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The Critique of Anthropocentrism and Humanism in Present-day Shin Buddhism

Introduction

The occidentalist overtones in modern and contemporary discourses on Japanese Buddhism have been recently pointed out in various studies. Within this context, the term occidentalism indicates, broadly speaking, a reverse form of orientalism, that is, of that construction of the “Orient-as-unity,” illustrated by Edward Said and other writers, which was the premise for the construction of the “putative unity and universality of the West,” and for the cultural and ideological justification of its hegemonic claims. (Ivy 2005: 317) Thus, Bernard Faure (1995) and Robert Sharf (1995) have efficaciously illustrated the selective use of elements of Zen Buddhism made by Suzuki Daisetsu and the Kyōto School in order to construe an alleged Japanese uniqueness through the opposition of ‘East’ and ‘West.’ This is, in fact, a nativist structure, where Japanese spirituality, taken to be the peak of a pan-Asian cultural legacy, is set forward as superior to the materialist and individualistic ‘western culture.’ Robert Kisala, on the other hand, has pointed out how, in new Japanese religions in the Nichiren lineage like the Nipponzan Myōhōji, the Sōka Gakkai and the Risshō Kōseikai, a considerable stress on peace and inter-religious dialogue can be accompanied by a rhetoric emphasizing the uniqueness of particular socio-cultural values.¹

A similar approach continues to inspire statements like those that can be found in a recent publication of the Japan Buddhist Federation (Zen Nihon Bukkyōkai 全日本仏教会), with which the large majority of Buddhist institutions in Japan is affiliated. Here, the privileged status held by Buddhism, according to which the polarization between the “extremes” of “intellectualism or materialism, absolutism or relativism,” and the like, is to be avoided “as much as possible” – which is presented as Buddhism’s unique contribution to world peace – is contrasted with the tendency of the “people in the West” to “fall into this pitfall of polarization,” and to “the strife between the people of monotheistic religions.” (Japan Buddhist Federation 2004: 58) The use of such rhetoric in a publication which is addressed to a large and international audience, being presented as *A Guide to Japanese Buddhism*, speaks once again of the pervasiveness of ideas in the broader context of Japanese

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¹ Kisala (1999: 159-161). Similar observations on the Sōka Gakkai had been made earlier by Anson Shupe (1991).

Buddhism related to cultural uniqueness which emphasize the centrality of Japanese values for the solution of worldwide pressing issues.

It is not therefore surprising that similar traits can also be found within a denomination of Japanese Buddhism such as Shin Buddhism (Jōdo Shinshū 浄土真宗), the two main branches of which, the Jōdo Shinshū Honganji-ha 浄土真宗本願寺派 and the Shinshū Ōtani-ha 真宗大谷派, alone amount to about 25% of all the Japanese Buddhist temples and to a relevant part of the population of Buddhist practitioners in Japan.²

With reference to this, the critique of “anthropocentrism” and “humanism” found in Shin Buddhism provides a fruitful starting-point for analysing the occidentalist overtones embedded in the approaches to modernity of this Buddhist denomination. This is, in fact, a critique that can be directly related to the emergence of elements of exclusive religious particularism in Shin Buddhism, which fit well to the “conservative option” postulated by Peter Beyer (1994: 90) as one of the two main strategies adopted by religion in order to respond to the globalization of society.

The analysis of such elements in Shin Buddhism is all the more interesting because they are not only counter-balanced, at the level of the doctrinal debate, by more tempered views and even counter-critiques, but they can hardly be considered to play a central role in this religious context. Although these occidentalist implications also find expression in official statements which are intended to represent the denomination as a whole, it is in fact more appropriate to say that contemporary Shin Buddhism is generally more inclined towards a positive approach to the process of globalization, which is distinctive of the other option postulated by Beyer (1994: 86), namely, the “liberal” one.

Thus, the critique of the concepts of “anthropocentrism” and “humanism” also exposes the ambiguities underlying the strategies which are being adopted by Shin Buddhism to face issues and problems emerging from a society in rapid change.

The Critique of Anthropocentrism and Humanism in the Shin Buddhist Doctrinal Debate

As a result of a strongly interpretative approach to the European concept of humanism, here reductively understood as a subject-centred way of thinking exclusively concerned with the welfare of human beings, and therefore anthropocentric, in Shin Buddhist circles the two terms “anthropocentrism” (*ningen-chūshin-shugi* 人間中心主義) and “humanism” (*byūmanizumu* ヒューマニズム) have been used, alternatively or simultaneously, as synonyms, indicating a vision

² Bunkachō (2004). Despite the well-known problems inherent in the Bunkachō’s (Agency for Cultural Affairs of the Ministry of Education) statistics, and especially in the classification of adherents, the data published in 2004 by this institution may at least provide a suggestion concerning the enduring relevance of Shin Buddhism within the context of Japanese Buddhism.

of reality to which pressing contemporary problems should be ascribed. Among them are the destruction of the environment, exploitation, war, economic-centred society, and loss of spiritual values. And, as such, the two aforementioned concepts generally appear within the wider discussions on *jiriki* 自力, the mind of self-power.³

However, it may be interesting to note that within the context of this critique of anthropocentrism and humanism the characteristic Buddhist concern about self-attachment, here strictly related to the Shin Buddhist concept of *tariki* 他力, the other-power of Amida, merges, often implicitly, with other philosophical and ideological themes. These are themes that were already present, for example, in Meiji Buddhist criticisms of ‘western civilization’ which also found expression at the World’s Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893. (Ketelaar 1991) They can also be found in the aforementioned speculations of authors like Suzuki Daisetsu or others linked to the Kyōto School, where these concerns are combined with the critique of rationality found in twentieth-century European thought, and, more generally, in the anti-individualistic rhetoric found in texts like the *Fundamentals of National Polity*.⁴ The latter in turn was dependent on various ideas elaborated much earlier by Japanese Learning (*Kokugaku* 国学), which still contributes strongly to the discourse on Japanese uniqueness (*nihonjinron* 日本人論).⁵ Therefore, not only is this rhetoric related to wider discussions taking place in contemporary thought, but it also can be seen to have deep roots in Japanese intellectual history.

When we consider the doctrinal debate currently taking place within Shin Buddhism, a typical formulation of the polemical approach to humanism is provided, for example, by the Ōtani-ha scholar Ogawa Ichijō 小川一乗 in his discussion on bioethics and organ transplantation. Ogawa has criticized the pitfalls of contemporary society and its scientific rationalism on various occasions, the latter, in his opinion, finding its cultural basis in European humanism (transcribed as “*hyūmanizumu*”). Humanism, although starting historically as a way to value the capacities of the

³ In Shin Buddhism, the elaboration of themes of the Pure Land teachings has resulted in the characteristic formation of a tradition where one’s self-effort or self-power (*jiriki* 自力) at performing good practices is seen not only as unnecessary, but even as an obstacle to achieving religious liberation. This is mainly due to the stress which was placed by Shinran 親鸞 (1173-1262), who is considered the founder of Shin Buddhism, on the necessity of abandoning all calculations (*bakarai* はからい) in order to have access to Amida Buddha’s compassion. This attitude of absolute reliance on the working of Amida, expressed by the teaching of other-power (*tariki* 他力), opens up the dimension of *shinjin* 信心, the entrusting faith which is accompanied by saying Amida’s name, the *nenbutsu*, as a sign of gratitude. *Shinjin* is thus the central religious experience of Shin Buddhism, through which the practitioner, though still an “ordinary being” (*bonbu* 凡夫) possessed by blind passions, is “grasped” by Amida, and immediately enters “the stage of the truly settled” (*shōjōju* 正定聚), which means that he/she will attain Buddhist liberation without fail. See, for example, CWS I: 110, 341, 455, 474, 560.

⁴ *Kokutai no hongi* 国体の本義 (1937). For some interesting examples, see Monbushō and Monbushō Kyōgaku Kyoku (2003: 4-6, 50-51, 152-156).

⁵ Cf., for example, Rambelli (1996).

individual, has ended up in modern times, he argues, in providing the basis for capitalist society, where competition and striving for material prosperity are dominant, and for a world-view which focuses almost exclusively on material prosperity in the present, and on one's individual life. (Ogawa 2002b: 74, 139, 153) In this sense, according to Ogawa, humanism manifests itself as egoism, which, in order to meet the endless demands of welfare and efficiency by human beings, does not hesitate to marginalize the weak, to create clones, and to resort to organ transplantation. As regards the last issue, he has especially insisted that such transplantation, since the life process is still functioning at the time of brain death, is a way to save a life by causing the death of someone else. (Ogawa 2002b: 82-83, 158; 2002a: 13-14) Against this approach to reality and to the modern striving for a long life and material prosperity, Ogawa (2002a: 15; 2005a: 43) has argued that, from a Buddhist point of view, death should instead be accepted in the light of the teaching of impermanence, and that all life, without exception, is equal and interrelated (*inochi wa byōdō* いのちは平等).

Equally critical of approaches to the world which are based on humanistic ideas is Honda Hiroyuki 本多弘之, also from the Ōtani-ha. According to Honda, the standpoint of humanism, which has developed in the context of European thought, is basically different from that maintained by Buddhism, since its focus is on this world, where human reason, the self, is taken to be the criterion for its own values. (Tanni no Kai 2000: 17-18, 28) In this respect, the humanistic approach is for him equivalent to that of *jiriki*, and the sensibility typical of humanism is rather expressed by "pity," "commiseration," and "care for beings" which are illustrated by Shinran in Chapter IV of the *Tannishō* as a feature of the "Path of the Sages."⁶ However, Honda notes, for Shinran these demands are extremely difficult to accomplish, and this is why he presented "the compassion of the Pure Land" (*jōdo no jibi* 浄土の慈悲), that is, the practice of the *nenbutsu*, as the right compassionate concern for human beings. Honda's approach to humanism is thus intended as a critique of the self from the point of view of *tariki*. (Tanni no Kai 2000: 24)

Hirata Atsushi 平田厚志, who belongs to the Honganji-ha, has similarly argued that the cause of the current crisis of spiritual values, which is made evident by serious social problems and by the emergence of nihilism, egoism, and the struggle for efficiency, is to be traced to the egocentrism which dominates contemporary society. (Hirata 2001: 26-27) According to him, a way out of this crisis and from the pitfalls of anthropocentrism can be found only by questioning one's *shinjin*. For Hirata, Shinran's approach to *tariki* is the clue for overcoming "the mind of self-power" (*jiriki no kokoro* 自力のこゝろ) and for taking, as a *nenbutsu* follower, one's responsibilities within society. Only in this way are the Shin Buddhist practice of "sharing one's faith with others" (*jisbin kyōninsbin* 自信教人信) and the realization of the universality of the Buddhist teachings achievable.⁷

⁶ "Shōdō no jibi to iu wa, mono o awaremi, kanashimi, bagukumu nari" 聖道の慈悲というは、ものをあわれみ、かなしみ、はぐくむなり。 (Tanni no Kai 2000: 23, 27-28). Cf. CWS I: 663; and SS: 628.

⁷ Hirata (2001: 39). Cf. the *Tannishō* 歎異抄 (A Record in Lament of Divergences), in CWS I: 663; and JSS II: 833.

Kawamura Kakushō 川村覚昭, another Honganji-ha scholar, laments the exclusive emphasis which has been placed in post-war Japan upon individual rights and on the dignity of the individual as a being separated from society, a view which he thinks reflects the typical anthropocentric attitude characteristic of humanism and requires a corrective from a Shin Buddhist religious point of view. (Kawamura 2001: 18-19; 2002: 26) Also for Kawamura (2001: 20, 23), since Shinran's main concern was to emphasize the egocentric nature of the self and its being trapped in blind passions, a true Shin Buddhist approach to social ethics should start from the overcoming of this self-centredness through Amida's compassion, and the opening up of the dimension of the 'other.'

Other Shin Buddhist Views on Anthropocentrism and Humanism

Two examples of a milder approach towards humanism are provided by Tokunaga Michio 徳永道雄 and Yasutomi Shin'ya 安富信哉.⁸ Tokunaga has recently argued that the humanistic approach should not be considered sufficient to face urgent social issues, because in the light of Shinran's teachings the limits of human action are to be clearly recognized. In this regard he refers to the *Postscript* of the *Tannishō* where it is emphasized that "with a foolish being full of blind passions" "all matters without exception are empty and false, totally without truth and sincerity," and the "nembutsu alone is true and real."⁹ Thus, Tokunaga also acknowledges that Buddhism should start from the standpoint of impermanence and no-self in order to provide an alternative system of values. At the same time, however, he maintains that humanism should not be discarded altogether, so as not to alienate religion from public opinion. (Tokunaga 2001: 33)

Yasutomi has argued that in Shin Buddhism social activism is often not sufficiently grounded on the teachings, and there is, instead, a diffuse tendency to refer to humanistic values. Yasutomi, though acknowledging the importance of the "humanism of the Renaissance," also points out its intrinsic limitation, which he ascribes to the exclusive focus on the "welfare of the human being," a trait revealing an "anthropocentric" standpoint. (Yasutomi 2002: 13-14) More recently, however, he has expressed some reservations about positions inside Shin Buddhism which propose a radical anti-humanistic approach. In fact, in Yasutomi's view, the humanistic standpoint also presents similarities with the dimension of "togetherness" (*warera* われら) strictly linked in Shinran's thought to the concept of *dōbō* 同朋 ("fellow companions"), which should be taken into account in order to counter solipsistic tendencies in Shin Buddhism. Furthermore, he thinks that the insistent criticism against humanism might have negative repercussions on the appreciation of the discourse on human rights.¹⁰

An articulated critique of the anti-humanistic standpoint from within Shin Buddhism has been recently advanced by Hishiki Masaharu 菱木政晴, who has noted

⁸ Tokunaga and Yasutomi belong respectively to the Honganji-ha and the Ōtani-ha.

⁹ Tokunaga (2001: 33-34). Cf. CWS I: 679; and JSS II: 853-854.

¹⁰ Personal communication, 7 November 2005. See also Yasutomi (2005).

the bias which characterizes this approach, as expressed particularly in the *Joint Declaration for the Thirtieth Anniversary of the Foundation of the Shin Buddhist Federation*¹¹ issued by the Shin Buddhist Federation (Shinshū Kyōdan Rengō 真宗教団連合) in September 2000.¹² Here, writes Hishiki (2005: 20), the emancipative aspects of humanism are systematically obliterated, opening up the way for blaming this contribution of European thought for the major problems of modern society. Contrary to this approach, he maintains that the contribution of humanism to the evaluation of the dignity of the human being is not to be discarded. Rather, it is to be synthesized with those ideas which focus on the concept of social equality, and which stress the dimension of “interconnectedness” of existence – a tendency which, he observes, is evident in streams of contemporary “western philosophy” as a way to deepen the discourse on humanism as well. (Hishiki 2003: 21) According to Hishiki, while the supporters of the anti-humanistic rhetoric assume to be espousing a critical view of society through the idea of the “equality of life” (*inochi no byōdō*), they are, in fact, reformulating one of the concepts of the Japanese Buddhist tradition which most often has been used in order to justify social control, that is, the idea, found in the Mahāyāna *Mahā-parinirvāṇa-sūtra*, that “all people possess the Buddha-nature.” He claims that this concept, which is based on an animistic worship of nature, was later assimilated into medieval “exoteric-esoteric Buddhism” (*kenmitsu bukkō* 顕密仏教), coming then to be interpreted, by extension, as meaning that “all beings (mountains, rivers, plants, and trees) can attain buddhahood” (*sansen sōmoku shikkai jōbutsu* 山川草木悉皆成仏). On this basis, Hishiki argues, the way for the confusion of the domains of nature and society was laid bare, a framework within which “no discontinuity” came eventually to be seen “between love for the scenery and patriotism.”¹³ He notes that in the “anti-humanistic” rhetoric it is thus possible to find at work those same ideological traits which were used to justify Japan’s imperialism as a mission to liberate Asia from the menace of western powers. (Hishiki 2005: 20)

The Shin Buddhist Critique of Anthropocentrism and Humanism in Official Statements

It is interesting to note that elements of the critique of anthropocentrism and humanism emerge from within Shin Buddhism also at the official level. However, even a general overview of Shin Buddhist attitudes to contemporary society shows how this denomination is characterized, both at the official level and that of religious activism, by few other distinctive features which speak of a more positive approach to modernity, not centred on ethno-cultural defence.

¹¹ *Shinshū Kyōdan Rengō kessei sanjū shūnen kyōdō sengen* 真宗教団連合結成30周年共同宣言.

¹² Hishiki (2005: 19). Cf. Shinshū Kyōdan Rengō (2000). Also Hishiki, who has long been engaged in social activism for peace, belongs to the Ōtani-ha.

¹³ Hishiki (2005: 25-26, 100-101). Hishiki (2005: 12) also makes in the text explicit reference to the critique of *hōgaku shisō* 本覚思想 formulated by the exponents of Critical Buddhism (*Hiban Bukkyō* 批判仏教). Cf. Hubbard and Swanson (1997), and Rambelli (2001).

One can think here of the emphasis put on the universality of its salvific message by contemporary Shin Buddhism, which is testified by the the current self-representation of its two main branches, Honganji-ha and Ōtani-ha, as communities based on the ideal of *dōbō* (“fellow companions”), and by a series of activities against social discrimination.¹⁴ Another central point in contemporary Shin Buddhism is the focus on peace, which is closely connected to a serious process of rethinking of the past war responsibilities of the religious community, started by the Ōtani-ha and the Honganji-ha in 1987 and 1991 respectively, which also implies a critical position towards the attempts made by the government to regain the status of military power for Japan and to promote nationalism. This last issue is especially linked to the visits made by state officials, notably Prime Minister Koizumi, to Yasukuni Shrine (Yasukuni jinja 靖国神社), which enshrines the war dead as “glorious war spirits” (*eirei* 英霊), and was until the end of World War II the centre of Japanese militaristic propaganda. In this regard, the strong opposition to state support of, or interference with, Yasukuni Shrine, which is linked in Shin Buddhism to fundamental doctrinal issues,¹⁵ also represents the defence of the principle of the separation of state and religion which is enshrined in the Japanese Constitution. From these examples, it may be seen how contemporary Shin Buddhism is generally oriented towards a sympathetic approach to modernity and globalizing society, without on the other hand evading the challenge of addressing the problems that it engenders. And this is an attitude which in turn is in tune with the general characteristics of the “liberal option” postulated by Beyer.¹⁶

¹⁴ For the concept of *dōbō* in Shinran’s work, see, for example, CWS I: 549, 551, 554; this term was characteristically used by Shinran, together with *dōgyō* 同行 (“fellow practitioners”), to address *nenbutsu* 念仏 followers. As regards social discrimination, institutional activities to cope with the issue of the *hisabetsu buraku* 被差別部落 have been on the agenda of the *Dōbō* reform movements of both the Honganji-ha and the Ōtani-ha since their inception in the immediate post-war period. More recently, other activities have been started in support of former Hansen’s disease (*Hansenbyō* ハンセン病) patients, subjected in Japan to forced isolation until the 1990s.

¹⁵ For passages of Shinran’s work against the worship of *kami* and the enshrinement of spirits (*jingi fubai* 神祇不拝), see, for example, CWS I: 255-292.

¹⁶ Beyer argues that the “liberal option” implies a positive approach to globalization. For this option, the evil in contemporary society represents more “a negative deficiency to be filled” on the basis of the “prevailing global values” than “a positive presence to be destroyed.” From this point of view, “humanity as a whole is the community and the religious task is to work for the fuller inclusion of all people in the benefits of this global community.” The solution to social problems, however, “while religiously inspired,” tends “to take on the characteristics of the target system,” focusing on “economic solutions to economic problems,” and on “political solutions to political problems.” Therefore, the adoption of the liberal choice should not lead one, as a general rule, “to advocate the legislation of religious norms.” The “conservative option” is characterized by Beyer as “the reassertion of the tradition in spite of modernity,” which is in conflict with dominant trends of globalization seen as “prime manifestations of evil in the world.” Among the main features of this option, for Beyer, there are the “approximate dichotomization of the world into the religiously pure and impure,” and the “great stress on a particular group-cultural moral code as the manifestation of divine will.”

Several critiques of anthropocentrism and humanism within Shin Buddhism testify instead at the official level the concurrent presence of elements which may be well taken as representative of the “conservative option,” which is typically, if not solely, characterized by the emergence of exclusive religious particularism.¹⁷ In this respect, the stance held by Ogawa Ichijō, who is also the current head of the Ōtani-ha Research Institute for Doctrinal Studies (Shinshū Ōtani-ha Kyōgaku Kenkyūsho 真宗大谷派教学研究社), has already been mentioned.¹⁸ A further recent example is provided by the New Year’s speech of the Honganji-ha head priest (*monshu* 門主) in January 2006, in connection with the celebrations for the 750th anniversary of Shinran’s death.¹⁹ In it, the danger of the increasing influence of the “anthropocentric way of thinking” (*ningen-chūshin no kangae* 人間中心の考え) is stressed, which leads to a desperate search for profit, leading to inequality, thus threatening the subsistence of many forms of life. This phenomenon is to be countered, it is stated, through a life in the *nenbutsu* guided by Amida’s wisdom and compassion.²⁰

However, the most clearly articulated official Shin Buddhist statement related to anthropocentrism and humanism is probably to be found in the text of the above-mentioned *Joint Declaration for the Thirtieth Anniversary of the Foundation of the Shin Buddhist Federation*, issued in 2000. (Shinshū Kyōdan Rengō 2000) Reference to this theme had already been made by the same Shin Buddhist Federation in a previous statement issued on the occasion of its twentieth anniversary in 1989, where it affirmed that “the reliance on an anthropocentric standpoint is not possible” (*ningen-chūshin-shugi ni tatsu koto wa dekimasen* 人間中心主義に立つことはできません) on the basis of an understanding of the human condition as that of “ordinary beings” (*bombu*). (Shinshū Kyōdan Rengō 1989) In the Declaration of 2000, however, which specifically addresses “humanism” (*byūmanizumu*), the criticism is formulated more directly and combined with rhetorical elements already found in other authors quoted above. As such, and because it is meant to represent the view on contemporary society of the Shin Buddhist denomination in its complexity, it deserves to be considered in detail.

We also see the rejection of religious pluralism, “political mobilization” seen as the “service” of religious faith, and, more generally, a pressure for the “dedifferentiation” of “functional areas” such as those of religion and politics, and religion and education, or religion and medicine. (Beyer 1994: 86-108)

¹⁷ Other aspects of contemporary Shin Buddhism which can be linked to the “conservative option,” and thus to the “reassertion of the tradition” *against* the process of globalization, are for example the rejection of organ transplantation, which represents the attempt to dedifferentiate the two areas of religion and medicine, and the not uncommon representation of the religious tradition as a ‘philosophy’ or a ‘way of life,’ which may well be interpreted as a strategy to resist secularization by attempting to deny the distinction between religion and non-religion in the specific case of the Shin Buddhist tradition. Cf. Beyer 1994: 90-93; 1998: 19.

¹⁸ For his position, see also Ogawa 2005b: 118.

¹⁹ The anniversary will occur in 2012 for the Honganji-ha, and in 2011 for the Ōtani-ha.

²⁰ See the official publication of the Honganji-ha, *Honganji shimpō* 本願寺新報 (1 January 2006: 6).

The text starts with a reference to the past responsibilities of the religious community in discriminatory practices and in supporting war, and emphasizes the importance for Shin Buddhism to return to the teachings of Shinran in order to give a positive contribution towards a better society. In the first section, one can find a critique of the pitfalls of modern mass production society, the dangers for the environment, competition as a key feature of the modern economy, and the consequent loss of common trust, the collapse of the family as an institution, and related problems in the educational field, the cause of which is identified in humanism. This is a critical situation, according to the text, which is aggravated by the fact that modern society is “proud of this humanistic approach” (*hyūmanizumu e no ogori* ヒューマニズムへの驕り), which fosters the view that pursuing the aim of wealth is a natural right. This “exclusive focus on the present world” (*gense-sbugi* 現世主義) manifests itself also in the yearning for a healthy and long life, and in the interest in immediate, worldly benefits. Organ transplantation and genetic manipulation, it is stated in the second section, are also conducted in “the spirit of humanism, which sees no limits for human knowledge,”²¹ and are, in fact, the expression of the tendency to see human life in purely utilitarian terms. “Buddhist spirituality” (*Bukkyō seishin* 仏教精神) and the “Shin Buddhist teachings” (*Shinshū no oshie* 真宗の教え), it is affirmed, can however provide an alternative way to cope with these serious problems. From the beginning, Śakyamuni had taught that life is interconnected and equal for all beings due to the chain of cause and conditions,²² and this stress on the equality of all life is reflected, it is argued here, in the idea of “fellow companions and practitioners” (*on-dōbō on-dōgyō*) fostered by Shinran. This attention to “life” (*inochi* いのち) is presented as a clue for opposing the lack of relationships in modern society – that is, the illusion that one can live independently from other beings and that one’s existence is a private affair (*‘inochi’ o shiyūka shite iru arikata* ‘いのち’を私有化しているあり方) – and the false belief that one can be satisfied by exclusive attention to a long and healthy life. The text, then, illustrates that the source of this true “life” is the work of “Amida’s Vow” (*Amida Nyōrai no bongan* 阿弥陀如来の本願), and that through the *nenbutsu* it is possible to awaken to it, and “to follow the path towards true happiness” (*shin no shiawase o motomete ikiru michi* 真の幸せを求めて生きる道). In conclusion, the way of “living according to the Shin Buddhist teachings” (*Shinshū no oshie ni ikiru* 真宗の教えに生きる) is summarized in two points. Firstly, the importance of “becoming aware that we are living in a way that privatizes ‘life,’”²³ and “to aim at peace and equality with all forms of ‘life’ on the earth” is stressed.²⁴ And, secondly, the necessity of “insisting on

²¹ “*Hyūmanizumu no seishin, doko made mo ningen no motsu jinchi de arimasu*” ヒューマニズムの精神は、どこまでも人間のもつ人知であります。(Shinshū Kyōdan Rengō 2000)

²² “... *iki toshi ikeru subete no ‘inochi’ wa, musū muryō no innen ni yotte naritatte iru no de aru*” 生きとし生けるすべての“いのち”は、無数無量の因縁によって成り立っているのであり。(Shinshū Kyōdan Rengō 2000)

²³ “*Watasbitachi wa, ‘inochi’ o shiyūka shitsuzukete iru arikata ni mezame*” 私たちは、“いのち”を私有化し続けているあり方に目覚め。(Shinshū Kyōdan Rengō 2000)

²⁴ “... *chikyū ni ikiru subete no ‘inochi’ no heirwa to byōdō o mezasu*” 地球に生きるすべての“いのち”の平和と平等をめざす。(Shinshū Kyōdan Rengō 2000)

questioning the meaning of human life”²⁵ in the current “process of de-humanization” (*bi-ningenka* 非人間化), which is going on in the twenty-first century. (Shinshū Kyōdan Rengō 2000)

The core of this text, therefore, lies in the articulation of the ideal of a true “life” (*inochi*), opposed to a “privatization of life” (*inochi no shiyūka* いのちの私有化), along the lines provided by the co-dependent origination theory (*musū muryō no innen* 無数無量の因縁), and its expression found in Shinran’s teaching through the ideal of “fellow companions and practitioners” – which is here intended to imply the equality of all beings. Awareness (*jikaku*) of a dimension of “life,” which is considered as the working of Amida’s Vow itself, is opened up through the practice of the *nenbutsu* and is the precondition for a world free of conflicts and discrimination. Within this framework, the critique of humanism comes to occupy a central place, not only in the analysis related to the past century (*nijū seiki no owari ni atatte* 20世紀の終わりにあたって), but also in that which focuses on the present challenges for the new century (*nijūichi seiki e no kadai* 21世紀への課題), providing throughout the text a negative standard for the right approach of the practitioners to contemporary society. Absent from this text is any reference to the cultural legacy of humanism in the development of the discourse on peace and the dignity of life, that, one might suppose, also finds its expression in “the principles of renunciation of war, freedom of religion, and separation of state and religion” (*sensō hōki, shinkyō no jiyū, seikyō bunri no gensoku* 戦争放棄・信教の自由・政教分離の原則) of “the Japanese Constitution” (*Nibonkoku kenpō* 日本国憲法), all of which are critically defended by the Shin Buddhist Federation in a different context.²⁶ Here, instead, the positing of the “spirit of humanism” (*hyūmanizumu no seishin*) as a homogeneous, negative ‘other,’ is the premise for the affirmation of Buddhist spirituality as the exclusive solution to the problems of the contemporary world. In fact, as it is stated in the final part of the second section, “along the search for a wisdom which can overcome humanism, there is no other way than that offered by Buddhism.”²⁷ In this regard, it is possible to note how equalitarian and critical aspects of the Shin Buddhist teachings can be used not only from an anti-authoritarian viewpoint to justify an engagement for peace or social welfare, as is quite common in many official statements, in the doctrinal debate on social ethics, and in the context of social activism, but also to affirm a hegemonic agenda which is aimed at reinforcing the prestige and the unique features of Buddhist spirituality, and affirming its superiority. And these two strategies can coexist, as in the example given above, even within the same textual context.

²⁵ “... *ningen to wa nanika toitsuzukeru koto o hōki shinai*” 人間とは何かと問い続けることを放棄しない。(Shinshū Kyōdan Rengō 2000)

²⁶ Shinshū Kyōdan Rengō (2003). This is the text of a letter of protest related to the visit to Yasukuni Shrine made by Prime Minister Koizumi in January 2003.

²⁷ “*Sono hyūmanizumu o koeru eichi o motomeru naraba, sore wa Bukkyō o oite hoka ni michi o midasu koto wa dekimasen*” そのヒューマニズムを超える英知を求めらば、それは仏教を措いて他に道を見い出すことはできません。(Shinshū Kyōdan Rengō 2000)

As has been suggested above, one prominent feature of the critique of the two related ideas of humanism and anthropocentrism found in the 2000 Declaration of the Shin Buddhist Federation is thus that the assumption that humanism, as a view of reality centred totally on the human being, is the fundamental cause of the main problems of contemporary society, provides the basis for a dichotomized representation of reality.²⁸ For these critics there is on the one hand “the spirit of humanism,” the search for unlimited human knowledge which carries with itself the technologization of life and a striving for worldly benefits which can never be satisfied, while on the other hand there is a spiritual approach to life which, on the basis of the equality of all beings, strongly rejects this “process of de-humanization” and “privatization.” The latter is an approach which only “Buddhist spirituality” can aptly provide, since for this anti-humanistic position there does not seem to be any other practicable way to overcome the self-centred personality. Shin Buddhism is thus construed implicitly as *the* perfection of a pan-Asian spiritual heritage, and, more explicitly, as *the* ideal solution to pressing social problems of our time. This is a strategy which evidently fits with the tendency, noted by Beyer for those religious groups which support the “conservative option,” to put “great stress” on their “moral code as the manifestation of divine will.” (Beyer 1994: 92) This pattern, which is traceable also in other texts, shows how the contemporary discourse on ethics within Shin Buddhism may overlap with the rhetoric of occidentalism.

Conclusion

Thus, if there are clear signs that Shin Buddhism is in many ways endorsing the “liberal option,” it is also evident that current attempts to address those social problems which are the by-products of globalization – implying, more or less explicitly, the assumption of the social nature of the experience of *shinjin* – do not exclude the recourse to strategies that emphasize differences and promote hegemonic agendas, while at the same time speaking with the rhetoric of equality. It may be argued that this is by no means unnatural at a general level for contemporary religious groups in their relationship to global society. This is, in fact, a choice implied in the very formation of the current concept of religion(s) as a feature of modernity, and indeed of their concrete reality, and in its close connection with the shaping of national identities. In this sense, as has been suggested by Beyer (1994: 94), one of the ‘advantages’ of the “conservative option” can be seen at work here, in terms of which the occidentalist and orientalist strategies find their reference point, that is, its attachment to “socio-cultural particularism.” This is a tendency that in present-day Shin Buddhism can also be traced, to some extent, to forms of social activism like those of the Vihāra (*Bihāra* ビハーラ) movement, where engagement in society is not disconnected from the affirmation of a pan-Buddhist identity to set against the pitfalls of a ‘western-based’ approach to medicine.²⁹ Thus it is stated for

²⁸ Cf. Beyer 1994: 92.

²⁹ The term *vihāra* is a Sanskrit word indicating a Buddhist monastery or temple, and was first used in Japan to distinguish the concept of a Buddhist hospice from its Christian

example that the question of support for terminally ill patients and other related issues cannot be resolved by “medicine and the other sciences,” but rather “Asian philosophy offers ways to solve” them. (Tashiro 1995: 67)

Needless to say, all this does not imply that just any criticism of the pitfalls of the processes of modernization and globalization of society and of the powers that currently govern them which resorts to a particular and even strongly group-centred religious tradition may be labelled as a form of occidentalism. At the same time it should not be forgotten that the risk of remaining entangled in some form of exclusive particularism is a constitutive component of the spectrum of responses generally provided by religions to globalization. For this reason, those activities which aim at a strict adherence to the “liberal option” are conditioned by a recurrent critical opposition between the religious values on which they rest and the instances of universalism that the process of globalization itself implicitly promotes without being able to fulfil them. This requires, ultimately, an activity based on egalitarianism, inclusivism, and a sustained self-critical attitude, oriented towards an evaluation and selection of those doctrinal aspects that provide a better echo for these ideas than for those of cultural uniqueness.

Abbreviations

CWS = *The Collected Works of Shinran*. 2 vols. Kyoto: Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha, 1997.

JSS II = Kyōgaku Dendō Kenkyū Sentā 教学伝道研究センター, ed. *Jōdo Shinshū Seiten. Chūshaku-ban* 浄土真宗聖典一註釈版 (Shin Buddhist Scriptures. Annotated Edition). Kyōto: Honganji shuppansha, 2004 (1st ed. 1988).

SS = Shinshū Seiten Hensan Iinkai 真宗聖典編纂委員会, ed. *Shinshū Seiten* 真宗聖典 (Shin Buddhist Scriptures). Kyōto: Higashi Honganji shuppanbu, 2002 (1st ed. 1978).

counterpart by Tamiya Masashi in 1985. This was the starting-point for a Buddhist movement beyond sectarian borders dealing with the suffering of patients at the terminal stage, which presently accounts for numerous groups of volunteers among diverse denominations of Japanese Buddhism.

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