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Empirical and Esoteric: The Birth of Shin Buddhist Studies as a Modern Academic Discipline**



This paper investigates the creation of modern Shin studies (*shinshūgaku* 真宗学) as a form of Buddhist studies distinct from modern Buddhist studies and traditional sectarian studies. Seeking to secure a place for Shin Buddhism in the modern academic world, Sasaki Gesshō, Soga Ryōjin, and Kaneko Daiei developed Kiyozawa Manshi's emphasis on personal religious "experience" into an "empirical" field of study. More specifically, they employed a discourse of personal "confession" to transcend the strictures of traditional sectarian studies; a discourse of "empiricism" to bring Shin studies in line with other academic disciplines; and a discourse of "esotericism" to combat the implications of historicist Buddhist studies. By examining a 1929 public debate between Kaneko Daiei and preeminent Buddhist studies scholar Kimura Taiken, I show these two fields of study to have been in substantive dialogue with one another. This paper thus presents evidence for a more complex understanding of the modern field(s) of Buddhist studies, as well as a more nuanced understanding of "Buddhist modernism" as more than the creation of individual thinkers who floated free beyond the confines of institutional Buddhism and imagined an easy harmony between Buddhism and science.



Keywords: Shin Buddhism – Kiyozawa Manshi – Buddhist studies – education – religious experience

When Buddhist priest Kiyozawa Manshi 清沢満之 (1863-1903) died in 1903, his young followers were left to carry forward his legacy. They were united by a commitment to Seishinshugi 精神主義, a movement focused on the personal

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cultivation of an inner experience of salvation through faith in Amida (Skt. *Amitābha*) Buddha. They were divided, however, in regard to how this experience was to be cultivated. Kiyozawa's life story was often told in terms of three stages of philosophical study, practice, and attainment of faith. One contingent of followers, represented by Akegarasu Haya 暁鳥敏 (1877-1954), focused overwhelmingly on Kiyozawa's faith experience, said to have received definitive expression in the essay "My Faith" (*Wa ga shinnen* 我信念). For them, Kiyozawa had come to "ignore study and practice as so much dust."¹ Their position came to be critiqued as based in a "principle of grace" (*onchō-shugi* 恩寵主義) that blindly affirmed all aspects of present reality as expressions of the Buddha's grace. Another contingent, represented by Sasaki Gesshō 佐々木月樵 (1875-1926), and Soga Ryōjin 曾我量深 (1875-1971), recognized value in Kiyozawa's identity as a scholar, emphasizing the role of study in the cultivation of self-knowledge. This group characterized itself as upholding a "principle of awakening" (*jikaku-shugi* 自覚主義),² and from its ranks arose the scholars who pioneered the establishment of a new academic discipline known as Shin studies (*shinshūgaku* 真宗学).³

The establishment of Shin studies is one manifestation of modern Buddhists' efforts to increase their social and political influence by regaining a foothold in public education. In the early Meiji period, Buddhism was defined as a form of "teaching" (*kyō* 教) in contrast to "learning" (*gaku* 学) (Sawada 2004: 89-117). Buddhist clerics and temples were differentiated from public school teachers and buildings, at first in name and then in fact. Buddhist thinkers like Shimaji Mokurai called for Buddhist clerics to resist this trend and make themselves of service as schoolteachers. Buddhist sects established private primary and secondary schools, even investing in and operating public middle schools (Tanigawa 2014: 88-106). They also founded universities like Ōtani University⁴ so that their members could gain an education in philosophy, religion, languages, and world history, presumably making their faith more relevant in the modern world. The 1918 University

1. This comment appears in Akegarasu's 1909 memorial address for Kiyozawa. *Seishinkai* 9(6): 44.
2. For a discussion of *jikaku-shugi* and *onchō-shugi* in relation to Kiyozawa's followers, see Yasutomi 2010: 140-155.
3. "Shin" refers to the Jōdo Shin sect (*Jōdo shinshū* 浄土真宗) of Pure Land Buddhism. This paper will focus exclusively on Shin studies as developed within the sect's Ōtani branch (*Ōtani-ha* 大谷派), to which Kiyozawa and his followers belonged, but it should be noted that modernization of sectarian studies also took place within the sect's other main branch, the Honganji branch (*Honganji-ha* 本願寺派). There is no evidence that the Ōtani scholars treated here were influenced in any significant way by Honganji scholarship, so in this case, exclusive focus on the Ōtani branch is defensible.
4. Although this university was known by different names prior to 1922, I will use its present name throughout the paper for the sake of clarity.

Ordinance enabled sectarian universities to receive accreditation and officially take on a public mission. The outcome of this was not only new modern departments of “religious studies” and “Buddhist studies” but also “sectarian studies” (*shūgaku* 宗学).

Shin studies, established at Ōtani University in 1920 to replace the former “sectarian vehicle” (*shūjō* 宗乘) department, is one prominent example. This paper’s examination of work by Sasaki Gesshō, Soga Ryōjin, and Kaneko Daiei 金子大栄 (1881-1976) will make abundantly clear that much more than a change of names was involved. Tokugawa scholars and their modern-day heirs, relying on an established interpretive tradition, were primarily concerned to resolve seeming contradictions in Shin scriptures and thereby demonstrate the consistency of views across the writings of Shinran 親鸞 (1173-1263) and between Shinran and the seven Shin patriarchs⁵ (Nobutsuka 2011: 85-7). Modern Shin studies scholars, by contrast, made “confessions” – replete with acknowledgment of past doubts and sinfulness – of their personal experiences and then sought to show their consonance with the experiences of Shinran and other figures of the past.⁶ The appeal to personal experience enabled escape from the traditional norms and goals of sectarian scholarship into a realm of “free inquiry,” in which they tried to reinterpret Shin teachings in relation to a broader terrain of competing Buddhist, religious, philosophical, and scientific discourses. As such, the field of modern Shin studies simply does not fit into the twofold categorization of “traditional sectarian studies” and “modern Buddhist studies” advanced by previous scholars (Stone 1990: 220; Dobbins 2006: 16).

Sasaki, Soga, and Kaneko’s work simultaneously sought to construct Shin studies as a modern academic discipline and to distinguish it from other such disciplines. Both goals were accomplished by defining Shin in terms of “inner experience.” As other scholars have noted, the grounding of religious authority in “experience” is fraught with problems. The appeal to *subjective, individual, and private* experience would seem to compromise any claim to *objectivity, any institutional foundation, and any public significance* (Proudfoot 1985; Sharf 1995, 1998; Asad 1993). Nonetheless, modern Shin studies scholars set out to reform Shin institutions and enhance Shin thought’s public significance through the claim that the “experiences” underlying their beliefs were in fact “empirical.” This claim was persuasive in part because Japanese neologisms connoting “experience,” “empirical,” and “experiment” (*jikken* 実験 and *keiken* 経験) were used interchangeably at least

5. Nāgārjuna, Vasubandhu, Tanluan 曇鸞, Daochuo 道綽, Shandao 善導, Genshin 源信, and Hōnen 法然 (also referred to as Genkū 源空).
6. Fukushima identifies this contrast in a comparative analysis of *Tannishō* commentaries by Edo-period scholar Jinrei 深励 and Akegarasu Haya (Fukushima 2003: 89-128). He relates Akegarasu Haya’s “confessional” discourse to broader literary trends in modern Japan, which Karatani Kōjin famously explained in relation to the *genbun itchi* 言文一致 movement and the related “discovery of interiority” (Karatani 1993).

through the mid-Meiji period.⁷ One consequence of this “empiricist” turn was that modern Shin studies scholars consistently expressed agnosticism regarding the afterlife. Another was their impulse, unusual in a Shin context, toward systematic practice.⁸ Shin studies thus took on the appearance of “empiricism” as well as this-worldly “practicality” – the buzz words in debates over education in modern Japan.

On the other hand, emphasis on the “inner” nature of “inner experience” differentiated Shin studies from other academic fields. In addition to their own inner experiences, modern Shin studies scholars claimed insight into the inner experiences of historical figures like Shinran and the hidden, inner meaning of Buddhist texts. In this way, they rendered Shin teachings *esoteric*, inaccessible to textual Buddhist studies or objective science. Other scholars have explained similar tendencies characteristic of Buddhist modernism in terms of the influence of Western Romanticism (McMahan 2008). Such influence certainly does come into play with Kiyozawa and his followers,⁹ but “esotericism” may be a more useful interpretive framework for understanding patterns present in their work.¹⁰ Their

7. According to the entry for *jikken* in the *Nihon kokugo daijiten* (2000), a distinction of usage between *jikken* and *keiken* was established by the Meiji 30s, but Shin modernists continued to use *jikken* to refer to “experience” long after.
8. For example, Kiyozawa gathered information on the practices of local religious ascetics, engaged in asceticism himself, and practiced *shikan* 止観 meditation. Kaneko Daiei participated in Okada Ryōhei’s popular Seiza 静坐 meditation group. Also, Soga’s sojourn in Niigata might be understood as a practice of “seclusion.” Yet these practices never congealed into a systematic methodology comparable to contemporary Buddhist “contemplative science,” let alone “scientific empiricism” as normally understood.
9. For example, Kiyozawa studied widely in Western philosophy, including Schleiermacher’s *On Religion*; Sasaki makes references to Emerson and to Edwin Arnold’s romanticist *Light of Asia* in *Jikken no shūkyō*; and Kaneko studied Henri Bergson as well as a variety of German philosophers.
10. I acknowledge that use of the term “esotericism” here could lead to misunderstandings. On one hand, I intend to indicate how, by appealing to the “inner meaning” of Buddhist texts, Sasaki, Soga, and Kaneko claim an understanding superior to that of modern Buddhologists or traditional sectarian scholars. In its earliest Buddhist usage, this is how the term “esoteric” functioned – “a polemical device to claim that what it represented – the advanced teachings of the Mahāyāna – was the best or most superior form of Buddhism” (McBride 2004: 356). On the other hand, I also intend to suggest parallels between the content of the Shin studies’ scholars’ thought and that of esoteric Buddhism in Japan. Sasaki, Soga, and Kaneko speak of Amida and his Pure Land as invisibly present in this world; of personal “encounters” with Buddhas and Buddhist teachers of the past; of becoming the Buddha in the present through subject-object reversal; of the importance of an awakened teacher (e.g. Kiyozawa); and of the identity of disparate entities (e.g. Dharmākara Bodhisattva and *ālaya* consciousness) on the basis of correlative thinking. Some of these elements might simply be labeled “Mahāyāna Buddhist.” Yet I find the term “esotericism” useful as a contrast to “empiricism” insofar as the latter implies objects of investigation that are open to observation and rational analysis while the former implies objects that are hidden and can be experienced and understood only through faith, practice, and the fruition of good karma.

esoteric discourse reinstated a place for “faith” alongside “reason” in the study of Buddhism; enabled “this-worldly” reinterpretations of Shin teachings; and facilitated responses to the charge that Amida Buddha was a fiction concocted centuries after the death of the “historical Buddha.” In sum, Shin modernists used “confessional” discourse to transcend institutional norms, “empiricist” discourse to square Shin metaphysics with science, and “esoteric” discourse to combat the implications of historical research.

The first section discusses Sasaki, Soga, and Kaneko’s formation of modern Shin studies; the following section investigates a public exchange between Kaneko and preeminent Buddhist studies scholar Kimura Taiken 木村泰賢 (1881-1930) for points of overlap and exchange connecting the two fields of study; and the conclusion briefly considers the paper’s findings in relation to previous research on Buddhist modernism and science.

1. The birth of modern Shin studies

Sasaki Gesshō

One of Kiyozawa’s main disciples, Sasaki Gesshō was a professor and administrator at Ōtani University from 1905 until his unexpected death in 1926. His career highlights include his 1921 study tour of Europe and America to inspect their systems of higher education; his controversial 1923 appointment as third president of Ōtani University; his collaboration with D. T. Suzuki on the English language journal *The Eastern Buddhist*; and his historic 1924 speech, “Ōtani University’s Founding Spirit.”¹¹

Sasaki developed modern Shin studies along *historicist* lines. Besides writing a biography of Shinran, Sasaki researched the history of early Buddhism, of Mahāyāna thought, and Pure Land Buddhism’s development in India and China. As a historian, his work was closest to the historical approach of modern Buddhist studies. It might be said that he contributed to and advocated for modern Shin studies without becoming a full-fledged representative of it. Yet Sasaki was as convinced as Soga and Kaneko that Shin Buddhism was ultimately a matter of religious experience in the present, and his historical research was ultimately concerned with the inner lives of its subjects.

Sasaki Gesshō’s first major work, *Religion of Experience* (*Jikken no shūkyō* 実験之宗教) (1903), draws out the empiricist language of Kiyozawa’s Seishinshugi writings. As early as 1901, Sasaki had defined Shin in terms of a concrete but ineffable experience of the Tathāgata (Buddha), calling Shin practitioners “the most extreme empiricists” (*Seishinkai* 1(10): 18-19). *Religion of Experience* extends this experiential understanding of religion into a historical study of Japanese Buddhism. The preface

11. For information on Sasaki’s life, see the introduction to Sasaki 2014.

underlines Sasaki's introspective, "confessional" approach, describing the book as "records of my actual feelings upon encountering great spirit through the inspiration of these persons." The opening and closing chapters defend religion as pertaining to "subjective facts" immune from scientific or philosophical critique and invisible to the dry historicism and textualism of modern Buddhist studies. Each of the other chapters discusses the life, teachings, and formative "experience" of a Buddhist figure – from Saichō and Kūkai to Rennyo and Hakuin – giving the impression of a search for a common core to Buddhism across sectarian divides.

Each of Sasaki's middle chapters consists of a longer section that emotively evokes that figure's inner psychology combined with a shorter section of dry historical biography. The text thus displaces history with psychology. For example, Sasaki's chapter on Saichō focuses on why he retreated to Mt. Hiei, a question, he claims, that can be answered not by historical research but only by "asking Saichō himself" (26). Sasaki proposes to do this by considering the psychology implied by Saichō's *Ganmon* 願文 (Prayer). Part of Sasaki's argument runs as follows:

Dengyō Daishi [Saichō], here at a pinnacle of self-reflection and self-contemplation, reached this awakening:

"I, lowly Saichō, am as ignorant as ignorant can be, as deranged as deranged can be, a dusty, bald-headed being. Above, I oppose the Buddhas. Between, I transgress the imperial rule. Below, I lack filial piety."

Dengyō Daishi's entrance into the mountains was not for the sake of opening a sect; it was for the sake of opening his own mind. It was not to overturn Buddhism of the South; it was to overturn the evil demons within his heart. It was not to save society from its evils; it was to save his own self from its evils... this awakening was the original cause that led Dengyō Daishi to become the founder of Japanese Tendai and a great figure of Heian Buddhism. Dengyō Daishi died in this awakening and lived in this awakening. (Sasaki 1926: 30-31)

Sasaki's analysis thus reductively characterizes Saichō's life and works in terms of a single experience of realization of his own lowliness – a point easily squared with Shin teachings.

One of Sasaki's last works, *Outlines of Shin Buddhism* (*Shinshū gairon* 真宗概論) (1921), is primarily an investigation of Shinran's *Kyōgyōshinshō* 教行信証 (The True Teaching, Practice, and Realization of the Pure Land Way). The opening "confession" marks off Sasaki's work as modernist:

I humbly confess:

Formerly, I thought my "Shin sect" was a teaching of the Pure Land opposed to the saintly path... a teaching of the future opposed to the present... a teaching of salvation opposed to awakening... a teaching of faith opposed to wisdom... a teaching of kingly dharma opposed to foreign countries. However, on the basis of the sutras and commentaries, I have come to firmly believe that is not so.

Therefore, I now firmly believe that my “Shin sect” is not only Saint Shinran’s “Shin sect” but also the World-Honored Śākyamuni’s “Shin sect,” and I have no doubt that my “Shin sect” is the only religion that can henceforth awaken and bring salvation to the people of the world. (Sasaki 1921: 1-2)

Sasaki thus foregrounds his study of Shinran with an appeal to the authority of his own, newfound “firm belief.” His discovery is that Shin is not just one “sect” among many, but rather identical to Śākyamuni’s Buddhism. Sasaki’s concern to demonstrate agreement between Śākyamuni and Shinran arises from the need to respond to the “theory that Mahāyāna was not taught by the Buddha” (*daijō hibussetsu-ron* 大乘非仏説論). His approach, consistent with *Religion of Experience*, is to try to show continuity between the inner thoughts of Shinran and Śākyamuni rather than take up historical details. Again Sasaki offers a “subjectivist history” meant to supersede “objectivist history.”

In *Outlines of Shin Buddhism*, Sasaki is less combative toward other fields of academic study, describing Shin as “the pinnacle of academic principle” rather than opposed to it (1). His changed attitude reflects the fact that the new discipline of Shin studies was in the process of being created. He describes Buddhist history as an empirical process of discovery comparable to but distinct from modern academics:

In academic research, one researches an object and makes a discovery. If what is clarified is something people have already researched and discovered, this leads to disappointment and indifference. As for religious wisdom, which is the power of faith, the more the same fact[s] of faithful understanding was discovered in the past, the more joyful one is. This is perhaps the point of difference between the wisdom of academic research and the faith of religious experience. (17)

While science accumulates new knowledge in the quest for intellectual progress, religion perpetually rediscovers the same “fact” through “experience.” Sasaki discusses Shinran’s founding of the Shin sect as arising out of his experience of this fact, which he then found confirmed in the sutras and writings of the seven Shin patriarchs (8-9).

Sasaki’s analysis of the *Kyōgyōshinshō* draws on a breadth of topics, including the Flower Garland Sutra (Jpn. *Kegonkyō*; Skt. *Avatamsaka Sūtra*) and Nirvana Sutra (Jpn. *Nehankyō*; Skt. *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*), Indian Mahāyāna thought, and early Buddhist history. He seeks to show how Shinran’s text reflects the broader Buddhist tradition rather than merely building upon Hōnen and the three Pure Land sutras (30-1). He depicts Shinran as the bearer of a tradition, stretching back to the Mahāsāṃghikas’ split from the Sthaviravādins, that has upheld “faith of experience” in contrast to “faith based on doctrinal authority” (24). The latter tradition has reified Śākyamuni, his precepts, and the superficial shell of his words

while the former has sought out the actual experience that inspired Śākyamuni and his teachings. This discussion clearly implies a critique of the traditional sectarian studies of Sasaki's day and its claim to "doctrinal authority."¹²

Sasaki's work concludes with a study of "the ultimate and conventional two truths" (*shinzoku nitai* 真俗二諦). This teaching was renovated by leading Shin authorities in the Meiji period as expressive of Buddhists' commitment to uphold their duties as citizens.¹³ Sasaki tracks discussions of the two truths in early classifications of the four noble truths; in the writings of Vasumitra, Nāgārjuna, Aṣvaghosa, and Prince Zhaoming 昭明 of Liang dynasty (502-557) China; in various Mahāyāna sutras; and in the work of modern Shin thinkers including Kiyozawa. Finally, he advances his own explanation that he classifies as "conventional-ultimate-conventional" (*zoku-shin-zoku setsu* 俗真俗説). Essentially, he interprets the two truths as a sequence descriptive of a practitioner's experience of leaving the conventional realm, entering the ultimate realm, and returning, a process paradoxically sequential (*zengo* 前後) and simultaneous or identical (*soku* 即):

Conventional and ultimate depend on one another and give rise to one world... We reside in the realm of foolish beings replete with affliction, yet in this place we also see the light of salvation. Ultimate and conventional are truly this realm of not-one and not-two. By discovering the realm of faith through the reversal of subject and object, we resolve the problem of the relationship of the two truths on the basis of the character for "identical" (138-9).

One "sees the light of salvation" and becomes the Buddha through subject-object reversal but also remains in the state of a foolish being. The "conventional" and "ultimate" truths are "identical" in the sense of "not-one and not-two." Such an explanation of the Shin experience of faith bears resemblance to D. T. Suzuki's explanations of the Zen experience of *satori* (awakening). Suzuki, like Sasaki, spoke of the need to penetrate beneath the words of Buddhist texts to the psychology of the awakened mind, and he characterized ignorance and awakening as "not-two, which is not the same as one" and marked by a process of the emergence of ignorance and return to awakening (which Sasaki might call "*shin-zoku-shin*").¹⁴ This resemblance is probably no coincidence, for the two were close friends and colleagues.¹⁵ Here is one small indication of the overlap and possible exchange between modern Shin studies and other arenas of modern Buddhist studies.

12. On the "principle of doctrinal authority" and its relation to the Kaneko heresy incident, see Schroeder 2014.

13. For a discussion in English, see Chapter 7 of Rogers *et al.* 1991.

14. See Jaffe's introduction in Suzuki 2014, especially p. xlvi.

15. *Outlines of Shin Buddhism* was published the same year Suzuki was brought – through Sasaki's influence – to work at Ōtani University.

Soga Ryōjin

Initially a critic of Kiyozawa, Soga Ryōjin eventually became one of Seishinshugi's prominent representatives. He studied and taught at Ōtani University until 1911 when he resigned over the university's transfer back to Kyoto. From 1911 to 1916, he lived in Niigata as a temple priest and solitary researcher. Thereafter, he returned to Tokyo to serve as editor of the journal *Seishinkai* and professor at Tōyō University. In 1925, he returned to Ōtani University, only to be chased out on heresy charges in 1930. He returned again in 1941, serving as head of the Ōtani Research Institute's Shin Buddhist Doctrinal Study Department during World War II. In 1949, he was purged from the faculty by occupation forces, but was brought back in 1951, becoming university president in 1961.¹⁶

Soga developed Shin studies along *psychological* lines. Soga's signature theory was that Dharmākara Bodhisattva (Jpn. *Hōzō bosatsu*), the pre-incarnation of Amida Buddha whose story is related in the Sutra of Immeasurable Life (Jpn. *Muryōjukyō*; Skr. Larger *Sukhāvativyūha Sūtra*), manifests as an aspect of human psychology through the experience of faith. He became the leading voice of modern Shin orthodoxy within the Ōtani denomination, considered by many Kiyozawa's true heir (Honda 1998; Ama 2003; Mizushima 2010).

Soga's most important early work is his seven-part "Discourse on Nichiren" (*Nichiren-ron* 日蓮論) (1904), an example of Shin modernists' efforts to justify their sectarian beliefs in relation to a broader terrain of competing Buddhist and non-Buddhist traditions. As evident in the work's introduction, Soga was particularly concerned to reveal the superhuman, supra-rational depths of figures like Nichiren, Shinran, and Śākyamuni in response to modernist attention to "historical Śākyamuni" as an ordinary human being and philosopher (Honda 1998: 33-36).¹⁷ As for why Soga wrote on Nichiren in particular, Takayama Chogyū's 高山樗牛 1901-2 writings on Nichiren may have been an influence (Yasutomi 2010: 149-150). In addition, modern Shin thinkers may have harbored a particular fascination with Nichiren as the ultimate "evil person" who disbelieved in Pure Land teachings. At a time when many harbored doubts in the veracity of Pure Land doctrines, Nichiren's slander of such doctrines presented material for the study of skepticism itself.

"Discourse on Nichiren" begins with an opening rhetorical flourish critical of historicist Buddhist studies and the scientific worldview:

In this age and times, people imagine themselves to be nothing more than a small six-foot body that lives for sixty years. One's self is only one's self, and others are only others. Śākyamuni is only Śākyamuni, and Christ is only Christ. Saichō is

16. For a biography of Soga, see Itō 1993.

17. Such motivations are on clear display in Soga's earlier essay "Discourse on Religious Persons" (*Shūkyōteki jinkakuron* 宗教的人格論) (Soga 1970, Vol. 1: 342-350).

only Saichō, and Kūkai is only Kūkai. Shinran is only Shinran, and Nichiren is only Nichiren... In the course of forty some years, how could a person expound 84,000 sutras, greater and lesser, expedient and true? Scientific research birthed historicist research, and historicist research has analyzed the great persons of the past, trying to extinguish their spirit and their life... He preached Hīnayāna teachings, so he must not have preached Mahāyāna teachings. He taught doctrines emphasizing solemn austerities, so he must not have taught doctrines of Pure Land rebirth. He opposed theism, so he must not have preached of a person-like Amida. Ahhh, historical research takes Śākyamuni to be only Śākyamuni. They deny that Śākyamuni is a public person (*kōjin* 公人) and only affirm him as an individual (*shijin* 私人). Unless they hear a sound or see something with their eyes, they do not accept it as knowledge. If it is not in texts, they do not accept it. They are firmly grounded, but they are shallow. They do not know the basis by which sounds and deeds arise. They do not know the basis by which historical records come forth. How can those with faith in eyes and ears have faith in their own spirit? How can those with faith in objective facts have faith in spiritual facts? How is it they believe in objective sounds but cannot accept the authority of their own subjective voice? They do not understand that Śākyamuni does not exist only as a textual object but directly becomes active in the depths of our own individual spirits... (Soga 1970, Vol. 2: 5-6)

The opening lines argue that a person's life is not restricted to his or her body and its lifespan. Insofar as empiricism is defined as a method of studying external, objective facts, Soga rejects it, yet his appeals to "spiritual facts" and a "subjective voice" points to how his approach is grounded in a kind of empiricism that prioritizes "subjective experience."¹⁸ In contrast to the "historical Śākyamuni," Soga appeals to a "living Śākyamuni" who enters into individuals' spirits in the present.

In "A Savior on Earth: The Meaning of Dharmākara Bodhisattva's Advent" (*Chijō no kyūshu: Hōzō bosatsu shutsugen no igi* 地上の救主—法蔵菩薩出現の意義—) (1913), Soga unveils his psychological rereading of the legend of Dharmākara Bodhisattva. The essay begins with a confession of sorts:

Toward the beginning of July last year, at the home of my friend Kaneko in Takada, I attained a sense of the phrase "The Tathāgata is myself." Then, toward the end of August, this time at Akegarasu's place in Kaga, I was offered the phrase, "The Tathāgata becoming me saves me." Finally, around October, I was made to realize that "When the Tathāgata becomes me, it signals the birth of Dharmākara Bodhisattva." This may not mean much to other people, but for me – who for

18. Soga, like Kiyozawa and Sasaki, insists that the objects experienced "subjectively" are "trans-subjective." For example, he states: "We cannot be satisfied with a perfection that is merely a subjective concept and not also an objective reality," and "We must directly enter the realm of mystery and believe in the reality of the Tathāgata Amida as the true absolute and ultimate subject 真の絶対至上の大主観 that transcends the individual subjectivity of all sentient beings" (Heisig *et al.* 2011: 274).

twenty years had been plagued by sickness and worldly worries, and who had not understood the meaning of the scriptures on this point, even though I made it my task to read from them daily – the insight I received made me feel as if I was handed a torch that all of a sudden lit up a room that had been kept in darkness for a thousand years. (Blum and Rhodes 2011: 108-9 amended; Soga 1970, Vol. 2: 408)

Soga presents his theory as the product of a series of personal religious experiences brought about by the Buddha. He goes on to corroborate his theory via discussion of sutras and Shinran's writings, but the initial appeal is to the authority of his own experience.¹⁹

Soga's essay explains that for the Buddha to be a true savior, he cannot remain a "mere ideal" but must somehow reach into actual present reality. According to Soga, Dharmākara performs this mediating role. Neither a historical human being like Jesus nor a "beautiful metaphor" like Kannon (Skt. *Avalokiteśvara*) Bodhisattva, Dharmākara has a "basis in present reality" via a practitioner's experience.

What is Dharmākara Bodhisattva? None other than the subject of the surrendering faith that is mindful of the Tathāgata. His eighteenth vow is the loving expression of the Tathāgata's experience of the entrusting child-mind of sentient beings. (Blum and Rhodes 2011: 113 amended; Soga 1970, Vol. 2: 414)

Soga's use of the term "experience" here might be glossed as "entrance into the experience" or even "hijacking of the experience." Dharmākara as the Tathāgata is said to enter into and become a person's experience of faith in the Tathāgata. Moreover:

The Bodhisattva first enters the experience²⁰ of the eternally deluded minds of common mortals, directly brings forth therein the Buddha-mind of sincere and joyful entrusting, and from the midst of that mind of wholehearted surrender arouses the heart of the eternal Tathāgata that makes the salvation of all the condition of his own attainment of Buddhahood. (Blum and Rhodes 2011: 116 amended; Soga 1970, Vol. 2: 419-420)

That is, Dharmākara first brings about in a person a mind of faith *in the Tathāgata* and then develops that into the very mind *of the Tathāgata*. One's own mind becomes the Buddha's mind; Dharmākara's vows become one's own vows. From this perspective, the Sutra of Immeasurable Life's account of Dharmākara's vows is not comprised of language *descriptive* of Dharmākara's vows but *connotative* of

19. This personal, confessional tone pervaded Soga's writings in the years from 1911-1913 when he lived in Niigata and worked out his Dharmākara Bodhisattva theory. See Mizushima 2010: 97-117.

20. Jan Van Bragt's translation in Blum and Rhodes 2011 renders "*jikken* 実験" as "experiment with," which I find misleading insofar as it suggests that the Buddha is "carrying out an experiment" or "trying something out."

vows forming in the reader's mind. This is similar to how ritual language is said to function within Kūkai's esoteric Buddhism. One can say Soga treats the Sutra of Immeasurable Life as an esoteric text.²¹

View of the Three Minds as Categories of the Manifestation of the Buddha (*Nyorai hyōgen no hanchū to shite no sanjin kan* 如来表現の範疇としての三心観) (1927) is an example of the mature modern Shin studies developed by Kaneko and Soga in the 1920s. Having previously declared Dharmākara to be a person's "true subjectivity" equivalent to the *ālaya* consciousness of Yogacara thought (and having equated the "three stages" of *ālaya* consciousness with the "three stages" of Dharmākara Bodhisattva – his 18th, 19th, and 20th vows), Soga here argues for the equivalency of the "three aspects of *ālaya* consciousness" – self-aspect, fruit-aspect, and cause-aspect – with the "three minds of the original vow" – sincere mind, joyful entrusting, and desire for birth in the Pure Land. This investigation into the hidden correspondences between different discursive Buddhist worlds is further emblematic of the "esoteric" nature of Soga's work.

Soga explains his methodology in *View of the Three Minds* as follows:

I am speaking on the facts of my own present consciousness. Therefore, it is neither Shin studies separate from experiences of consciousness, nor is it Yogaçara studies unconnected to religious awareness. That is to say, I am speaking of Shin studies that flows within my own consciousness and of Yogaçara studies that reflects upon my own religious needs. (Soga 1927: 24)

Soga thus claims to follow an "empirical" approach, attentive to the "facts" of his own consciousness, as opposed to mere intellectual speculation or philological study of texts. He also attributes the same methodology to Shinran, drawing attention to Shinran's bravado in reinterpreting scripture:

"Though Amida Tathāgata discloses three minds, the true cause of attaining nirvana is the mind of faith." These are truly bold words [of Shinran's]. "Though Amida Tathāgata discloses three minds" – to restrain this, and regardless of what is said [in the sutras], to declare, "the true cause of attaining nirvana is the one mind of faith." – I believe that he has truly said an excellent thing, and that it was precisely because he stood atop the direct fact of strong religious awakening that he was able to say such a thing. Normally, one would say, "Amida Tathāgata discloses three minds" and automatically bow one's head in agreement. (ibid.: 27-8)²²

21. On the distinction between descriptive and ritual language in regard to Kūkai's esoteric Buddhism, see Abe 1999: 146.

22. Shinran's discussion of the "three minds" appears in the third chapter of the *Kyōgyōshinshō*. For English, see Shinran and Hirota 1997: 93-107.

Soga expresses amazement at Shinran's daring to "restrain" the sutra's apparent meaning and boldly insist that only the "one mind of faith" matters. Soga sees Shinran's "bold words" as evidence of the power and authenticity of his experience of the "direct facts" of awakening. This calls to mind Soga's previous expression of surprise at his own "boldness" at advancing his radical theory of Dharmākara (Soga 1970, Vol. 2: 409).

Kaneko Daiei

Kaneko Daiei (1881-1976) came to study Kiyozawa's thought through Soga's influence. After graduating from Ōtani University in 1904, he returned home to Niigata to work as a temple priest and solitary researcher. In 1915, he came to Tokyo to serve as editor of *Seishinkai* briefly before being hired at Tōyō University and then Ōtani University in 1916. He was accused of heresy and ousted from the university in 1928, ostensibly for his theory of the Pure Land. In 1930, he was appointed professor at Hiroshima University of Literature and Science. In 1941, he was reinstated at Ōtani University along with Soga. His writings on Shōtoku Taishi were endorsed as "recommended reading" by the wartime government, which helps explain his purge from the faculty in 1949. In 1951, he was invited back to Ōtani University, where he lectured and wrote prolifically on the *Kyōgyōshinshō*.²³

Kaneko developed Shin studies along *metaphysical* lines. In exploring metaphysical questions such as the nature of existence, death, and the Pure Land, Kaneko read widely within Buddhism but also turned to Western philosophy, especially Kant and his Neo-Kantian interpreters.²⁴ In this respect, Kaneko followed Kiyozawa in trying to identify and defend Buddhism's intellectual value in a global context. His understanding of Western academics and philosophy put him in a position to pioneer in modern Shin studies – even as it opened him up to the critique of turning Buddhism into Western philosophy.

Outlines of Buddhism (*Bukkyō gairon* 仏教概論) (1919), which takes the form of a comprehensive textbook on Buddhism as a whole, seems to mark him as a scholar of "Buddhist studies" rather than sectarian studies. Yet his sectarian commitment to Mahāyāna Buddhism in general and Shin in particular is quite evident. For example, he attempts to dispatch with the "theory that Mahāyāna was not taught by the Buddha" by arguing:

23. For a biography of Kaneko, see Hataya 1993.

24. "The transcendental nature of religion," published by Kaneko in the June 1922 issue of the journal *Gasshō*, evidences this influence on his thought on the eve of *Prolegomena to Shin Studies* (*Shinshūgaku josetsu* 真宗学序説). He discusses Kant and Neo-Kantian thinkers Ernst Troeltsch, Georg Mehlis, and Hermann Cohen. In particular, Cohen's view of Plato's "ideas" as equivalent to Kantian "a priori laws" may inform Kaneko's notion of Ideas.

Can one really say that the thought of a genius is transmitted through the records of his words and deeds, and not through created works? Recognizing that the Buddha's meaning cannot be transmitted by mimicry, shouldn't it rather be said that Mahāyāna sutras of a created nature come close to the Buddha's meaning while the Hīnayāna sutras of a transmitted nature actually stray far from his meaning? (9-10)

Kaneko thus sidesteps historical questions and makes the theological argument that the Buddha's "words and deeds" may be "mimicked" in Hīnayāna texts, but their inner "meaning" can only be transmitted by the creative works of similarly awakened beings.²⁵

Kaneko's interpretive lens is evident in the chapter "The pure content of the Buddha's teaching" in which he explains the development of Buddhist teachings – from Hīnayāna through Shinran's Pure Land teachings – in terms of the successive unfolding and clarification of the teaching of no-self. He concludes:

Thus, reflecting upon the nature of the development of Buddhist teachings, I find it is none other than the infinite manifestation of the truth of no-self experienced by Śākyamuni. Needless to say, when people become overly fixated on this latest teaching of self-power and Other-Power, it will signify the need for a further division. At the same time, I find that I cannot allow my research into the doctrines to stop at mere research. Through my own true experience of no-self, I must shoulder the blessings of Buddhist teachings of the past and become a starting point for Buddhist teachings of the future. (60)

Having presented Shin as the pinnacle of Buddhism's historical development, Kaneko points to a future when Buddhism will evolve beyond Shin. Kaneko would say he is proposing evolution of the "forms of teaching" (*kyōsō* 教相), not the "principles of teaching" (*kyōgi* 教義).²⁶ Nonetheless, his remark gives a sense of the freethinking, reform-minded spirit that characterized his sectarianism.

The following chapter in Kaneko's book attempts to determine "the pure form of the Buddha's teachings." Skeptical that the Buddha's experience of awakening can be expressed straightforwardly by him in words (e.g. in the *Āgamas*), Kaneko argues it is transmitted more effectively by accounts revealing the nature of the Buddha's person (*jinkaku* 人格). The Flower Garland Sutra and Vimalakīrti Sutra (Jpn. *Yuimakyō*; Skt. *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra*) accomplish this to a degree, but it is the Lotus Sutra (Jpn. *Hokkekyō*; Skr. *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra*) and Sutra of Immeasurable Life that reveal the true nature of a Buddha: Buddhas

25. Incidentally, Murakami Senshō 村上專精 (1851-1929) had advanced the same argument *together with* the claim that, historically speaking, Mahāyāna was not taught by the Buddha. See Okada 2009.

26. Kaneko's distinction recalls Kiyozawa's distinction between "sectarian teachings" and "sectarian study," as well as Soga's distinction between unchanging "faith" and expedient "teachings."

become Buddhas by virtue of contemplating and thereby encountering the eternal Buddha.²⁷ Here we see how the Mahāyāna view of an “eternal Buddha” as the source of Buddhahood is connected to the Shin modernists’ prioritization of hidden over transparent meanings, persons over texts, and mystical encounters in the present over postmortem salvation.

In *Prolegomena to Shin Studies* (*Shinshūgaku josetsu* 真宗学序説) (1923), Kaneko proposes his model for modern Shin studies. Every academic discipline, he explains, has objects of study (e.g. the natural world), methods of study (e.g. “experiments”), and principles by which results are explained. The proper object of Shin studies, he argues, is the teachings contained within the Sutra of Immeasurable Life (not the *Kyōgyōshinshō*) while its proper method of study is “introspection” (*naikan* 内観) as modeled by Shinran and the seven Shin patriarchs. Introspective study of the Pure Land sutras gives rise to an experience of salvation through faith.²⁸ It is the “reason” (*riyū* 理由) or principle underlying this phenomenon that Kaneko is concerned to explain.²⁹ This is not a mere academic issue, for understanding this “reason” is essential to the process of attaining faith.

...even though it is true that faith or practice is the only important thing in Shin Buddhism, a certain realization, that is to say a certain kind of rationality, must be working in the depth of faith and practice. No matter how much a human observes an object with a microscope, if he has no brains, it’s impossible to discover any scientific truth. In just the same way, even if it is said that we should just believe or just practice, neither faith nor practice is possible as long as we have not been readied by our rational faculties. Thus, a certain kind of rationality must be working in the depth of faith and practice. Seen in this way, both practice and faith can be included within study. This certain rationality lies at the basis of Shin Buddhist Studies. (Blum and Rhodes 2011: 176)³⁰

Just like empirical scientists, Shin practitioners and scholars in introspectively examining the sutras must be “readied” by their “rational faculties.” The empirical

27. In the Sutra of Immeasurable Life, Ananda addresses Śākyamuni: “World-Honoured One, today all your senses are radiant with joy... The Buddhas of the past, present and future contemplate each other. How can this present Buddha not contemplate the other Buddhas?” (Inagaki 1995: 233-4).

28. Here the distinction between Shin practice and Shin studies disappears.

29. Scholars have often understood the third part of Kaneko’s formulation as the “reason” for engaging in study, a topic that is addressed in the lecture (e.g. Blum and Rhodes 2011: 167). Yet Kaneko’s work initially defines the “why” of Shin studies in terms of “seeking for reasons 理由 *riyū*” just as scientists seek out reasons to explain the results of their experiments, and his lecture culminates in a discussion of Shinran’s introspective discovery of the “reason” for the Pure Land (Kaneko 1966: 14-15, 90-102).

30. For the original text, see Kaneko 1966: 19-20.

nature of Shin studies – its basis in faith “experience” – is taken for granted; Kaneko’s additional claim is that such experiences be accompanied by rational thought.

The “reason” Kaneko deems essential is that which reveals the true nature of Amida Buddha and his salvific powers, thus explaining the empirical fact of salvation through faith. Kaneko relates that the search for such a reason can be carried out in two ways. First, one can seek out Amida Buddha’s “basis in things” (*jiyū* 事由) – the external circumstances that explain Amida’s existence. Kaneko here discusses historical accounts of how Pure Land teachings arose after Śākyamuni’s death as well as theological debates regarding whether multiple Buddhas can inhabit the same universe and how an ordinary being burdened by past karma can qualify for rebirth in a pure land. Kaneko ultimately dismisses as “useless” these various historical, philosophical, and theological arguments that have sought to account for and evaluate Pure Land teachings (Blum and Rhodes 2011: 203).

Kaneko then approaches his explanation of the true “reason” for the Pure Land via a discussion of Nāgārjuna’s critique of the concept of cause and effect: “Nāgārjuna argues that, for A to be the cause of B, A must simultaneously both exist and not exist within B. Because this is a contradiction, causation itself becomes problematic...” (ibid.: 205). As a student of Kant, Kaneko believes that the necessary connection between cause and effect is not an *a posteriori* aspect of the world of things but rather an *a priori* form contained within the mind. Kaneko furthermore believed those *a priori* forms could be perceived through subjective experience. The inner necessity of the law of causation, Kaneko continues, can only be known by entering into “the world of awakening,” which is “the world of Ideas” (or “forms”). Similarly, the existence of the Pure Land appears groundless, but the experience of faith allows one to enter the “world of Ideas” and perceive the Pure Land as an *a priori* form. This *a priori* form manifests in the world when a person’s realization of need for salvation necessarily triggers an event of salvation.³¹

In *The Idea of the Pure Land* (*Jōdō no kannen* 浄土の観念) (1925), Kaneko implements his vision of Shin studies. Comprised of two sections, the first presents an account of his own understanding of the Pure Land in relation to his personal experiences; the second seeks to corroborate that understanding through discussion of Shinran and other past figures and texts. His introspective approach to scriptural study is evident when he states:

My approach is to focus on the inspiration I feel in my heart upon reading them. What meaning do the teachings of the Mahāyāna scriptures hold in regard to my present, past, and future? What meaning do they hold in regards to my spirit? (33-4)

31. As Rhodes notes, Kaneko’s two-sided understanding of faith relates to Shinran’s “two kinds of deep faith” (*nishu jinshin* 二種深信) (Blum and Rhodes 2011: 163).

His “esoteric” approach to scriptural study is evident in the following:

It’s fine to use the word “Buddha” or the word “Pure Land” or the word “*nenbutsu*” just as they are. The words used by people of the past are okay, but it is not okay to merely mimic their pronunciations yet express a completely different meaning... Speaking to people of the world of Ideas is exactly like speaking to people in a foreign language... Most people’s use of religious words is like parroting foreign words without knowing their meaning. I am becoming sarcastic here, but it really is the case that people speaking of “being saved by Amida” just do not understand what “Amida” and “being saved” are. (138-9)

For Kaneko, the meaning of scriptural language is completely obscure to those who have not experienced awakening. This sort of claim is common to many modern proponents of “religious experience,” epitomized by Rudolf Otto’s (in)famous instructions to readers who have never had a deeply-felt religious experience to “read no further” (Otto 1958: 8). Yet it also points to a classic Buddhist distinction between the “exoteric” and “esoteric” meanings of sutras.

2. *Shin studies and Buddhist studies in conversation*

I will now consider modern Shin studies’ broader significance by examining an exchange between Kaneko Daiei and Buddhist studies scholar Kimura Taiken. Kimura was a Sōtō Zen cleric who studied and taught Buddhist philosophy at Tokyo Imperial University, taking up the mantle of the movement to study “original Buddhism” (*genshi bukkyō* 原始仏教) as the source and true nature of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Part of this project was to purify Mahāyāna of its “unscientific elements” (e.g. Mount Sumeru cosmology) (Okada 1997: 192-197).

The 1929 exchange between Kaneko and Kimura was incited by a lecture given by Kimura on Kaneko’s scholarship and heresy incident that was transcribed and printed in the journal *Bukkyō shisō*. It seems the prominent heresy incidents surrounding Kaneko in 1928 and Soga in 1930 brought their work into the national spotlight. Kaneko rose to his defense, thus beginning a 2-month long (May 9-July 2nd) exchange consisting of 19 articles appearing on the front-page of the national Buddhist newspaper *Chūgai nippō*. Their positions can be summarized with reference to five overlapping points:

1) *Rationality*

Kimura sympathizes with Kaneko’s desire to demonstrate rationalist grounds for Shin thought. Without such grounds, Buddhist teachings cannot satisfy the intellect of modern man or play a role in modern society. Insofar as Kaneko’s work attempts this task, Kimura recognizes it as a legitimate mode of Buddhist studies. However, he takes issue with Kaneko’s apparent use of Western philosophy – rather than elements within Buddhism – to purify Buddhism.

Kaneko balks at the suggestion that his views of Shin teachings are innovations intended to make Shin intellectually palatable for a modern audience. He claims to make use of Western philosophical language only to clear away the simple-minded literalism that plagues modern understandings of Buddhism.

2) *Afterlife*

Kimura critiques Kaneko for ignoring the afterlife, arguing that the teaching of the Pure Land loses its power if one subtracts the afterlife. Acknowledging recent scholarly claims to the contrary, Kimura contends that the doctrine of reincarnation has been essential to Buddhism from its beginning, central to such developments as Abhidharma philosophy and Yogācāra thought. Without a belief in an afterlife, there can be no Buddhism. Moreover, to deny the soul's persistence after death is ultimately to uphold a materialist view of the world no better than Marxism. In a closing comment meant to be critical, Kimura states he cannot help but evaluate Kaneko's position as "positivist" (*jissōron-teki* 実証論的).

In response, Kaneko reasserts his agnosticism. He distinguishes between the problems of "death" and "after death," noting that the former problem is certain while the problem of what happens after death is uncertain. Religion's genesis is intimately related to the problem of death, not to that of life after death. He adds that concern about life after death signals selfish, "materialist" motivations while discovery of present reality as a place of spirit and eternity is the more spiritual view.

3) *Shin orthodoxy*

Kimura takes Kaneko's concept of the "Pure Land as Idea" seriously, concluding that if Shin studies is to be established, one of its two essential projects must be to connect that concept with that of the Western Pure Land. However, he critiques Kaneko for failing to state precisely what he means by "Idea," concluding that Kaneko's theory as it stands is incomplete and unclear. He also contends that the basic orthodoxy of Shin is "because there is a Pure Land, I have faith," so Kaneko's reformulation of this as "because I have faith, there is a Pure Land" is problematic.

Kaneko accuses Kimura of harboring a naïve geographical notion of the "Western Pure Land," of approaching Buddhist teachings via "mathematical knowledge," and of arrogantly presuming to already understand Shinran's teachings. He defends his position "because I have faith, there is a Pure Land" as one orthodox way of approaching the teachings, pointing to the writings of Senmyō 宣明³² (1749-1821) and Shinran.³³ Kaneko further argues that faith based in unreflective

32. Senmyō was the Ōtani denomination's sixth lecture master (*kōshi* 講師), succeeding the more famous Jinrei 深励. Kaneko relates that Senmyō upheld the view "Because there are sentient beings, there is the Tathāgata."

33. Kaneko points to Shinran's two modes of explanations beginning either from the Buddha or the practitioner (*jūhō kōki no setsu* 従法向機の説 and *jūki kōhō no setsu* 従機向法の説).

acceptance of the teaching that “there is a Pure Land” remains superficial; true faith develops out of self-reflection on one’s limitations.

4) History

Kimura agrees with Kaneko that various religions and sects of Buddhism arise out of a common psychology, noting his previous discussions of this in terms of “religious *a priori*.” Yet the study of Buddhism, he continues, is not the study of this common core. From its very beginnings in the four noble truths, Buddhism has been made up of forms. The distinctions between Zen and Pure Land or between Amida Buddha of the West and Ashuku (Skt. *Akṣobhya*) Buddha of the East have been of utmost importance to the history of Buddhism and the lives of Buddhists.

In response, Kaneko affirms his introspective approach. Just as the study of philosophy and the act of philosophizing can be distinguished, so can Buddhist studies be divided into “comprehension study” (*gegaku* 解学) and “practice study” (*gyōgaku* 行学). The former studies the outer “forms” of the teachings and “copies” them; the latter studies the inner meaning of the teachings and tries to write them anew. “Comprehension study” analyzes Shinran’s writings from a common-sense, conceptual perspective; “practice study” works to cultivate in the scholar Shinran’s inner psychology, enabling a trans-conceptual, faith-based understanding of the teachings.

5) Sectarianism

Kimura admires Kaneko’s aspiration to show Shin’s grounding in the broader Buddhist tradition, but he criticizes Kaneko’s method of argumentation. The “theory that Mahāyāna was not taught by the Buddha” has undercut the argument that Pure Land teachings are Buddhist because they are the words of the Buddha. Scholars of Pure Land Buddhism must prove that Pure Land teachings represent the Buddha’s true intentions by examining the *historical* development of Pure Land teachings.

Kaneko does not address this critique. He defends his sectarian identity as distinct from traditional, narrow-minded loyalty rooted in family history and from the modernist trend toward all-inclusive, non-discriminating trans-sectarianism. He insists Shin must be consistent with the broader Buddhist tradition; thus, “awakening” must also play a central role in Shin.

Regarding this exchange, it must first be noted that Kimura actively engages with Kaneko’s scholarship. Prior to the exchange, Kimura had already read and publicly lectured on Kaneko’s work.³⁴ Here he sympathizes with Kaneko’s project to

34. Kimura notes that he has read Kaneko’s recent work on the Pure Land as well as *Outlines of Buddhism*. He also comments on his previous regret that Kaneko’s heresy incident had reached a resolution without the main issue – Buddhist studies methodology – being addressed.

render Shin teachings in a modernist form and to demonstrate their connections to Buddhism as a whole. Although dissatisfied with the vagueness of Kaneko's use of the term "Idea," he is intrigued by Kaneko's theory and challenges him to chart its connections to traditional expressions of orthodoxy.

Second, it is striking to note how Kaneko comes across as "positivist" and focused on "present reality" while Kimura is critical of "positivism" and oriented toward the "afterlife." Kimura bases his work on the empirical "facts" of Buddhist history, yet he espouses an understanding of Buddhism inclusive of a non-empirical afterlife. Kaneko's "empiricism," by contrast, rests upon the weak basis of personal confessions and seemingly arbitrary explanations of the inner experiences of others, yet it does firmly refuse to make claims about the afterlife.

Finally, Kimura's impatience with Kaneko's ignorance of history is notable. If Shin Buddhism faced two major intellectual problems in the modern period – metaphysical and historical – modern Shin studies had answered the former with some success but had failed to deliver a convincing response to the latter. It is thus no coincidence that the next important work by a Shin modernist was Soga Ryōjin's 1936 "Shinran's View of Buddhist History," which presented an argument for Amida Buddha as the "origin" of Śākyamuni rather than a later creation.³⁵ In conclusion, Kaneko and Kimura engaged in a substantial public dialogue that may very well have spurred on each other's work in addition to influencing a broader readership.

3. Conclusion

This paper has argued that modern Shin studies represents a distinctive form of Buddhist studies. The basis of Sasaki, Soga, and Kaneko's work in personal "confession" was fundamentally different from that of traditional sectarian studies, as was its consideration of non-sectarian sources and traditions. Nonetheless, they attempted to reform sectarian studies from within their sect. This runs counter to how Buddhist modernism is often portrayed as the creation of individual thinkers floating beyond sectarian or institutional confines.

Modern Shin studies was also distinct from modern Buddhist studies, not only in its sectarianism but also in its subjectivist, "esoteric" style of studying Buddhist scripture and history. Yet the two fields of study had many points of overlap and exchange. A bias against theological scholarship may explain why studies of modern Japanese Buddhism have failed to consider modern sectarian studies.

In recent years, scholars have produced valuable studies of how Buddhism came to be represented as "empirical" and "scientific" from the mid-19th century through the present (McMahan 2008; Lopez 2008; Hammerstrom 2010). Such

35. For an abridged translation, see Blum and Rhodes 2011: 119-138. For the original, see Soga 1970, vol. 5: 385-471.

representations range from modest claims that Buddhist teachings relate to real-life experiences to grandiose claims that the Buddha foresaw the theories of Darwinian evolution and quantum physics. Over-emphasis on the latter makes it all too easy to caricature Buddhist modernism as having eviscerated Buddhism of its essentials to make it conform to science. The Shin modernists considered here represented Buddhism using the empiricist language of the day, but they also fought against the materialism and literalism they perceived in a scientific worldview that misunderstood religion as superstition. Integral to their multi-faceted engagement with science was a discourse of “esotericism.” In their views of this-worldly salvation, of becoming the Buddha through subject-object reversal, of the hidden inner meanings of Buddhist sutras, and of transmission through personal rather than textual encounters, we can hear echoes of the esoteric world of medieval Japanese Buddhism in which Shinran lived. Further research might investigate how such connections can be accounted for historically and how they relate to more explicit interest in esotericism by Buddhist modernists in China, Tibet, and elsewhere (e.g. Tuttle 2005).

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