STUDIES IN RELIGION

SCIENCES RELIGIEUSES

Revue canadienne / A Canadian Journal / Vol. 12, No. 4 1983

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Sacred ritual, sacred language: Jodo Shinshu religious forms in transition*

The Jodo Shinshu sect is the major Buddhist organization in Canada and was the first to establish churches in this country.[1] These churches became religious, cultural, and social centres for the Japanese immigrant community, though many of the immigrants had received their principal religious formation within the Shinto cultural context of Japan, with Buddhism as a secondary influence. The sect's strong role in the Japanese community in Canada is further surprising because the forms of Buddhism which had helped to shape the early life of many of the *issa*, the first generation of immigrants, were Nichiren, Zen, or one of the many sects other than Jodo Shinshu.

In 1929 the first Buddhist congregation was established in Alberta.[2] The community's ritual life was given shape through the purchase of a Mormon church, the installation in the sanctuary of an altar to Amida Buddha, the acquisition of a minister from the sect's headquarters in Kyoto, and the establishment of a regular service of thanksgiving on Sunday morning.

The transition from the traditional rituals of Japan to current Jodo Shinshu practice in Alberta has fundamentally affected the norms of religious self-definition for devotees. Juxtaposing current practice in Japan and Alberta will show that apparently minor alterations in ritual practice have significantly altered the Jodo Shinshu faith.

Immediately upon introduction into the Canadian cultural context, the ritual structure of Jodo Shinshu was adapted to aspects of the normative model set by Christian churches. A regular meeting on Sunday was insti-

* An invited paper read at the Ninth Biennial Conference, Ethnicity and a New Canada,' Edmonton, Alberta, October 17, 1981.

1 Tetsuden Kashima, *Buddhism in America: The Social Organization of Ethnic Religious Institution* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), and Emma McCloy Layman, *Buddhism in America* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1976), discuss the general history of the movement.

2 For historical sketches of the Japanese community in Alberta, see Leslie Kawamura, 'The Historical Development of the Buddhist Churches in Southern Alberta,' in *Religion and Culture in Canada*, ed. by Peter Slater (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press for the Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion, 1977), 491-506; Leslie Kawamura, 'Changes in the Japanese True Pure Land Buddhism in Alberta—A Case Study: Honpa Buddhist Church in Alberta,' in *Religion and Ethnicity*, ed. by Harold Coward and Leslie Kawamura (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press for the Calgary Institute for the Humanities, 1978), 37-55; and Howard Palmer, *Land of the Second Chance: A History of Ethnic Groups in Southern Alberta* (Lethbridge, Alberta: The Lethbridge Herald, 1972), 108-26.

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SR 12/4, pp. 363-79 / automne/fall 1983 / imprimé au Canada/printed in Canada

tuted, augmenting and often replacing the memorial and festival pattern that shaped devotees' life in Japan.[3] This affected the way ministers carried out their functions, placing emphasis on the Sunday service and drawing attention from the memorial services traditionally held in the home. Participation in worship moved from a Japanese model, focussing on the individual family privately worshipping at the temple or around the *butsu dan* (shrine) in the home, principally in memorial for a recently departed relative or for the collective dead. Instead, it shifted to the whole community gathering for the regular service of thanksgiving at the church on Sunday morning. Though the context of worship shifted, the service itself continued to accent in structure and content the beliefs which Shinran introduced as reforms to Japanese Buddhism in the thirteenth century.

From sacred memory to sacred belief

The service of thanksgiving practiced in Alberta commonly takes place in the Buddhist church on Sunday morning. The ritual pattern is similar whether the service is conducted in Japanese or English and, like the eucharist for some branches of Christianity, forms the core of all special and festival services. Entry into the time of devotion is marked when a gong hanging in the entrance of the church is struck. Candles have been lit and offerings of rice, sweets, and cut flowers are in place on the main shrine. As devotees enter they *gassho*,[4] repeat the *nembutsu*[5]—the central oral/auditory symbol of Jodo Shinshu—and walk up the centre aisle to the lesser altar. They offer incense in adoration of the Amida Buddha and in thanksgiving for the Original Vow[6] through which salvation is attained.

Once seated, the congregation chants the *nembutsu*, accompanied by the piano, as a collective entrance to the service. One of the denomination's three principal *sutras*[7] is chanted, then read in English. A *gatha* (hymn) is sung to piano accompaniment. The minister's sermon which follows occupies about one-half the time of the service and focusses on some aspect of Jodo Shinshu teaching. Another *gatha*, announcements of church activities, and a final meditation using the *nembutsu*, with piano accompaniment round out the service.

This format differs markedly from that in Japan. Holding a regular communal service on Sunday instead of maintaining, as the tradition does, a private cycle of memorials for a deceased relative, distances the Bud-

3 Ichiro Hori, *Folk Religion in Japan: Continuity and Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 83-139.

4 *Gassho* is the primary symbolic gesture of Jodo Shinshu Buddhism. It is formed by joining the hands, which are held vertically at the level of the breast, palm against palm, fingers against fingers. It is a gesture of gratitude and adoration.

5 The *nembutsu*'s literal meaning (*Namu Amida Butsu*) expresses reliance upon the enlightened one who has infinite wisdom and compassion. For Jodo Shinshu followers it is a daily practice expressing gratitude to Amida Buddha for his great compassion.

6 This refers to the eighteenth vow of the Buddha in which he vows not to obtain the Great Enlightenment if it is refused to any sentient being who in faith and with sincerity of heart, repeats Buddha's name but is not born into the Pure Land.

7 The three principal *sutras* are the larger *Sukhavati-vyuha Sutra*, the *Amitayur-Dhyana Sutra*, and the smaller *Sukhavati-vyuha Sutra*.

dha's teaching on transience from the immediate and personal reference point embodied in the individualized cycle.[8] Transience becomes a principle emphasized in and of itself, and the ritual attention to it no longer marks an occasion where one experiences first-hand—through personal remembrance—the transience of life.

The rhythm of the traditional system of memorials associated directly to the death of one's immediate relatives and to the collective dead is virtually replaced in the North American context by the regular pattern of Sunday services. Just how dramatic this shift is becomes apparent when modern practices are set against traditional memorial services.

In Jodo Shinshu, as in many forms of Buddhism, death is the primary focus of rite and cult.[9] The folk religious forms of Shinto, indigenous to Japan, provided the structure for this mythic preoccupation with one's deceased relatives and the collective ancestors. Consequently, the ritual season is structured according to the day of death of the relative. It begins with the funeral, then continues through the first memorial service seven days later, a sequence of services every seven days until the forty-ninth day, and an established pattern of memorials on subsequent years.[10] Following the forty-ninth-day memorial the relative is understood to have gained the status of an ancestor, to be wooed and memorialized through the counterpoint of festival days for the collective dead. Here again an ancient Shinto pattern continued to structure the major sacralization of time for the Japanese.

In Japan the funeral service generally takes place in the home of the deceased; the Alberta community uses the church for such occasions. The regular service is accented with *Ho Myo*, the presentation of a Buddhist name which is written on a memorial tablet and given to the immediate family. The grace of Amida Buddha and the power of the Original Vow are emphasized in this service. Ultimate entrance to the Pure Land is reiterated throughout *sutra*, *gatha*, and sermon, along with the assurance that this is the ultimate destiny of all devotees.

Following a short internment service at the graveside, the custom now is simply to conduct a single seventh-day service (*Sho Nanuka*) in a congregational setting at the church. The forty-ninth-day memorial service (*Shiju-ku Nichi*) remains a part of current practice, but the traditional five intermittent services are not observed. The pattern of observing memorials for the deceased on appointed years has also fallen into almost complete disuse. Occasionally a family will have a memorial service in the home at

8 The first generation of immigrants were faced with a particular religious problem. How does one conduct the ritual forms for the ancestors when you are in a foreign land, a place without their memory embodied in a cemetery of columbarium? For cosmic faiths in general, their removal from the indigenous land in which the ritual drama has its local theatre has a devastating effect on the process. There simply is no established ground for the ritualization of the cosmic symbols in these cases.

9 Historically, the Shinto focus on memorial ritual was adopted by Buddhism in Japan as symbolic of the principle of transcience—the principle around which the Buddhist *dharma* (teaching) refined its understanding of life.

10 The sequence of memorial years is the third, seventh, thirteenth, fifteenth, seventeenth, thirty-third, and fiftieth.

the *butsu dan* near the anniversary of the death. The choice of the commemorative year and day, however, appears to be completely arbitrary.

The celebration of ultimate integration

Throughout the year a set of services mark the departure and attainment of all who have died. These services for the collectivity of the dead constitute a counterpoint to the private memorial cycle. Indeed, these services affirm the ultimate unity of all ancestors and mark the passage of particular deceased relatives into the collective dead through their designation as an ancestor. From the strictly Buddhist perspective this transition is that of 'becoming one with Amida Buddha.'

Four seasonal holidays are directed to the collectivity of the spirits of the household dead: New Year, *O-Bon*,[11] and the vernal and autumnal equinoxes.

Robert J. Smith has concluded from his fieldwork in Japan that the honouring of ancestors is customarily included in the offerings and meals associated with New Year, albeit that this recognition is minimal compared to that accorded on *O-Bon* and on the equinox days.[12] In the Alberta Buddhist community, the New Year's morning service at the church follows the usual thanksgiving service format. The lengthy *sutras* formerly associated with this day have given way to the *San Butsu Ge* ('Praises of the Buddha'), while the sermon reflects on the past and expresses the community's gratitude for the new year. For devotees, beginning the new year in the church marks special newness, a fresh beginning.

In preparation for this day the *butsu dan* in each home and in the church has been thoroughly cleaned and polished. A fresh candle is prepared, along with offerings of rice, sweets, fruit, and flowers. Photographs of departed ancestors occupy a highly visible place in the home altar, along with a scroll bearing the Buddha's name or likeness.[13]

The feast associated with the new year is elaborate, and the symbolic meaning of some dishes, along with their ritual presentation, remains intact. A number of families continue to eat the traditional *mouche* soup shortly after rising on New Year's morning. Its colour and texture symbolize sperm, and the dish marks the hope for fertility in the coming year. At the midday feast, herring eggs represent productivity, shrimp's curled shape symbolizes longevity, and the toughness of dried fish expresses hope for a hardy and strong body.

An additional element in the community's New Year festivities is the 'pilgrimage' held on the first or second day or on the first weekend of the new year. Men, singly or in small groups, wander from house to house like wayward ancestral spirits, receiving the ladies' hospitality. They are

11 Note translation and comment below on *higan*.

12 Robert J. Smith, *Ancestor Worship in Contemporary Japan* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974), 98-99.

13 Virtually all the informants, when asked directly, commented that placing photographs of relatives on the *butsu dan* contravened Jodo Shinshu teaching. If they were in Japan and had a Shinto shrine along with the customary Buddhist shrine, the photographs would be placed on the Shinto shrine.

greeted formally and served saki, traditional Japanese food, and at least one drink of hard spirits. This wandering tribute continues for some time, resulting in a touch of drunkenness and bountiful humour and conviviality.

Higan, the autumn and spring equinoxes, are celebrated March 18-21 and September 20-26. This occasion is set aside to mark the ancestral spirits.[14] Jodo Shinshu shifted the primary symbolic meaning of this event from its cosmic association with the sun cults of ancient Japan to the central Buddhistic virtues of equanimity and balance. The sermon on this day reminds devotees that the six *paramitas* (virtues) of perfections—giving, morality, patience, vigour, concentration, and wisdom—'are gates through which one enters and crosses to the other shore.'[15] The seminal virtues of balance and equanimity, expressed by the universe itself on these two days, are the path to the Pure Land of Amida. In the imagery of Pure Land Buddhism, the place of ultimate sacredness—the Pure Land or Other Shore—lies in the west.

Although the service book used in North American Jodo Shinshu churches suggests that devotees go to the cemetery to 'pay homage and express their thanksgiving to those who have passed away, by offering flowers and food,'[16] this practice has not formed part of the ritual life of the Alberta community. The ritual embodiment of the cosmic symbols associated with the ancestors' ultimate integration has given way to the ideas of equanimity and balance. These concepts are central to the church service commemorating equinox days.

The most elaborate commemorative festival, and certainly the peak of the ritual life of the Jodo Shinshu community in Japan and Canada, is *O-Bon*. Celebrated to pay respect and honour to the memory of the ancestors, it is the primary occasion in the year for focussing on the collectivity of the dead. In Japan followers of Shinto and virtually all Buddhist sects participate in its celebration. There, *O-Bon* is the highlight of the year, giving each family an opportunity to gather under one roof and meet with the spirits of the household dead. Each house is made into a temple for the worship of the family's ancestors.

Several scholars have described how, in the traditional Japanese setting, members of the family go to the graveyard prior to August 13 to clean the site and offer flowers and incense honouring the deceased. A number of symbolic acts throughout *O-Bon* ritualize the return of the ancestor for the feast period. For example, water is poured on the grave and a path cleared to guide the ancestral spirits on their return to the home. A temporary altar is prepared, the ancestral tablets are exposed to view, and elaborate offerings of food are made. In some homes a small fire is lit outside the gate as a sign of welcome to the returning spirits.

The night of August 14 is devoted to a feast for the whole family. The temporary altar holding the ancestral tablets and offerings to the ancestors

14 Herman Ooms, 'The Religion of the Household: A Case Study of Ancestor Worship in Japan,' *Contemporary Religions in Japan* 7 (1966), 241-50.

15 Shoyu Hanayama, *Buddhist Handbook for Shin-shu Followers* (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1969), 36.

16 Ibid.

often 'presides' over the festive table. The priest[17] makes his rounds to the homes in his jurisdiction and briefly chants a *sutra* at the *butsu dan*. The festival concludes on the night of August 15 with the kindling of a farewell fire at the house's gate and the bidding of farewell to the ancestors. In many places family members accompany the ancestral spirits to the cemetery, the seashore, a river bank, or a mountain, carrying a lantern, small boat, or *stupa* (a central Buddhist symbol consisting of a small, rounded dome) to see the spirits off. A final offering will then be made as a gesture to link the temporary presence of the ancestral spirit during the festive season to their enduring cosmic presence.

The practice of *O-Bon* in Southern Alberta has adapted to several of the dominant religious patterns of Western Canada. What in Japan is primarily a family event is here centred around the church and its related activities. On the Sunday morning closest to the festival, families gather at an appointed time at the local cemetery, visit the graves of their relatives, and make offerings of fresh food and flowers. The *nembutsu*, bracketed by the gesture of *gassho*, forms the principal act of private graveside devotion.

A temporary altar is set up in the cemetery. At the Raymond cemetery, this is customarily done in front of the columbarium, which was a central depository for the community during the unsettled years of the Second World War, and houses the ashes of numerous Japanese. The door of the columbarium stands ajar and the altar is adorned with cut flowers and offerings of rice and sweets. The incense and burner await the offerings while the image of Amida Buddha presides at the centre of the altar.

The service follows the regular worship format. The chanting of a short *sutra* is followed by a sermon reflecting on the Jodo Shinshu understanding of this festival. *O-Bon*, the minister observes, 'teaches us to model our lives in the way of filial piety, to show our honor and reverence towards the departed, to express our feelings of gratitude and thanksgiving to the departed as well as the living who have given us life and numerous benefits on this earth, and above all it teaches us that our deliverance as well as that of the departed ones comes only through the Holy Vow of Amida Buddha.'[18] Following the sermon everyone is invited to offer incense in the spirit of gratitude. The procession begins with the *hatsu bon*, those who were bereaved during the year. Each person approaches the altar, *gasshoes*, offers incense, repeats the *nembutsu*, and concludes his or her devotion with a final *gassho*.[19]

After paying their respects, Jodo Shinshu followers move from the cemetery to the church for the full *O-Bon* service and festive dancing. Appropriate *gathas* and a sermon on the day's theme fill out the service of

17 In Japan, 'priest' is a common title used in *Jodo Shinshu* circles. The community in Alberta, however, has adopted 'Minister' as the formal title for its clergy. It is likely that the Protestant milieu of North America has led to this change.

18 Anonymous, *Buddhism and Jodo Shinshu* (San Francisco: Buddhist Churches of America, 1955), 286.

19 It is of some interest to note that the town council of Raymond has instituted an annual 'remembrance day' following the pattern of the Raymond Buddhist Church *O-Bon* festival.

thanksgiving. The *Bon Odori*, a dance celebrating freedom from hell and entrance into the Pure Land, is the culmination of the festival.

Tree of Enlightenment and the Christmas Tree

The commemorative services described above focus on Jodo Shinshu's homage to and maintenance of the ancient Japanese tradition of ancestor worship, within the context of its specific religious meaning. Other prominent services sustained, in altered form, by North American followers of Jodo Shinshu include festivals honoring the birthday and the enlightenment of the Buddha. Changes in the ritualization on both occasions illustrate an accommodation to the normative forms of the Christian festival cycle and to the secular concerns prominent within our society.

The Flower Festival (*Hana Matsuri*) observed on or about April 8, is considered the happiest of Japanese Buddhist celebrations.[20] It marks the birth of Shakyamuni Buddha, which is traditionally regarded as taking place in 565 B.C. at Lumbini Garden in Nepal. The formal elements of the thanksgiving service are kept very brief, with attention focussing on a small shrine of flowers, the *hana mido*, in which a statue of the baby Buddha stands. It is a day for the children to participate in the service in a central way and for them to be singled out for the attention of the community. The shrine is covered with paper flower blossoms, and hundreds of birds made by the traditional art of paper-folding swoop down towards the shrine. In the legend of the Buddha's birth sweet rain fell, flowers burst forth in bloom, and birds filled the air with song, all of nature announced the birth of the Master of Enlightenment.[21]

The ritual associated with the *hana mido* has adults and children alike come forward and offer flowers in adoration of the Buddha. They pour sweet tea over the statue of the baby Buddha. This devotional act is bracketed with the gesture of *gassho*. To the left of the shrine, a simulated cherry tree has been formed from locally cut branches. Adorned by the elderly with hundreds of paper cherry blossoms and decorations, the tree calls to mind the bounty surrounding the Buddha's birth and, of course, the coming of spring to Japan. Following this devotion, honours are handed out to all children present. A token of Sunday School attendance, along with a gift, is given by each teacher to the members of his or her class. The devotion and honour paid to the baby Buddha is thereby turned to the children in the community, with the modern gesture of gift-giving identifying the children with the Buddha.

After the service proper, a curtain is drawn over the main shrine, and a programme of entertainment is presented, largely by the children. This programme includes music, dance, and dramatic productions. One dramatic skit viewed was titled *Amida Buddha's Boat* and depicted the journey to

20 One informant commented that *Hana Matsuri* was a welcome release from the regular pattern of services, in which the constant focus was on the dead. Taped interview with Makio and Reyko Nishyama at Raymond, Alberta, August 15, 1981.

21 This florid account can be found in any of the many translations of the *Jataka*, or *Legend of the Buddha*. See, for example, *Buddhism in Translation*, trans. by Henry Clarke Warren (New York: Atheneum, 1969), 38-48.

the Pure Land. The Buddha, captain of the boat, follows the central teaching of Jodo Shinshu and accepts all who come, despite their exclamations of impurity and weakness. Another skit performed in Raymond, a contemporary morality play titled *Goldilocks and the Three Buddhist Monks*, illustrated the moral lessons contained in the six *paramitas*. In both cases the entire entertainment contained a strain of self-mockery marked by an inversion of sacred and ethnic images.[22]

Bodhi Day (*Jo Do Ye*) celebrates Gautama Siddhartha's enlightenment. Falling on December 8, it has been influenced by the major ritualized festival still operative in Canadian society, Christmas. Historically, Jodo Shinshu has given little attention to this commemoration, but in Canada there are obvious social and cultural reasons for highlighting it. Both Bodhi Day and Christmas call to mind the saving events in which a tree plays an important symbolic role. Increasing numbers of Japanese are emphasizing Bodhi Day, acquiring and decorating a tree to commemorate the Master's enlightenment. Recently in Calgary, a spruce tree was decorated in the Jodo Shinshu church, and children made a statue of Buddha and placed it under the gift-surrounded tree. In Raymond, a fig tree which normally decorates the shrine area is moved into prominence and decorated with Buddhist motifs such as *dharma* wheels and paper cut-out shrines. A statue of the Buddha in the *mudra* of contemplation is placed under the tree on this occasion. The service proper features *gathas* chosen on the festive theme, and the reading of a portion of the Buddha's biography.

Several informants have suggested that *Bodhi* Day, with its proximity to Christmas, and *Hana Matsuri*—which shares with Christmas the typology of the birth of the hero—have gained ritual prominence in Canada through a creative encounter with the dominant cultural images of Christmas. They suggest that two Buddhist 'Christmases' are now a part of the community's ritual life. Given that most Japanese Buddhists have Christmas trees and practice gift-giving on December 25—suggesting that it is quite within the Buddhist framework to honour a great teacher whatever the tradition—it would seem that three such celebrations (*Bodhi* Day, *Hana Matsuri*, and Christmas) are operative within the current festive life of the community.

Gatha as chant or hymn[23]

A major aspect of popular piety flowing through the ritual life of Jodo Shinshu devotees in Japan and North America is the *gatha*, a hymn of praise and thanksgiving or a meditation on the *dharma* (Buddha's central teaching on salvation). Musically speaking, *gathas* can be divided into two general categories. The first are those melodies using the Japanese scale of twelve semitones arrived at by perfect (untempered) fifths; the second are

22 Ritual inversion is common to the celebrations of many traditions. During *Hana Matsuri*, the playfulness of the children with sacred images both religious and ethnic is as refreshing as Victor Turner's theory of liminality suggests. See his book *The Ritual Process* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969) for a complete discussion of the theory.

23 The authors are grateful to Della Ruth Goa for the musical analysis reflected in this section on the *gatha*.

those using the Western world's diatonic scale of eight tones. Each category has a distinct genius and presents distinct problems in its execution. In Alberta a piano is used as the principal instrument for accompaniment of the *gathas*. To play a *gatha* written for the Japanese untempered scale on the tempered piano requires certain adjustments to the tones of the melody. Add to this alteration the use of diatonic harmonies instead of the traditional Japanese unisons, major sixth, minor sevenths, and octaves, and you have a distinctly Western-sounding piece of music. On the other hand, the piano is a natural accompaniment to a *gatha* written in the diatonic.

The Japanese style of singing also seems ill-suited to Western modes. The human voice has been described as an instrument with a lower, a middle, and an upper register. Depending on the range of tones in a piece of music, a singer 'places' each tone in one of these registers. To give fullness to the tone, he or she amplifies the sound, using as resonators the chest, the back of the throat and the oral cavity, or the skull and nasal cavities. These resonators create what are called chest tones, middle tones, and head tones. The standard style of Western singing amplifies tones from the lower register with the chest resonators, tones from the middle range with the middle resonators, and tones from the upper register with the head resonators. Western melody and harmony accommodate this practice. The singing one hears in the Buddhist communities in Alberta is distinct from this style, in that the lower register is used almost exclusively and these tones are amplified through the resonators in the head. If a singer finds the music rising beyond his or her lower register, he or she shifts to a lower octave to finish the musical phrase. This style of singing seems to internalize the sound, bringing it up to resonate in the head, then effectively swallowing the tone rather than letting it escape. As a consequence, neither the transformed Japanese *gathas* nor those written on the diatonic scale are very easily sung by the congregation.

This variation in musical practice leads to an interesting comparison of spiritualities. The Western singer, from an essentially Christian, indeed Protestant culture, places his or her tone, maximizes its fullness, and projects it, reflecting the biblical injunction found in Mark 16:15: 'Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel.' The evangelical orientation of the faith is well suited to the musical form. The Buddhist devotee, on the other hand, finds the tone deep within, lets it ring in his head, then retains it inside, just as Buddhism stresses developing a deep inner spirituality: 'I put my faith in Buddha. May we all together absorb into ourselves the principle of Thy Way to Enlightenment and awaken in ourselves Thy Supreme Will. I put my faith in Dharma. May we all together be submerged in the depth of Thy Doctrine and gain wisdom as deep as the ocean.'[24]

Up to this point we have examined ritual practices current in the Jodo Shinshu community in Southern Alberta, mapping changes which suggest a shift in religious self-definition. In Japan, Buddhism adopted Shintoist symbolic forms, with Jodo Shinshu stressing memorial services which

24 This quotation is drawn from a credo used in the service of thanksgiving titled 'Three Treasures,' in Susumu K. Ikuta (ed.), *Seiten* (Vancouver: Young Buddhist League, 1967), 104.

primarily gave ritual form to the honour and devotion felt for the deceased. Through ritual commemorations the sacredness of the memory of the deceased became the vehicle for opening the devotee's mind and heart, integrating joy and sorrow, life and death, at a level of consciousness where gratitude shifts from a concept to a way of being. The festivals for the collectivity of the household dead, the family ancestors, ritualize the cosmic cycle from birth to death to rebirth. Through elaborate and integrating ritual, the devotee's sense of union with a given relative or ancestors, or, indeed, with Amida Buddha and the cosmos itself, is personally enacted. The focus is not on clinging to or developing a coherent belief or theory about the continuous round of incarnations; rather, on engaging the total human journey in a manner that nurtures the devotee's emotions, imagination, and reason. The forms of ritual activity, whether chanting a *gatha* or commemorating a deceased relative, stress personal experience and transformation.

The ritual patterns of the Jodo Shinshu sect in Alberta make it apparent that attempts to accommodate the North American cultural context have led to a diminution in the ritual cycle, and a greater emphasis on abstraction and public rather than private experience. The move to a congregational setting, a discursive focus on the Buddhist belief system, and the inevitable shrinking of the ritual cycle, a consequence of leaving the ancestral land and coming to the prairies, places the faith in danger of an overt Protestantization. The rise of discursive belief, combined with a decrease of ritual embodiment, form the general pattern. Notable exceptions are the festivals of *Hana Matsuri* and *Bodhi* Day, where an expansion of ritual action was noted. Here, ironically, the ritualization is brought about because the dominant Christian ritual forms became the normative mode for the tradition's development of new ritual forms.

We will now examine how religious language is affected by the North American situation, and how, in turn, this affects an additional shift in religious self-definition for Jodo Shinshu devotees.

Sacred language

In keeping with Buddhist doctrine, Jodo Shinshu identifies the *Tripitaka*—the 'three baskets' comprised of Buddha's sayings, rules, and philosophic commentaries—as its sacred texts.[25] As is the case with other Buddhist denominations, Jodo Shinshu has selected specific scriptures from the *Tripitaka* as the basis for its teaching and practice. Jodo Shinshu has focussed on three principal *sutras*: the *Larger Sukhavati Vyuha Sutra*, the *Amitayur Dhyana Sutra*, and the *Smaller Sukhavati Vyuha Sutra*. Of these three sacred scriptures, Shonin Shinran, the founder of Jodo Shinshu, placed special emphasis on the *Larger Sukhavati Vyuha Sutra*.[26] In it

25 Buddhist texts that made their way to China include both the *Hinayana* and the *Mahayana Tripitakas*. Several important commentaries by patriarchs were added to the canon in China. This body of texts called The Great Tripitaka (*Daizo-Kyo*) is used by *Jodo Shinshu*. See Joshin Motoyoshi, *Young Buddhist Companion* (San Francisco: Buddhist Churches of America, 1957), 9.

26 Ibid., 9-10.

Gotama Buddha relates how all mankind will be saved through the grace of the *bodhisattva* Amida. In the *Amitayur Dhyana Sutra* Gotama teaches that only through faith in the grace of Amida and his holy name, *Namu Amida Butsu*, can one escape worldly suffering and obtain enlightenment. Buddha's teaching in the *Smaller Sukhavati Vyuha Sutra* is that one can obtain rebirth in the Pure Land of Amida by chanting Amida's holy name *Namu Amida Butsu* with sincere faith. Shinran in turn emphasized that the chanting of *Namu Amida Butsu* (the *nembutsu*) as prescribed in the *Smaller Sukhavati Vyuha Sutra* was the only means by which Buddhahood could be realized.[27] It is not surprising, then, that the chanting of the *nembutsu* has become the key act of self-definition for the follower of the Jodo Shinshu religious tradition.

In addition to the three sacred scriptures described above, Shinran chose seven patriarchs whose writings he judged to express the true spirit of Buddhism. These seven are Nagarjuna and Vasubandhu of India; T'an-luan, Tao-cha'o, and Shanytao of China; and Genshin and Genku of Japan. Their writings are called *The Sacred Writings of the Seven Patriarchs*. To these are added the works of Shinran and Shonin Rennyo, which are also classed as authoritative commentaries on the Three Sacred Scriptures.[28]

In actual usage, however, it is the brief poetic passages in such commentaries which strongly shape Jodo Shinshu sacred language. For example, although few if any Buddhists in Southern Alberta have read Nagarjuna's writings, almost all have chanted the *Junirai*, Nagarjuna's poem of twelve verses in adoration of Amida Buddha.[29] Once again it is the chanted scripture which provides religious self-definition for the Jodo Shinshu believer. This conforms with Shinran's enlightenment experience, which turned him from the highly intellectualized Tendai Buddhism of his day to a simple but sincere faith in Amida Buddha.[30] Ritual chanting, not intellectual analysis, thus characterized traditional Jodo Shinshu experience of scripture.

The shifting experience of sacred language

Attendance at services and interviews with Southern Alberta's Jodo Shinshu followers suggest that a change in their experience of sacred language is taking place. This change is part of the attempt of the Japanese Buddhists to evolve a new self-identity in a non-Buddhist, English-speaking culture. The Reverend Y. Kawamura, retired minister of the Raymond Jodo Shinshu congregation, has succinctly summed up the change in use of sacred language: 'In Japan, mainly *sutra* chanting and little sermon. In Canada, mainly sermon and little *sutra* chanting.'[31] Seventy-five years in Canada have changed Jodo Shinshu's use of sacred language from a uniquely Buddhistic form to a pattern more characteristic of Protestant Christianity. The sermon is stressed, the chant downplayed.

27 Ibid., 126.
28 Ikuta (ed.), *Seiten*, 15.
29 Ibid., 17, 107.
30 Ibid., 31-32.
31 Taped interview with the Reverend Y. Kawamura at Raymond, Alberta, August 15, 1981.

This marked turn in the use of sacred language, from the ritual-poetic to the discursive-rational, is causing concern. As the deceased Reverend Shinjo Ikuta, a first-generation Jodo Shinshu minister, put it, this tendency to 'rationalize' is in danger of unbalancing Buddhism. By placing too much emphasis on understanding with the mind, the spiritual aspect may be lost.[32] Ikuta's son, former minister of the Calgary Jodo Shinshu congregation, echoes his father's worry when he notes: 'The faith is in danger of being reduced to fixed ethical principles. . . . It is [then] no longer living . . . . the personal aspect becomes lost.'[33] Strangely, it is the ritual chant, which sounds so impersonal and dead to the outsider, that seems to open the way to personal faith for the Judo Shinshu follower. The apparent acceptance of Protestant emphasis on rational-discursive use of sacred language suggests a loss of private spiritual experience for the Canadian Buddhist of Japanese extraction. Thinking back to the experience of the Jodo Shinshu founder, Shinran, the wheel seems to be turning full circle. The very kind of intellectualized Buddhism Shinran rejected may be reappearing in North American Jodo Shinshu under the rubric, 'mainly sermon, little chanting.' As one lay person observed, when the new minister preached on the *Junirai* chant one stanza per week for twelve weeks it 'turned everybody off.'[34]

Effects of the rise of discursive language

The psychological effect of the shift from the ritual-poetic to the discursive-rational is highlighted in the funeral service. The service begins and ends with chanting, while the middle focusses on the sermon. According to the Reverend Y. Kawamura, the sermon typically talks about the life of the deceased, explains Buddha's compassion and one's rebirth in Amida's Pure Land, and stresses that relatives and the deceased are one in *nembutsu*, the ritual chant.[35] The sermon appears to attempt to communicate a sense of oneness with the deceased, on the basis of Buddha's teaching that after death all are reborn in Amida's Pure Land. In addition, it suggests that the relatives and the deceased are somehow united in the *nembutsu* chant.

While such discursive teaching undoubtedly has some effect, it is not the cognitive functions of the psyche that are dominant in the experience of bereavement. Simply telling a wife that she will join her departed husband when she is reborn in the Pure Land and that they are one when she chants the *nembutsu* is of little help. In the crisis of bereavement it is the non-rational—the emotional and the intuitive—aspects of the psyche that dominate. These are precisely the psychological processes actualized and satisfied in ritual chant. Although the discursive meaning of *Namu Amida Buddha* may be 'I surrender myself to Amida Buddha,' it is through the emotional and intuitive processes of chanting that the existential experi-

32 Taped interview with the Reverend Susumu Ikuta in which he quoted his father, the Reverend Shinjo Ikuta, Calgary, Alberta, September 1981.
33 Ibid.
34 Taped interview with Reyko Nishiyama at Raymond, Alberta, August 15, 1981.
35 Interview with Kawamura (see n. 31 above).

ence of oneness is realized. A shift of emphasis in the funeral from the chant to the sermon has the effect of removing the psychological mechanism by which the wife can identify with Amida and her deceased husband.

Reyko Nishiyama of Raymond confirms the theoretical unity presented in the sermon when she says of her experience of chant: 'You are one with Amida Buddha in the *nembutsu*.'[36] During the chant she also thinks of her deceased parents, and with regard to her husband she reports, 'I feel closest to Mac when we chant the *nembutsu* together.'[37] In her view Jodo Shinshu is not a religion of education but of the heart. Scholars may work out the meaning of the chant, she says, but it is the feeling the chant induces that makes Jodo Shinshu special.

The Reverend S. K. Ikuta of Calgary presents the following introspection into the psychology of the chant:

> When you identify with the chant it has the function of structuring spiritual space: the sound of the chant, the smell of the incense, and the action of putting hands together—all this through repeated experience becomes predictable and induces the spiritual.
>
> When I chant it brings memories of my father, of gatherings with other ministers . . . it sets your mind psychologically to hear the Buddha's teaching. It [the mind] opens . . . like flower buds being opened to receive the sun.
>
> Chanting out loud is also quite important. Shinran says rather than recite the *nembutsu* quietly within yourself, say it out loud; bring it out and then listen. Although I am chanting:
>
> Amida speaks it,
> Amida hears it,
> And I am the union.[38]

Another psychological function of the chant is as a mnemonic device. When scripture is poetic rather than discursive, it is much easier to memorize. The Buddhist tradition has always used chanting as a device for embedding scripture in the budding consciousness of the young child. Raised within the tradition, the Reverend Y. Kawamura reports: 'My father taught me scripture. I would repeat after him. After ten years he taught me how to read and what it meant. Later on in the University I studied these texts.'[39]

The order indicated has psychological importance. First the texts are memorized by chanting; then comes reading of the text, and finally discursive analysis. The later stages are psychologically dependent upon the first. The ritual chanting not only provides the mechanism for memorization, but also etches the sound of the sacred words ever more deeply within consciousness. As Reyko Nishiyama aptly puts it: 'To me [the chant] is meditative. It induces peace from the hustle and bustle of life. It is very comfortable. It has seeped in . . . it is part of my consciousness.'[40] As such, it becomes the foundation from which discursive analysis can proceed. More importantly, it is constantly available for immediate guidance, inspiration, and solace in the crises of life.

As the above psychological analysis suggests, the turn from chant toward sermon in Southern Albertan Jodo Shinshu practice will have the

36 Taped interview with Reyko Nishiyama at Raymond, Alberta, September 12, 1981.
37 Ibid.
38 Interivew with Ikuta (see n. 32 above).
39 Interview with Kawamura (see n. 31 above).
40 Interview with Nishiyama (see n. 36 above).

effect of gradually cutting off the Japanese Buddhist consciousness from its spiritual root. If the sacred word is not learned in childhood through the chant, if the poetic teachings are not nourished and reinforced in adulthood by private and public repetition of the chant then the psychological foundation will be missing and the sermon will become an empty exercise. At its best the sermon will be an entertaining exercise for the intellect, but an exercise bereft of psychological mechanisms for engaging the deeper levels of consciousness.

As Jacob Needleman suggests, it is precisely because modern Christianity and Judaism have allowed themselves to be reduced to the intellect alone that they have become empty in experience, causing many in North America to turn to Eastern religions in an attempt to recover psychological depth.[41] It would be tragic if Jodo Shinshu Buddhists, in accommodating to the dominantly discursive culture of Canada, were to lose the very thing that Westerners are turning East to find. It is perhaps worth recalling the danger to religious experience inherent in losing touch with the non-rational—the thesis of Rudolf Otto's 1920 analysis of the malaise of modern Western religion.[42]

In traditional Jodo Shinshu life, the joining together of the whole community in ritual chant provides a unifying centre for family and social life. Group chanting gives a sense of harmony and belonging; it induces a feeling of oneness to the whole congregation. Ministers conflict with one another in their sermons and teachings, observes one respondent, but the chants, memorized in childhood and communally repeated, do not change.[43] In all Jodo Shinshu festivals, group chanting has occupied an important place. Since the arrival of the Japanese in Southern Alberta, the amount of chanting associated with each festival seems to have been gradually reduced. Although this is not unexpected in the process of accommodation, it has the effect of weakening the unifying core of Jodo Shinshu group life. At least one respondent has found that the chant functions as a monitor of the unity and harmony within the congregation.[44]

Translation and chant

It seems clear from the above psychological and social analyses that the shift toward the discursive and away from chant is having a negative effect on the Jodo Shinshu experience of sacred language. A major part of the problem centres on attempts to translate from Chinese into English. In the Raymond congregation, attempts at chanting in English translation, or simultaneously in Chinese and English, have raised many problems. When English chanting was introduced in the Sunday School, the children reportedly objected and requested a return to the familiar Chinese, even though they did not understand it. English allowed some understanding of the meaning, but did not make the chanting personally meaningful. One

41 Jacob Needleman, *The New Religions* (Richmond Hill, Ontario: Simon & Shuster, 1972), 17.
42 Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958).
43 Interview with Nishiyama (see n. 36 above).
44 Ibid.

teacher drew a parallel between chanting in Chinese and listening to an opera in Italian. After a while it doesn't matter that you don't understand the language; it becomes familiar and intimate.[45] The children have been chanting in Chinese since they were babies, so for them the English is strange.

In the view of the Reverend S. K. Ikuta, the translation problem is the main one facing today's Buddhist leaders in America. The Jodo Shinshu church is only now translating the chant from Chinese to Japanese. Eventually, Ikuta thinks, the chant will have to move into English. But it will take a long time and there are many problems. For example, it is difficult to make the current English versions appropriately musical. Ikuta says this is because these translations were prepared too quickly, were not developed spontaneously, and therefore do not 'sit right.'[46] Another complaint is that the English is too flowery. In English you are giving yourself to the meanings, in Chinese you are giving yourself to the chant.[47] In addition, certain key terms cannot seem to be adequately translated. *Shinjin*, for instance, which is more accurately translated as 'true mind' appears translated as 'faith.' As a second example, the individual words of the *nembutsu* can be translated:

Namu – 'I throw myself'
Amida – 'Infinite compassion'
Butsu – 'From the Buddha nature within us'[48]

But the English is discursive and does not work well as a chant. Since all translation is interpretation, it is held that it is best to stay with Buddha's actual words—they are the ones best suited to praise him.[49]

The problem of translation is not restricted to the Jodo Shinshu experience, it is at the heart of the cultural transition of any religion. The difficulty is that if one translates the sacred language into the vernacular, it must be sacralized. But English today has become so narrowly secularized that it has largely lost its power to sacralize—to invoke the non-rational aspect of religious experience. Because the sacramental power of English is seriously diminished, the problem facing the Jodo Shinshu community is, for example, also faced by the Roman Catholic church in its translation of the Mass into English. The discursive becomes dominant, and the transforming power of the original is in danger of being lost.

This is the dilemma facing today's Jodo Shinshu Buddhists of Alberta. Ritual chanting of poetic scriptures has traditionally anchored the religious self-definition of the Jodo Shinshu faith. Attempting to accommodate to American culture, Jodo Shinshu congregations have rushed to translate their ritual chants into English. The result has been discursive rather than poetic use of language, and unsatisfactory attempts to chant in English. Consequently, there has been a change within the structure of services, giving more time to the rational activity of the sermon, also now in English.

45 Ibid.
46 Interview with Ikuta (see n. 32 above).
47 Interview with Nishiyama (see n. 36 above).
48 Interview with Ikuta (see n. 32 above).
49 Ibid.

Although these changes have been part of the attempt by Japanese Buddhists to evolve a new self-identity in a non-Buddhist English-speaking culture, the danger is that these very changes will result in a serious loss of self-identity. However, true to the Buddhist understanding of reality as constant change, the Reverend S. K. Ikuta offers a drastic but optimistic prognosis:

> Buddhism has evolved by holding to the words of the Buddha, by going back to them in each new situation and finding new inspiration. Buddha's words are different when heard by the twentieth-century man as compared with tenth-century man. In twentieth-century man's study of Buddha's words, a new and different Buddhism may emerge in North America.[50]

Whatever happens to Buddhism, it is likely that Jodo Shinshu will enrich modern Western religious experience. Jodo Shinshu is bringing to North America and Europe a new and enriched understanding of ritual chant. In the past the Western view of chant has been negative, as typified by Frederich Heiler in his classic 1932 study. Ritual prayer, he concluded, is no longer the free outpouring of the heart: 'It becomes a fixed formula which people recite without feeling or mood of devotion, untouched both in heart and mind. At first prayer is an intimate intercourse with God, but gradually it becomes hard, impersonal, ceremonial, a rite consecrated by ancestral custom.'[51] No one spiritually sensitive to Jodo Shinshu practice of ritual chant can accept such negative analysis. And since Heiler includes Buddhism in his preview, his error cannot be easily excused. Although Heiler is insightful with regard to Christian experience, he is spiritually tone-deaf when it comes to Buddhist chant. The *nembutsu* chant, experienced by the sincere Jodo Shinshu as an opening of the heart toward Amida Buddha, is every bit as warm and personal as the prayer of the sincere Christian. Would that Heiler had had the opportunities to come to know the Jodo Shinshu Buddhists of Southern Alberta. The psychological and spiritual power of their ritual chant would likely correct his misconceptions.

Conclusion

In mapping the changes introduced to the *Jodo Shinshu* tradition during its seventy-five-year history in Western Canada, several areas have emerged as keys to understanding the shifting ground of devotees' self-definition. An accent in the funeral and cycle of memorial service on the cardinal Buddhist idea of transience has replaced the familiar ritualizations of the experience of the loss of the relative found in the traditional cycle of memorial commemorations. Also, the absorption of the memorial cycle into the regular Sunday 'service of thanksgiving' has further removed the teaching from the concrete experience of transience embodied in the death of a loved one.

Similarly, the cosmic-oriented cycle of festivals focussing on the ancestors has suffered from a marked diminution in ritualized behaviour.

50 Ibid.

51 Friedrich Heiler, *Prayer: A Study in the History and Psychology of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 65.

Admittedly, the elements discussed are part of the folk religion, not strictly Buddhist, much less *Jodo Shinshu*. The evidence in Japan and Alberta, however, suggests that these ritual elements were followed by *Jodo Shinshu* devotees as occasions in which the Buddha nature was manifest through the generations and throughout nature. In the North American setting ritual acts which link the devotee to the cosmos have largely fallen into disuse in favour of teachings about the Buddhist principle associated with festivals.

Ritual chant which traditionally anchored the religious self-definition of the *Jodo Shinshu* has followed a similar course. Translations of various texts into English have failed to capture the poetic and sacred impulse in the new language. Consequently, the sermon with its discursive language about the faith has come into prominence. The trend to discursive language as a medium for religious expression and away from the traditional poetic ritual chants has been marked.

Jodo Shinshu with its traditional roots in the broad folk religion of Japan and its central traditional accent on the *nembutsu* chanted in faith has, in the context of North America, moved dramatically to accommodate the new cultural milieu. Traditional cosmic ritualization along with a spirituality centred on chanting the *nembutsu* is shifting towards a discursive pattern the dominant Protestant-secular culture provides as the norm for religious self-definition.