



Galen Amstutz. *Interpreting Amida: History and Orientalism in the Study of Pure Land Buddhism*. (SUNY Series in Buddhist Studies). Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997, 248 pages, ISBN: 0791433099, US \$65.00 (hardcover); ISBN 0791433102, US \$21.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by

Charles B. Jones
The Catholic University of America
CBJones57@aol.com

Copyright Notice

Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no charge is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format with the exception of a single copy for private study requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to jbe-general@jbe.la.psu.edu.

Soon after finishing this book, I decided to pose the central question it asks to my wife over lunch: “If you were to find that one particular branch of Japanese religion encompasses one third of the population of the country, moves enormous amounts of wealth around, has spawned social and political movements that have changed Japan’s history, and is far ahead of all the others in the process of modernization, would you not expect it to receive great attention from scholars and anyone interested in Japan? This being so, why is it that the Jōdo Shinshū, the religion in question, has received far less attention and serious study than its rivals in the religious scene?”

She immediately responded, “Maybe it just wasn’t different enough from what they already knew. Maybe it wasn’t exotic enough.”

In fact, this is exactly (though not entirely) what Galen Amstutz argues in the book *Interpreting Amida*.

This book, like Donald Lopez’s *Curators of the Buddha* and Thomas Tweed’s *The American Encounter with Buddhism 1844–1912*, is a look back upon the encounter of Buddhism and the West and the manner in which western existential needs and religious preconceptions decisively (dis)colored its understanding and appraisal. As such, it will be of interest to scholars of Buddhism and Japanese society, and indeed to anyone curi-

ous about the way that Buddhism has been received in Euro–American circles.

In very cursory fashion, the argument of the book may be summarized as follows:

Amstutz begins with two chapters that give a very concise history of Jōdo Shinshū. This history is structured a little differently from other studies such as James Dobbins' *Jōdoshinshū* (Indiana, 1989) or more popular histories such as that contained in Alicia and Daigan Matsunaga's *Foundation of Japanese Buddhism* (Buddhist Books International, 1976). Books such as these, as Amstutz observes, generally give Shinran the lion's share of attention, and as a rule go no farther than the life of Rennyō (1415–1499). Amstutz, by contrast, continues the narrative from Rennyō until the present day, presenting much information on Shinshū development that one does not ordinarily encounter.

The remaining four chapters trace the development of western interpretations of Shinshū during four time periods: pre–nineteenth century (chapter three); from 1870 to 1945 (chapter four); the postwar period (chapter five); and prospects for the future (chapter six).

Generally, Amstutz identifies three different groups of westerners who had an interest in Japanese Buddhism: the missionaries working in Japan, Euro–Americans who followed Buddhism for their own existential needs, and academics (Buddhologists and those with other research interests in Japan). Of these three groups, it is the missionaries who showed the most accurate understanding of Shinshū, both in its doctrinal and ethical teachings and in its political and economic significance. That those whom we would expect to be the most hostile to any other religion should show this degree of understanding is not as ironic as it might seem at first glance; after all, the missionaries were present in Japan and could observe the scene firsthand, and part of their job was to understand the competition as accurately as possible. The real irony is that other western researchers never made use of their writings and descriptions, which were largely forgotten in the pre– and postwar periods (p. 64).

Those who followed Buddhism (Theosophists, Transcendentalists, the Beats, and so on) were simply not looking for what Shinshū offered. As my wife quickly surmised, it was not different or exotic enough to be of interest. This group wanted something that would either supplant the Judeo–Christian heritage they already knew and loathed, or something that would complement it (pp. 66–68).

Even scholars had their blind spots. A tendency to value “the original” as “the authentic” led them either to discount Shinshū as the final corruption of the Buddha's message, or led them to concentrate on Shinran (with

a nod to Rennyō), and thus miss all of the developments that occurred after the sixteenth century that made Shinshū the large and influential organization it is. The scholarly division of labor also impeded perception of Shinshū. Since so much of its importance is economic and social, scholars of religion (who prefer texts and doctrines) did not pay it much attention. Scholars of all specialties consistently applied categories to Japanese religion that had their origins in western Christian academics, and also missed much that is crucial.

Perhaps most ironically, Japanese scholars, even those working in Shinshū-sponsored universities, were influenced by western models of scholarship and failed to provide the correctives needed. In their own English-language publications, the Nishi and Higashi Honganji groups presented their own orientalist account of Shinshū (pp. 61–63, 90–93).

This book has much to recommend it. It brings a finer point and much documentation to the suspicions that many scholars have had about the Pure Land Buddhism's relative invisibility in the West. It sounds a clear call for scholars of religion to extend their sights to the importance of all religious groups, not just Shinshū, as actors in the social and economic scene instead of as nothing but elite philosophies and bodies of doctrine.

That being said, I want to raise a few points for further reflection. First, it is difficult to pinpoint the tone of the argument. Much of it seems very critical of, almost angry at, the distorted picture of Japanese Buddhism that has been mediated to the western audience. The author's admiration for the perspicuity of the missionaries seems apparent, and one may well agree that scholars who take as their task the accurate description of the Japanese scene ought to know better. However, that those who study Buddhism for their own needs should emphasize Zen rather than the more numerically and socially significant Pure Land is only inevitable. To take them to task for not seeing what they were not looking for in the first place seems pointless. But this may not be what Amstutz was trying to do; the emotional tone of the prose may stem from the very rushed and cursory style (to which we will return below).

Second, much of chapter five (on the postwar period) describes not only western blindness to Shinshū's existence and significance, but also the blindness of Japanese scholars themselves. Amstutz wonderfully illustrates the scholarly trends that led to this blindness (folklorism, *nihonjinron*, prewar nationalism), and this is very useful. But the word "orientalism" is prominent in the book's title and runs through its contents, including this chapter. I cannot be sure whether or not I am to critique the inability of the Japanese themselves to see Shinshū clearly as a result of the same orientalist tendencies that skew western perceptions. If so, then it would follow

that orientalism is not strictly a western problem.

Finally, I have a stylistic criticism. In a book of 248 pages, the main narrative only extends to page 121, meaning that fully half of the book is taken up with the appendix, the endnotes, and the bibliography. In fact, much of the book's information and analysis is contained in hundreds of notes, most of them at least a paragraph in length. As a result, if one wishes to read the book adequately, one must constantly flip to the back to find the documentation and analysis. Because of this, the main text moves very quickly and cursorily through the material, giving the impression of a series of topic sentences whose paragraphs reside elsewhere. I wish that the material in the notes could have been integrated into the main text to flesh it out and make the supporting structures more readily apparent.

Otherwise, this book is well worth reading. Scholars of East Asian religion who take the time to grapple with it are bound to reflect on their methodologies, habits, and assumptions upon returning to their primary materials. It is to be hoped that the result will be greater self-critical examination and methodological self-awareness.