In short, not only are contemporary men and women intellectually, emotionally, and psychologically different from their predecessors a generation earlier, they, as well as society as a whole, are ongoing experiments in whether the speed, intensity, and pressures of globalization are sustainable. Buddhist teachings have always emphasized impermanence as a defining feature of reality, yet Buddhist priests have championed institutional continuity, well-worn doctrines of liberation and salvation, and their roles as ritual specialists. New paradigms of the person and society in general, shaped by domestic and global forces,

⁶ "Over 70 per cent of Japanese Worried about Life."

<http://www.japantoday.com/category/national/view/over-70-of-japanese-worried-about-life-govt-poll>. (Accessed August 20, 2008.)

confronts traditional Japanese Buddhist institutions at every turn. If temple Buddhism does not accelerate institutional change and innovative policies to accommodate the attitudes and lifestyles of this new era, and find ways to assuage the widespread anxiety of the general population, it will, like the banking and financial sector, become "a victim of what it thinks it knows" (Friedman, 2000: 227). Like global warming, the emerging forces that are beginning to destabilize Japanese temple Buddhism remain easy to dismiss by many elderly Buddhist leaders, with painful consequences still a decade or more in the future. Funerals, memorial services, and the sale of graveyard plots constitute business-as-usual for most temples and priests, bringing considerable economic gain. And yet, like our dependency on fossil fuels, there is a shrinking time horizon for just how long this reliance can be sustained.

Innovation for the Twenty-First Century

To conclude on a more positive note, there are tangible signs that a growing number of individual priests and leaders in several major denominations have initiated policies that respond directly to the problems they face. They have engaged issues of social justice and public welfare, established new organizations to engage these issues, and have thus reasserted a claim to relevance before a dubious public. Given the ambivalent and often negative public perception of Buddhism in Japan today, each effort to restructure temple and tradition represents an important conceptual shift in how priests see their roles in and duties to society.

Professor Ueda Noriyuki, in his book *Ganbare Bukkyō!* and in his role as advisor to an inter-denominational group of priests (titled "Bōzu Be Ambitious"), has identified these initial efforts as a "Buddhist renaissance" (2004). After meeting a wide variety of priests during the course of my fieldwork, I am less certain about a "renaissance" because of widespread psychological and institutional inertia that seeks to avoid change and preserve the status quo. However, like Professor Ueda, I do find innovation and activism slowly gaining greater credibility within Buddhist and lay communities, aided in part by editorial policies and reporting at trade-newspapers like *Chūgai Nippō* and *Bukkyō Times*, as well as compelling accounts in more mainstream publications. Interviews with chief editors at both trade newspapers indicated they consistently promote coverage of socially active temples or priests, especially when there are tangible results benefiting disadvantaged others.

A useful concept that can accommodate a wide range of responses to the kinds of local and global influences Buddhist priests face today is "experimental Buddhism."⁷ Rather than privilege denominations that often do little to help priests adapt to changing social conditions, "experimental Buddhism" provides a "big tent" that spans considerable diversity yet has some common features. In its most general sense, the concept evokes the continual reinvention and reworking of not just Buddhism but all religious traditions as they struggle to keep pace with rapid social change and the concerns of contemporary men and women. The adjective "experimental" calls particular attention to the ways a variety of actors (Buddhist priests included) sidestep the restrictions of denomination and doctrine to use religious

⁷ A more theoretical treatment of the concept of "experimental Buddhism" can be found in my article published in *Tricycle Magazine*, Winter, 2010, pp. 46-47, 111. The term is also instrumental to my overall research agenda and is reflected in the title of my forthcoming book.

traditions selectively and strategically. What matters most is the utility of social capital generated from both diverse Buddhist traditions and current technological and administrative resources. The goal is to help people meet the challenges of existing social conditions, some of which, as we have seen, are historically unprecedented and globally influenced.

Through trial-and-error, relevant concepts and methods are selected and then applied to any number of ends, some social and political, others psychological and religious. Drawing upon deeply internalized dispositions that incline people to act, think, and feel in ways consistent with social situations and cultural norms, these newly configured Buddhist values become resources rather than blueprints for action and meaning. While the process is selective, pragmatic, and rational, the overall intent is to nurture positive change that (depending on the situation) improves the general quality of life. A few examples of this type of innovation and activism include creating outreach programs for individuals isolated from meaningful human contact, suicide prevention, restoring transparency to temple finances, establishing care homes and hospices for the elderly as well as shelters for victims of domestic violence, and patrolling neighborhood parks where teenagers congregate to sniff glue.

Experimental strategies to restore vitality to Buddhist temples by increasing their social relevance were apparent during discussions with senior officials at the Jōdoshū (Pure Land) headquarters in Kyoto in June 2009. As the denomination prepares for its 800th anniversary in 2011, top administrators have examined seriously the Pure Land mission for the future.⁸ The official in charge of the event, Chief Administrative Office Mitsunari Ryūzo, sees it as a chance for regular people to encounter how religion might have significance for their lives. "The resources we are committing to the *dai-onki* are not just for the denomination but for society in general. We want to promote temples as centers of a community through the concept of *tomoiki*, or 'living together harmoniously'."⁹

Central to this endeavor is a working model established by Head Priest Akita Mutsuhiko of Ōtenin temple in central Osaka, which has pioneered some of the key concepts and institutional strategies that now guide Pure Land agendas for the future. Head Priest Akita has shown that it is possible to not only reformulate a temple's mission (which now emphasizes "learning, healing, and enjoyment") but its social function as well. Ōtenin collaborates regularly with a non-profit organization that is actually housed at the temple. The temple and

⁸ A similar celebration was held by Rinzai Zen headquarters in 2008, but it was roundly criticized by many Rinzai priests I spoke with for poor planning and coordination. The event was also compromised by an accounting and investment scandal in financial offices of the denomination's main university.

⁹ The term *tomoiki* is a concept derived from the *kanji* characters for *tomo* (as in, *tomo ni*) and *ikiru* (or *sei*). Together, these two characters (共生) evoke ideas of "togetherness," "friendship," "harmony," and "symbiosis." However, on the Jōdoshū home page, we find the term rendered in both *kanji* and *hiragana* characters. When the unfamiliar *kanji* combination is used, the Japanese reading of each character appears in smaller *hiragana* characters to guide pronunciation. Additionally, the official logo for the *dai-onki* event reads (in four *kanji* characters) *Hō-nen-tomo-iki*, which can be translated loosely as "living in harmony with (the teachings of) Hōnen" (the founder of Pure Land Buddhism in Japan). Using clever animation, the *hiragana* syllables—*to*, *mo*, *i*, *ki*—spin into place first and become part of the four *kanji*. See <http://www.jodo.or.jp/honentomoiki/index.html> for the animation, and <http://www.jodo.or.jp/honentomoiki/kyoseitomoiki.html> for a gloss of specialized terms. (Accessed Dec. 14, 2010).

NPO function as a center for local urban communities, sponsoring a diverse range of activities (symposia, workshops, lectures, theatrical performances, concerts, etc.) only some of which are related to Buddhist themes. According to Head Priest Akita, the temple's most important role is to bring people together because of mutual interests or shared concerns rather than the ritual occasions connected with funerals, memorial services, and other ceremonies. In fact, the temple has no *danka*, and conducts funerals only on rare occasions.

Thanks in part to Head Priest Akita's many published articles and op-ed pieces in local and national newspapers, and his persistent efforts to educate top officials about the changing function of temples, the Pure Land national headquarters has come to share his perspective about the opportunities and possibilities for *tomoiki*-type symbiosis between temple and community. With so much space usually available in temple compounds, an NPO can set up offices without detracting from the religious atmosphere.¹⁰ As in Japan's pre-modern past, a constant flow of people coming in and out of a temple helps to maintain its vitality by keeping it connected with the outside world, where new networks, relationships, and affiliations can present resources and opportunities not available locally.¹¹ According to Chief Administrative Officer Mitsunari back at Pure Land headquarters, "The decrease in temple membership will become increasingly severe in the future, so this seems a way to work together with other denominations to address a shared concern. For me, putting Jōdoshū (Pure Land) or any other doctrine in front of this kind of initiative is 'taboo.' We have to develop new approaches, such as 'sustainability' (*inochi no renzokusei*), that speak to the interests of people in today's society."

These comments return us to some of the themes under consideration in this discussion. If an organization like Jōdoshū can overcome institutional lethargy and implement plans to promote temples as community centers with potential NPO/NGO affiliations, they will provide a working model for other denominations to consider. In this plan, local temples have the possibility to become more connected in positive ways to global networks of information, resources, and people. Imagine the paradigm shift if a majority of neighborhood temples were to be seen as resource centers for personal empowerment, based not on religious doctrine (which would still be present) but on more humanistic concerns that promote social welfare domestically and abroad. If ordinary Buddhist temples in Japan are to survive well into the 21st century, their fate rests with individual priests charting a course towards more socially relevant, innovative, and activist forms of their traditions. A growing number of priests are

¹⁰ Plans are underway to utilize the internet and establish a website that helps to match NPOs with Jōdoshū and other denominations' temples. Using a word with rather negative connotations for "internet dating" websites (*deai-kei*, or "type of chance encounter") as an example, Jōdoshū headquarters believes there needs to be a forum where interested parties can check each other out before making a commitment. Priests would list the attributes and resources of their temple, while NPOs would do likewise for their organization and its mission. After a screening process, the two candidates would actually meet to discuss the possibilities of collaborating, and establish a working relationship (including rent, utilities, infrastructure, access, and so on).

¹¹ In his 2009 book *Tera yo! Kaware!* (Hey Temples! Change!), Rev. Takahashi Takushi has noted at least ten different ways that temples can change, based on his own experience as head priest of the innovative Rinzaï temple, Jingūji (Matsumoto city). Among these include diverse people going in and out of the temple, NPO affiliations, connecting local and global perspectives, and deep community involvement (Takahashi, 2009: 110-163).

attempting to move in this direction, but time will tell whether their efforts resonate with individuals currently unaffiliated with temples.

It is a rather daunting challenge to "reboot" an institution so it better aligns with the four dynamics mentioned at the beginning of this discussion. For local religious leaders especially, difficult and contentious decisions have to be made by individuals largely unfamiliar with increasing pluralism, new information technologies, restructuring trends, and greater personal agency among a more mobile population. Older priests may choose to rely on existing patterns of patronage and memorial services for their parishioners, and for the short-term, their temples will manage. But to go this route is to wilfully avoid problems that will be inherited by their successors. Decreasing parishioners and monetary contributions are already forcing many priests to seek outside employment, or to merge their temple within regional spheres of administration over which they have little control. Strategies to revitalize local temples do exist, as the preceding discussion has noted, yet they are piecemeal and isolated, with little recognition or support from denomination headquarters. Without a sustained effort to understand the dynamics at work on religious institutions in Japan, the next two decades will force Buddhist priests into a much-too-close encounter with the fundamental truth of impermanence.

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