



***Dharmavidya's Engagement with Hōnen:  
How a Contemporary British Pureland Buddhist  
Teacher Retrieves his Japanese Spiritual Heritage***

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**Abstract:** The Buddhism of the contemporary British teacher and writer Dharmavidya David Brazier has been directly influenced by that of the Kamakura-era Japanese Pure Land Buddhist, Hōnen. This article investigates the nature of this influence through an examination of two short texts, Dharmavidya's *Summary of Faith and Practice* and Hōnen's *Ichimai Kishōmon*. It suggests that the relationship between the two pieces of writing can be clarified by applying to them not only the traditional Buddhist concepts of *upāya* and *senju*, but also theoretical perspectives drawn from the work of the philosopher and religious commentator, John D. Caputo. This approach shows that Dharmavidya leaves 'open' what the Pureland ritual of *nembutsu* chanting might mean for the devotees who practice it. The article also contends that, under Hōnen's influence, Dharmavidya has produced a text that can be considered 'post-secular'.

**Keywords:** Pure Land Buddhism, Amida, Dharmavidya David Brazier, Hōnen, *nembutsu*, *upāya*, *senju*, John D. Caputo, post-secular

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**D**harmavidya David Brazier (b. 1947), a contemporary British Pureland<sup>1</sup> priest, activist and Buddhist psychologist, inspired by the influential Kamakura period Japanese Buddhist teacher Hōnen (1133–1212), claims to be challenging some currently established assumptions about the nature of Buddhism. This article examines this claim by considering the relationship between two short texts (one by Hōnen, one by Dharmavidya) in the light of ideas taken from the work of the philosopher of religion, John D. Caputo (b. 1940). Dharmavidya mines Hōnen's work for concepts with which to confront what he understands to be an attempted secularisation of Buddhism. The application of a theoretical perspective taken from Caputo demonstrates that, in the course of this confrontation, Dharmavidya's thought displays two characteristics: firstly, he implicitly (and unfashionably) essentialises his form of Buddhism as 'religious'; secondly, he destabilises any fixed notion of what the nature of this 'religious-ness' might be.

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<sup>1</sup> Conventionally, Dharmavidya's Amida Order uses 'Pure Land' to designate a location within Buddhist cosmology, and 'Pureland' to describe his Buddhist religious denomination. I shall employ this distinction here when writing of his religious practice and that of his followers; I shall, however, refer to the wider religious tradition of which he is part as 'Pure Land' Buddhism, in line with common usage.

After an initial section in which I contextualise Dharmavidya's Pureland Buddhism, I introduce the two texts. In subsequent sections I argue that Dharmavidya's reading of Hōnen's text, *One-Sheet Document* (*Ichimai Kishōmon*, 1212) enables him to make two 'religious turns' in his own text, *Summary of Faith and Practice* (2001, hereafter referred to in this article as *SFP*), eight hundred years later, as part of his implicit critique of 'secular Buddhism'.<sup>2</sup> The conclusion assesses the significance of Dharmavidya's text by placing it in relation to the wider horizon of a specific definition of the 'post-secular'. This definition is among six elaborated by James A. Beckford (2012), and asserts that the post-secular builds on the secular rather than replacing it.<sup>3</sup> I contend that this definition (which Beckford finds laid out in the work of Caputo) is helpful in positioning *SFP* not only in relation to other Buddhisms, but also in terms of the conceptual framework in which scholars currently position contemporary religion.

### Dharmavidya's Pureland: The Buddhist Context

In his definitions of Pureland concepts, Dharmavidya equates the notion of a 'Buddha-field' (*buddhakṣetra*), an 'area' where the power of a Buddha holds sway, with that of a 'Pure Land'<sup>4</sup> (Dharmavidya, 2007: 236). After the death of Śākyamuni, various ways of recollecting him, of keeping the Buddha in mind (*buddhānusmṛti*), were generated, and the notion of Pure Lands where, despite his physical demise, his presence could still be felt, was one of these (ibid: 242). Pure Land Buddhisms (forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism) have associations with China that stretch back as far as the early centuries of the Common Era, and with Japan that go back to at least the eighth century of the Common Era. References to Pure Lands abound across Mahāyāna literature: there are more than two hundred texts that deal with the Pure Land known as Sukhāvātī alone (Atone and Hayashi, 2011: 5).<sup>5</sup> The earliest example of a specifically Pure Land school may have been centred on the Buddha Akṣobhya and his Buddha-field in the 'East', known as Abhirati (Williams with Tribe, 2000: 185). Pure Land sects such as Hōnen's Jōdo-shū and Shinran's Jōdo Shinshū have been strong since the Kamakura era (1185–1332) in Japan. Along

<sup>2</sup> Dharmavidya has recently made a more *explicit* attack on what he sees as pronounced secularising tendencies within contemporary non-Asian Buddhism in *Buddhism is a Religion: You Can Believe It* (2014).

<sup>3</sup> The other five of what Beckford calls 'six clusters' of usages of the post-secular are 'Secularization Deniers and Doubters'; 'Reenchantment of Culture'; 'Public Resurgence of Religion'; 'Politics, Philosophy, and Theology' (a discussion of the ideas of Habermas), and 'A Plague on All Your Houses' (critical and negative views of the subject). The current article makes no claim as to the applicability or otherwise of these five to Dharmavidya's Pureland Buddhism, though my wider research does involve some investigation of the extent to which *SFP* represents an attempt to 're-enchant' Buddhism.

<sup>4</sup> This equation has been disputed in some Pure Land Buddhist circles: although some scholars and practitioners have, like Dharmavidya, held that, since 'Buddha-fields' are 'places' where a Buddha exercises power, and since a Buddha is, by definition, purified of all defilements, then such fields must necessarily also be pure. Others, however, claimed that not all *buddhakṣetras* are Pure Lands. They posited the existence of three types of *buddhakṣetra*: pure, impure, and mixed. In the view of some, these types were conceived as realms where *bodhisattvas* were constantly working towards the requisite degree of purity (but hadn't achieved this yet); according to others, the 'purity and impurity of the Buddha Lands is actually a feature of the minds of those who inhabit them and not the Lands themselves' (Laumakis, 2008, 216).

<sup>5</sup> Pure Land beliefs and practices have not been confined to Pure Land sects, and many practitioners in other Buddhist traditions (for example, Shingon) will have encountered them. Pure Lands are ubiquitous in Tibetan Buddhism.

with their close relation to Zen, the various schools of Japanese Pure Land together still constitute the main forms of Buddhism there (Atone and Hayashi, 2011: 1).

Pure Land Buddhists focus on chanting, worship and devotion. They have relatively little to say about 'mindfulness', a concept currently treated outside Asia as almost synonymous with Buddhism. As a Pure Land Buddhist practitioner of the Jōdoshū tradition, Dharmavidya's particular devotional practice is to chant the phrase known as the *nembutsu*,<sup>6</sup> associated with the hoped-for (traditionally, but not necessarily exclusively, post-mortem) 're-birth' in the utopian environment referred to as the Pure Land of Sukhāvātī ('Sweet Realm', 'Land of Happiness', 'Land of Bliss') in the 'West'.<sup>7</sup> The *nembutsu* is translated from the Japanese by Dharmavidya as 'The act of calling the Buddha's name. The verbal formulae by which this is done' (Dharmavidya, 2007: 241). For Dharmavidya, the actual words that constitute the *nembutsu* are 'Namo Amida Bu', translated by him as 'Homage to Amida Buddha. I, a foolish being, call out to the Buddha of absolute grace' (ibid: 241).

The primary object of Dharmavidya's Pureland devotion is the Buddha Amida. For him, Amida Buddha is the Buddha of infinite life, light and grace (ibid: 235). The name Amida is a Japanese term for Amitāyus-Amitābha, where Amitāyus means Buddha of measureless time, and Amitābha means Buddha of measureless light. According to the *Larger Sukhāvātīvyūha Sūtra*, Amida's name as a *bodhisattva*, prior to his becoming a Buddha, was Dharmakāra. Dharmakāra made 48 Vows, the fulfilment of which led to the creation of Sukhāvātī. Each of these Vows is structured in the same way, the pattern of which may be characterised as 'If such-and-such an event does not come to pass, may I, *bodhisattva* Dharmakāra, not attain Enlightenment as a Buddha'.

There is a retrospective logic at work here for Pure Land Buddhists: in their view, since Dharmakāra *has* achieved enlightenment as Amida Buddha, and since this achievement was conditional upon all who 'heard my name' being admitted to the Pure Land, then, plainly, *nembutsu* reciters will assuredly have Sukhāvātī as their destination. For Dharmavidya and his followers, the form of the Vows structures the route to liberation.

## Two Texts

Dharmavidya claims Hōnen's *Ichimai Kishōmon* as a direct source of inspiration for *SFP*. *SFP* is the first section of the *Nien Fo Book: The service book of the Amida Order* (2001, revised 2015), an eclectic collection of Buddhist texts for use during services, and for private contemplation. Directly underneath the title on the first page of this book is printed the attribution: 'Dharmavidya, inspired by Honen's Ichimai Kishomon'.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Sometimes referred to as *nenbutsu* (see, for example, the entry in Inagaki, 1984: 225). I retain in this article what I perceive to be the currently more widespread spelling (see, for example, the usage in Bloom, 2007; Fitzgerald, 2006; and Atone and Hayashi, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> In the *Sukhāvātīvyūha Sūtras*, the Pure Land of Sukhāvātī is said to be a vast number of miles away from this world, to possess trees and fruit made from gold, silver and precious stones, to feature huge rivers and lotuses ninety miles in circumference, to be flat, and to be infused by melodic sounds issuing from divine musical instruments (for a modern, detailed commentary on these features see Ratnaguna and Śraddhāpa, 2016: 36;126-129).

<sup>8</sup> Dharmavidya employs neither diacritical marks nor italics in relation to Sanskrit and Japanese terms in his writings. Such marks and italics do not, therefore, appear in direct quotations from his work in this

In addition to the impact of the ‘content’ of Hōnen’s text upon that of Dharmavidya (both deal with the centrality of the *nembutsu*), there are a number of other indications of influence. For example, Dharmavidya positions his own text as of key importance within his tradition; he claims that it is a definitive encapsulation of key teachings; he expresses it as a culmination of earlier teachings; it deals with the practice of chanting; and it is presented as simple and straightforward.<sup>9</sup> In each of these respects, Dharmavidya derives his stance in his text from that of Hōnen in *Ichimai Kishōmon*. Taken together, these influences enable Dharmavidya to configure himself as a ‘religious’ Buddhist.

*Ichimai Kishōmon* was written by Hōnen on his deathbed in Kyōto in 1212 at the request of one of his close disciples for a summary of his teaching. It represents a definitive statement of the teacher’s spirituality. In translation into English, it takes up a mere fifteen lines. Hōnen simply proclaims that the *nembutsu* is the only effective Buddhist practice.

He stresses that the possession by him of a more profound doctrine than this would actually be an impediment to liberation. He valorises ignorance and faith. Hōnen died a few days after composing it and authenticating it with his handprints. During his last moments, after maintaining ‘right thought on one’s deathbed’ (*rinjū shōnen*) he will, according to Pure Land Buddhist belief, have received the traditional welcome into the next world (*rinjū raigō*) from Amida Buddha and his bodhisattva attendants, Seishi (Sanskrit: Mahāsthāmaprāpta) and Kannon (Sanskrit: Avalokiteśvara). At the time of his death (lying down, facing Sukhāvati) purple clouds are said to have appeared in the sky as a sign that he had achieved *ōjō*, or birth into Amida’s Pure Land (Fitzgerald, 2006: 132).

Dharmavidya wrote *SFP* in Britain at the beginning of the twenty-first century as an encapsulation of his Pureland beliefs, and as a text to be ritually recited in services by the Order of Amida Buddha, which he founded and of which he is Head.<sup>10</sup> There is strong continuity between the two thinkers. Dharmavidya’s Order of Amida Buddha (founded 1998) positions itself as a Jōdoshū organisation, and, as such, holds Hōnen to be ‘founder of the first independent Pureland denomination of Buddhism in Japan’ (Dharmavidya, 2007: 239).<sup>11</sup> Dharmavidya’s explicit acknowledgement of the influence of Hōnen’s text

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article.

<sup>9</sup> In a 2017 article on ‘Reuse and Intertextuality in the Context of Buddhist Texts’, Elisa Freschi and Cathy Cantwell write about the relationship between Buddhist texts and those which precede them and from which they quote: “Philosophical or technical texts tend to quote explicitly, whereas ritual texts see the predominance of the conveyed message over the transparency of the transmission so that reuse is mostly silent. Religious texts of various forms come in between these two extremes” (Freschi and Cantwell, 2017: 1). I contend that some of the significance of the intertextuality of Dharmavidya’s *SFP* lies in its atypicality: it is most certainly a ‘religious’ and a ‘ritual’ text, but its borrowing from Hōnen is explicit and never ‘silent’. This demonstrates that a priority for Dharmavidya in this text is to legitimize his thought (and through that, his Order) by conspicuously relating it to that of Hōnen.

<sup>10</sup> There are Amida groups following the teachings of Dharmavidya in London, North East England, Birmingham, Malvern, Perth (Scotland), and (outside the UK), France, the Netherlands, Belgium, USA, Canada, Israel and India. Each of these groups is headed by at least one ordained member of the Amida Order. Thus, although founded by a British teacher, the Order and the wider organization (the Amida-shu, or Amida School) which it leads, can claim to have considerable geographical reach. It has undertaken socially-engaged projects in many parts of the world, including India, Sarajevo and Zambia.

<sup>11</sup> It also thereby implicitly places Dharmavidya as a ‘patriarch’ in a Pure Land Buddhist lineage—although he has expressed reservations about the whole concept of lineage (Brazier, 2001: 164–170)

illuminates the devotional stance of Pureland Buddhism, which does not focus on mindfulness and meditation.

I contend that two different manifestations of 'translation' (in the broad sense of the process by which ideas move from one culture to another across time) in *SFP* facilitate Dharmavidya's 'religious' stance. In the first of these, we can witness a fixed, pre-existing, ahistorical set of ideas moving from one setting to another through the adoption of words appropriate to the new context, and within an over-arching sense of 'canon'. Dharmavidya's assumption is that the ideas remain the same but are moved from Hōnen's text into his own. In Buddhist terms, these new expressions are *upāya*<sup>12</sup> (expedient or skilful means; Japanese: *hōben*), or new ways of delivering old essences. The language is viewed as being separate from, and less enduring than, the 'truth' it conveys. *Hōben* is a strategy of adapting teachings to the capacity of learners to receive them (see Pye, 1978). It involves a 'variety of practices for a variety of beings in a variety of circumstances' (Foard, 1998: 109). *Hōben* has as its central concern communication of the *Dharma*. It has been described as 'not a mere device' but, rather, as *the* critically important concept of Mahāyāna philosophy (Matsunaga and Matsunaga, 1974: 72) since the bodhisattva is duty-bound to preach enlightenment to others. The text also employs another, specifically Pure Land Buddhist, principle, however: *senju* (selection). By both Hōnen and Dharmavidya, the chanting of the *nembutsu* has been 'selected' or chosen as *the only effective* (and therefore 'exclusive', *senchaku hairyū*) spiritual practice.<sup>13</sup>

Hence, the first sense in which Dharmavidya positions *SFP* as 'religious' depends on the notion of *hōben*, and his definition (made elsewhere by him, and taken, he says, from Durkheim) of 'religion' as existing 'when there is a division between the sacred and the mundane' (Brazier, 2014: 145). In his view, eternal religious truths have been passed down to him in Hōnen's writing and become manifested anew as *hōben* in his own text. In a second sense, however, *senju*, the selection by him of one exclusive practice (*nembutsu*) as constituting that 'religion', undermines the stability of the first sense: despite this exclusivity, the actual 'meaning' of the *nembutsu* is left undetermined in *SFP*, and so the nature of 'religion' is no longer fixed in the text. From the perspective of the reading practitioner, *nembutsu* is opened by *SFP* to multiple interpretations.

In considering both Hōnen's and Dharmavidya's texts in more detail, I argue that both *hōben* and *senju* are 'present' in *SFP*, but that the second mode of translation undercuts the first and produces a text which appears merely traditionally 'religious' but which also opens up the possibility of characterisation as 'post-secular' in the sense outlined at page 2 above. Dharmavidya implicitly places *SFP* in an intellectual and historical space created for the category 'religion' as a result of the secularising tendencies of the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, before going on to destabilise the parameters of that category itself. I elaborate upon this in the Post-secular *nembutsu* section later in this article.

<sup>12</sup> Although this Sanskrit word is, perhaps, the term for 'expedient means' most familiar to a general Buddhist readership, I have, hereafter, employed the Japanese term, as is appropriate when referring to Dharmavidya and his tradition.

<sup>13</sup> For the use of *hōben* and *senju* as analytical tools in the study of Pure Land Buddhisms I am indebted to an essay on another Japanese Pure Land figure, Ippen (1239–1289) by James H. Foard (1998: 101–115). Foard positions the two concepts in opposition to each other.

### ***Ichimai Kishōmon***

On his deathbed Hōnen concisely commended the *nembutsu* to his followers as a portable, demotic practice. It was, in a sense, a message from a battlefield. In Kyōto at that time, representatives of more established schools of Buddhism had petitioned to have the *nembutsu* banned, and two of Hōnen's followers were executed. Hōnen himself had spent the years between 1207 and 1211 in enforced exile on the island of Shikoku (Fitzgerald, 2006: 117–126). The practice was controversial as it was said to lead to immorality: some practitioners claimed that, since all that was needed for liberation was the *nembutsu*, they could, or even should (as a demonstration of their faith in the power of the Vow), behave as they wished (ibid: 111–116). Although Hōnen firmly distanced himself from such an interpretation, he remained a controversial figure. After his death his grave was vandalised by his opponents.

Hōnen's text was short not only because wider historical circumstances and his sense of his own impending death enjoined brevity, but also because his message was straightforward. He had 'selected' his primary Buddhist practice as that of exclusive *nembutsu* recitation as early as 1175. Hōnen thought that the age in which he lived (*mappō*, or a period of degeneration of the *Dharma*) was so defiled, so far away from the Buddha in time and morality, that only the *nembutsu* would suffice for liberation (Fitzgerald, 2006: 24–25). He did not elaborate a doctrine based on the *nembutsu* recitation. The *nembutsu* recitation was the doctrine—for Hōnen it was self-sufficient.<sup>14</sup> There is no sense here of a complex teaching being articulated in simple terms; rather, the teaching *itself* is simple. On account of this simplicity the *Ichimai Kishōmon* devotes more space to saying what it is *not* concerned with, than it does to describing what it is trying to do. It is not describing a form of meditation, nor is it laying out a practice for scholars. On the contrary, it recommends a 'letting go' of any 'knowledge' the reader may possess, and the assumption of a state of radical ignorance, a kind of 'unknowing'.

Hōnen's short text is structured as a 'cry from the heart', as if it has welled up from inside of him, unmediated and de-historicised. It has been triggered by a request from a disciple for a 'memento' (Fitzgerald, 2006: 135). There is here neither an attempt to contextualise its teaching within the Buddhist tradition, nor an acknowledgement of the influence of predecessors (particularly the Chinese Pure Land scholar, Shan-*tao* [613–681]) who also commended the practice of *nembutsu* recitation.<sup>15</sup>

### **Summary of Faith and Practice**

As has already been pointed out, unlike the *Ichimai Kishōmon*, *SFP* declares a key antecedent right from the beginning: its subtitle reads 'Dharmavidya, inspired by Honen's Ichimai Kishomon'. It is staged as if Hōnen, on his deathbed, has whispered across the centuries into the ear of Dharmavidya who will then set out as a patriarch in a lineage to transmit the Pureland message anew.

The *SFP* claims to be transmitting a timeless teaching that can be found beyond itself. It creates an aura of sanctity and mystery by enacting the revelation of this message as

<sup>14</sup> Foard calls this sense of self-containment 'the exclusive ultimacy of the *nembutsu*' (Foard, 1998: 109).

<sup>15</sup> For a history of how *nembutsu* changed from a mainly meditational to a primarily vocal practice see Atone and Hayashi, 2011: 1–57.

the progressive unveiling of a secret. The structure of the opening sentence initiates a dramatic deferral of the revelation by starting with an account of whom the mysterious practice is *for* ('those having a karmic affinity with Amitabha Buddha wishing to practise a religious life in truly simple faith'), and putting off a declaration about what the practice actually *is* until the end of the sentence ('...the practice of Nien Fo<sup>16</sup> with body, speech and mind, particularly verbal recitation of "Namo Amida Bu"'). This invites the reader to acquiesce to the practice before knowing what it is. Next (continuing the strategy of the gradual stripping away of 'excess' meaning, and in much the same way as in Hōnen's text), the reader is told at some length what the practice of *nembutsu* is *not* (it is not a form of meditation or the product of study or wisdom) as a protracted preface to a second paragraph where (with some bathos) the advocated practice turns out to be simplicity itself: just 'with complete trust recite "Namo Amida Bu"'. In this second paragraph, too, Dharmavidya echoes Hōnen's insistence that learning is a barrier to liberation, and that one ought to 'set it aside and be the foolish<sup>17</sup> being completely in the performance of the practice.'

### *SFP as hōben*

In the first sense in which *SFP* can be construed as 'religious', it is implicitly configured by Dharmavidya as an 'expedient means'. Picking up the baton from Hōnen's earlier text, it conveys what it implies as an enduring but impenetrable truth to a twenty-first century readership. This is the opposite position to that taken by the 'Secular Buddhism' advocated by Stephen Batchelor (2012) which, according to Chris Ward, is 'suspicious of superstition, belief and devotional religious behaviours', and is 'the default historical attitude of the West towards Buddhism' (2014: 232–233).

The tension between these two putative Buddhisms has been historically constructed. Philip Almond (1988), Donald Lopez (1995), and Richard King (1999) have described how, by the nineteenth century, Buddhism had long been 'dead' in India, then part of the British Empire. In the subcontinent, there was virtually no extant Buddhism left for the civil servants and army officers of the colonial power to encounter, interact with, and study. In its corporeal absence, Buddhism became identified by its vestiges, archaeological and, especially, textual (Allen, 2002). Retrieved Sūtras were identified as 'real', original, unpolluted Buddhism. Other 'lived' forms of Buddhism across Asia were to a greater or lesser extent viewed as decadent pollutions of a pristine Indic fountainhead. Moreover, as apparent challenges to religion from thought systems such as Marxism and Darwinism started to emerge from Victorian times onward in Britain, this 'original' Buddhism was increasingly taken to be a text-based 'secular philosophy', and its living forms as corrupt (albeit colourful and exotic) 'religious' excrescences. This fed into an Orientalist narrative which implicitly characterised Mahāyāna devotees

<sup>16</sup> *Nien Fo* is the Wade-Giles rendering of pinyin *Nianfo* (Chinese), and is used by Dharmavidya as another term for *nembutsu*.

<sup>17</sup> In Dharmavidya's Pureland Buddhism, the Japanese translation of 'foolishness' is *bombu* or *bonbu* (Dharmavidya, 2007: 236). His Pureland Buddhism (but not Jōdoshin-shū Pure Land Buddhism, based on the teachings of Shinran) holds that *bombu*, rather than an idealized 'Buddha-nature', is the fundamental characteristic of human beings (Brazier, 2013: 181). Pureland does not privilege 'wisdom' (except in the sense of knowing that one does not know).

as credulous adherents of an inauthentic doctrine (Lopez, 1995: 7). By means of the *hōben* in the *SFP*, Dharmavidya challenges the modern hegemony of Secular Buddhism by inverting (and thus subverting) the prevailing narrative: he takes ‘devotional’, ‘religious’ Pure Land Buddhism as original, as having been the Buddhism of Śākyamuni (Dharmavidya, 2007: 18), and as having been ‘passed on’ by intervening teachers like Hōnen. For him, it is secularised Buddhism that is the unwelcome distortion; Buddhism is, and always has been, ‘essentially’ religious. Specifically, his understanding of religion assumes a binary between mundane and metaphysical realms, and this theme emerges consistently throughout his thinking. For example, he believes that, in certain circumstances, Buddhas act to bridge the two realms:

In some ways, Saṃbhogakaya-buddhas are angels.<sup>18</sup> The term angel means a messenger who brings something from the spiritual domain to we who dwell in the mundane world (Brazier, 2014: 37).

*SFP* enacts the delivery of a religious essence which it hypothesises (paradoxically, by using words) as being *beyond* words. In the interests of legitimacy and a sense of lineage, it makes the strategic claim that it is clothing an old truth in a new text. As *hōben*, it is interested primarily in communication. It has also, however, selected one particular practice from the whole spectrum of those falling under the historically constituted domain of ‘Buddhism’. In Dharmavidya’s text, the ‘truth’ it claims to have inherited is not only posited as an essence, but also as a form of words of indeterminate meaning.

#### *SFP as senju*

In 1198, Hōnen wrote at length about his reasons for selecting the *nembutsu* as the only effective religious practice for the age in which he lived in *Collection on Nembutsu (Senchaku-shū)* (Atone and Hayashi, 2011: 31–33), justifying his selection by anchoring it within a notional Buddhist heritage. Throughout his various teachings, he was more preoccupied with the singleness of purpose his selection had enjoined upon him, with trusting that reciting the *nembutsu* would bring him to the Pure Land, than he was with articulating the *nature* of that Pure Land. It is not an exaggeration to say that the vast majority of his writings riff upon a single, simple theme:

In life I pile up merit by the practice of the *Nembutsu*, and at death I go to the Pure Land (Fitzgerald, 2006: 36).

In a similar spirit to that of Hōnen in his *Ichimai Kishōmon*, Dharmavidya in *SFP* selects the *nembutsu* as the primary Buddhist practice not for its expressiveness, or even just for its instrumentality. Predominantly, he chooses it for what it *might* do, for its potentiality. For Dharmavidya, the *nembutsu* does not only place the practitioner in relation to a pre-existing, metaphysical ‘essence of Pure Land’, but it also expressly refuses to define the form the advent of that Pure Land will take. Rather, it *prophesises* that the conditions of that advent lie in the recitation of its words. It envisions refuge in the Pure Land as consummating a whole range of undefined possibilities. The reader is explicitly

<sup>18</sup> The implications of Dharmavidya’s use of language with such Christian connotations as this will be discussed in the conclusion below.



counselled *not* to enquire into the nature of any essence, but to perform the *nembutsu* in 'ignorance'. To say *Namo Amida Bu*, is, for Dharmavidya, to utter a kind of invocation. Within the outer shell of the apparent *hōben* mode of 'translating' Hōnen, there nestles this other *senju* mode that undercuts and destabilises the former by 'unfixing' its meaning. The reader is advised to simply recite the *nembutsu* with trust and see what happens.

*SFP* is ambiguous about the relative amounts of 'Self Power' (*jiriki*) and 'Other Power' (*tariki*) that are involved in reciting the *nembutsu*. Since the time of the Chinese thinker Tánluán (476–542), Pure Land Buddhism has been formulated as an Other Power practice (Dobbins, 1989: 5), whereby the practitioner attains spiritual enlightenment not through Self Power (for example, by striving for ethical perfection or 'success' in meditation) but by entrusting to the power of the Primal Vow. For Dharmavidya in *SFP* it is certainly the Vow (and not the practitioner) that 'does the work', but the practitioner has to activate the Vow by uttering the *nembutsu*. This inclusion of a small but significant element of *jiriki* alongside the stronger sense of *tariki*, introduces something of the destabilising ambiguity noted above, as well as bringing *SFP* (predictability, given the Amida Order's affiliation) more in line with Hōnen's thought, rather than with that of Shinran, whose Jōdo Shinshū version of Pure Land Buddhism dispensed with *jiriki* altogether. For Shinran, everything was dependent on the power of the Buddha, and on that alone (Bloom, 2007, 86).

### **Post-secular *nembutsu*?**

To sum up the argument so far, we can consider the Pureland Buddhism of Dharmavidya's *SFP* significant because, as an 'essentially' traditional religion posing a challenge to more 'secular' expressions of Buddhism (Brazier, 2014) it operates on one level in *hōben* mode, delivering what it takes to be an enduring truth, inherited from Hōnen, in new words. However, it also selects and commends its central practice (*nembutsu* recitation) as something which is inherently unstable and not rigid in its meaning.

In endeavouring to understand Dharmavidya's 'religious' stance in *SFP*, it is illuminating to compare his thought with that of the contemporary philosopher of religion and radical theologian, John D. Caputo. Although Caputo works from within a broadly Christian tradition, I contend that his comprehension of what it means to be 'religious' in the twenty-first century is similar to that of Dharmavidya. In light of this, I also argue that, since Caputo refers to his own position as 'post-secular', it is, in this sense, legitimate to apply the label to Dharmavidya as well. Furthermore, this has some implications for our understanding of contemporary Buddhism in the UK.

As has been stated, James A. Beckford views Caputo's work as illustrative of a particular variety of post-secularity, which he calls 'Building on the Secular' (Beckford, 2012: 3). In his view, Caputo champions the idea of the 'post-secular as, in part, a progressive achievement that builds on secularism's achievements' (ibid: 4). It is necessary to define in more detail what Caputo means by this, and to demonstrate the similarities between this position and that of Dharmavidya.

Caputo recognises that the secularisation emerging from the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, and specifically from its valorisation of

'reason', has yielded significant insights. For example, he asserts that Enlightenment thinkers were correct to question religion's claim to 'knowledge':

The faithful need to concede that they do not cognitively *know* what they *believe* by faith in any epistemologically rigorous way (Caputo, 2001: 111).

In this sentence, Caputo is allowing room for a co-existence of reason ('knowing') and faith ('non-knowing'). Each is permitted its own sphere. In his view, far from ridding the world of religion, by rejecting it the 'reason' of the Enlightenment has, paradoxically, created a space for it. During the process of secularisation, 'someone has invented "religion" and declared it off limits from "reason"' (ibid: 43). In Caputo's thought, reason's disdain for faith has actually served to protect the latter by removing it from the field of conflict.

Caputo does not, however, idolise 'reason', choosing to employ it pragmatically rather than as an all-embracing 'Pure Reason': 'Philosophers have now preferred "good reasons" to over-arching Reason' (ibid: 64). He desires 'a more fully enlightened Enlightenment... a new idea of reason (that) is no longer taken in by the Illusion of Pure Reason' (ibid: 61); he advocates a reason that acknowledges its own limits. For him, not depending on Pure Reason is a reasonable position to adopt. Hence, when explaining how much he values a mystical, religious experience of 'non-knowing', he emphasises that what he is treasuring 'is not a simple, garden-variety ignorance', but 'a learned or wise ignorance' (ibid: 19)—that is, an ignorance that is not unreasonable. What he calls 'this "post-secular" frame of mind' is not 'uncritical or naïve. It has arisen as a result of ...criticising the critique' (ibid: 38). As a theologian 'moving on' from the Enlightenment, he criticises and rejects the Enlightenment's belief that it had successfully rejected religion. He does not reject that Enlightenment itself.

One of the consequences of Caputo's 'building on the secular' in this way is a destabilisation of the very categories of 'religion' and the 'secular':

I am out to waylay the usual distinction between religious and secular in the name of what I shall call the "post-secular" (ibid: 2).

He is 'critical of the idea that we can establish air-tight borders' (ibid: 61). Since, for him, 'the condition of religious passion is non-knowing' (ibid: 19),

the religious sense of life has to do with exposing oneself to the radical uncertainty and the open-endedness of life (ibid: 14).

For Caputo, what he calls the 'non-knowing' does not undermine religious faith, but validates it:

Undecideability protects faith and prayer from closure and in keeping them at risk also keeps them safe (ibid: 130).

Moreover, he maintains that this lack of closure means that:

There is a kind of endless translateability or substitutability, a holy undecideability, let us say, between God and love, or God and beauty, or God and truth, or God and justice, in which we cannot resolve the issue of which is

a version of which, which is the translation of which, which is the substitute of which (ibid: 127).

Dharmavidya's thought on these matters follows a similar pattern to that of Caputo. By the very act of criticising the 'secularism' of the post-Enlightenment period, Dharmavidya implicitly accepts the Enlightenment notion of a binary opposition between this secularism and 'religion'. It is the Enlightenment notion of the secular which enables and sustains his notion of the religious, just as it does for Caputo. The Enlightenment is criticised not so much for its valorisation of 'reason', but for trying to efface the religion for which this valorisation has itself created space. We can understand Dharmavidya as building on the legacy of the Enlightenment in a 'post-secular' manner by pushing back against this perceived effacement.

Dharmavidya's thought is also similar to that of Caputo in another way, namely through how his insistence in *SFP* that religious faith is a kind of 'non-knowing' destabilises the categories of the religious and the secular themselves. As Pure Land Buddhists are told in *SFP* not to concern themselves overmuch with what or where the Pure Land is, they cannot, with absolute confidence, allot the practice associated with getting to it to any watertight category. This is reminiscent of Caputo's 'substitutability' and 'translateability' quoted above. For those who aspire to reaching it, the Pure Land could be a post-mortem heaven-like destination, or it could be a worldly utopia that can be constructed through Buddhist engagement and political action in the 'here and now'; it is ontologically underdetermined. In this sense, the *nembutsu* of the *SFP* is post-secular. It is a ritual practice without firm parameters of meaning attached to it by its instigator. Dharmavidya makes no attempt to ascribe 'meaning' to the words 'Pure Land' antecedent to the utterance of the *nembutsu*.

Keegan Osinski, responding to an essay by Caputo, writes about Christian liturgy as a process of 'waiting':

Joining in the liturgies of the church is a way of entering the house and facing the possibilities there... Participating in the liturgy is a way of practising perhaps... We learn Derrida's unconditional hospitality, a hospitality open to perhaps—perhaps friend, perhaps foe—which entails a certain surprise, a certain unexpectedness of the guest (Osinski, 2015: 200).

Similarly, Dharmavidya structures his Pureland Buddhist practice as just such an attending, or a hospitable waiting for the potentialities of the Pure Land to arrive. Towards the end of Dharmavidya's account of his mother's death in *Who Loves Dies Well* (2007), he recounts how he read extracts from the Pure Land Sūtras to her on her deathbed:

I read:

Millions of miles to the West from here,

There lies a land called Perfect Bliss.....

Around the Land of Perfect Bliss

There are seven balustrades  
 Seven fine nets, seven rows of trees  
 All of jewels made, sparkling and fine;  
 That's why they call it Perfect Bliss...' (Dharmavidya, 2007: 220).

This is liturgy in the sense described by Osinski, but this time it is *Pureland Buddhist* liturgy, which is enacting the waiting for the 'meaning' of the *nembutsu* to become clear. Here, one is reminded of the death of Hōnen described earlier. There is a similar sense of anticipation.

For the Pureland Buddhist, the words 'Namo Amida Bu' may be suggestive of post-mortem paradises, or more earthly utopias. In *SFP*, Dharmavidya offers no guarantees as to what the Pure Land actually is.

### **Conclusion: 'Post-secular' Buddhism, not post-'secular Buddhism'**

Dharmavidya's placing of his *SFP* as a kind of cultural 'translation' of Hōnen's *Ichimai Kishōmon* allows him to position his Pureland Buddhist practice in a manner which we can describe as post-secular in light of the perspectives borrowed from the work of Caputo. He understands himself as inheriting and passing on a notion of 'religious' Buddhism from Hōnen, but goes on to problematize any fixed concept of what that notion might be. His thought occupies part of the space created for the category of 'religion' by the Enlightenment as described by Caputo, but goes on to destabilize that category itself.

Dharmavidya's philosophical and doctrinal stance does not by itself mean that the UK is entering an era of 'religious' Buddhism which will replace the hegemony of more secularized varieties. The Buddhist population of England and Wales is relatively tiny (0.4% of the population according to a 2011 census). The proportion of that 0.4% who would have identified as *Pure Land* or *Pureland* Buddhists had they been given the opportunity to do so would surely have been minute, given that the Network of Buddhist Organizations lists only two groups made up of such Buddhists on its website.<sup>19</sup> The Amida Order itself is undeniably small in numerical terms. Its Register for 2017 lists a total of twenty-four ordained members, twelve male and twelve female. There is currently no sociological case to be made from these Amida Order-related figures alone<sup>20</sup> that can challenge the view, referred to earlier, that Secular Buddhism is the default historical attitude of the 'West' towards Buddhism. Neither is there anything in them to undermine the more general theory, recently reasserted by Steve Bruce (2017), that what he calls the 'West' is becoming progressively secularized.

However, although there may be nothing yet in the numerical evidence regarding the Amida Order to suggest that the contemporary UK is witnessing the onset of a post 'Secular Buddhism' era, I maintain that *at the level of doctrine* we can consider

<sup>19</sup> The two groups are The Amida Trust (the organisation which supports the Amida Order) and the Pure Land Buddhist Fellowship.

<sup>20</sup> Although several other, numerically stronger forms of Buddhism in contemporary Britain may also be likely to resist characterisation of themselves as 'secular'.

Dharmavidya's thought as a form of 'post-secular' Buddhism. This, in turn, has implications for both Buddhism and post-secularism.

Other writers have employed the term post-secular in relation to Buddhism. To take two examples, Phra Nicholas Thanissaro (2014) applied the term in understanding the perspectives of teenage heritage Buddhists in the UK, and Alp Arat (2017) employed it to argue that the much-vaunted secularisation of 'mindfulness' is more apparent than real.

My own approach has been to borrow Caputo's specific understanding of the post-secular as building on the achievements of secularism and apply this to Dharmavidya's text. As Caputo developed his understanding within a broadly Christian context, and as this understanding has been seen as helpful when applied to *SFP*, this argument serves to flag up certain Christian motifs in Dharmavidya's work. His likening of bodhisattvas to angels has already been noted, and he uses the conventionally Christian term 'grace' in the *SFP* and widely throughout his work. His service book also contains 'hymns' and 'prayers', although this is by no means uncommon in the wider Pure Land Buddhist tradition.

Although at first sight it may appear that Dharmavidya is unconsciously pursuing an 'Orientalist' agenda by which an Asian tradition is intellectually colonised and misappropriated by being articulated in terms of the categories of Christianity, the situation is more complex than this. Galen Amstutz has pointed out (1997: xi) that Jesuit missionaries to Japan identified the Shin Pure Land Buddhism they found there as 'protestant' in the sixteenth century. More modern thinkers such as D.T. Suzuki have drawn similar comparisons between Pure Land Buddhism and forms of Christianity. Dharmavidya's standpoint is different in kind, however. Rather than seeing Buddhism as 'essentially' Christian, he views Christianity as, in some senses, fundamentally Buddhist:

A pure mind transcends cultures and therefore transcends particular religions.  
Buddhism thus points to the essence of all true religion (Brazier, 2014:165).

Rather than 'Orientalism', this could be said to indicate some kind of 'Occidentalism' on Dharmavidya's part, the imposition of Asian Buddhist categories onto a Christian religious landscape.

Moreover, just as the understanding Pureland as post-secular in Caputo's sense throws the 'Occidentalism' of Dharmavidya's Buddhism into relief, it also thereby goes some way towards challenging a wider secularisation thesis, at least at the level of doctrine. Steve Bruce's recent book (2017) claims that in what he calls the attempted 'Easternization of the West', Asian spiritual practices such as Buddhism and Yoga imported into the UK have failed to constitute a backlash against secularism and have themselves become secularised. Dharmavidya's assertion of the religious nature of his Pureland Buddhism, and its susceptibility to being described as 'post-secular', offer a legitimate challenge to the universality of that claim.

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### **Appendix 1: Hōnen's Ichimai Kishōmon ('One-Sheet Document')**

The method of final salvation that I have propounded is neither a sort of meditation, such as has been practised by many scholars in China and Japan, nor is it a repetition of the Buddha's name by those who have studied and understood the deep meaning of it. It is nothing but the mere repetition of the *Namu Amida Butsu* without a doubt of His mercy, whereby one may be born into the Land of Perfect Bliss. The mere repetition with firm faith includes all the practical details, such as the threefold preparation of mind and the four practical rules. If I as an individual have any doctrine more profound than this, I should miss the mercy of the two Honourable Ones, Amida and Shaka, and be left out of the Vow of the Amida Buddha. Those who believe this, though they clearly understand all the teachings Shaka taught throughout his whole life, should behave themselves like simple-minded folk, who know not a single letter, or like ignorant nuns or monks whose faith is implicitly simple. Thus without pedantic airs, they should fervently practise the repetition of the name of Amida, and that alone.

Fitzgerald, J.A. (ed.) (2006). *Hōnen the Buddhist Saint. Essential Writings and Official Biography*. (trans. H.H. Coates and R. Ishizuka). Bloomington: World Wisdom. p135.

### **Appendix 2: Dharmavidya's Summary of Faith and Practice**

#### *Summary of Faith & Practice*

(Dharmavidya, inspired by Honen's Ichimai Kishomon)

For those having a karmic affinity with Amitabha Buddha wishing to practise a religious life in truly simple faith, freeing themselves of sophistication and attachment to all forms of cleverness, the method of opening oneself to Amitabha's grace is the practice of Nien Fo with body, speech and mind, particularly verbal recitation of "Namo Amida Bu". This is not something done as a form of meditation, nor is it based on study, understanding and wisdom, or the revelation of deep meaning. Deep meaning is indeed there for the nembutsu is a window through which the whole universe of Buddha's teaching can be perceived in all its depth, but none of this is either necessary or helpful to success in the practice. Rather such study cultivates secondary faculties to be held separate from the mind of practice itself.

The primary practice requires only one essential: realise that you are a totally foolish being who understands nothing, but who can with complete trust recite "Namo Amida Bu"; know that this will generate rebirth in the Pure Land, without even knowing what rebirth in the Pure Land truly is. This is the practice for ignorant beings and ignorance is essential for its accomplishment. This practice automatically encompasses the three minds and the mind of contrition as a fourth. To pursue something more profound or more sophisticated, or to have a theory, or to think that understanding will yield greater enlightenment than this is to be misled and to fall back into self-power whereby the whole practice is spoilt. However wise, learned or skilled you may be, set it aside and be the foolish being completely in the performance of the practice. Nothing else is required and anything else is too much. Faith and practice cannot be differentiated.



The Buddha-body is delineated by the precepts. How deficient we are by comparison! By our daily difficulty in the preceptual life, we awaken to the presence of the myriad karmic obstacles without which we would already perceive the land of love and bliss, we would be as the vow-body of Buddha. Thus we know in experience that we are foolish beings of wayward passion. This knowledge of our condition is part of the essential basis when it gives rise to contrition. Thus all obstacles become impediments to faith unless we experience contrition and letting go. Saving grace, as was made clear by Shan Tao's dream and advice to Tao Cho, only comes through the sange-mon.

If you can perform the practice in this simple minded way, Amida will receive you and you may fear for nothing since all is completely assured. Dwelling in this settled faith you may then use your secondary faculties, your knowledge and skills and accumulated experience, as tools for helping all sentient beings. But do not then think that anything of relevance to your own salvation is thereby accomplished, nor that you are making something of yourself. Whatever merit there may be in your actions of this kind, immediately and totally dedicate it to the benefit of others, that they may enter the Pure Land and that you yourself may not be encumbered by consciousness of virtue which will only contaminate the practice. As Honen says, "without pedantic airs, fervently recite the name."

Dharmavidya. (2001). Nien Fo Book of the Amida Order. *Friends of Amida*. [www.amidatrust.ning.com](http://www.amidatrust.ning.com)