

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.

Elisabetta Porcu
Marburg University / Ōtani University

Stephen G. Covell

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

religious tradition whose pervasive characteristic is that it consists of “householding world-renouncers.” The Tendai sect was selected as focus of study because of the author’s personal engagement with it and because it can be considered typical of the modern situation of Temple Buddhism.

In Chapter 1, “Temple Buddhism Today: Scholarly and Popular Images of Corruption,” Covell describes the corruption paradigm which has been dominant in the perception of modern Japanese Buddhism. The paradigm has been expressed in terms of five themes: 1) Japanese Buddhism’s favoring doctrine over practice; 2) its magical orientation, which following Weberian theory needs to be repudiated; 3) assumptions about decadence deriving from historians Tsuji Zennosuke and Tamamuro Fumio; 4) secularization theory; and 5) idealized images of the world-renouncing priesthood. In his subsequent chapters, however, Covell proceeds to show that the simplistic corruption paradigm quite fails as an empirical description of real Temple Buddhism.

In Chapter 2, “Laity and the Temple: Past and Present” Covell surveys how the Temple Buddhism tradition depends economically on *danka* membership, for which it provides routine death-related services. It is familiar knowledge that the system became entrenched in the Tokugawa period but less appreciated that it continued to be popularly supported in the 20th century despite massive Meiji and Shōwa socio-political changes. And in the early 20th century, for example, some lay members acquired innovative administrative roles in temples. However, in the postwar period the *danka* system has become unstable, especially in rural areas, because of a variety of continuing social and legal transformations: postwar land reforms which took away temple properties and income; newly idealized images of Buddhism; urbanization and rural depopulation; changing family structures; legal changes which weakened lay members’ participation in the temple; competition in death services from secular, non-Buddhist funeral industries; and the weakening of the traditional sense of affiliation to religious organizations, which has not yet been successfully restructured.

A central question is what, if any, new religious alternatives people are seeking under these soon-to-be post-*danka* conditions. Contemporary Japanese have access to various new religions (which are inherently more nimble in responding to consumer demand) as well as many kinds of access to Buddhism other than through Temple Buddhism. Covell suggests that Temple Buddhism of the Tendai kind has lost a clear identity, for in its contemporary mode, it is not clearly either popularly magical or austere world-renunciant.

One thing that Temple Buddhism needs to do to retain its market is to create new roles for lay *danka* participation, which is Covell’s theme in Chapter 3, “Trying to Have it Both Ways: The Laity in a World-Renouncer Organization.” However, this kind of reform has proved difficult in Tendai not only because of a long history of lay passivity inherited from the Edo period, but also because Tendai still envisions itself as a world-renouncing organization with an (at least symbolically) world-renouncing leadership which is inherently superior to the lay membership. Indeed, the whole modern priesthood expresses a related kind of structural contradiction.

Priests claim the ideal of renunciant “true Buddhism” at the same time that they are married and spend almost all their time taking care of the mundane ritual work of “funeral” Buddhism. In Tendai, the sect organization is trying to revitalize the role of the priest but does so against a background of acute public awareness of the contradictions in the priestly image. Covell identifies several specific factors which have undermined Tendai’s ability to claim to represent a “true Buddhism:” connections between priests and the modern imperialist state; the relaxation of monastic precepts (especially against marriage) which has dissolved the distinction between monastics and lay people; modern ideas concerning the proper roles of clergy; and priests’ commercial activities.

In the case of state connections, Tendai inherited a tradition of service to the state virtually from the Heian period, a tradition which survived the Meiji Restoration to be reenacted under 20th century conditions. What particularly delegitimated the image of priests for the latter half of the 20th century though was of course Tendai’s support for (or at least nonresistance to) WWII, which Covell summarizes nicely.

Meanwhile, whether world-renunciation and monastic precepts are required for “true Buddhism” is of course a centuries-old debate in Japan, but it continues today and in Tendai the problem is one of the apparent internal contradictions of its claims (world-renunciation vs. mundane ministry as mentioned above). The modern dilemma is rooted in the breakdown of the (at least official) practice of clerical celibacy which occurred in the Meiji period. Modern Tendai has attempted to deal with the challenge by promoting the taking of (somewhat non-renunciant, modernized) precepts, some for professionals and others for lay people, while utilizing favorable advertising generated by the handful of individuals who perform traditional Tendai austerities. However, it has been difficult to counter public perceptions that the typical priest is only a ritual hack.

The tendency of modern Japanese Buddhism to present itself as a universal, abstracted intellectual tradition has also tended to undermine world-renunciant Japanese Buddhism as a lived spiritual practice.

The crisis of identity in Tendai is exacerbated by a shortage of qualified energetic people who actually want to do ordinary Temple Buddhist work. Here Covell identifies three factors: clerical marriage from the Meiji period led to an unofficial system of temple inheritance (suppressing the entry of innovative outsiders); temples which have vacancies for resident priests are usually located in undesirable rural areas; and for those with a serious interest in Buddhism, there are a variety of alternate paths of religious activity, including new religions.

In Chapter 5, “New Priests for New Times?” Covell takes up the efforts of Temple Buddhism to broaden recruitment and to expand the possible innovative roles which might be played by priests. One so-far unsuccessful recruiting experiment has been to make calls for priest-trainees from among the general public. Another campaign has aimed to enable Tendai to transcend the image of funeral Buddhism by promoting the engagement of priests in social welfare activities. After all, in the Edo period, Buddhist temples served as local centers of

community services, and during the first half of the 20th century Buddhist thought on social welfare successfully evolved and modernized under the leadership of individuals such as Hasegawa Ryōshin. And more recently, Buddhist welfare thought has continued to dynamically adapt to new conditions (e.g. NPO law or the aging society), though often through the decentralized efforts of individual local priests. To some extent, however, priests of Temple Buddhism feel trapped between contradictory images of social service and religious renunciation. Covell observes that the most effective translocal activity in Tendai, whether social service or peace activism, occurs in the framework of youth associations.

A truly major structural contradiction in Temple Buddhism is the unsettled role of the modern priest's wife (and children), which Covell takes up in Chapter 6, "Coming to Terms: Temple Wives and World-Renouncers." Since the Meiji universalization of clerical marriage, priests' wives came to perform a great deal of the practical work of the temple, but at first were largely been kept out of sight and recognition because their presence contradicted the formal claim of world-renunciation claimed by the male priesthood. As Covell carefully notes, the temple problem is enfolded within larger gender issues in modern Japan: insufficient career recognition and narrow work role expectations for women, and the conservative gender role expectations of Japanese religious organizations in particular, which strongly emphasize selfless motherhood as the ideal female role.

During the postwar period, temple Buddhist wives have come to play larger and larger de facto roles in temple management, and are no longer hidden behind the scenes. Even today, however, the structural contradiction with world-renouncer claims remains, even when the local temple members entirely accept the married priesthood. The wife category has been institutionally indeterminate (important legal complications are involved as well), often leaving temple wives and even children "homeless at home" in Covell's phrase. The ambiguity of their position has occasionally resulted in serious injustices such as wives' being completely excluded from inheritances.

In Tendai, the leadership has tried to moderate the contradiction by improving the education and qualifications of temple wives, but the system is deeply male-biased, and a test program (for example) for temple wife precept ordination was largely unsuccessful.

In Chapter 7 "Money and the Temple: Law, Taxes and the Image of Buddhism" Covell takes up the unique business problem posed to Temple Buddhism, which is to maintain practical financial solvency while at the same time combating religiously-negative images of professionalization, privatization and commercialization. The maintenance of temple institutions is much more complex than in the pre-technological past. Temples today employ multiple fundraising approaches, but in most cases death rituals (funerals and memorial services) still provide the bulk of the income. The position of temples is also conditioned by their need to conform to the national law on "temples as juridical persons" and to relevant tax laws. Covell includes a fascinating overview of the Kyoto City tourism tax dispute, a conflict running all the way from 1956 to 1999 which involved the repeated attempts of

revenue-starved Kyoto City governments to tax temples on the grounds that they were primarily tourist sites rather than places of Buddhist practice. Covell argues that the ambiguities of the contest illustrated the unresolvably complex mixture of both “secular” and “religious” purposes which temples serve in Japan.

Finally, in Chapter 8 “The Price of Naming the Dead: Funerals, Posthumous Precept Names, and Changing Views of the Afterlife” focuses on the problem of death rituals, for – despite the very-well known higher spiritual goals of Buddhist traditions – these rituals continue to be the main income-producing activity for almost all of Temple Buddhism. Criticism of the centrality of death ritual often centers on the specific practice of granting expensive posthumous Buddhist (precept) names to *danka* members, an ancient custom which has recently become sharply questioned in regard to its lack of modern meaningfulness, its element of discrimination against burakumin, and its commodification. A key background condition of this criticism is that Japanese views of the afterlife and ancestralism are today undergoing a period of significant change, in which the older sense of ancestralism is being replaced by the notion of death ritual as counseling for the living. A significant number of Buddhist clergy themselves are aware of the mismatch between these newer needs and what Temple Buddhism usually offers, and this insight has led to attempts at reform programs such as the promotion of Buddhist precepts for laity. Any attempts at reform, however, must work against the strong society-wide trend towards the adoption of attitudes of consumerism. A major feature of the consumerist shift is the expanded provision of funeral services by private enterprises operating outside the boundaries of Temple Buddhism. In short, traditional Buddhism is fighting an unvictorious battle with commodification.

As this summary indicates, although Covell’s study is not exceptionally long, it is extremely rich in well-judged information which clearly displays the author’s ten years of hands-on experience with Japanese Buddhism. The complex, contradictory issues it discusses are not theoretical, but rather the ones that tens of thousands of working Buddhist clergy in Japan confront every day – just as the real lives of Christian clergy can be dominated by matters which are more mundane than the official spiritual teaching proposes. The book is thus an absolutely essential contribution to the English language literature on Buddhism in Japan, and as Covell himself outlines in his epilogue, it ought to stimulate a wide variety of new lines of additional research.

If this reviewer has one quibble with Covell’s treatment, it is that is that for readers unfamiliar with certain details of Japanese Buddhist teachings, Covell confusingly mixes up in his presentation the diverse strains of post-monastic Temple Buddhism and Jōdo shinshū Temple Buddhism. Now, contemporary Shin Buddhism is, in its own fashion, an often highly conservative institution which shares many of the dilemmas which Covell elucidates for post-monastic Buddhism, such as the struggle to survive in a post-*danka* environment, the prevalence of restrictive gender-based expectations for women, or the economic reliance on death rituals.

However, it is still valid to emphasize that modern Shin is not a form of post-monastic post-world-renouncer Buddhism. Its psychological theory and

institutional practice were different from its beginning in the 13th century, and as such Shin, despite its own flaws, is not saddled with the same deep structural contradictions – between the claims of world-renunciation and the practice of mundane ministry – which beset the post-monastics.

From this perspective a potential theme that Covell misses is the extent to which the post-monastic Buddhisms of post-Meiji Japan can be explained as “semi-Shinshūized,” that is how their behavior is responsive to a competitive religious environment in which the most influential inherited model has been Shin Buddhism specifically. It is impossible in the United States, for example, to discuss the gradual adaptation of Roman Catholicism to American expectations without some reference to the cross-traditional modeling (and challenge) set up by the multiplicity of Protestant Christian traditions.

Galen Amstutz
Ryūkyū University