

Mark L. Blum and Yasutomi Shin'ya (eds.).  
*Rennyō and the Roots of Modern Japanese Buddhism.*  
 New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, 298 pp.

This volume is in part the result of a conference organized in 1998 at Ōtani University in Kyōto for Rennyō's 500th memorial anniversary. The book comprises 16 essays (7 of which have already been published in Japanese in the volume *Rennyō no sekai*, namely the proceedings of the aforementioned conference held at the annual meeting of the *Association for Indian and Buddhist Studies*). It includes an introduction of Rennyō's studies and is divided into three parts, entitled *Historical Studies*, *Shinshū Studies*, and *Comparative Religion*. Besides, a chronology of Rennyō's life, a glossary with the transliteration of Japanese and Chinese terms, and an exhaustive bibliography are added at the end of the volume. The essays are mostly English translations of Japanese articles, while four are by American scholars.

In the first part, devoted to historical studies, the figure of Rennyō is presented, who strongly contributed to the dissemination of the Hongan-ji (at the time when it was not yet divided into the two main branches of Honganji-ha and Ōtani-ha, which occurred at the beginning of the Tokugawa period in the 17th century), which was destined to become one of the largest denominations of Japanese Buddhism.

Yasutomi Shin'ya's article entitled "The Life of Rennyō: A Struggle for the Transmission of Dharma" offers a clear and concise introduction to Rennyō's life, his role in revitalizing both "the stagnant religious organization of Honganji" and the concept of *shinjin*, which is a fundamental idea in Shin Buddhism, in an age characterized by "social upheaval and natural disasters." (17)

"Leaders in an Age of Transition" by the well-known historian Kuroda Toshio, investigates the role Rennyō played in the Japanese religious context, with focus in particular on his attitude towards the relationship between secular and religious power, *ōbō* (imperial law) and *buppō* (Dharma law). Moreover, Kuroda deals with the figure of Rennyō and his ability to cope with the changes in Japanese medieval society in an age of transition. A decisive factor was, according to Kuroda, what he himself defined as the system of *kenmitsu bukkyō* 顕密仏教 (exoteric-esoteric Buddhism), a fundamental concept in his thought, which was declining just at Rennyō's time due to the "general breakdown of the former social and political order," a fact that enabled the new Buddhist traditions, such as Shin, Zen, Hokke and Jōdo, to "operate openly." However, practices and viewpoints linked with *kenmitsu bukkyō* still persisted, and Rennyō's ability was precisely that of facing and overcoming such influences and "established a new mode of religious belief." (40) Kuroda, like Yasutomi in the previous article, highlights Rennyō's new methods of proselytizing, in particular his usage of the *Letters* (*Ofumi*, or *Gobunshō*) as an effective form of popularization of Shin Buddhist teachings.

"Continuity and Change in the Thought of Rennyō" by Stanley Weinstein makes

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\* This review is a translated and slightly adapted version of my review in Italian originally written for the internet journal *Marburg Journal of Religion*.

a comparison between Shinran and Rennyo. From the doctrinal point of view, in line with other scholars, like the historian Hattori Shisō, Weinstein questions whether Rennyo, in his aim of making the Shinshū teaching more accessible to the people, did not compromise or somehow “dilute” some of Shinran’s teachings. In this regard, Weinstein mentions some passages from the *Letters* which seem to deviate from the founder’s ideas. (See pp. 53-54) Weinstein points out the emphasis put by Rennyo on the secular power and briefly takes account of the academic debate on these points, concluding in any case with his expression of gratitude for the role Rennyo has played in transforming the religious institution of the Hongan-ji in “what has become the largest Buddhist denomination in Japan today.” (56)

The sociologist Matsumura Naoko analyses the role of women in Rennyo’s thought and his proselytizing activity in her article “Rennyo and the Salvation of Women.” She claims that the eighth successor of Shinran strongly believed in the idea of salvation of women and professed it constantly, acquiring in this way great popularity amongst them. Besides, Matsumura makes a comparison between the “*nyoninkō* 女人講,” the meetings among women, encouraged by Rennyo, and feminist groups of the 1960s and 1970s (pp. 67-68), which is however not particularly convincing.

The analysis of some representations of Shin Buddhism by Jesuit missionaries, in the period after Rennyo, is undertaken in the essay of Kinryū Shizuka entitled “The *Ikkō-shū* as Portrayed in Jesuit Historical Documents.” Here, documents written by these missionaries, are considered by the author as a useful means for acquiring knowledge of Shin Buddhism of that period, although they contain “malicious and self-righteous statements.” (73) It has to be noted, however, that from the point of view of the Study of Religions, from which this review is written, the essay presents some problems, when, for example, Kinryū refers to the practices carried out by the New Religions as “embarrassing activities,” (77) which should have been avoided in an essay included in the “historical” part of the volume.

Kusano Kenshi analyses the persecution of the Ōtani Hongan-ji by Tendai militia-monks of Mount Hiei in 1465 (sixth year of Kanshō period). (At the beginning of this study the year 1468 is mistakenly given). The essay, entitled “The Kanshō Persecution: An Examination of Mount Hiei’s Destruction of Ōtani Honganji,” identifies the reasons of such persecution which temporarily stopped Rennyo’s activities, especially through the analysis of the “Letter of Indictment from Mount Hiei” (*Eizan chōjō*), written by Tendai authorities before the attack.

The figure of the *myōkōnin* 妙好人 Akao no Dōshū (-1516), a disciple of Rennyo, is explored in Minamoto Ryōen’s article entitled “Late Rennyo and the *Myōkōnin* Akao no Dōshū.” Here, the focus is mainly on the connection between Rennyo’s interpretation of the *nenbutsu* and the emergence of the *myōkōnin* tradition.

Mark L. Blum is the author of “Rennyo Shōnin, Manipulator of Icons,” which closes this part on historical studies. Blum investigates Rennyo’s use of iconographical images, and the distribution of calligraphies representing the *honzon* 本尊, the central icon, seen both as a means of expressing his concept of orthodoxy and of communication to expand the Hongan-ji. Besides, Blum highlights the

important role Rennyo played in the prevalence in Shin Buddhism (in particular in the Honganji-ha and Ōtani-ha) of the *bonzon* scrolls with the calligraphy of the various *myōgō*, *vis-à-vis* pictorial representations.

The section dedicated to doctrinal studies opens with an article by Terakawa Shunshō, one of the leading specialists of Ōtani-ha, under the title “Shinran and Rennyo: Comparing their Views of Birth in the Pure Land,” and as the title indicates, deals with the interpretation of “birth” in the Pure Land in the thought of these two religious leaders. It is focused in particular on the concept of “birth” in Shinran and takes into account, above all, a writing in his last years entitled *Jōdo sangyō ōjō monrui*, in which, starting from the three main sutras of the Pure Land tradition, this concept is expressed, Terakawa maintains, in accord with Shinran’s main work, the *Kyōgyōshinshō*. For Terakawa, in the final analysis, Shinran’s interpretative approach is centred particularly on the present life, and though the author acknowledges that Rennyo’s emphasis was placed more on a religious “birth” in the Pure Land after death, Rennyo’s position is shown as being essentially in agreement with that of his predecessor.

“Rennyo’s Position in Modern Shin Buddhist Studies: Soga Ryōjin’s Reinterpretation” by Kaku Takeshi, also an Ōtani-ha scholar, explores the role Rennyo played within doctrinal studies through the interpretation of Soga Ryōjin (1875-1971), one of the most renowned figures of modern Shin Buddhist thought.

The article by Alfred Bloom, “Rennyo and the Renaissance of Contemporary Shin Buddhism: Rennyo’s Place in the History of Shin Buddhism,” the only non-Japanese author in this section, although he himself being a Shin Buddhist, outlines the meaning of Rennyo’s activities and his methods of proselytizing. In spite of the fact that the title seems to indicate an analysis of contemporary Shin Buddhism, in reality this is limited to the medieval period, and only in the last few lines is a brief reference to the role Rennyo plays in the contemporary period. Also in the Introduction, this essay is mistakenly presented as being of the post-war period. (9)

“The Characteristic Structure of Rennyo’s *Letters*” by Ikeda Yūtai examines, exactly, their structure, which, as also highlighted in other essays here, were a significant means in Rennyo’s work of disseminating Shin Buddhism. In particular, Ikeda takes into account the relationship between the *Letters* and the *Tannishō*.

The article by Yasutomi Shin’ya, “The Tale of the Flesh-Adhering Mask,” closes this part of the volume. It explores the legend known as *Yome odoshi no oni no men* (“Flesh-Adhering Mask of Daughter-in-Law Intimidation”), which is linked to Rennyo, especially during his stay in Yoshizaki (present-day Fukui Prefecture). The story was at that time a form of Nō theatre and was performed also as *kyōgen* during Shin Buddhist ceremonies. It is considered one of the examples of artistic forms used by Rennyo for propagating the teaching. In this story Yasutomi identifies doctrinal contents deriving from ideas spread by this religious leader, in particular the theme of the salvation of women through the recitation of the *nenbutsu*. (192)

The third and last part of the book, “Comparative Religion,” comprises three articles. The first is by Katō Chiken and is entitled “Rennyo and Luther: Similarities in their Faith and Community Building.” It analyses the Shin Buddhist tradition and

Lutheran Protestantism and the formation of their religious communities by examining the figures of Rennyō and Martin Luther. William R. La Fleur explores briefly the concept of “religious joy” expressed in Rennyō’s *Letters*, in his article “Dancing into Freedom: Rennyō and Religion.”

The volume is concluded by Ruben L. F. Habito’s essay “Primal Vow and its Contextualization: Rennyō’s Legacy, and Some Tasks for Our Times,” in which the author, from a Roman Catholic point of view, sets three questions related to the reflection on the role of Shin Buddhism in contemporary period: 1) how Shin Buddhist believers see themselves in connection with members belonging to other religious traditions; 2) how they relate to political authority; and 3) how they understand the emphasis placed by Rennyō on the afterlife, represented by his famous sentence “the important matter of the afterlife,” and deal with it in connection with their worldly life.

Apart from some misprints, the book is well organized and includes several illustrations. As for the glossary, it would have been perhaps more useful to have it with an English translation of the terms, especially for those who are not familiar with Japanese.

Although it should be kept in mind that many of the essays are written by Shin Buddhist scholars, and are therefore mainly expressions of a perspective ‘from within,’ overall the volume represents an important contribution in English not only for the studies of Rennyō but also of Shin Buddhism in general, and thus constitutes a useful and valid instrument of study.

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*Japanese Temple Buddhism: Worldliness in a Religion of Renunciation.*  
Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2005.

One of the peculiarities of the postwar Western study of Buddhism is that it has shown more interest in the modern anthropology of Buddhism in Southeast Asia or Tibet than in the modern anthropology of Buddhism in Japan – even though Japan by any account is the most modernized and (for reasons of historical evolution) Western-like of any traditionally Buddhist country in the world. As Stephen Covell notes in his new study, there is a long convention of dismissing the importance, validity, or interest of that part of contemporary Buddhism in Japan which is rooted in the various pre-Meiji traditions (these are collectively termed by the author Temple Buddhism).

Covell aims to challenge the simple-mindedness of this dismissal. In his “Introduction: Snapshots of Buddhism in Everyday Japan” the author, starting with vignettes of Temple Buddhist life, sets out his problem: how to interpret a modern