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Modern Japan*

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A Review of *Against Harmony: Progressive and Radical Buddhism in Modern Japan*

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Against Harmony: Progressive and Radical Buddhism in Modern Japan. By James Mark Shields. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, 404 pages, ISBN 978-0-19-066400-8 (hardback), U.S. \$99.00.

In this exploration of New Buddhism (*Shin-bukkyō*) and other progressive and radical forms of modern Japanese Buddhism over a fifty-year period (1885-1935), James Mark Shields has made an important contribution to several fields, including Buddhist Ethics. More often than not, scholarship on Japanese Buddhist ethics focuses on the pre-modern period, especially the writings of the founders of Japanese denominations (such figures as Saichō, Kūkai, Hōnen, Shinran, Eisai, Dōgen, and Nichiren). As a result, the richness of Japanese Buddhist ethics since the mid-19th century has been relatively overlooked. In this respect, with *Against Harmony* Mark Shields has filled a void.

Shields organizes his exploration chronologically, focusing first on key figures in the Buddhist Enlightenment movement (“enlightenment” in the Western sense of an emphasis on reason and logic) and New Buddhism in the late Meiji Period (1885-1910) and then moving on to a second period (1910-1935) “marked by both an intellectual turn toward a

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more aesthetic and ‘cultural’ understanding of Buddhism, and, especially in the 1920s and early 1930s, various experiments in Buddhist-inflected utopianism and radical Buddhist activism” (12). Readers interested in Buddhist ethics will especially appreciate his treatment of Takagi Kenmyō (1864-1914), a Shin Buddhist priest who affirmed socialism and engaged in activism on behalf of the “hidden outcasts” (*burakumin*); Uchiyama Gudō (1874-1911), a Zen priest who under the banner of “an-archo-communist revolution” advocated for the rural poor; and Nichiren Buddhist Seno’o Girō (1889-1961), who in the 1930s deployed socialist and anarchist thought to formulate what Shields characterizes as a “blueprint for Buddhist revolution.” For their stances Takagi and Uchiyama were arrested and executed by the state while Seno’o was arrested and spent six years in prison (even though, after an initial five months of interrogation, he recanted and pledged to support the emperor, like other leftists who underwent a forced political conversion [*tenkō*]). Anyone who mistakenly thinks that “engaged Buddhism” began in the late twentieth-century needs to read this book.

Another highlight of the book relative to Buddhist ethics is Shields’s delineation of how these Japanese Buddhists drew from Marx, Tolstoy, Unitarianism, and Christian social ethics. Readers will also appreciate his treatment of the *Lotus Sutra* as a political text, and his reflections on why in the 1930s some of the most activist Buddhists—on the left and the right—were Nichiren Buddhists. Shields highlights how the *Lotus Sutra* “enjoins a collapsing of realms” that generates a realization of this world as a Buddha land (*bukkokudo*) and grounds a social vision “that resists appeals to the afterlife or ‘other-worldly’ forms of transcendence,” which in turn has led Nichiren Buddhists to be “engaged in social and political activities—often with a zeal and passion that is scarce among other Buddhist sects” (193).

With his focus on Buddhist developments in the Meiji (1868-1912), Taishō (1912-1926), and early-Shōwa (1926-1945) periods, Shields is mapping a complex intellectual landscape. As he introduces dozens of

Buddhist thinkers and activists, he does his readers the service of comparing and contrasting their stances while defining and distinguishing an array of terms that get bandied about—often with varying and in some cases unclear definitions—in these Buddhists’ discourses and in scholarly treatments of pre-war and wartime Japanese Buddhism and society. As he states early on, a “goal of this work . . . is to bring some light to the grey and underexposed areas that lie within and between the various conceptions and manifestations of ‘progress,’ ‘reform,’ and ‘modernity’ in the formative period of modern Japanese Buddhism” (6). To that end, Shields lays out the range of meanings of such key constructs as “modern” (and “modern Buddhism”; 13ff), “progress” (16ff), “socialism” (18ff), “conservative” (47), and “radical” (22). In the process he lifts up combinations of these terms that at first glance seem paradoxical, such as “progressive conservatives,” which denotes figures like D. T. Suzuki, who was “committed to the construction of a global, cosmopolitan philosophy” while also believing that “religion in general and Buddhism in particular could and should be invested in supporting the ‘welfare of the people,’ which would include actively supporting the nation in times of peril—such as war” (130). Shields also does us the favor of analyzing the meanings ascribed to Japanese terms that connote “religion” (73, 199), “culture” (199) “faith” (147ff), “pantheism” (105ff, 246), and “secularism” (135), and in the process illuminates the nuances of those terms, such as the differences between *shinjin* and *shinkō*, both of which get rendered as “faith.”

The richest element in the book, and recurring theme, is how these thinkers negotiate the ground between materialism and idealism, not simply in the narrow philosophical sense but in terms of a division between “practical engagement with the world” (59) and personal moral cultivation, spirituality (as in Kiyozawa Manshi’s *seishin-shugi* or spiritualism), or faith (*shinjin*), “a division between those Buddhists modernists committed to large-scale social and political reform, and those more inclined toward individual renewal by way of meditation, spiritual renewal, and ‘culture’” (15). In negotiating that divide, Akamatsu Katsumaro,

for example, argued that individuals need to be purified of desires before society can be changed (31). Takagi Kenmyō understood socialism not in materialist terms as a political praxis but “primarily as a tool for character transformation—which, it is implied, will lead to social transformation through good works” (146). Takashima Beihō set forth the “union of the physical and the spiritual” (*busshin ichinyo*) as, in Shields’s words, “a potential middle path between materialist and idealist perspectives” (113). Kawakami Hajime attempted “to fuse Marx’s historical materialism with a (Tolstoyan) emphasis on the importance of consciousness and the will” (180). New Buddhist representative Sakaino Kōyō wrote, “the primary purpose of Buddhism is to address matters of a mental or spiritual nature. . . . And yet, although this may sound like New Buddhists have disdain for concrete materiality, it is not the case that we merely prize the spirit and disdain material things” (247).

These stances appear mainly in the first period Shields examines, when the visions were generally “amelioristic and moralistic rather than revolutionary, with a focus on personal transformation as the means to social reform—albeit with a strong dose of active engagement” (26). In the second period (1910–1935) we see more of a shift from progressive to radical stances, with thinkers like Uchiyama and Seno’o being more willing to embrace materialism in the Marxist sense and sing the praises of socialism and structural change.

Some readers may feel a bit lost at times in the details concerning individual thinkers and movements. This may be inevitable, however, given the diversity of views in the period in question; and Shields skillfully guides his readers through this thicket, frequently lifting his focus above individuals by offering comparative comments and highlighting theoretical patterns. As an added benefit for those who might feel overwhelmed by the details, Shields pulls his analysis together in a final section on “overcoming materialism,” thereby riffing on a major conundrum faced by Japanese intellectuals in the early-twentieth century: “overcoming modernity.”

One facet of the book that I especially appreciate is how Shields couples his expertise on Japanese Buddhism and intellectual history with skillful use of theory and Western philosophy. His integration of theorists and philosophers in the book is apt and measured. That is to say, he draws on theories and philosophical positions to shed light on and analyze with rigor the phenomena in Japanese religion and thought that he is exploring, not to display theoretical prowess in a way that masks rather than illuminates those phenomena.

As flagged above, a theme that Shields weaves through his monograph is the divergence of views on the relative importance of individual spirituality and social engagement, the ordering of the two, and their exact content. Much of what we see transpiring across the fifty-year period is a dance around the “S” word: socialism. As Shields points out, in Japan “socialism in any form was understood by the government—at least by 1905—as a dangerous, foreign menace. And yet, there was hardly any of the fear that one finds in Western countries like the United States—that is, the fear that socialism is dangerous because it is destructive to individual liberty, or to individualism more broadly. Indeed . . . the government, and conservative ideologues of various stripes, tended to see socialism as being ‘individualistic,’ and thus destructive of the communal, harmonious fabric of the Japanese (or possibly pan-Asia) social identity” (19). The array of stances laid out by Shields can be seen in part as a series of engagements with socialism, or, more exactly put, with social and economic conditions generated by Japanese capitalism as a core element of the modernization and nation-building occurring in Japan following the Meiji Restoration (1867) and leading up to the Second World War.

For those whose interests lie primarily in the field of Buddhist ethics, Shields’s exposition prompts rich questions about Buddhism in relation to individual moral cultivation and social activism. One question is that of the extent to which traditional Buddhist moral cultivation extends beyond the individual and the purification of her mind (and ac-

tions) and leads naturally to social engagement to the extent that many of these Buddhists claim. In part this is the issue of how the existential suffering at the center of the Buddhist doctrine of *dukkha* relates to other forms of suffering, such as political oppression, poverty, and physical harm. This question also gets at the exact relationship between liberation “from karma, illusion, earthly desires, and samsaric suffering” (*gedatsu*) and social forms of liberation (*kaihō*) (p. 31). Insofar as the connection is not clarified and the thinker rests content with claims that personal transformation needs to come first or that it simply provides a basis for good works, what we may have is less a progressive Buddhist than a “liberal” Buddhist. In the case of those who attempt to clarify that connection or focus on the need for social activism and structural change, the question that emerges is the extent to which their stance derives from the experiences of these Buddhists as Buddhists or from external influences, such as the thought of Marx, Tolstoy, and Christian ethicists. That is to say, given the history of what Ichikawa Hakugen termed Japanese Buddhist “accommodationism” (*junnō-shugi*) relative to the socio-political status quo, to what extent were these thinkers drawing from resources in their own tradition and reforming Japanese Buddhism in fundamental ways that one would expect to persist beyond the period in question? Or, to find a critical leverage toward the state, did they have to look beyond Buddhism? And insofar as they did so, were they engaged simply in a temporary splicing of Western notions of society and social ethics onto Buddhism, a splicing that has not endured beyond the period in question?

At the end of the book Shield notes that the “development of progressive Buddhism in post-war Japan is material for another volume” (145), and I hope that he will write that book to follow-up on this excellent monograph and explore these questions.