

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)  
Anti-Copyright



# Why Anarchists Like Zen?

A Libertarian Reading of Shinran (1173–1263)

Enrique Galván-Álvarez

Enrique Galván-Álvarez  
Why Anarchists Like Zen?  
A Libertarian Reading of Shinran (1173–1263)  
2017

[https://www.stockholmuniversitypress.se/site/books/e/  
10.16993/bak/](https://www.stockholmuniversitypress.se/site/books/e/10.16993/bak/)

[usa.anarchistlibraries.net](http://usa.anarchistlibraries.net)

2017



graph Series (Los Angeles: Pure Land Publications, 1993), pp. 145–156.

Tsang, Carol Richmond, War and Faith. Ikko Ikki in Late Muromachi Japan. (London: Harvard University Press, 2007).

Victoria, Brian Daizen, Zen at War. (Oxford: Rowman and Littleman Publishers, 2006).

Warner, Brad, Hardcore Zen: Punk Rock, Monster Movies & The Truth About Reality (Somerville, Massachusetts: Wisdom Publications, 2003).

Watts, Alan, Buddhism the Religion of No-Religion (Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 1999)

Young Lee, Kenneth Doo. The Prince and the Monk. Shotoku Worship in Shinran's Buddhism. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007)

## Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| 1. Why Anarchists Like Zen — Introduction. . . . .     | 5  |
| 2. Rebellion Beyond Zen: Shinran's Buddhism . . . . .  | 9  |
| 3. The Liberative Promise of Tariki . . . . .          | 13 |
| 4. Egalitarian Hopelessness, Collective Transformation | 24 |
| 5. Neither Monk Nor Layman: An Ethic of Resistance?    | 30 |
| 6. Concluding Thoughts . . . . .                       | 44 |
| Acknowledgement . . . . .                              | 49 |
| References . . . . .                                   | 49 |

- Scott, Rachelle. *Nirvana for Sale. Buddhism, Wealth and the Contemporary Dharmakaya Temple in Contemporary Temple* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009).
- Shigaraki Takamaro. *Heart of the Shin Buddhist Path*. David Matsumoto, trans. (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2013).
- Shinran, *Collected Works of Shinran*, Dennis Hirota, trans., (Kyoto: Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-ha, 1997).
- Snyder, Gary, “Buddhist Anarchism”, in *Bureau of Public Secrets*, (<http://www.bopsecrets.org/CF/garysnyder.htm>, 2002 [1961])
- Why Anarchists Like Zen? A Libertarian Reading of Shinran (1173–1263) 123 Snyder, Gary “Revolution in the Revolution in the Revolution”, in *Regarding Wave* (New York: New Directions Books, 1970), p. 39.
- Sokunyo Ohtani Koshin. “Immesurable Light and Life -2008 New Year’s Message from the Monshu” in *Manitoba Buddhist Temple*. ([http://www.manitobabuddhistchurch.org/blog\\_files/1cbf020d5e6\\_07cce8a4ce4a2c63b8c11-46.html](http://www.manitobabuddhistchurch.org/blog_files/1cbf020d5e6_07cce8a4ce4a2c63b8c11-46.html))
- Suzuki, Daisetz, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).
- Takagi Kemmyo, “My Socialism”, in *Living in Amida’s Universal Vow*, ed. Alfred Bloom (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2004), pp.189–196.
- Tanaka Kenneth and Richar Payne, eds., *Approaching the Land of Bliss. Religious Praxis of Amitabha* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004).
- Tannisaro Bikku, trans., *Kalama Sutta: To the Kalamas 1994* (<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an03/an03.065.than.html>).
- Thornley, Kerry. “Zenarchy” [1991]. *The Anarchist Library*. December 19<sup>th</sup> 2009. (<http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/kerry-thornley-zenarchy>)
- Tokunaga, Michio, “Buddha’s Law and King’s Law: The Bifurcation of Shinran’s Teaching”, in *Shin Buddhism: Mono-*

- Márquez, Alberto, León Duarte (Montevideo: Editorial Compañero, 1993).
- Marshall, Peter, *Demanding the Impossible. A History of Anarchism*, (London: Harper Perennial, 2008).
- Mayes, Ian “Envisioning a Buddhist Anarchism”, in *The Implicit & Experiential Rantings of a Person*, 2011, (<http://parenthesiseye.blogspot.co.uk/2011/11/envisioning-buddhist-anarchism.html>).
- McMullin, Neil, *Buddhism and the State in Sixteenth-Century Japan* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984).
- Park, Jin Y. *Buddhism and Postmodernity. Zen, Huayan and the Possibility of Buddhist Postmodern Ethics*. (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2008).
- Rambelli, Fabio. “Just Behave as You Like; Prohibitions and Impurities Are Not a Problem. Radical Amida Cults and Popular Religiosity in Premodern Japan” in Kenneth Tanaka and Richard Payne, eds., *Approaching the Land of Bliss. Religious Praxis in the Cult of Amitabha*. (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004), pp. 169–201.
- Rambelli, Fabio. *Zen Anarchism. The Egalitarian Dharma of Uchiyama Gudo* (Berkeley: Institute of Buddhist Studies, 2013).
- Rapp, John. “Anarchism or Nihilism: The Buddhist-Influenced Thought of Wu Nengzi” in Alexandre Christoyannopoulos *Religious Anarchism: New Perspectives*. Newcastle: Cambridge Publishing Scholars, 2009), pp. 202–225.
- Ritzinger, Justin, *Anarchy in the Pure Land: Tradition, Modernity, and the Reinvention of the Cult of Maitreya in Republican China* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: ProQuest, 2010).
- Rogers, Minor and Ann Rogers. “The Honganji: Guardian of the State (1868–1945)”. *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 17 (1990): 1–26

Most attempts to formulate a Buddhist anarchism in the West take Zen Buddhism as their reference point, often disregarding other Buddhist traditions and their anarchic/libertarian potential. In response to these early Western formulations I propose an alternative pathway for Buddhist anarchism based on a radically different Buddhist tradition, that of Shinran Shonin (1173–1263). Shinran’s thought can arguably contribute to contemporary Buddhist anarchism some of the elements that it seems to be lacking: a self-critique that is not devoid of social criticism, a deconstruction of Buddhist power and an historical awareness. For this purpose, I will first outline some of the anti-authoritarian traits in Shinran’s writings, which have so far not been read from an explicitly anarchist angle. Then I will look closely at Shinran’s critical view of humanity and human relations through his concept of mappo, drawing out the egalitarian and subversive implications of Buddhist eschatology. In so doing I show how Shinran’s radical re-reading of the Buddhist canon, and the self-understanding it yields, bring into question some important narratives that legitimize and construct the established, politico-religious order.

## **1. Why Anarchists Like Zen — Introduction.**

Most attempts to formulate a Buddhist anarchism in the West take Zen Buddhism as their reference point, often disregarding other Buddhist traditions and their anarchic/libertarian potential. This is partly to do with the way in which Zen has been presented to the West, by individuals such as D.T. Suzuki or Alan Watts, and also due to a relative ignorance about Asian anarchisms and their links with various forms of (both Zen and

non-Zen) Buddhism.<sup>1</sup> It is not uncommon to read that Gary Snyder was the first Buddhist anarchist, a view that despite being popular does no justice to the longer history of Buddhist anarchism.<sup>2</sup> Although Snyder is likely to have been the first to have used the term ‘Buddhist anarchism,’ in his homonymous 1961 essay (he is certainly the first one to use the term in English), the first self-identified Buddhist anarchists are to be found in the turbulent histories of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Japan, Korea and China. Buddhist anarchism first emerged as a Buddhist response to colonial domination (Korea), industrialization, war and the totalitarian state (Japan) and the various authoritarian regimes that followed the fall of the Qing dynasty (China).<sup>3</sup> Many participants in the North American Counterculture had an interest in both Buddhism and anarchism, but they were largely oblivious to the fact that the two traditions had already been brought together in Asia.

Snyder’s rhetoric of “[t]he mercy of the West [being] social revolution” and “the mercy of the East [being] individual insight into the basic self / void,” hints that not only he is setting himself up as a pioneer by merging the two “mercies” but also

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the best example of a Buddhist anarchist who did not rely (exclusively) on Zen ideas in order to construct his Anarcho-Buddhism is that of the Chinese monk Taixu (1890–1947). Taixu’s main Buddhist practice was connected to the millenarian tradition of Maitreya and it shares many of the devotional aspects of Japanese Pure Land thinking discussed in this chapter. For a thorough discussion of Taixu’s thought see Justin Ritzinger, *Anarchy in the Pure Land: Tradition, Modernity, and the Reinvention of the Cult of Maitreya in Republican China* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: ProQuest, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> An example of the tendency to consider Gary Snyder the first Buddhist anarchist can be found in this blog entry by Ian Mayes, which constitutes one of the more articulate contemporary formulations of Buddhist anarchism in the West: “Envisioning a Buddhist Anarchism” in *The Implicit & Experiential Rantings of a Person* (<http://parenthesiseye.blogspot.co.uk/2011/11/envisioning-buddhist-anarchism.html>, 2010)

<sup>3</sup> Gary Snyder, “Buddhist Anarchism”, in *Bureau of Public Secrets*, (<http://www.bopsecrets.org/CF/garysnyder.htm>, 2002 [1961]).

Why Anarchists Like Zen? A Libertarian Reading of Shinran (1173–1263) 121 Dobbins, James Jodo Shinshu: Shin Buddhism in Medieval Japan

(Hawai’i: University of Hawai’i Press: 2002).

Esho Shimazu, “The Sangowakuran Incident and its Significance for Engaged Buddhism”, in Muryoko. *Journal of Shin Buddhism*. (<http://www.nembutsu.info/sangowakuran.htm>)

Foulk, Griffith, ‘Ritual in Japanese Zen Buddhism’, in *Zen Ritual. Studies of Zen Buddhist Theory in Practice*, ed. by Steven Heine and Dale Wright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 21–82.

Fuller Sasaki, Ruth, trans., *The Record of Linji* (Honolulu, University of Hawai’i Press: 2009).

Galvan-Alvarez, Enrique. “Meditative Revolutions? Orientalism and History in the Western Buddhist Anarchist Tradition in Enlightened Anarchism. Forthcoming.

Goto-Jones, Christopher, *Political Philosophy in Japan. Nishida, the Kyoto School, and Co-Prosperity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

Inagaki Hisao, ed. *The Three Pure Land Sutras, Volume II. The Sutra on the Buddha of Immeasurable Life*. (Kyoto: Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-Ha, 2009)

Ives, Christopher, “The Mobilization of Doctrine: Buddhist Contributions to Imperial Ideology in Modern Japan”, *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 26 (1999): 83–106.

Kiyozawa Manshi, “Negotiating Religious Morality and Common Morality” in Mark Blum and Robert Rhodes ed., *Cultivating Spirituality. A Modern Shin Buddhist Anthology*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), pp. 77–91.

Main, Jessica. *Only Shinran Will Not Betray Us*. Takeuchi Ryo’on (1891–1967), the Otani-ha Administration and the Burakumin, (Thesis Presented at McGill University, April 2012).

Bloom, Alfred, "Introduction", in Fitzgerald et al., eds., *Honen the Buddhist Saint: Essential Writings and Official Biography* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2006), pp. xxiii-xxxvii.

Bloom, Alfred, "Shin Buddhism in the Modern Ethical Context", in *Shindharmanet* (<http://shindharmanet.com/course/c24/>)

Bloom, Alfred. *Strategies for Modern Living. A Commentary with the Text of the Tannisho.* (Berkeley: Numata Centre, 1992).

Bloom, Alfred. "The Life of Shinran Shonin: The Journey to Self-Acceptance" in Paul Williams, ed., *Buddhism in China, East Asia and Japan. Vol II* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2005), pp. 87-93.

Bloom, Alfred, ed., *The Essential Shinran. A Buddhist Path of True Entrusting* (Boston: World Wisdom, 2007).

Blum, Mark. *The Origins and Development of Pure Land Buddhism: A Study and Translation of Gyonen's Jodo Homon Genrusho.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Brown, James. "The Zen of Anarchy: Japanese Exceptionalism and the Anarchist Roots of the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance". *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*, 19.2 (Summer 2009) p. 214.

Buber, Martin, *Paths in Utopia* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1950).

Clark, John [Max Cafard]. "Zen Anarchy" [2006]. *The Anarchist Library*. August 14<sup>th</sup> 2009, (<http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/max-cafard-zen-anarchy>)

Curley, Melissa Anne-Marie, *Know That We Are Not Good Persons: Pure Land Buddhism and the Ethics of Exile* (PhD Thesis presented at McGill University, June 2009).

De Ridder, Widdukind, "Max Stirner: The End of Philosophy and Political Subjectivity", in Max Stirner, ed. by Saul Newman (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 143-164.

Dessi, Ugo, "The Pure Land as a Principle of Social Criticism", *Japanese Religions*, 33 (1 & 2): 75-90.

that the West lacks "insight" and the East "social revolution".<sup>4</sup> Although Snyder has long moved away from this orientalist discourse, some of the problematic aspects of his Buddhist anarchism still haunt many of the representations of Buddhist anarchism in the West. Although Zen is certainly not incompatible with anarchism (in fact one of the first self-identified Buddhist anarchists was the Japanese Soto Zen monk Uchiyama Gudo, 1874-1911), the way in which Zen and anarchism have been combined in the West often lacks a thorough critique of Buddhist power, historical awareness and the willingness to confront authoritarian aspects within the Zen tradition.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Suzuki's conception of "pure Zen", still popularly accepted in most Western countries, as a "rational" practice completely devoid of rituals, doctrine or philosophy, is not only "ahistorical [and] formless"; it is also crafted in a political context that is far from libertarian.<sup>6</sup> Suzuki's "pure Zen" is an attempt to marry Zen exceptionalism to state-sponsored Japanese nationalism and to offer "an exceptional gift of the Japanese people to the world", especially to an ailing West, "overtly determined by its rationalistic materialism".<sup>7</sup>

Although Suzuki's Zen is a perfectly valid formulation within the Zen tradition, to claim that all historical man-

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> An account of Gudo's work and some of his manuscripts can be found in Fabio Rambelli. *Zen Anarchism. The Egalitarian Dharma of Uchiyama Gudo* (Berkeley: Institute of Buddhist Studies, 2013). Also, instances of the tendency to present Zen as an inherently anarchist philosophy separated from its history can be found in the writings of John Clark, Kerry Thornley, Brad Warner and to some extent Gary Snyder.

<sup>6</sup> For Suzuki's own account of the Zen tradition see Daisetz Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 3-18. Griffith Foulk, 'Ritual in Japanese Zen Buddhism', in *Zen Ritual. Studies of Zen Buddhist Theory in Practice*, ed. by Steven Heine and Dale Wright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 36.

<sup>7</sup> James Brown. "The Zen of Anarchy: Japanese Exceptionalism and the Anarchist Roots of the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance". *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*, 19.2 (Summer 2009) p. 214.

ifestations of Zen are ‘pure Zen’ or that Zen is the most rational form of Buddhism and therefore the one closest to radical thinking, is problematic. At best such a claim is a misguided bow to Zen narratives of self-legitimation and at worst a colonial ordering of Buddhist traditions according to European criteria and needs, which mirrors the British discovery of Buddhism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup> The discovery and construction of (Theravada) Buddhism by early British orientalist reflects an analogous pattern to the modern construction of Zen in so far as it tries to identify a “pure” and “original” Buddhism that is palatable for the rational ethos of the post-enlightenment. By stripping this “original” Buddhism from “irrational” and “religious” elements, Buddhism is rendered abstract, philosophical and ahistorical, thus fulfilling the needs of a certain European consumer.

The aim of this chapter is to propose an alternative pathway for Buddhist anarchism based on a radically different Buddhist formulation, that of Shinran Shonin (1173–1263). Shinran’s thought can arguably contribute to contemporary Buddhist anarchism some of the elements that it seems to be lacking: a self-critique that is not devoid of social criticism, a deconstruction of Buddhist power and some form of historical awareness. For this purpose, I will first outline some of the anti-authoritarian traits in Shinran’s writings, which have so far not been read from an explicitly anarchist angle. Then I will look closely at Shinran’s critical view of humanity and human relations through his concept of *mappo*, drawing out the egalitarian and subversive implications of Buddhist eschatology. In so doing I show how Shinran’s radical re-reading of the Buddhist canon, and the self-understanding it yields, bring into question some important narratives that legitimize and construct the estab-

---

<sup>8</sup> For a brief discussion of this historical tendency see Rachele Scott, *Nirvana for Sale. Buddhism, Wealth and the Contemporary Dharmakaya Temple in Contemporary Temple* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), pp. 8–11.

sive histories many instances of resistance can be discovered and creatively re-appropriated. Shinran’s historical awareness and his creative re-engagement of the Buddhist textual tradition extend an invitation to re-interpret and re-read. Such re-reading, which is understood as one of the Latin etymologies of the word religion (*re-legere*, literally read again), is central to any Buddhist anarchism that aims to religiously re-read the world and itself. Thus Shinran contributes a thorough and critical model for re-reading Buddhist history, the Buddhist canon and the (Buddhist) readers themselves.

## Acknowledgement

This research was partially enabled by the research group *Culturas, Religiones y Derechos Humanos (CRDH-GdI-01)* at the International University of La Rioja (Universidad Internacional de La Rioja-UNIR). The author would like to thank the project for the generous material and institutional support which contributed to the completion of this chapter.

## References

- Amstutz, Galen, *Interpreting Amida. History and Orientalism in the Study of Pure Land Buddhism* (Albany: State University of New York, 1997).
- Amstutz, Galen, “Shinran and Authority in Buddhism”, in *Living in Amida’s Universal Vow. Essays in Shin Buddhism*, ed. by Alfred Bloom (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2004), pp. 143–154.
- Bloom, Alfred “Honen and Shinran: Loyalty and Independence”, in *Shindharmanet*, 2012 (<http://www.shindharmanet.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/pdf/Bloom-Loyalty.pdf>)



Thus, Shinran's example proves how an awareness of the ultimate relativity of morality does not involve a necessary bow to the established order, but can also be used to challenge it and, arguably, transform it. In the same way that Shinran stands up against what he judges to be injustice, the Jodo Shinshu anarchist can use her or his relative judgment to articulate strategies of resistance.

Following the analogy of the Christian "right of private judgement" the relative judgment of Shinran or the practitioner is informed or infused by the subjective experience of tariki. A subversive agency ought to come about as an interplay of both the enlightened design of the Buddha and the relative and contingent design of the practitioner. Shinran's actions can be said to provide an instance of that interplay of wills or agencies. Whereas his relationships reflect a freer and more decentralized spirit founded in tariki, he also considers pragmatic implications and acts in relation to an implicit and culturally received moral sensibility. The particular content of this moral sensibility is not crucial to the formulation of a Shinran-based anarchism as it belongs to the realm of provisional judgment, to which Shinran refuses to confer any ultimate validity, and could be replaced or reformulated. However, this interplay of agencies offers a model for trying to live in the spirit of an ideal world while having to deal with a dystopian one.

Most importantly, Shinran's refusal to enter a symbiotic relationship with the state can trigger a Buddhist anarchist reassessment of the long history of Buddhist cooptation and collaboration with the state, to which the Jodo Shinshu tradition is no exception. If Buddhism is not inherently authoritarian, its long history of entanglement with government across the Buddhist world needs to be acknowledged and critically explored. In order to articulate a Buddhism that can be anarchist, it is essential to first understand how Buddhism has not, by and large, been anarchistic. Further, by exploring oppres-

lished, politico-religious order. Finally, I explore the ethical and political implications of Shinran's actions, assessing what Jodo Shinshu (i.e. Shinran's Buddhism) can contribute, not just to the deconstruction, but also to the articulation of a Buddhist anarchist project.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. Rebellion Beyond Zen: Shinran's Buddhism

The most significant and central feature of Shinran's thought is the logic of tariki, often translated as other-power.<sup>10</sup> Whereas in most Buddhist traditions, including Zen, the individual is meant to strive through some form of disciplined practice regime in order to reach a given soteriological goal, Shinran formulated a Buddhism based on a radical negation of self-effort and self-reliance as a means to insight. In fact he harmonized means and ends by arguing that if the end (becoming a Buddha) is a state of naturalness and spontaneity (Jp.

---

<sup>9</sup> Shinran uses the term Jodo Shinshu (literally 'the true Pure Land way') to refer to his own doctrine, which in his view is a restatement of what his teacher Honen taught. However, Shinran developed Honen's thought and substantially reinterpreted and enriched it in a number of ways, as Alfred Bloom discusses at length in "Honen and Shinran: Loyalty and Independence", in Shindharmanet (<http://www.shindharmanet.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/pdf/Bloom-Loyalty.pdf>, 2012). Throughout this chapter, I will be using the term Jodo Shinshu as synonymous with Shinran's thought and not as referring to any specific institutional denomination.

<sup>10</sup> To make clear that the term tariki, literally "other power", is not meant to imply a power completely external to the individual but simply other to her or his conscious self, Mark Blum offers these suggestions for the translation of the term: "Tariki, also called butsuriki [buddha-power] or ganriki [vow-power], denotes the transcendent power of a buddha, but because of the ambiguity inherent in the relationship between buddha and self in the tathagatagarbha [literally buddha-seed, but generally translated as buddha nature] doctrines, which have always been close to Pure Land thought, 'spiritual power beyond the known self' is a more apt gloss for this term" (Blum, p. 8).

jinen, Ch. ziran) the means (the path towards Buddhahood) must also reflect and be guided by those qualities. Shinran's formulation of tariki represented a significant departure from the more conventional and established forms of Buddhism and, consequently, had important social implications. Shinran lived during the turbulent Kamakura period (1185–1333), at a time when other Japanese Buddhist 'reformers', such as Shinran's own teacher, Honen (1133–1212), as well as Dogen (pioneer of Japanese Soto Zen, 1200–1253) or Nichiren (1222–1282), were often critical of the established socio-religious order and substantially reformulated existing ideas about Buddhist practice, social relations and hierarchy. In order to explore the anarchic potential of Shinran's thought I will first discuss how Zen has been (mis) construed as the most anarchist of Buddhisms.

Paraphrasing Christmas Humphreys and John Clark, Peter Marshall refers to Zen as "the apotheosis of Buddhism" and the Buddhism that "developed its libertarian potential to the fullest".<sup>11</sup> The libertarian thrust of Zen lies in its iconoclastic statements and the often playful, absurdist and rhizomatic dynamics that animate many of the narratives of the Zen lore.<sup>12</sup> However, most Zen anarchists or anarchists with Zen Buddhist sympathies present Zen in an ahistorical, uncritical and decontextualized fashion, some- times enshrining meditation as

---

<sup>11</sup> Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible. A History of Anarchism* (London: Harper Perennial, 2008), p. 61.

<sup>12</sup> Many of the more anarchistic stories correspond to the early age of Chinese Zen (Chan) which corresponds to the Tang period (618– 907). This age has been construed by Zen anarchists, from Uchiyama Gudo to John Clark as a golden era in which the antiauthoritari- an spirit of Zen is fully expressed, as I have argued elsewhere (see Galvan-Alvarez, Enrique, "Meditative Revolutions? Orientalism and History in the Western Buddhist Anarchist Tradition in Enlightened Anarchism, Forthcoming). A representative cycle of stories about the Zen of this period is the collection of koan of Rinzi patriarch Linji, see Fuller Sasaki, Ruth, trans., *The Record of Linji* (Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press: 2009).

Buddhist community and freeing it from traditional regimes of discipline, the Pure Land can be said to be prefigured in the age and world of mappo. However, such a prefigured community ought to remain extremely cautious about its own motives, as it is still under the influence of mappo. The fact that Shinran sees both mappo and the Pure Land at work within himself introduces a critical element of self-questioning accompanied by self-confidence and assurance. This dual awareness provides a paradigm for articulating the interplay between a critical or dystopian consciousness and a hopeful or utopian one. Shinran's complex notion of birth in the Pure Land, as something that is at once fully settled in the middle of ordinary life and also only entirely realized in the future, presents a living utopia that can irrupt and affect our present world while being ever deferred to the future. These dynamics offer a model of constant progression that can never look at itself in a self-satisfied manner, claiming to have achieved the final goal.

Furthermore, the temporal and simultaneous immanence and transcendence of birth in the Pure Land introduces a critical gap between the utopian ideal and the embryonic awareness that embodies it absent in formulations of Buddhist anarchism that see anarchy already fulfilled in the realm of Zen rhetoric or the practice of meditation. However, the main problem in Shinran's thought is agency or, more precisely, a rebellious agency that can transform the dystopian realm of mappo. Such an agency is never articulated by Shinran, but his actions, which can be read as an extension of his teachings, show that neither the tariki logic nor the teleology of mappo, rendered him submissive or passive. Even though he calls into question his own ability to discern between good and evil, Shinran acts in accordance to his relative judgment, which at times includes vehemently contesting what he regarded as unacceptable behavior (e.g. the ban on nenbutsu).

volved in the oppressive realities of mappo can trigger the wish to rebel and transform.

If we were to apply Shinran's insight into the ruler's corruption, following the same historical logic that makes him imagine the nenbutsu as the most central and universal Buddhist practice and also the most appropriate for mappo, it could be argued that in the latter days' hierarchy has become corrupting and ineffective and ought to give way to an alternative social paradigm. The alternative could be inspired in Shinran's *ondobo ondogyo*, the community of fellow travelers, which resists hierarchical formations and the ethos of mappo. The horizontal social formation embodied in the equal discipleship to the Buddha can, thus, be construed, like the nenbutsu, as the most fundamental Buddhist social model and in the latter age of mappo, the only viable one. This model can add to the Buddhist anarchist project a focus on historical suitability and sensitivity, which does not need to be rooted in Buddhist eschatology, to balance the emphasis on the philosophical and ahistorical similarity between Buddhism and anarchism. Though Shinran's view of history is rooted in Buddhist teleological narratives, his critical awareness of his *zeitgeist* and attention to historical context and suitability (rooted also in Buddhist ideas of causation) are helpful tools that can be translated to other conceptions of history.

The interaction between the age of mappo and the Pure Land is Shinran's formulation of the basic Mahayana doctrine of the mutual dependence of *samsara* and *nirvana*, however it can also be engaged for negotiating notions of dystopia and utopia in a political context. At the heart of the relationship between mappo and the Pure Land lies a concern about harmonizing means and ends. In so far as the corrupted self of mappo cannot affect liberation, any more than the state can orchestrate its own vanishing, release comes from a radically different realm and is expressed in actions that mimic or instantiate the utopian end. By decentralizing the

an inherently revolutionary tool for social change.<sup>13</sup> The self-legitimizing discourse of Zen is also often taken at face value leaving unquestioned the histories of the Zen tradition and institutions in a context of competition with other Buddhist schools and discourses.<sup>14</sup> The lack of self-criticism and the adoption of an absolutist Zen discourse renders these attempts at formulating a Buddhist anarchism self-referential and unconvincing.

Thus, formulations of Zen anarchism, such as Max Cafard's (a.k.a. John Clark) *Zen Anarchy* or Kerry Thornley's *Zenarchy* often present Zen as being "more anarchic than anarchism" or "hold Universal Enlightenment a prerequisite to abolition of

---

<sup>13</sup> Discourses that construct meditation as an inherently progressive tool that might even be indispensable to social revolution can be found across Western Zen anarchist writings. These include Snyder's characterization of meditation as having "nation-shaking implications" ("Buddhist Anarchism"), Warner's implicit construction of Zen and *zazen* as a form "inner anarchy" (pp. 28–30) or Thornley's statement that "Zenarchy is the Social Order which springs from Meditation" (p. 13). These attempts to "meditate the state away" obscure the history of practices like *zazen* being used to support the state and further its ends as Brian Victoria's work demonstrates and fails to answer how the mere practice of Buddhist meditation has so far failed to produce an anarchist society despite being widely practiced across the history and geography of Buddhism. See Victoria, Brian Daizen. *Zen at War*. (Oxford: Rowman and Littleman Publishers, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> In finding Zen the most anarchist of Buddhisms, Zen anarchists collide with a certain Zen Buddhist discourse that presents Zen as the superior and ultimate form of Buddhism. Whereas this exceptionalist discourse is common across Buddhist traditions, which often competed against each other and unfailingly presented themselves as the best option, incorporating it to a Buddhist anarchism is problematic. Presenting Zen unmediated as the "Apotheosis of Buddhism" (Marshall p. 61) or asserting that "it did not degenerate into superstition [unlike other forms of Buddhism]" are ahistorical claims that ignore the power struggles and politics at work in the self-legitimation of Zen. For an account of the political implications of this self-legitimation see Park, Jin Y. *Buddhism and Postmodernity. Zen, Huayan and the Possibility of Buddhist Postmodern Ethics*. Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2008, pp.135–143.

the state”.<sup>15</sup> The complete identification of Zen and anarchism leads to a dismissal of authoritarian elements in the Zen tradition, which are either ignored or explained away by using Zen’s own self-legitimizing narratives. An example of this tendency can be found not only among Zen anarchists but also in Marshall, who presents Zen’s disciplinary regime of practice in a mildly sympathetic fashion by using much of Zen’s own discourse. The authority of the teacher is justified because students need some- one “to help them break out of their everyday perceptions and intellectual habits”.<sup>16</sup> Analogously, the strict discipline of Zen monasteries, including the ritual of using the keisaku for hitting the shoulder, is presented as “ways of shaking people out of their habitual way of seeing” and as a method to “develop the pupil’s character from within and increase his or her moral sense”.<sup>17</sup> Although Marshall acknowledges that these forms of authority and externally half-imposed, half-consented discipline are “aimed at creating self-disciplined freedom, not dependence on masters” he does not question the seeming dissonance between means

---

<sup>15</sup> John Clark [Max Cafard]. “Zen Anarchy” [2006]. The Anarchist Library. August 14<sup>th</sup> 2009, p.4 <http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/max-cafard-zen-anarchy>; Thornley, Kerry. “Zenarchy” [1991]. The Anarchist Library. December 19<sup>th</sup> 2009, p. 13. <http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/kerry-thornley-zenarchy>

<sup>16</sup> Marshall, p. 61.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Marshall, p. 62. It ought to be said that the Zen practice of using the keisaku, a long flat stick used for hitting the shoulders of practitioners while in meditation, is not necessarily always used as a form of disciplinary punishment but also as a form of relieving muscle tension around the shoulders when sitting in meditation for long periods of time. In Soto Zen the meditator has to request to be hit, but in the Rinzai ‘school’ or ‘tradition’ the stick-holder (jikijitsu) might choose who to hit and when. Whatever the purpose, the atmosphere created by someone menacingly carrying a stick behind your back (Zen practitioners sit facing the wall and so they cannot see the movements of the stick-holder) is certainly one of disciplinary rigor, if not mild coercion.

Buddhist foundation for forging a different Buddhist anarchism, could enable the Western Buddhist anarchist tradition to question its own assumptions and histories of power. Furthermore, Shinran’s emphasis on trust and devotional language destabilizes Buddhist anarchist orientalist imaginings of Buddhism as exclusively meditative, non-religious and, in a post-enlightenment sense, rational. However, a Shinran-based anarchism shows how Buddhist anarchism need not be couched in the language of exceptionalism that regards Buddhism as “the religion of no-religion”.<sup>85</sup>

A clear example is the logic of tariki, which is grounded in Buddhist rationality and philosophy, but which sits awkwardly with a purely meditative Buddhism stripped of “religious” elements. Nonetheless, tariki frees up the Buddhist practitioner from traditional Buddhist regimes of practice, which often involved hierarchical and disciplinary elements. Since the unmediated agency of the Amida Buddha acts directly on the practitioner it might be said to be a Buddhist “right of private judgment”, enabling the practitioner to discern in relation to his or her experience of tariki. As William Godwin’s work proves, the notion of a “private judgment” can be developed into a critique of state authority and authority at large. Also, tariki accomplishes the equalization of all beings, since in the last days of mappo no one can be said to not need the Buddha’s help. These parallel equalities, which offer complementary visions of entanglement and liberation, enable social criticism and can be engaged for militating against hierarchy. Most importantly, the notion of mappo has a strong relational flavor that identifies the dark age with the dark minds of the beings living through them, which are equally and mutually entangled in darkness. Thus, the relational awareness of being deeply in-

---

<sup>85</sup> The phrase, widely used to describe Buddhism in popular culture, can also be found in the title of Alan Watts’ *Buddhism the Religion of No-Religion* (Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 1999).

To claim that Shinran is inherently anarchistic is as anachronistic and misleading as claiming Zen philosophy and discourse as being “more anarchistic than anarchism”. However, Shinran, like Zen philosophy, can be read anarchically and provide a Buddhist foundation to an anarchist project. Furthermore, Shinran’s critical and historical awareness and his critique of both Buddhist and state authority can help contemporary Buddhist anarchisms to critically examine their own history and the history of Buddhism at large. Whether seen as reformist or revolutionary, Shinran’s attempts to redefine his own authority in a decentralizing way, and his nonconformist attitude towards what he perceived as corrupt secular and religious powers, can inspire a fruitful reflection about the social relations at work in Buddhist anarchist communities and their relationship to their larger societies. Moreover, as Buddhist anarchism grapples with its own relationship to the state, the history of Buddhists who wrestled with the state and kept a respectful but resistant distance can yield many poetical and political lessons. In these ways, the critical and rebellious side of Shinran can be extrapolated and re-engaged for resisting other and more recent practices of domination and oppression.

## 6. Concluding Thoughts

This discussion of the libertarian potential of Shinran fulfills a dual purpose: to reveal the more anarchistic aspects of Shinran’s teaching, using them for formulating a Jodo Shinshu Buddhist anarchism; and to offer some of his insights as a counterbalance to the privileging of an orientalist and ahistorical conception of Zen in recent Buddhist anarchist rhetoric. Offering an alternative, though not necessarily incompatible,

---

the Monshu” in Manitoba Buddhist Temple. ([http://www.manitoba-buddhistchurch.org/blog\\_files/1cbf020d5e607cce8a4ce4a2c63b8c11-46.html](http://www.manitoba-buddhistchurch.org/blog_files/1cbf020d5e607cce8a4ce4a2c63b8c11-46.html)).

and ends.<sup>18</sup> Many of these formulations take as premise the anarchic nature of Zen, which if left unquestioned result in celebratory discourses that lack a reflective and critical self-assessment. Whereas the Zen tradition does not lack elements of self-reflection and self-deconstruction, it is true that those elements are very rarely engaged with in Western Zen anarchist writings. Hence, Shinran’s understanding of Buddhism through the logic of tariki and the self-critical awareness it yields, can contribute a thorough critique of Buddhist histories of power, which is essential to any Buddhist anarchism. In order to make Shinran’s anarchic potential explicit I now turn to outline the anti-authoritarian implications of tariki in the context of the Pure Land tradition.

## 3. The Liberative Promise of Tariki

An important task in the formulation of any Buddhist anarchism is to examine the social relations that a given set of Buddhist ideas inspires or produces. The fact that most Buddhist institutions throughout history have tended to mimic and adopt the authoritarian patterns present in their societies does not mean that all formulations of the Buddhist teachings automatically lead towards oppressive social formations. Moreover, institutionalization is unequally regarded in the various Buddhist traditions; it might be seen as an essential and necessary feature enshrined as part of the doctrine (e.g. the role of the teacher in Tantric Buddhism) or it might be conceptualized as a historical and situational development that is somehow useful but also contingent (e.g. the institutions claiming to preserve Shinran’s legacy), with a broad range of positions

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. The same can be said about one of Gary Snyder’s early poems which combines spiritual and political vanguardism in imagining a future revolution: “Revolution in the Revolution in the Revolution”, in *Regarding Wave* (New York: New Directions Books, 1970), p. 39.

in between.<sup>19</sup> Any Buddhist anarchism would favour more decentralized forms of organization that do not consider social hierarchy as a requisite for Buddhist practice. Arguably, the teachings of Shinran or Jodo Shinshu lean towards the more libertarian side, despite being used, after his death, to create highly hierarchical and rigid systems of authority.<sup>20</sup> In his radical reformulation of Buddhist doctrine Shinran demolishes many of the premises that legitimated the Buddhist authorities and hierarchies of his time. The debunking of established Buddhist rituals, moral and meditative disciplines and the monastic regime is accomplished through the logic of tariki.

The tariki principle involves, in Shinran's own words, "entrusting ourselves to the Primal Vow and our birth becoming

---

<sup>19</sup> The practice of Buddhist tantra is traditionally regarded as impossible outside a hierarchical teacher-student relationship. In a recent study, Singh expresses it in these terms: "The Guru alone can be the guide and the pathfinder. Without taking refuse [sic] in a Guru and getting proper initiation from him any effort to understand transcendental reality and infinite unity would be ludicrous efforts of emptying the ocean with the help of a shell. [...] It is Guru and Guru alone who can help us in transcending our being", Lalan Prasad Singh. *Buddhist Tantra: A Philosophical Reflection and Religious Investigation*. (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 2010), pp. 117–118. James Dobbins analyses the emergence of doctrinal authority within Shinran's community and the contending institutions that claimed it, shortly after Shinran's death in great detail in *Jodo Shinshu: Shin Buddhism in Medieval Japan* (Hawai'i: University of Hawai'i Press: (2002), pp. 63–98.

<sup>20</sup> For a history of the development of the Jodo Shinshu institution(s) after Shinran's death see Dobbins (pp. 63–156) and its later and increasingly authoritarian character see Carol Richmond Tsang. *War and Faith. Ikko Ikki in Late Muromachi Japan*. (London: Harvard University Press, 2007). Although Shinran relativized good and evil and disregarded notions of auspiciousness or ritual purity, his later followers developed new criteria for "separating the pure from the polluted" (Jessica Main. *Only Shinran Will Not Betray Us. Takeuchi Ryo'on (1891–1967), the Otani-ha Administration and the Burakumin*. (Thesis Presented at McGill University, April 2012), p. 80), enshrining Shinran's bloodline as the locus of purity and mimicking the imperial model of kin(g)ship.

anarchism. The relativistic character of most Buddhist thought, including Jodo Shinshu, can produce a sort of cynical passivity that, despite being critical of government, also lets governments rule. The paradigmatic example of the Buddhist-influenced Daoist text *Wu Nengzi* (9<sup>th</sup> century) in China demonstrates how Buddhist relativity can lend itself to an ironic acceptance and collaboration with the government.<sup>82</sup> Although there might be a critical and self-cynical element in collaborating with authority, such an approach, far from destabilizing or disrupting that authority, ensures its smooth functioning. Suzuki (in)famously wrote about Zen, and Buddhism at large I would argue, can be "wedded to anarchism or fascism, communism or democracy".<sup>83</sup> The history of Jodo Shinshu certainly confirms that Suzuki's statement also applies to the teachings of Shinran, which have been interpreted from a broad range of ideological perspectives from socialism to liberalism and from Japanese imperial nationalism to eco-pacifism.<sup>84</sup>

---

<sup>82</sup> A detailed commentary of text from an anarchist perspective can be found in Rapp, John. "Anarchism or Nihilism: The Buddhist-Influenced Thought of Wu Nengzi" in Alexandre Christoyannopoulos *Religious Anarchism: New Perspectives*. Newcastle: Cambridge Publishing Scholars, 2009), pp. 202–225.

<sup>83</sup> Although a younger Suzuki had written in 1938 that Zen could be "wedded to anarchism or fascism, communism or democracy, atheism or idealism, or any political or economic dogmatism" (Suzuki in Victoria, p. 63), towards the end of his life he said at a public lecture that "anarchism is best" (Brown, p. 214).

<sup>84</sup> A socialist reading can be found in Takagi (see note 28), a liberal one in Kiyozawa (see note 81), a Japanese imperialist reading corresponds to the war time doctrines discussed in note 66 and elements of eco-pacifism can be said to pervade the official discourse of the two largest Jodo Shinshu institutions: the Nishi and Higashi Honganjis. The addresses of the 24<sup>th</sup> Monshu of the Nishi Honganji, Sokunyo Koshin Ohtani (1945), reflect on "peace issues and environment concerns" and offers a Buddhist analysis of "armed conflicts and climate change" and ethics of moderation and mutuality. Sokunyo Ohtani Koshin. "Immeasurable Light and Life -2008 New Year's Message from

paradigm and logic of nonconformity that can be engaged in a subversive manner. However, by making obedience illusory and not just irrelevant or unnatural, Shinran implicitly equates deliberate conformity and conscious nonconformity as absurd designs. In other words, one might argue that obedience is an illusion but complying with it while being aware of its illusory nature does not present a problem. Seeing the absurdity of authority does not necessarily involve rebellion, as one might choose to cynically or playfully comply with it. After all, obedience is deconstructed along with free will or the ability to act according to our wishes and, since we are prisoners of our karmic histories, neither rebellion nor compliance are really our choice.<sup>80</sup> Thus, whereas Shinran's playful debunking of his own authority could be interpreted in an antiauthoritarian direction, it can also be used for justifying an ironic and self-aware form of compliance.<sup>81</sup>

In fact, this problem has long haunted the political history of Buddhism and the formulation of any kind of Buddhist

---

<sup>80</sup> Shinran is at his most deterministic in Tannisho XIII, arguing that it is not our good or bad intentions what determine our actions, but our karmic histories, over which we have no power. However, this view can be interpreted, as Bloom does, as implying that another form of agency, through *tariki*, is possible since "[t]he reality of the Vow and its compassion illuminates and determines our [karmic] experience. Our experience does not limit the Vow", *Strategies for Modern Living. A Commentary with the Text of the Tannisho*. (Berkeley: Numata Centre, 1992), p. 120.

<sup>81</sup> For instance, Amstutz characterizes Jodo Shinshu values during the Tokugawa period (1603–1868) as "emphasizing hard work, frugality, obedience to the government, conservative protectiveness of one's family group or business [...], honesty, moderation, courtesy, restraint, observance of social hierarchy and, above all, self-confidence" (*Interpreting 24*). This enumeration shows how Jodo Shinshu did not develop in an antiauthoritarian direction and how Shinran's rhetoric of equality and spontaneity did not translate, and does not necessarily translate, into social equality and individual freedom. Thus, a long history of cooptation and cooperation with the state does not render Jodo Shinshu essentially conservative any more than an early history of subversion and social criticism makes it inherently antiauthoritarian.

firmly settled; hence it is altogether without one's working".<sup>21</sup> The "Primal Vow" refers to the 18<sup>th</sup> among Dharmakara Bodhisattva's 48 vows, who promised not to attain enlightenment (and therefore become Amida Buddha) unless all beings could be born in his Pure Land by simply calling his name with a trusting mind. "Birth", the soteriological goal of Shinran's Buddhism, is thus accomplished by trusting the Buddha's vow and not through the practitioners "own working", that is her or his efforts, designs or meritorious practice. The practical implication of this principle is a cancellation of the polarity of good and evil: "on one hand, you should not be anxious that Tathagata [Amida Buddha] will not receive you because you do wrong [...] On the other hand you should not think that you deserve to attain birth because you are good".<sup>22</sup> The irrelevance of moral or spiritual abilities for attaining the soteriological goal renders the institutions, disciplinary regimes and authority figures that act as guiding examples of moral or spiritual accomplishment also irrelevant. In fact, Shinran does not stop at considering good and evil people equal in regards to realizing entrusting to the vow, but goes as far as enshrining the evil person, as the true object of the Buddha's promise: "Amida made the Vow, the essential intent of which is the evil person's attainment of Buddhahood".<sup>23</sup>

In this way, Shinran does not only transcend the established Buddhist morality but also subverts its implicit hierarchy, arguing that the "good" person is likely to rely on her or his own abilities to achieve Buddhahood and therefore is less likely to entrust to the vow, whereas "evil" people are more receptive to the vow since they are more aware of their limitations. In this

---

<sup>21</sup> *Lamp for the Latter Ages. Mattosho II in Shinran, Collected Works of Shinran*, Dennis Hirota, trans. (Kyoto: Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-ha, 1997), p. 525. From now on *Collected Works of Shinran* will be referred to as CWS.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 525–6.

<sup>23</sup> *A Record in Lamenting Divergences. Tannisho III*, CWS, p. 663. 24. *A Record in Lamenting Divergences. Tannisho VI*, CWS, p.664. 25. *Ibid.*

new framework the notions of good and evil are relativized and redefined, affecting the social relations based on their polarity. “Good” people are those who think of themselves as good and do not realize their “evilness”. The logic of Amida’s vow makes both good and evil contingent, rendering the authority figures associated with good unnecessary and preventing a clear-cut hierarchy based on the deliberate cultivation of good acts or states of mind. Therefore, hierarchical institutions devised for the purpose of cultivating good and avoiding evil (e.g. the monastic community) can also be made redundant. Although new institutions could be created to promote “entrusting to the Primal Vow”, such institutions can never be said to mediate or cultivate the experience of entrusting. Shinran’s strong emphasis on tariki characterizes entrusting or shinjin as spontaneous experience that cannot be achieved through practice, therefore any religious institution is rendered contingent.

The traditional authority of the master over the disciples is also redefined if not dissolved altogether. Though Shinran regarded Honen as his master, and the presence of Amida in the world, he claims to have not had “even a single disciple”. There were many who looked up to Shinran as an example to follow, but Shinran’s logic is based on his understanding of tariki: “if I brought people to say the nembutsu [Amida’s name] through my own efforts, then they might be my disciples. But it is indeed preposterous to call persons ‘my disciples’ when they say the nembutsu having received the working of Amida”.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, Shinran regards the idea that “going against a teacher” mars one’s path to enlightenment as both “arrogant” and “absurd”.<sup>25</sup> Students and teachers meet and part because of their conditions and conditionings (in Sanskrit: karma), and gratitude is a spontaneous feeling, not something to be cultivated by the student or to be used as a form of controlling mechanism

---

<sup>24</sup> A Record in Lamenting Divergences. Tannisho VI, CWS, p.664.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

one person”.<sup>77</sup> To which Shinran ironically retorts: “Then why did you say that you would follow whatever I told you?”<sup>78</sup> Shinran then elaborates on how hard it is to act according to our wishes, since we are often at the mercy of our karmic histories, and how the “good” or “evil” in our hearts has no weight in our attainment of birth in the Pure Land. In this way, not only “good” and “evil” are once again relativized when seen from the all-inclusive and non-discriminating compassion of the Buddha, but the very possibility of obedience (whether to one’s own will or to another’s) is revealed to be an illusion.

By adopting the mask of authoritarianism Shinran demonstrates the absurdity of obedience and implicitly sets a precedent for questioning authority. As his own unreasonable request shows, the fact that we respect or agree with certain people does not mean that we should or could blindly follow their instructions.<sup>79</sup> Although the focus of Shinran’s argument is our inability to act coherently and, consequently, how no behavioural requirements (including social or religious compliance) should be added to shinjin, the implication of his exchange with Yuien-bo also implies that compliance is both irrelevant and irrational. Even though this brief exchange needs to be understood as part of a Buddhist polemic, it offers a

---

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> A structurally similar argument is put forward by Kiyozawa (1863–1901) who regards moral codes as ultimately unrealistic and unattainable. At a time when the Jodo Shinshu institutions were advocating an ethic of obedience to the state, Kiyozawa regards morality as a teaching aimed “at enabling someone to appreciate the impossibility of moral praxis” (Kiyozawa Manshi, “Negotiating Religious Morality and Common Morality” in Mark Blum and Robert Rhodes ed., *Cultivating Spirituality. A Modern Shin Buddhist Anthology*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), p. 82). Not unlike Shinran’s relativization of morality, Kiyozawa’s could equally be appropriated for a libertarian agenda that interrogates the state and its ethics but also as a quiet injunction to let it be as it is and focus on the absolute experience of shinjin. Consequently readings of Kiyozawa both as accommodating and as resistant are equally abundant (Curley, pp. 148–153).



his own power base in the Eastern provinces. In this case, Shinran resorts to his social authority as a father, rather than his loosely defined authority as a teacher, to curtail his son's attempt to speak on his behalf. However, neither in Jishin-bo's case nor in the other instances that involve conflict, Shinran issues any form of spiritual condemnation. No pronouncement is made about his opponents' future destiny, although he at times rationalizes their behaviour in the following manner: "such thoughts arise because they fail to entrust themselves to the Buddha dharma".<sup>73</sup> Ultimately, however, Shinran seems to regard relations with his loosely defined followers as ruled by karmic conditions, which escape both the student and the teacher's conscious will: "We come together when conditions bring us to meet and part when conditions separate us. In spite of this, some assert that those who say the nembutsu having turned from one teacher to another cannot attain birth. This is absurd".<sup>74</sup>

An analogous use of the tariki logic for deconstructing social relationships of authority and obedience can be found in the thirteenth chapter of Tannisho, in which Shinran first assumes the mask of authoritarianism to later debunk it by offering a radical critique of obedience. The chapter opens with an unusual request of obedience from Shinran to Yuien-bo: "Yuien-bo, do you accept all that I say? [...] Then you will not deviate from whatever I tell you?" -Yuien-bo swiftly promises to comply.<sup>75</sup> However, the unusual request for obedience is followed by a further bizarre command: "Now, I want you to kill a thousand people. If you do, you will definitely attain birth".<sup>76</sup> Yuien-bo's response is again swift, but negative: "Though you instruct me thus, I'm afraid it is not in my power to kill even

---

<sup>73</sup> Lamp for the Latter Ages. Mattosho XX. CWS, p. 554.

<sup>74</sup> A Record in Lament of Divergences. Tannisho VI. CWS, p. 664. 75. A Record in Lament of Divergences. Tannisho XIII. CWS, p. 670. 76. Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> A Record in Lament of Divergences. Tannisho XIII. CWS, p. 670.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

on the part of the teacher. By shifting the focus to an individual relationship between the practitioner and the Buddha, the traditional disciplinary regime of Buddhist practice is dismantled and translated to a subjective and personal realm, which does not necessitate social relationships of authority. Shinran preserves some of those relationships (e.g. his regard for his teacher and leadership before his students, his loose monastic identity) in a symbolic way but their original hierarchical content is emptied or radically redefined.

Shinran's ideas are a development within Pure Land Buddhism, a stream of Buddhism focused on the goal of birth in the Pure Land of Amida Buddha, the realm of effortless enlightenment, through a variety of devotional and often non-monastic, non-meditative practices. Unlike other forms of Buddhism, which prescribe meditative exercises and a monastic lifestyle in order to achieve the Buddha's enlightenment in this life, Pure Land Buddhism aims to create the necessary conditions for emerging in a realm where enlightenment will naturally happen after death. However, as I will argue later, the transcendent/inherent nature of the Pure Land as a post-mortem/this life realm varies greatly in different Pure Land Buddhist contexts. Pure Land Buddhism originated in India and later developed in various ways in China, Tibet, Korea, Vietnam and Japan. Pure Land Buddhism was first organized as a separate tradition or school in 13<sup>th</sup> century Japan, through Honen's movement and the many lineages established by his disciples. However, Pure Land practices and ideas pervade Mahayana Buddhism in all its manifestations across South, Central and East Asia. The Pure Land movement represented a simplification of Buddhist practice, making its eventual goal accessible for lay people who had no time for meditation or a contemplative lifestyle. It is based on the idea that everybody can be reborn in Amida's Pure Land (understood differently across the Buddhist world but generally equated with Buddhahood or the effortless attainment of Buddhahood)

by doing a variety of relatively simple practices that differ slightly depending on historical and geographical setting, but that all have in common the recitation of the Buddha's name (in Japanese: nenbutsu). This practice is based on the story of the Buddha Amida who promised to bring all beings to his realm if they call the Buddha's name and aspire to be born in the Pure Land.

However, the Buddha's vow and his joyous realm have been interpreted in myriad ways across the Buddhist world, from symbolic interpretations that equate the Pure Land with enlightenment and refer to it as the practitioner's pure mind (Zen) to readings of the Pure Land as a realm reached fully only after death (common among most Pure Land Buddhists) or as a visionary display that can be accessed through meditation (Tibetan and Chinese Pure Land meditative-visionary traditions).<sup>26</sup> Analogously, within Pure Land Buddhism, interpretations of the practical implications of the Buddha's vow range from the requirement to adhere to (monastic or lay) precepts and arduously engage in constant recitation of the nenbutsu up to the crucial moment of death (most Chinese and some Japanese traditions) to an emphasis on the mind that calls the nenbutsu and understands recitation as an expression of mindfulness or gratitude towards the Buddha (Shinran).

Over and above being central to Pure Land Buddhists, the Pure Land narrative also pervades all forms of Mahayana Buddhism. It can be said to be a Buddhist utopia or ideal world, as it represents the social application of the Buddha's insight. In so far as it stands for the world that unfolds from a Buddha's enlightenment it expresses the Buddhist virtues of compassionate detachment, equality and all-inclusiveness and, consequently, has a history of being construed as heterotopia, an alternative

---

<sup>26</sup> A few of these interpretations are analyzed in Tanaka and Payne, eds., *Approaching the Land of Bliss. Religious Praxis of Amitabha* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), which explores different approaches to the Pure Land ideal throughout Buddhist history and geography.

in Japanese Buddhist communities) denying that he has any power over the objects or the students.<sup>71</sup> It is impossible to determine the exact power relations at work in the many disputes that took place in Shinran's community, however there seems to be a difference in the way he deals with difference of opinion in doctrinal matters and the way he addresses aggressive or deceitful behaviour that compromised Shinran or disrupted the community. Furthermore, the advice to not become familiar with "wrongdoers" ambiguously reads in context both as an informal excommunication and as a refusal to impose his views on those antagonizing them.<sup>72</sup> Among fellow practitioners, the slander of the three treasures (teacher –freely used to refer to Honen, Shinran or the Buddha– the teachings and the community of fellow practitioners) is likely to have been regarded as expressing the wish to leave the community and Shinran's "respectful distance" can thus be read as a tacit acknowledgment of that wish. In any case, the correspondence recording these disputes never goes into detail as to what specific acts or words entailed "slander" or were deemed beyond the pale.

Shinran is at his most severe when he disowns his son, who had been claiming his father's authority to seemingly create

---

<sup>71</sup> When asked why does he not demand the sacred objects given to a follower who has now left the community, Shinran is recorded to have thus reasoned against it: "When differences of opinion arise in this world, the land becomes raucous with complaints to return the Honzon scroll and sacred writings, to return the titles, to return the true entrusting they've gotten. [...] The Honzon scroll and sacred writings are forms of skilful means meant to benefit sentient beings. Even if someone were to decide to cut their ties with me and to enter someone else's community, I have no special monopoly on these sacred writings, for what the Tathagata teaches has currency throughout all communities". Kudensho V. Bloom, ed., *The Essential*, pp. 20–21.

<sup>72</sup> In the same letter in which Shinran advises to "keep a respectful distance and not become familiar" with wrongdoers, he also reasons that they ought to be left alone since their conversion "is not our design" as it needs to be "awakened through the Buddha's working", *Lamp for the Latter Ages*. *Mattosho XX*. CWS, p. 554.

A laissez-faire attitude towards divergence from his teachings is also observed in his letters, except when certain individuals claim Shinran's authority while misrepresenting his message for their own purposes (e.g. his son Jishin-bo). This attitude of non-interference can be found in statements such as "I cannot accept what your fellow practitioners are saying, but there is nothing to be done about it".<sup>68</sup> Shinran's tone is more severe when he condemns slandering of parents, teachers or fellow-practicers, as in the case of Zenjo-bo from whom Shinran takes distance: "I had no close feelings for him and did not encourage him to come and see me".<sup>69</sup> In other letters, Shinran advises his followers to "keep a respectful distance and not become familiar with those given to wrongdoing".<sup>70</sup> Although this can be read as an informal kind of excommunication, Shinran systematically refused to take back the sacred objects given to his followers (the very procedure that signifies excommunication

<sup>68</sup> Lamp for the Latter Ages. Mattosho XVIII. CWS, p. 549.

<sup>69</sup> Lamp for the Latter Ages. Mattosho XIX. CWS, pp. 551–552. Some of the actions described in these letters comprised what East Asian Mahayana Buddhism considered the acts carrying the worst karmic consequences, namely the five grave offenses and the misuse or slander of the dharma [Buddhist teaching]. The five gravest offenses are enumerated divergently in different canonical sources but usually involve the killing or attacking of parents, a Buddha, the Buddhist community, Arahats or Bodhisattvas. Although the Larger Sutra mentions that the easy practice of nenbutsu is not available to "those who commit the five grave offenses and slander the right Dharma" (Inagaki, p. 22), the latter Pure Land tradition from Shan Tao (613–681) onwards, including Shinran, considered this as a deterrence to commit those actions and not as an actual clause of exclusion. Thus, Shinran reads this exclusion as oblique inclusion. The purpose of the exclusion clause is to show "the gravity of these two evil kinds of wrongdoing", which he sees at work in himself, a confirmation that sentient beings cannot liberate themselves and that the Buddha's vow is for their sake. Thus the deterrence to commit evil is seen as a form of reassurance, which "make[s] us realize that the sentient beings throughout the ten quarters, without a single exception, will be born in the Pure Land". Notes on the Inscription on the Sacred Scrolls. CWS, p. 494.

<sup>70</sup> Lamp for the Latter Ages. Mattosho XX. CWS, p. 554.

social order.<sup>27</sup> The Pure Land of Amida Buddha is sometimes described in the Sutras in ways that lend themselves to a radical egalitarian reading. As a realm of egolessness, all beings share in the same qualities and have only nominal status, their wishes are fulfilled and their needs are met.<sup>28</sup> Also, the absence of greed, hatred and ignorance involves the lack of property or possession, violence, war and, indeed, government.<sup>29</sup> Though

<sup>27</sup> Curley explicitly discusses the pre-modern conception of the Pure Land "as a heterotopia –an enacted utopia, or an immanent space of difference, neither strictly transcendent nor strictly immanent", Curley, Ann Marie Know That We Are Not Good Persons: Pure Land Buddhism and the Ethics of Exile (PhD Thesis presented at McGill University, June 2009), p. 7. More modern and politically oriented readings feature Takagi Kemmyo's construction of the Pure Land as "the place in which socialism is truly practiced", Takagi Kemmyo, "My Socialism", in Living in Amida's Universal Vow, Alfred Bloom, ed., (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2004), p. 191. Takagi Kemmyo (1864–1914) was a Jodo Shinshu cleric from Higashi Hongaji, expelled from the order because of his involvement in the socialist-anarchist movement. He was tried and convicted for seemingly fabricated charges of conspiring against the emperor's life and died in prison, allegedly at his own hand.

<sup>28</sup> The Larger Sutra, the Buddhist sutra privileged by Shinran as the most important, describes the beings born in the Pure Land as being "all of a single kind with no distinction in appearance. The words 'humans' and 'devas' [Sanskrit, gods] are used simply in accordance with the forms of existence in other worlds [...] all receive the body of naturalness, of emptiness and of boundlessness", Inagaki Hisao, ed. The Three Pure Land Sutras, Volume II. The Sutra on the Buddha of Immeasurable Life. (Kyoto: Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-Ha, 2009), p.46. Furthermore, "the sentient beings born in that land all possess the thirty two major physical characteristics [of a Buddha]. Their wisdom having been completely perfected, they penetrate deeply into the reality of all things" (Inagaki, p. 60). Again the Larger Sutra describes the Pure Land as a place where "Palaces to dwell in, clothes, food and drink, many kinds of beautiful flowers and incense, and other ornaments that are provided to them [those born in the Pure Land] arise out of spontaneity" (Inagaki, p.45).

<sup>29</sup> The Larger Sutra further describes the inhabitants of the Pure Land: "With respect to the myriad things in that land, they harbor neither a sense of 'mine' nor any sense of attachment. Free and unrestricted, their minds are unattached in going and coming, proceeding and staying. They do not

the Buddha is often referred to as the lord or king of the land, he does not seem to rule it in any way and appears more as a *primus inter pares* in a society of Buddhas. Neither the sutras nor Shinran elaborate on the Pure Land in the explicitly political way described above, however, the latent anti-authoritarian potential of the Pure Land narrative can contribute a utopian referent to any Buddhist anarchist imagination.

Though never overtly political, Shinran's reading of the Pure Land is not devoid of social implications. Emphasizing compassion, the Pure Land is not seen as the ultimate destiny of the practitioner, but as a transformative stage leading to his or her return to the realm of suffering to liberate all beings. Thus, the world ought to be first escaped, but only for the purpose of being later revisited and transformed. Shinran's spacio-temporal conception of the Pure Land is a complex and debated matter within Jodo Shinshu which falls beyond the scope of this chapter. Suffice to say that interpretations of Shinran's thought range from an otherworldly Pure Land located in a mythical West and reached only after death to an immanent Pure Land that interpenetrates, irrupts and transforms our world.<sup>30</sup> This diversity of readings is enabled by Shinran's reluctance to accept there were living Buddhas among his fellow humans but also his certainty that "There is no need to wait in anticipation for the moment of death, [since] at the time shinjin [entrusting] becomes settled, birth too becomes settled".<sup>31</sup> This means, paradoxically, that the person who entrusts in the Buddha's vow is "equal to Tathagatas" and "is in the rank of succes-

---

discriminate between those with whom they are close and those with whom they are not. They have no thought of self and other, nor of competition and dispute" (Inagaki, pp. 62–63).

<sup>30</sup> For the recent and modern history of some of these interpretations see Curley (pp. 133–177). For an outline of some of the earlier patterns of interpretation of Shinran's teaching see Shigaraki Takamaro. *Heart of the Shin Buddhist Path*. David Matsumoto, trans. (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2013), pp. 76–80.

<sup>31</sup> *Lamp for the Latter Ages*. Mattosho I. CWS, p. 523.

of a Jodo Shinshu fundamentalist politics with aspirations to take over the state, and on the other resist state interference aimed at turning the religious teachings and community into a mechanism of social control. Shinran's refusal to entrust the spreading of his religious ideas to the state is also rooted and legitimated through the logic of *tariki*. Since no person can make or train another to entrust to Amida, how can anybody claim the role of spreading the teaching?

The logic of *tariki* does not only affect the relationship between the community and the state but Shinran's self-perception and relations within and across the religious community. In a manner that resembles the Buddha of the Kalama Sutta Shinran is recorded saying in the Tannisho: the "Vow of Amida [...] was entirely for the sake of myself alone" and addressing his audience: "whether you take up and accept the nembutsu or whether you abandon it is for each of you to determine."<sup>67</sup> The first statement should not be read as an ontological assertion of Shinran's specialness, but as an experiential appraisal of the individual experience of entrusting to the Buddha. Shinran can only speak for himself and therefore, as far as he is concerned, the vow is for himself alone. Although he shares the teaching and his interpretation of it with others he cannot speak for others or impose his beliefs on them. This non-coercive and individualistic approach further confirms why a coercive and homogenizing structure like the state could never be in charge of spreading or propagating the teaching.

---

<sup>67</sup> *A Record in Lament of Divergences*. Tannisho, Postscript. CWS, p. 679; *A Record in Lament of Divergences*. Tannisho II. CWS, p. 662. The Kalama sutta from the Pali canon features the historical Buddha exhorting his audience not to rely on authority, received tradition, or well-sounding words. The Buddha insists that every individual should question and test everything they hear and then decide for themselves whether it is true or not. See Tannisaro Bikku, trans., *Kalama Sutta: To the Kalamas* (<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an03/an03.065.than.html>, 1994).

to spread and the saying of the nenbutsu “for the sake of the imperial court” are not explicitly connected in the letter. Moreover, saying the nenbutsu for the court is an act of ambiguous devotion. As much as it could signify a bow to the emperor’s authority, we should not forget that Shinran frequently encouraged his followers to say the nenbutsu for their enemies (e.g. those obstructing the nenbutsu).

Using a language that resembles that of his diatribe against the emperor and his minister, Shinran speaks of those authorities who persecuted his movement as “people lacking eyes” and “people lacking ears” because they “perform deeds that will bring about the suppression of the nenbutsu and act out of malice toward people of the nenbutsu”.<sup>65</sup> Shinran’s advice on how to deal with nenbutsu opponents is thus articulated for his followers: “without bearing any ill toward such persons, you should keep in mind the thought that, saying the nenbutsu, you are to help them”.<sup>66</sup> The fact that Shinran encourages his followers to say the nenbutsu for a given individual does not necessarily mean that homage is paid to that individual, as the second instance clearly shows. Far from paying respects or accepting the authority of “people lacking ears” and “people lacking eyes”, Shinran’s response is a clear gesture of resistance couched in the all-inclusive language of Buddhist compassion. The reference to the imperial court does not necessarily signify an implicit relationship of mutual dependence or cooperation, but an expression of the Buddha’s compassion, which embraces friends and enemies alike.

By drawing this basic separation between *buppo* and *obo*, Shinran can be said to on one hand preempt the emergence

---

taken it for the sound of a bugle commanding us to attack the enemy? Or did I mistake the bells and drums of battle for injunctions for peace?” Takagi Kemmyo, “My Socialism”, in *Living in Amida’s Universal Vow*, Alfred Bloom, ed., (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2004), p. 193.

<sup>65</sup> A Collection of Letters V. CWS, p. 565.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

sion to Buddhahood” and yet they remain “foolish beings possessed of blind passions”.<sup>32</sup> This double awareness (in Japanese: *nishu jinshin*, literally “two kinds of deep confidence”), involving both assurance and self-criticism, constitutes the structure of liberative entrusting, rendered in Shinran’s writings as *shinjin* (true or trusting mind) or *anjin* (peaceful mind).

*Shinjin* plays a key role in Shinran’s thought, as the expression of realization of the Buddha’s vow which assures the practitioner unfailing enlightenment. It is the mind of *shinjin* what makes *nenbutsu*, or the calling of the name, effective, as it accomplishes birth in the Pure Land. Thus, Shinran deemphasizes any inherent magical power in the name (*Namu Amida Butsu*, as pronounced in Japanese) and focuses on the mind that leads one to recite the name. This is a mind that understands the paradoxical nature of the human condition (both steeped in defilement and assured of enlightenment) and expresses itself by the verbal act of entrusting in the Buddha. Most importantly, this is not a mind that could be cultivated or brought about through a prescribed method, it is a mind that comes about through *tariki* or *jinen* (naturalness, spontaneity).<sup>33</sup> In this way the practitioner is liberated from a strict regime of practice, in which the only requirement is the spontaneous recitation of the name, understood not as the practitioner’s but as the Buddha’s practice. This approach to practice reflects the naturalness or spontaneity of the Pure Land, implicitly modelling the lifestyle of the person of *shinjin* in the

---

<sup>32</sup> *Lamp for the Latter Ages*. *Mattosho IV*. CWS, p. 528, 529. *A Record in Lament of Divergences*. *Tannisho IX*. CWS, p. 665.

<sup>33</sup> Shinran elaborates on this originally Daoist idea of spontaneity for explaining the workings of *tariki* agency in “On *Jinen Honi*”, CWS, p. 427–428. In his own words *jinen* or spontaneity (Chinese, *ziran*) means both the “supreme nirvana” (p.428) and the lack of concern “about being good or bad” (pp. 427–428). Thus, the goal of Buddhist practice mirrors the means that attain it. Above all *jinen* means that entrusting and realization do not happen “through the practitioner’s calculation” but “through the working of the Tathagata’s vow” (p.427), therefore, “no working is true working” (p. 428).

free and effortless life of the Pure Land. When translated to the discourse of anarchism this mirroring offers an example of prefiguration or harmonizing means and ends. The duality running through Shinran's thought enables this awareness to be at once (self-)critical and (self-)confident, providing a valuable model for any utopian project.

Furthermore, the centrality of spontaneous tariki, and the absence of anxiety about "performing good acts" or "despair[ing] of the evil they commit" allows the practitioners to act with a large degree of freedom.<sup>34</sup> The ethics emerging out of this logic can be neither legalistic nor finalist, since the violation of any given code represents no hindrance and there is no goal that has not been accomplished in the mind of entrusting.<sup>35</sup> Not surprisingly, the open-ended formulation of ethical behavior became a highly controversial issue in the early Jodo Shinshu communities, who often used this new discovered freedom in ways that transgressed conventional moralities. Although Shinran admonished his followers against "excusing acts that should not be committed, words that should not be said and thoughts that should not be harbored" he never mentions what those acts might be.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, he does not regard any bad deed as powerful enough to outdo the liberating effectiveness of the Buddha's vow and considers wrongdoing the norm among "foolish beings possessed of blind passions".<sup>37</sup> Paradoxically again, Shinran's vision of human defilement and radical evil enables,

<sup>34</sup> A Record in Lament of Divergences. Tannisho I. CWS, p. 661.

<sup>35</sup> Bloom discusses Shinran's moral approach on the one hand "not advocat[ing] a repressive ethic emphasizing abstention from any worldly activity simply because it is worldly" and, on the other, "suggest[ing] an ethic of displacement in which contemplation of the Vow and the recitation of Nenbutsu infuses an awareness of Amida's compassion" which in turn inspires compassionate action. See Bloom, "Shin Buddhism in the Modern Ethical Context", in *Shindharmanet* (<http://shindharmanet.com/course/c24/>).

<sup>36</sup> Lamp for the Latter Ages. Mattosho XX. CWS, p. 553.

<sup>37</sup> A Record in Lament of Divergences. Tannisho IX. CWS, p. 665

and shares his experience as an exile. Towards the end he also encourages the community to say the nenbutsu "not with thoughts of themselves, but for the sake of the imperial court and for the sake of the people of the country". He also recommends people whose shinjin is settled to say it "with the wish, 'May there be peace in the world, and may the Buddha's teaching spread'".<sup>63</sup> This fragment has been used to imply that Shinran paid homage to the emperor and implicitly endorsed the obo-buppo ideology.<sup>64</sup> However, the wish for the teachings

<sup>63</sup> A Collection of Letters II. CWS, p. 560.

<sup>64</sup> This interpretation was particularly preeminent during the period stretching from the Meiji Ishin (1868) and the end of World War II (1945). A good example is the testament of the 20<sup>th</sup> Monshu of Nishi Honganji, Konyo Ohtani (1798–1871), which explicitly identifies the emperor with Amida, and argues that gratitude ought to be expressed as obedience. Shinran's teaching had thus come full circle, from denouncing the rulers' hypocrisy to becoming their ultimate source of legitimacy. Konyo's text can be found, along with thorough analyses in Curley (p. 140–147) and in Rogers, Minor and Ann Rogers. "The Honganji: Guardian of the State (1868–1945)". *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 17 (1990): 1–26. As the Japanese state became increasingly militarized and imperialistic, Shinshu scholars scanned Shinran's writing in order to find passages that could legitimate Japan's many wars. This process has been called "The Mobilization of Doctrine" and is discussed by Christopher Ives in more detail in "The Mobilization of Doctrine: Buddhist Contributions to Imperial Ideology in Modern Japan," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 26 (1999), pp. 83–106. Moreover, in the early 1910s, the Shinshu socialist and pacifist Takagi Kemmyo strongly criticized the reading of Shinran's injunction to say the nenbutsu for the sake of the imperial court as advocating subservience. He points out how later in the same letter Shinran encourages the fellowship to recite the nenbutsu "with the wish 'May there be peace in the world and may the Buddha's teaching spread'". This latter injunction seems to contradict the violent and repressive policies of "the imperial court" (at Takagi's time) and cannot be understood as implying obedience, but simply as a wish for the wellbeing of all, including those opposed to the nenbutsu. The increasingly militarized Japanese state of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century seems to sit awkwardly with the wish for peace and so Takagi refuses to imagine that compliance with its policies could be justified in any way through Shinran's teaching. Takagi thus confronts the Shinshu scholars who legitimate the imperial polity through this particular letter: "Although the passage above is a gospel for peace, have people mis-

spread the nembutsu by utilizing outside people for support. The spread of the nembutsu in that area must come about through the working of the revered Buddha.<sup>60</sup>

By refusing any kind of interference or help from “outside people” or “powerful supporters”, which referred to government officials, Shinran can be said to resist the cooptation of his community. However, by using the principle of tariki once again he disrupts an old Japanese concept: the mutual or necessary dependence between buppo and obo. The coupling of buppo and obo goes back to the introduction of Buddhism in Japan and served to provide a symbiotic relationship for state and Buddhist institutions. Thus, the monks protect the state through rituals and in turn the state protects them through naked power.<sup>61</sup> This relationship enabled the rulers to be legitimized by Buddhist ideology and to be able to use that ideology to rule their subjects; on the other hand the Buddhist teachings were officially endorsed and spread by the rulers. Shinran explicitly challenges the logic of this model when refusing external support.<sup>62</sup> Although he does not reject the idea that practicing the nembutsu might benefit the nation in some sense, Shinran is firmly opposed to provide or receive the “benefit” the state expected from Buddhist establishments.

The possibility of benefiting the nation, and others at large, is expressed in another letter to Shoshin-bo, a follower who was about to undergo litigation because of his involvement with Shinran’s movement. In it Shinran identifies as part of a persecuted community, “people of the Pure Land nembutsu”,

<sup>60</sup> A Collection of Letters VII. CWS, p. 568.

<sup>61</sup> These dynamics are discussed at length in Neil McMullin, *Buddhism and the State in Sixteenth-Century Japan* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984).

<sup>62</sup> See Tokunaga Michio, “Buddha’s Law and King’s Law: The Bifurcation of Shinran’s Teaching,” in *Shin Buddhism: Monograph Series* (Los Angeles: Pure Land Publications, 1993).

in Fabio Rambelli’s words, “radical Amidists [...] to offer an alternative vision –an essentially egalitarian one”.<sup>38</sup> Although Rambelli does not consider Shinran a “radical Amidist” per se he acknowledges him as an intellectual bridge that enables subversive Pure Land Buddhists to deconstruct and mock the established politico-religious order.<sup>39</sup>

Consequently, Galen Amstutz calls Shinran “one of the most shrewdly and profoundly rebellious individuals in East Asian history” since his reinterpretation of Buddhist doctrine issues “a challenge to the mythos of monastic Buddhism and its authority”.<sup>40</sup> This is accomplished largely through tariki, which posits a primordial, enlightened agent (the Amida Buddha) who acts directly on the practitioner without mediation or validation from religious authorities. In this way, by regarding the Buddha as the primordial and ultimate agent, the practitioner becomes, in a complex and paradoxical manner, empowered as one assured of enlightenment, freed from religious institutions and disciplines but deeply indebted to the Buddha. By entrusting practitioners’ autonomy over practices that involve training, skill and learning, the social framework of Buddhist practice can be dismantled or radically redefined, since there is no need for spiritual hierarchy. However, a flexible conscience ordered according to Buddhist sensibilities is not altogether absent, though shifted to the individual’s subjective sphere, as I will discuss in the fourth section of this chapter. The libertarian implications of this peculiarly Shinranian notion offer a

<sup>38</sup> Rambelli, Fabio. “Just Behave as You Like; Prohibitions and Impurities Are Not a Problem. Radical Amida Cults and Popular Religiosity in Premodern Japan” in Kenneth Tanaka and Richard Payne *Approaching the Land of Bliss. Religious Praxis in the Cult of Amitabha*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004, p.176.

<sup>39</sup> In fact, Rambelli presents Shinran simultaneously being considered by others to be an *ichinengi*, one of the streams of Pure Land Buddhism that he labels as “radical Amidism”, but also being “very critical of this alternative interpretation of Amidist orthodoxy and orthopraxy” (p. 179)

<sup>40</sup> Amstutz, “Shinran and Authority,” p. 150.

paradigm of Buddhist individuality and freedom that can be developed in an anarchist direction as a basis for self-reliance and non-conformity. Nonetheless, tariki is embedded and needs to be seen within the narrative of mappo, the degenerate last days of the Buddhist teaching (dharma) in which beings are incapable of being morally good or accomplishing Buddhist practices.

#### 4. Egalitarian Hopelessness, Collective Transformation

Shinran's revered teacher Honen (1133–1212) was a pioneer in advocating exclusive reliance on the nenbutsu as the only effective practice in the age of mappo.<sup>41</sup> However, Honen was not guided by a teacher but by reading the Buddhist scriptures over and over, eagerly seeking a path to enlightenment that could be available to all, not just the intellectual, moral, contemplative, economic or social elites. Honen was the first Buddhist in Japan to regard the Pure Land teaching as a doctrine that could stand on its own; its practices and motifs had always been part of larger systems or the chosen personal practice of certain individuals or small groups. Following his egalitarian concern Honen attracted people from all the social classes, who despite largely retaining their social positions were linked by a new religious consciousness that made no distinctions among them. Honen's exclusive focus on an easy practice that was available to anyone is deeply rooted in the narrative of mappo, since it is in the latter days that beings need more than ever a simple means to Buddhahood. An idea rooted in Buddhist

---

<sup>41</sup> The idea of mappo is based on some Buddhist sutras that posed that humanity will progressively degenerate as time elapsed from the historical Buddha's disappearance from the world (fifth century BCE). The most popular Japanese calculations located the beginning of the last and most degenerate age circa 1050.

Shinran finds in his rulers the same "blind passions" and duplicity he finds in himself and others around him, the implicit legitimacy of the rulers as moral examples or superior beings is seriously compromised.

Despite Shinran's relatively few explicit pronouncements about political issues, many scholars have explored the political implications of his message. Thus, the "shrewdly" and "rebellious" individual whom Amstutz sees using "the masks of technical interpretation and his own self-deprecation" Christopher Goto-Jones construes as "stretching way off the 'permissive' end of Shotoku's political constitution" into some "kind of anarchism".<sup>59</sup> Shinran stretches some of the more liberal aspects of the Japanese politico-religious tradition but he also sets himself apart from it by refusing to present buppo (i.e. the Buddhist teaching) and obo (i.e. the law of the king) as necessary or inherently complementary. This separation is put forward in a letter in which Shinran's disavows his son Jishin-bo for misrepresenting his ideas:

If you accept what Jishin-bo is saying –that I have instructed people to spread the nenbutsu by relying on outside people as powerful supporters, which I have never said- it will be an unmitigated error. [...] You must not in any way design to

---

<sup>59</sup> Amstutz, Shinran and Authority, p. 150. Christopher Goto-Jones, *Political Philosophy in Japan. Nishida, the Kyoto School, and Co-Prosperity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 35. The semi-legendary prince Shotoku Taishi (574–622) is credited for having brought Buddhism and literacy to Japan. Shinran's relationship with the crown prince is a complex and nuanced one. On the one hand Shotoku serves to legitimate Jodo Shinshu as stemming from the founding father of Japanese Buddhism (through Shinran's dream-visions of Shotoku as Bodhisattva Kannon), but on the other, "Shinran's focus on the karmic and spiritual lineage [connecting Shinran and his teaching to Shotoku], undermined the authority of the emperor, who gained his symbolic power through his imperial lineage to Prince Shotoku", Kenneth Doo Young Lee, *The Prince and the Monk. Shotoku Worship in Shinran's Buddhism*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 124.



ened the movement in two fundamental ways: on one hand, it allowed Honen's ideas to spread to remote areas of Japan far from Kyoto, and on the other it reinforced the nonconformist attitudes of those punished. As an exile stripped of his monastic status, Shinran found himself in an in-between position which he playfully appropriated through the term *hiso hizoku* (literally, neither monk nor layman). This term has been read in myriad ways by both sectarian and non-sectarian scholars; however, it seems unquestionable that the phrase denotes a gesture of resistance towards the state who disrobed him. By being *hiso hizoku* Shinran can be seen as denying both state and Buddhist authority. By claiming he is not a layman he resists the state's forceful disrobement, while by claiming he is not a priest or monk he refuses to submit to the monastic community and its hierarchy. Shinran's self-proclaimed marginality thus becomes an exilic space, a space of resistance to various entangled and established orders.

The phrase *hiso hizoku* also appears in the postscript of the *Kyogyoshinsho*, Shinran's opus magna, in which he openly criticizes the emperor and his ministers. In his (in)famous diatribe he accuses them of "acting against the dharma and violating human rectitude" when they become "enraged and embittered".<sup>58</sup> This dystopian portrayal of the political authorities resonates with the rhetoric of *mappo*, which, needless to say, also applies to the rulers of the latter age (*mappo*). If the emperor and his ministers act against both Buddhist and Confucian principles, which are meant to legitimize their rule in the first place, how can they use those same principles to justify their rule? Shinran does not ask such a question directly, but his invective implicitly hints at the rulers' hypocrisy. Even if Shinran does not develop this criticism to encompass all forms of political authority, his message seems to be that rulers can be challenged and held to certain standards. Furthermore, as

---

<sup>58</sup> *Kyogyoshinsho* VI, 117. CWS, p.289.

eschatology with distinctly negative teleological implications can be engaged for opening up an egalitarian and liberative horizon. As history moves away from the time the Buddha appeared in the world, beings also move away from the possibility of becoming enlightened. It is this deeply relational notion of *mappo* that allows Shinran to challenge the political and Buddhist authorities of his time, and to re-conceptualize all sentient beings in a horizontal relationship to each other in relation to the Buddha's compassion. Horizontality is founded in interdependence among deluded beings and between beings and their times. If all beings are the product of their times and the times are corrupt, there is no room for positing a spiritual vanguard that transcends its *zeitgeist*. Rambelli further spells out the subversive possibilities of this idea:

There is no distinction between the enlightened, morally pure elites and their ignorant and corrupt subordinates: in the final period only evil, common folk exist. Those who think that they are better than others are actually worse than the worst criminals because while sinners are aware of being sinners, elites delude themselves by believing in their innate goodness [...] Evil became the essential characteristic of all beings: the *kenmitsu*'s [established Buddhism] lowest are now the anthropological paradigm.<sup>42</sup>

Shinran's conception of *mappo* is also intensely personal, and what is sometimes interpreted as a negative self-image is in fact Shinran's self-awareness of being a product of his time. The discovery of the degenerate age is primarily existential in Shinran's writings, and it expresses a given historical consciousness through personal insight. From a Buddhist philosophical standpoint, it is impossible to separate the subjects living in a given context and the context itself, since they both create each other. Thus, living in *mappo* is being *mappo*. Shinran discovers this reality in himself and declares: "This self

---

<sup>42</sup> Rambelli, "Just Behave, p. 176.

is false and insincere; / I completely lack a pure mind".<sup>43</sup> Although most of the time Shinran expresses this critical awareness in relation to himself, he is not oblivious to the fact that others are equally a product of the corrupt times: "Each of us in outward bearing, / Makes a good show of being good, wise and dedicated / But so great are our greed, anger, perversity and deceit / That we are filled with all forms of malice and cunning".<sup>44</sup> This severe perception of humanity complicates any attempt to claim religious or moral authority. Shinran undermines his own authority in an un-self-legitimizing way when he exposes his position as religious leader or teacher as a farce: "I am such that I do not know right and wrong / And cannot distinguish false and true, / I lack even small love and small compassion, / And yet, for fame and profit, enjoy teaching others".<sup>45</sup>

Self-reflective statements such as this along with the tariki-in-fused claim "I do not have a single disciple" further complicate Shinran's identity as a teacher.<sup>46</sup> However self-deprecatory his rhetorical self reveals itself to be at times, this perception did not stop Shinran from sharing his ideas and writing until the end of his life. Neither did it stop him from occasionally using his loosely defined form of authority when he felt his message was compromised, sometimes in a hierarchical or authoritarian fashion.<sup>47</sup> Although the

<sup>43</sup> Hymns of the Dharma Ages. Shozomatsu Wasan LXLIV. CWS, p. 421.

<sup>44</sup> Hymns of the Dharma Ages. Shozomatsu Wasan LXLV. CWS, p. 421.

<sup>45</sup> Hymns of the Dharma Ages. Shozomatsu Wasan CXVI. CWS, p. 429.

<sup>46</sup> A Record in Lament of Divergences. Tannisho VI. CWS, p. 664.

<sup>47</sup> The best example is Shinran's disowning of his son Jishin-bo in 1256. Jishin-bo had deceived Shinran by claiming in front of his students that he had received new and secret teachings. The new teachings divided the community between those who remained faithful to Shinran's original teaching and those who espoused Jishin-bo's purported secret and new teaching. Although the actual content of Jishin-bo's doctrines is largely a matter of speculation, it seems to have contained the idea that the community ought to enter a symbiotic relationship with the political authorities and powerful

also warned of the undesirable social implications of letting the Pure Land movement grow unchecked. The popularity of Honen's movement posed a threat to the status of the traditional schools, in terms of social and financial support from the laity, but it was also an implicit threat to the larger socio-political order.

Two of the accusations levelled against the Pure Land movement concerned the imperial order (in)directly. The first involved setting up a new Buddhist school without imperial permission and the second charged the movement with being disrespectful or neglectful towards the kami, the native deities of Japan whose worship is intimately connected to the cult of the emperor.<sup>57</sup> These alleged crimes set a dangerous precedent: Buddhist institutions could exist without state control and might, directly or indirectly, challenge its authority.

A few members of the Pure Land movement were executed, and others like Shinran or Honen were exiled and / or disrobed. The ban and the diaspora it created seems to have strengthened

<sup>57</sup> In fact, the teaching of Shinran was used to legitimize countless peasant uprisings two centuries later, during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Ikko-ikki). Even as the socially subversive potential of his thought was thus demonstrated, the largest and emerging institution claiming to represent Shinran's legacy at the time (the Hongan-ji) had a mixed approach to the revolts, not meeting them with suppressive measures but admonishing the insurgents against drawing easy social implications from Shinran's message. A thorough discussion of this period and the attitude of the Jodo Shinshu institution can be found in James Dobbins, pp. 132–156 and Carol Tsang, pp. 44–156. Ambivalence about the revolts still pervades Jodo Shinshu discourses. However, modern Jodo Shinshu scholars and clerics, like Alfred Bloom (1926) have appreciated the liberatory dimension of the Ikko-ikki: "The outcome was the emancipation of the peasants from spiritual oppression, based on the fear of batchi or divine retribution in forms of punishment if they did not obey the demands of their overlords, the temples, shrines, and daimyo (local warlords), who represented the divine power on the land. Their release from superstition later led to the single-minded peasant revolts (Ikko ikki)", Bloom, Alfred. "Introduction" in Honen the Buddhist Saint: Essential Writings and Official Biography (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2006), p. xxxvii.

and that world is growing right now].<sup>56</sup> Although the world in Durruti's heart is different from the Pure Land, his utopian imagination runs parallel to Shinran's imagining of the relationship between the Pure Land and the person assured of birth in the Pure Land.

The strong relational quality that animates Shinran's conception of mappo and the interplay between the realms of enlightenment and delusion has structural similarities to certain formulations of anarchist thought and if translated to the realm of politics can be read in an anti-authoritarian direction. Because of these features Shinran's thought has the potential to contribute to Buddhist anarchist discourses a model for a community of equals and some form of blueprint for imagining the interaction between a dystopian consciousness and a utopian one. As confidence is ever coupled with severe self-criticism and an aspiration for ongoing transformation, any project modelled in Shinran's thought ought to remain self-questioning and suspicious about its own claims and authority. This critical spirit is an important element missing in many current Buddhist anarchist discourses. While not fully anarchist, Shinran's political statements and social identity also contain many subversive elements that offer a number of interpretive possibilities.

## 5. Neither Monk Nor Layman: An Ethic of Resistance?

In 1207 Honen's exclusive nenbutsu movement was banned by the imperial court, at the request of the state-supporting and state-supported Buddhist institutions. In the banning petition against Honen and his followers, the established Buddhist orders argued not only over contentious points of doctrine but

---

<sup>56</sup> Alberto Márquez, León Duarte (Montevideo: Editorial Compañero, 1993), p. 27

narrative of mappo can lead to a quietist acceptance of the established order, its highly relational nature also entails a subversive promise. The interdependent relation between beings and their times can be applied politically to yield a Buddhist, relational analysis of domination, which can be disrupted if the relational agents shift.<sup>48</sup> Social relations are also reflections of the age and beings' mindsets and so can be imagined to be governed by the same relational principles. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that even in the dark latter days, even if traditional (and more hierarchical) Buddhist disciplines are no longer available, the (horizontal) tariki way is still available to all. Therefore, the dystopian reality of mappo can be disrupted, exited or transformed.

Against the empty authorities of mappo, based on greed and deception, Shinran posits the community of those who have entrusted themselves to Amida, who are in a sense awake but who also remain entangled in the vicissitudes of their era. In a posthumous biography Shinran is recorded renouncing again his teacher role because of its incompatibility with tariki and further arguing that "As we are all the disciples of the Tathagatha, all of us stand on a par as "fellow seekers [ondobo ondogyo]".<sup>49</sup> Ondobo ondogyo, often rendered in English as "fellow practitioners", "Dharma friends", "fellow companions" or

---

patrons. A thorough account of the dispute and disowning can be found in Bloom. "The Life of Shinran Shonin: The Journey to Self-Acceptance" in Paul Williams, ed., *Buddhism in China, East Asia and Japan*. Vol II (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2005), pp. 87–93.

<sup>48</sup> This moment of negative self-discovery and its social implications can be compared to Max Stirner's notion of empörung, since they both represent a turning point that begins within the individual but that ultimately has social consequences. Both notions also lead to a debunking of inner and outer authorities, as De Ridder explains in relation Stirner in his essay "Max Stirner: The End of Philosophy and Political Subjectivity", in Max Stirner, ed. by Saul Newman (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 160.

<sup>49</sup> Kudensho VI in Bloom, ed. *The Essential Shinran. A Buddhist Path of True Entrusting* (Boston: World Wisdom, 2007), p. 20.

“fellow travelers”, is imagined by Shinran as a body of equals galvanized by a common purpose: that of journeying together towards the Pure Land. Though never developed in explicitly socio-political terms by Shinran, this horizontal model can be said to fulfil a double purpose: to mirror the Pure Land, the realm where all beings are equal, and to offer a liberative alternative to the hierarchical and corrupt world of mappo. In this sense, ondobo ondogyo represents a prefiguration of ideal equality like the undisciplined and “natural” lifestyle of the entrusting person. The community of fellow practitioners exists in between a hierarchical world and an egalitarian ideal, a position that could potentially turn them into a transformative agent. The egalitarian ideal of the Pure Land does not only provide a “principle of social criticism” but can also shape non-hierarchical formations in a hierarchical society.<sup>50</sup>

This model resembles, structurally, Shinran’s negotiation of the paradox of defilement and assurance as one of opposition but also of dialectic transformation. Thus, while practitioners remain “in this [defiled] world” their shinjin or entrusting heart is “equal to the hearts and minds of all Buddhas”.<sup>51</sup> Assurance of enlightenment presumes a transformative and liberative process that unfolds with the awakening of shinjin, since “Through the benefit of the unhindered light [tarikī], / We realize shinjin of vast, majestic virtues, / And the ice of our blind passions necessarily melts / Immediately becoming the water of enlightenment”.<sup>52</sup> Although the particular signs of this transformative process remain a contested issue within Jodo Shinshu, it seems clear that Shinran’s view of mappo is not ultimately fatalistic as it entails the promise of liberation or transformation. Another phrase commonly used by Shinran to refer to assurance of Buddhahood is “the stage of

<sup>50</sup> Ugo Dessi discusses “The Pure Land as a Principle of Social Criticism” in *Japanese Religions*, 33 (1 & 2), 75–90.

<sup>51</sup> *Lamp for the Latter Ages*. Mattosho VII. CWS, p. 532.

<sup>52</sup> *Hymns of the Pure Land Masters*. Koso Wasan XXXIX. CWS, p. 371.

no-retrogression” implying that people of shinjin are on a continuous journey forward towards enlightenment.<sup>53</sup> From a Buddhist anarchist perspective, the dialectic of self-criticism / transformative assurance offers a paradigm of critical progression that never stops questioning itself, as I will elaborate at length later.<sup>54</sup>

Furthermore, in social terms, ondobo ondogyo or the people of shinjin can become an embodied space of transformation and resistance to the empty hierarchies of mappo. The fellow practitioner’s heart-minds are already beyond the control of both state and monastic authority, being equal with the Buddhas and having received assurance of reaching the Pure Land. Consequently the actions flowing from such hearts, despite being often filtered and expressed through selfish delusion, can introduce a disruptive and spontaneous element within a network of hierarchical relationships. Gustav Landauer’s insight into the relational nature of the state is very relevant to this analysis, along with his idea that revolution comes from within and moves expansively outwards.<sup>55</sup> The same principle is expressed in the poetical formulation of the Spanish anarchist Buenaventura Durruti, who when asked about the ruins that a destructive revolution would leave behind replied: “Llevamos un mundo nuevo en nuestros corazones y ese mundo está creciendo en este instante” [We carry a new world in our hearts

<sup>53</sup> For a letter that discusses the implications of this concept see *Lamp for the Latter Ages*. Mattosho XIII. CWS, p. 540.

<sup>54</sup> Shinran kept this attitude of self-questioning and self-criticism until the end of his life as he writes at 85 the following reflection: “[W]e are full of ignorance and blind passion. Our desires are countless, and anger, wrath, jealousy, and envy are overwhelming, arising without pause; to the very last moment of life they do not cease, or disappear, or exhaust themselves”. *Notes on Once-Calling and Many-Calling*. Ichinen tanen mon’i. CWS, p. 488.

<sup>55</sup> Landauer in Martin Buber, *Paths in Utopia* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1950), p. 49.