

**Path of No Path**  
**Contemporary Studies in**  
**Pure Land Buddhism**  
**Honoring Roger Corless**

**Edited by Richard K. Payne**

**Institute of Buddhist Studies and**  
**Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research**  
**2009**

© 2009 by Institute of Buddhist Studies and  
Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored  
in a retrieval system, or transcribed in any form or by any means  
—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise—  
without the prior written permission of the publisher.

First Printing, 2009  
ISBN: 978-1-886439-41-2  
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2009920743

Published by  
Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research  
2620 Warring Street  
Berkeley, California 94704

Printed in the United States of America

## Contents

Foreword <i>by Arthur Holder</i>	vii
Preface: Appreciating Roger <i>by Gordon Bermant</i>	xi
Acknowledgments <i>by Richard K. Payne</i>	xix
Practice	
Vajrasattva Meditation: Healing through Crosscultural Perspectives <i>by Harvey B. Aronson</i>	3
A Tang Esoteric Manual for Rebirth in the Pure Land: <i>Rites for Contemplation of and Offerings to Amitāyus Tathāgata</i> <i>by Charles D. Orzech</i>	31
Shinran's Secret Transmission to Nyoshin: The <i>Hōri hachiman chō</i> <i>by James H. Sanford</i>	57
American Jōdo Shinshū Practice: A Fork in the Road <i>by Gordon Bermant</i>	77
Transmission	
Yuan Hongdao and the <i>Xifang helun</i> : Pure Land Theology in the Late Ming Dynasty <i>by Charles B. Jones</i>	89
Spiritual Kinship and Lineage in Major Buddhist Traditions <i>by Charles S. Prebish</i>	127
How Not to Talk about Pure Land Buddhism: A Critique of Huston Smith's (Mis)Representations <i>by Richard K. Payne</i>	147
Interpretation	
The Supremacy of Amida's Vows in Rennyō: The Case of Women <i>by Alfred Bloom</i>	175
Shinran's Pure Land Buddhism as a Way of Being Religious: Some Twenty-first-century tasks for Shin Buddhist Theology <i>by Ruben L. F. Habito</i>	189
Amida and Pure Land within a Contemporary Worldview: From Shinran's Literal Symbolism to Figurative Symbolism <i>by Kenneth K. Tanaka</i>	215
Contributors	243
Bibliography	245
Index	257

## How Not to Talk about Pure Land Buddhism: A Critique of Huston Smith's (Mis)Representations

Richard K. Payne

Dean, Institute of Buddhist Studies, Berkeley

### Preface

Unfortunately, I only came to know Roger Corless as anything more than an academic colleague late in his life, after his retirement from Duke University and eventual relocation close enough to the Institute of Buddhist Studies that he could teach for us on a regular basis. Indeed, the last time I saw Roger was at the opening of our new offices in Berkeley, California. Despite the advanced state of the illness that would eventually kill him, he was happy—no, enthusiastic—to see the new facility now devoted to the propagation of Pure Land Buddhism. The frontispiece is a photograph of Roger taken that day and evidences his joyful attitude.

As described by Gordon Bermant in his preface to this volume, “Appreciating Roger” (pp. xi–xviii), the Roger Corless that I came to know encompassed many distinct identities. In addition to other things, he was both a Shin Buddhist and a Catholic, and, as I only learned after his death, he was involved with Nichiren Buddhism as well.

In the present popular culture this kind of religiously plural identity is perhaps not uncommon. It seems, however, that the autonomy of each element within a personal plurality is often blurred into a kind of vague and diffuse “spirituality.” With Roger, however, I never had the sense that he equated the various religious commitments that constituted his life, much less confusing them with one another.

### Introduction

In contemporary American culture, Huston Smith is widely recognized and esteemed as a leading scholar of religious studies. His *World's Religions* (originally, *The Religions of Man*)<sup>1</sup> has sold millions of copies

Richard K. Payne

---

and is still used as a textbook in introductory courses across the nation. Even people who do not recognize his name hold views about religion that have been deeply informed by his teachings and writings. Through his writings, teaching, television appearances, and works in other popular venues, Smith has played a formative role in developing the contemporary American understanding of religion. When I first met him, through a class offered by the University of California Extension, Santa Cruz, sometime in the late 1970s, I found him to be very charismatic, a quality that in itself made his vision of religion convincing. His view that religion is a central part of personal existence has been part of a more general social development toward an individualized understanding of religion, moving away from institutional forms of religion toward something more personally relevant.<sup>2</sup> In addition, he has provided an alternative to rejecting the unknown religious Other as a threat. Smith has spoken reassuringly to a society confronted by the reality of religious diversity as happening in our own towns and cities, if not on our own streets. In contrast to views of religions that see them as competing—sometimes violently—over irreconcilable claims regarding truth and value, Smith presents a view of religious diversity as forming a harmonious whole in which each complements the other.

It is noteworthy, then, when in his recent *Buddhism: A Concise Introduction*<sup>3</sup> he turns his attention, after years of neglect, to Pure Land Buddhism. For these reasons, how Smith represents Pure Land Buddhism not only reflects widespread conceptions about the nature of religion generally, and Buddhism per se, but may also have a lasting influence on how Pure Land is received more widely. There are, however, three problematic aspects of Smith's treatment of Pure Land Buddhism specifically, and of Buddhism generally.

The first of these is that he uncritically perpetuates a particular image of Buddhism, that known as "Buddhist modernism." The second problem with Smith's treatment of Shin and of Buddhism is his use of Christian religious concepts and categories as if they were universal. The final problem is Smith's own theological commitment to Traditionalism, which informs his late representations of Buddhism, forcing it to fit with his own theology. After discussing each of these three problems in Smith's representations of religion and Buddhism, we will examine his representations of Pure Land and Shin Buddhism. First, however, it is worth considering the historical development leading up to Smith's treatment of Pure Land, as this history itself reveals important limitations that create specific distortions in its representation of Buddhism.

### History of Smith's Pure Land "Afterword"

Published under joint authorship with Philip Novak, *Buddhism: A Concise Introduction* is divided into two sections. Except for one new chapter, the first section largely repeats the Buddhism chapter of Smith's previous work, *Religions of Man/World's Religions*. The second section by Novak discusses the movement of Buddhism to the West. This second section is followed by the Afterword written by Smith dealing specifically with Pure Land Buddhism—a topic of which he claims special knowledge because of his experiences as the child of Christian missionaries growing up in China.

The first section has had two previous incarnations. First, there is the chapter as it appeared in the original *Religions of Man*, published in 1958. In 1991, thirty-three years later, *Religions of Man* was reissued in a revised edition under the title *The World's Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions*. This revision comes after his "discovery" of Traditionalism in the 1969–1970 academic year, an event that may explain his choice of subtitle for the new edition. Other than minor editorial changes, the only significant change to the Buddhism chapter was the addition of a section treating Tibetan Buddhism. Similarly, the difference between the chapter in its second incarnation in *The World's Religions* and its third incarnation as the first part of *Buddhism: A Concise Introduction* is for the most part relatively minor. Beyond minor editorial changes, in the process of converting the sections into separate chapters they are expanded by the addition of apposite stories. The only significant change to this third incarnation of the first section is a new chapter on Theravādin *vipassanā*—the meditation practice followed by the work's coauthor, Novak, and hence probably from his pen.

Thus, between 1958 and 2004, the section by Smith has only been revised to the extent of having two sections added: one on Tibetan Buddhism and one on Theravāda. But other than these two new chapters—what might be referred to as a purely aggregative change—no rethinking of the content, no revision of the understanding of Buddhism as it was known in the 1950s, was undertaken. This lack of any significant revisioning between 1958 and 2004 ignores a huge body of research on Buddhism that had been published in the intervening years.

While evidencing the limitations of Smith's scholarship, I believe it reveals more than that. Dismissing more than four and a half decades' worth of research on the very topics on which Smith continued to publish is not

Richard K. Payne

simply a matter of a lack of awareness or interest, but rather appears to be the consequence of a presumption regarding the nature of religion.

This is the presumption that every religion has an essential core that remains unchanged, no matter what additional information becomes available. It seems that as far as Smith is concerned, he determined the essence of Buddhism and adequately described it in 1958. Therefore, there has been no need to reconsider his characterization of Buddhism—even after almost half a century, during which time hundreds of publications about Buddhism have appeared. The essence that Smith used to structure his representation of Buddhism is that image promoted by Buddhist modernism.

### **Uncritical Perpetuation of Buddhist Modernism**

Buddhist modernism presents a version of Buddhism that was created during the latter part of the nineteenth and first part of the twentieth centuries in response to assaults on Buddhism by Christian missionaries. In an attempt to assert the value of Buddhism, Buddhist apologists—both Euro-American and Asian—created a representation of Buddhism that itself reflected the religious ideas and values of liberal Protestantism.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, some authors have felt it appropriate to use the term “Protestant Buddhism” for this modern interpretation of Buddhism.<sup>5</sup> Three of these religious ideas seem to have been particularly formative for the modernist reinterpretation of Buddhism.<sup>6</sup>

These ideas were, first, that religion should be a rational system of personal self-development—which has as its corollary an opposition to superstition and ritualism. Second, that the religions important in the modern world all have an historical founder whose self-appointed task was the purification of a decadent religious system. Third, in keeping with the social gospel of nineteenth-century liberal Protestantism, Buddhist modernism also emphasized social reform as a more general expression of its purification of a decadent religious system. This reformist program included emphasizing the role of the laity in decision-making; extending practices and standards previously only undertaken by monks, such as meditation, to the laity; and asserting a congruence between Buddhism properly understood and modern science. As Sarah Levine and David N. Gellner have put it,

Buddhist modernists mark a radical departure from traditional Buddhist revivalists, because they seek to monasticize the laity as well, that is, to bring

## How Not to Talk about Pure Land Buddhism

the laity up to a level of Buddhist virtue that had previously been thought possible and appropriate only for monks. Modernist revivalism is frequently combined with social reform, and usually consists in viewing the religion in question as scientific or at least as compatible with modern science.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, the rejection of supposedly irrational practices, such as ritual, and superstitious beliefs was motivated by the desire to portray Buddhism as a rational system of self-development. In this process, individual meditation practices were promoted as paradigmatic of Buddhism—part of the “monasticization” of the laity.<sup>8</sup>

As noted above, despite its recent publication date (2004), the substantive core of Smith and Novak’s *Buddhism: A Concise Introduction* dates to the mid-1950s, when the Buddhist modernist representation of Buddhism was the one most easily accessible. Smith perpetuates its claim to authority as “original” Buddhism uncritically, and has continued to perpetuate it as such without change. It is the Buddhist modernist portrayal of Buddhism that informs Smith’s representations of the essence of Buddhism.

That Smith essentializes Buddhism in accord with the self-representations of Buddhist modernism means that his representation of Buddhism is structured in two specific ways. First, as discussed above, Buddhist modernism selectively highlights those religious values that appeared to be congruent with late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century liberal Protestant theology. Second, it fits the history of Buddhism into the mold of Protestant conceptions of the universal pattern of religious history. Protestant religious historiography imposes a cyclic pattern of a founder who teaches an originally pure, rationalistic morality that gradually decays, is reformed back to its original purity, only to be followed by another cycle of decay and reform.

This liberal Protestant revisioning of the essence of Buddhism is presented by Smith when he states that the Buddha preached a religion that was “without authority, ritual, theology, tradition, grace, and the supernatural.”<sup>9</sup> Immediately thereafter, Smith goes on to characterize “original Buddhism”<sup>10</sup> in positive terms as empirical, scientific, pragmatic, therapeutic, psychological, egalitarian, and individualistic.<sup>11</sup> Doing so, he emphasizes exactly those qualities that a mid-twentieth-century liberal Protestant audience would find acceptable—and indeed, hardly a more concise summary of the Buddhist modernist representation of Buddhism can be found.<sup>12</sup>

Smith has set up this characterization of the “original” teachings of the Buddha as part of the Buddha’s being a figure of reform—modeled

Richard K. Payne

precisely on Protestant historiography's understanding of Jesus as a reformer of temple Judaism, which is in turn itself the basis of the images of Martin Luther and John Calvin as reformers of medieval Catholic Christianity. Making the history of Buddhism fit into this mold, Smith characterizes the religion of India at the time of the Buddha as "corrupt, degenerate, and irrelevant, matted with superstition and burdened with worn-out rituals."<sup>13</sup> At the same time, by portraying the Buddha's teachings in this manner, Smith manages to set up the future of Buddhism—when rituals, speculative philosophy, appeals to authority, and appeals to the power of buddhas and bodhisattvas become evident—as a process of decline and decadence.<sup>14</sup> This dynamic comes into play when he presents Hōnen and Shinran as the founding figures of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism.

While Smith is not responsible for creating the Buddhist modernist representation of Buddhism (or for creating the Protestant historiography of religion), he is responsible for perpetuating it. This perpetuation is itself evidence of a second set of presumptions that Smith expresses when he describes his own purposes in writing *The Religions of Man* originally. He models his presentation on music appreciation, asserting that he is not interested in a balanced, historical approach but rather a presentation of the best of religions—their values.

Probably as much bad music as good has been written in the course of human history, but we do not ask that a course in music appreciation give it equal space. Time being limited, we expect no apology for spending it with the best. I have taken a similar position with regard to religion.<sup>15</sup>

What is implicit in such an approach is the presumption that Huston Smith is himself in a position to judge what is "best" in any and all religions, as well as the presumption that it is only what he considers to be "the best" that people need to know about a religion. Thus, what we have is not "original Buddhism," as Smith claims, but *Smith's* Buddhism—his judgment as to what is best about Buddhism and his selective representation of Buddhism according to that judgment. The rhetorical strategy of cloaking the representation of Buddhism that Smith himself has created in raiment of "original Buddhism," replete with all the weight of authority such a phrase brings with it, is an instance of bad faith.<sup>16</sup>

### Universalizing Christian Categories and Concepts

Not only has Smith chosen to ignore all of the advances in Buddhist studies scholarship that have taken place over the last four and a half

decades, but as a work in religious studies his text similarly fails to note advances in that field as well. One of the key issues for religious studies in the English-speaking world has been an increasing awareness of the problems involved in raising familiar concepts and categories to the status of universal concepts and categories. Although these familiar concepts and categories are (almost by definition) Christian, if not more specifically modern Protestant, once abstracted from that context they are commonly treated as context-neutral and universal. Once considered to be context-neutral and universal, it is assumed that they can be applied without regard to historical period or sociocultural setting. From this assumption it follows that the same concepts and categories employed, for example, in the study of late nineteenth-century American Protestantism can be applied universally—that these same concepts and categories will apply equally well to all religions, no matter whether one is studying such widely divergent religions as early medieval Indian Buddhism or postcolonial Afro-Brazilian Candomblé.<sup>17</sup>

One example of the difficulties produced by the tendency in religious studies to universalize Christian concepts and categories is the use of the concept “soteriology.” Although employed in its Latinate form, this refers to salvation, which in the Christian context implicates a three-part narrative structure: salvation from sin by a savior. Yet, the human condition as defined by Buddhism is arguably one of ignorance, not sin. The three-part narrative structure for Buddhism would instead be: awakening from ignorance by following the eightfold path. To universalize soteriology is, then, to at least implicitly define Buddhism as a religion of salvation, and in doing so to misrepresent its most fundamental teachings.

While it may be understandable that a work on religious studies published in the mid-1950s would have made the assumption that Christian concepts and categories could be universalized, to perpetuate that assumption into the treatment of Buddhism in 2004 is much more problematic. Like the uncritical perpetuation of Buddhist modernism, the unreflective universalization of Christian concepts and categories also constitutes a distorting factor in Smith’s representations of Buddhism.

Another example of Smith’s unreflective universalization of Christian concepts and categories is the use of “grace” in his representation of Buddhism. (Smith also equates “other-power” [*tariki*] with the Christian concept of “grace,”<sup>18</sup> which will be discussed below in our examination of the problems with Smith’s treatment of Pure Land *per se*.) He introduces grace into his representation of Buddhism in the chapter in which

Richard K. Payne

he discusses the differences between Theravāda and Mahayana. There he claims that Theravāda asserts that “self-reliance is our only recourse. . . . For Mahayana, in contrast, grace is a fact.”<sup>19</sup> The closest he comes to defining his use of the term “grace” in a Buddhist context is to reference the Mahayana “doctrine of cosmic help (grace).”<sup>20</sup> This hardly explains which *Buddhist* concept he intends.

The idea of grace is not context-neutral. It is part of a complex of ideas, the entirety of which is at least implicitly entailed by its use. Taking as one example, a Catholic encyclopedia explains that

Christian grace is a fundamental idea of the Christian religion, the pillar on which, by a special ordination of God, the majestic edifice of Christianity rests in its entirety. Among the three fundamental ideas—sin, redemption, and grace—grace plays the part of the means, indispensable and Divinely ordained, to effect the redemption from sin through Christ and to lead men to their eternal destiny in heaven.<sup>21</sup>

In its native Christian context, grace is identified as an integral part of the description of the human condition as one of sin, and in need of salvation, which is attained through grace. An unnuanced use of the term “grace” in reference to Buddhism implicitly introduces this entire complex of ideas.

Also typical of Smith’s universalizing is his claim that the traditional worldview is one committed to a “great chain of being” metaphysics.<sup>22</sup> The “great chain of being” was given name by Arthur Lovejoy, but the idea originated with Plotinus’ adaptation of Platonic thought, in what is now known as Neoplatonism. The idea of the “great chain of being” is that the phenomenal world, the world of our experience, is derivative from a higher reality. This is also known as “emanationist metaphysics,” in that being or existence emanates out from the ultimate source, progressively creating lesser forms of being, including human existence. The metaphor of the chain is used to convey the idea that there is a dependence of the lower upon the upper, but in Neoplatonism the lesser is not only derivatively dependent upon the higher, it is less real. The identity of the real with the good in Neoplatonic thought also gives a moral ranking to the levels of reality—the higher levels being of greater goodness, the lower being increasingly evil. In this system, that which is purely evil is the purely nonexistent.

Smith’s particular version of the great chain of being is Kabbalistic in character. Kabbalah is also an emanationist metaphysics, one in which the ultimate source of being is known as the “Ein Sof.” By describing

Smith's view as Kabbalistic I mean that in his conception the source of being is inherently unknowable for humans; it exists behind a mystical "cloud of unknowing." The source of being in Smith's theology is unknowable just as the Ein Sof of Kabbalistic thought is. This presumption of the limits of human knowledge is in direct opposition to the Buddhist goal of wisdom as knowledge of impermanence.

One of the consequences of emanationist metaphysics is a belief that there is a hierarchical order of being—that some things are more real than others, and that the less real derive from the more real. In another of his recent works, *Why Religion Matters*, Smith argues that hierarchy is not only one metaphysical system among others and is spiritually better than any other, but makes the extraordinary—and unsubstantiated—claim that it is the sole metaphysical system of all religions.

Etymologically, *hierarchy* comes close to being a perfect word for joining the two virtues—holiness, *heiros*, and sovereign power, *arkhes*—which, conjoined, announce religion's central claim.<sup>23</sup>

That a theocratic politics would follow from acceptance of such a claim is passed over in silence by Smith. And, as will be discussed further below, as an empirical claim, this universal generalization is simply false.<sup>24</sup>

Universalizing religious concepts and categories involves treating them as if they were unproblematically applicable to all religious traditions, without regard to historical or social location—as context-neutral. Smith universalizes both broadly Christian concepts and categories, such as grace, as well as his own theological ideas, such as emanationist metaphysics and the hierarchical view that is its corollary. Doing so, however, misleads readers into thinking that they understand something, such as Buddhism, when in fact they are being led to something quite different—Smith's own theology. In such a case the assertion of a fundamental unity of religions obscures rather than clarifies.

### Smith's Soft Traditionalism

*Traditionalism: perennialism + anti-modernism.* To adequately grasp the problematic character of Smith's Pure Land "Afterword" requires that we see it within the larger context of Smith's own ideological commitments. This broader context goes beyond his specific treatment of Shin, and even his treatment of Buddhism in its entirety, to include his overall Traditionalist project—a personal commitment he has explicitly embraced. This, however, means that we will need to first understand Traditionalism as a system of thought.

Richard K. Payne

Roughly speaking, Traditionalism combines perennialism and anti-modernism. From perennialism it takes the notion that there is a single, universal, ultimate religious truth that is variously manifest in the different religious traditions. The mystics are the ones who have accessed this single, universal, and ultimate truth, and they are, therefore, the source and definition of that which is authentic and valuable in any religious tradition.

The anti-modernism of the Traditionalists is rooted in Romanticism, historically the intellectual background for Traditionalism. Much of the rhetorical appeal of Traditionalism is found in its prophetic decrying of the modern condition. In light of this diagnosis of the current condition of humanity, it prescribes an abandonment of modernity and a return to traditional social organization and traditional religion. The common human propensity for nostalgia about an idealized past is here converted into a religious—and, in fact, social and political—program.

Mark Sedgwick has been instrumental in identifying Traditionalism as a coherent and influential—albeit largely unrecognized—system of religious thought. Sedgwick distinguishes between “hard Traditionalists” who are explicit in their commitment to Traditionalism, and “soft Traditionalists” who use Traditionalist ideas but who do not make their commitments explicit. Smith is a somewhat ambiguous case. His most popular and successful works make no reference to Traditionalism or to the founding Traditionalist figures, such as René Guénon (1886–1951) and Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998). Yet in an autobiographical tone, he has written repeatedly about the revelatory quality of his encounter with the writings of Schuon.<sup>25</sup> In a tale clearly benefiting from frequent retelling, we are given a vision of a miraculous discovery of three of Schuon’s works explaining Buddhism and Shintō, Vedānta, and Islam at exactly the right moments in a year-long around-the-world study tour in 1969–1970. Not only did these books miraculously appear at just the right moment, but they led Smith to reconsider Schuon’s *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* and resolve thereby his own personal theological quandary regarding the unity and diversity of religions.

Smith’s implicit Traditionalism becomes evident when he asserts in *Why Religion Matters* that he can “use the terms *traditional* and *religious* interchangeably, for all traditional societies were religious.”<sup>26</sup> This kind of apparently purposeful terminological confusion is endemic to Smith’s writings, and makes it possible for him to imply certain conclusions without arguing for them. In this case, the unexpressed implication of this formulation is a dualistic opposition. If traditional and religious are

coterminous, then modern is necessarily irreligious. Under such an implication the ideas of a modern religion or a traditional secularism are simply oxymorons, despite the existence of both.

The concept of “tradition” is central to Traditionalism, but is itself deployed rhetorically without clear definition—as an empty signifier it is much more powerful and, therefore, more useful. Having established this rhetorical grounding, Smith goes on to assert that all religions, presumably including Buddhism, share five characteristics. While this characterization of all traditional religion under these specific five characteristics seems to be unique to Smith,<sup>27</sup> it is important as a clear expression of Smith’s own theological precommitment to a perennialist view regarding the unity underlying the appearance of diversity.

The five characteristics that Smith asserts apply to all religions are, first, that “*spirit is fundamental and matter derivative*”; second, that “*human beings are the less who have derived from the more*”; third, that there is a “*happy ending*”; fourth, since the world is the intentional creation of a perfect being, it is meaningful; and, fifth, that people belong in the world.<sup>28</sup> (He has given other such lists of characteristics elsewhere.<sup>29</sup>)

Although Smith presents these five characteristics of traditional religion as unproblematic, each of them is in fact highly contentious. The claim that “*spirit is fundamental and matter derivative*” only works within those religions that first of all make the spirit-matter distinction. Daoism might, for example, be offered as an instance of a religion in which such a distinction is not made. The closest analogy might be the relation between the Dao and the “*ten thousand things*,” but the Dao is not “*spirit*,” nor are the ten thousand things “*matter*”—and indeed, in some understandings, the Dao and the ten thousand things do not differ from one another. Second, the notion of human beings as the less which derives from the more is an expression of Neoplatonic emanationism (and perhaps, Anselm’s ontological proof), and would hardly apply to religions that do not accept an emanationist metaphysics. Those forms of Hinduism that embrace a cyclic cosmogony would seem to have no such emanationist metaphysics. Not all religions believe in a “*happy ending*.” Certainly the examples of classic Greek religion, as well as the Norse conception of Ragnarök demonstrate the falsehood of this claim. Likewise, the Hebrew Sheol is not a happy ending either.

That the world is the intentional creation of a perfect being is also not found in Buddhist (or Hindu) cosmogonies, where the cosmos simply has always been, though cycling through periods of creation, decay, and quiescence before reemerging in a new cycle. There are also Native

Richard K. Payne

American mythologies in which the world is the creation of twins, one good and one evil. Finally, the question of whether we humans belong here in this world is only an issue for religions in which the idea has been asserted that we do not—a view perhaps only asserted by Gnosticism. Thus, we find that far from being an empirically based generalization about traditional religions, Smith's five characteristics are in fact an expression of his own theology—an assertion of what religion should be, instead of what it is. Rather than claiming his constructive role in creating this theology, however, he commits an act of bad faith—asserting its objectivity and universality, and claiming the authority of “tradition” for it.

It is in this fashion that Traditionalist thinkers construct a hegemonic metanarrative about religion. Typically the Traditionalist metanarrative combines perennialism, with its own implicit Neoplatonism, and anti-modernism. Traditionalism seemingly invariably portrays the history of religion as a process of decay from an idealized past (*gemeinschaft*, or “community” in the romantic sociology of Ferdinand Tönnies<sup>30</sup>) in which communities are portrayed as unified by shared commitments to traditional ways of life. The cause for this decay, this decline from this ideal(ized) past, is identified with the rise of modern society (*gesellschaft*, or “society”), particularly with science and technology, relativism and materialism. From this diagnosis of the contemporary human condition, the prescription is a return to the past, abandoning modernity for a supposedly simpler life, one fully in harmony with the natural and supernatural (hierarchical) order of being.

Having discussed the three distorting lenses through which Smith projects his representation of Buddhism generally, we can now turn our attention specifically to his treatment of Pure Land.

### **Smith's (Mis)Representations of Pure Land Buddhism**

At two points in his “Afterword,” Smith explicitly equates Pure Land with Christianity, more particularly with Protestant Christianity. At the start of this chapter, he explains having overlooked Pure Land on the grounds that the focus of general public interest was on Zen at the time he wrote *Religions of Man*. This explanation is itself emblematic of the problems with Smith's approach to religious studies—he is self-consciously not attempting to produce a balanced or comprehensive historically informed work in comparative religions. Instead, it is evident

that the interest Anglo-Americans had for Zen was more important for his intended audience, despite the fact that “the largest sect in Japanese Buddhism is Shin Buddhism.”<sup>31</sup> Smith’s diagnosis for the lack of interest in Pure Land Buddhism is that it did not appear to offer an alternative to Christianity, that it did not have the exotic appeal of Zen.<sup>32</sup> However, rather than exploring the contours of difference between Pure Land and Christianity (much less the problematics of the appeal of the exotic Other<sup>33</sup>), Smith then suggests that it is this very appearance of familiarity that provides the best gateway to understanding the Pure Land tradition.

The first comparison Smith makes is between Pure Land and the Christianities of Paul and Luther, but without any explanation. What he does specifically point to is the soteriological dynamics of evangelical Christianity—as exemplified in the revivalism of George Whitefield and the program of Alcoholics Anonymous—in which grace comes to those who accept their own utter powerlessness and accept their total dependence on a higher power. This is a misleading and utterly superficial understanding of Pure Land thought. Within Pure Land thought itself, dependency on Amida’s vow is in fact limited to the question of the eventual attainment of awakening. It in no way extends to a fatalistic abnegation of personal will, as expressed in the saying, “Not mine, O Lord, but thy will be done.”

Not only is the Christian concept of grace not universalizable, as discussed above, but if one understands Pure Land thought in its own Buddhist context, Amida is not available as an intercessor. As a buddha *tathāgata*, Amida no longer exists. What is effective is the vow; it is the continuing karmic efficacy of the vow of Amida that anyone thinking of him, even as few as ten times, is assured birth in Sukhāvati.<sup>34</sup> Smith, however, attributes to Buddhism what can only be seen as a version of the Catholic conception of a Treasure House of Merits accumulated by the saints—

a storehouse of salvific energy personified by [buddhas] and bodhisattvas who dwell in innumerable ethereal realms. From these luminous, heavenly beings, faithful Buddhists can request and receive, not just some help or help that matches their own efforts, but unlimited help. It is a Cosmic Resource that is not of human making, but from which mortals need only ask in order to receive.<sup>35</sup>

Within the context of Pure Land thought, however, what the vow assures is not assistance with one’s marital problems, or with having one’s child accepted to the right college, or with getting a raise at work, but

Richard K. Payne

only birth in Sukhāvātī, which, while it is a very nice place, is only a stepping-stone—though the final one—on the path to awakening.

Indicative of the way in which Smith simply universalizes Christian concepts, we find embedded in this quotation—without qualification or comment—the phrase “faithful Buddhist.” What it means to be a faithful Christian is relatively clear—exclusive and unwavering adherence to a specific set of doctrinal claims, such as the divinity of Jesus. This has its roots in the Hebrew Bible’s emphasis on exclusive adherence to Yahweh as the one true God, an emphasis that indirectly reveals the pluralistic reality of ancient Near Eastern religion. But nowhere in its entire history has Buddhism developed a concept like “being faithful” in this sense.

It is also the case that fitting Shin Buddhism into the category of religion as defined by Smith entails undesirable consequences. For example in his other recent work, *Why Religion Matters*, Smith sets up an agonistic dichotomy between science and religion—a move consistent with Smith’s increasingly evident commitment to a kind of Kabbalistic Neoplatonist soteriology and cosmology discussed above. If we accept that Buddhism fits into this understanding of religion, then of necessity Buddhism is also set in opposition to science. Yet, as at least suggested above, religion is not a natural but rather a social category—one that we create and maintain through use. Hence, there is no necessary reason either that science and religion should be antagonistic, nor is there any necessary reason that Buddhism be classed as a religion—particularly not as that category is defined by Smith.<sup>36</sup>

As discussed in the second section above, Smith universalizes Christian concepts and categories, applying them uncritically to all religions. One of the Christian conceptions that Smith universalizes in his representation of Pure Land Buddhism is “faith.” He does this without any evidence of having reflected on the propriety of using a term so heavily laden with Christian meaning in a Buddhist context—without considering, in this instance, the possibility of differences between the Pure Land concept of *shinjin* and Christian faith. And indeed, in contemporary works this term is frequently glossed as “faith”—a rendering Smith invokes by giving his Afterword the subtitle “The Flowering of Faith.” The equation of faith and *shinjin* is not, however, an unproblematic one.

The appropriate way to translate *shinjin*, or even whether it is best left untranslated, has long been a contentious issue among Shin scholars, apologists, and interpreters—the proverbial oceans of ink having been expended on this hotly contested issue. The importance of attending to the religious connotations of such key terms—that these considerations

are not simply matters of intellectual posturing—is particularly evident in this case.

The term “faith” as it exists in contemporary Western popular religious discourse necessarily entails two contrastive connotations. The first is the “works versus faith” debate that marked the Reformation. In other words, one cannot use the term “faith” today without it implicitly introducing the concept of works as its contrastive marker. A second connotation entailed by the use of the term “faith,” prominent in American religious history, is the contrast between faith and knowledge (or reason).<sup>37</sup> Following the Second Great Awakening (ca. 1800–1840) American Protestant religion took on a distinctly anti-intellectual emphasis, rejecting knowledge as an impediment to faith. The denial that reflective thought serves any religious value corresponds to the Romantic emphasis on the irreducible and veridical character of personal experience—a rhetorical claim often repeated in perennialist assertions regarding the nature of mystical experience, and its privileged epistemological position. The two connotations—faith versus works, and faith versus knowledge—are necessarily entailed in any use of the term “faith” in contemporary American religious culture, whether made explicit or not. The failure to reflect on those connotations explicitly and to bring into discussion the radically different semantic contexts of “faith” in modern American religious culture and *shinjin* in Pure Land Buddhism simply conflates the two. This, then, necessarily leads to a misrepresentation of the meanings intended by the term *shinjin*.

Put briefly, the Sanskrit roots for the term *shinjin* are themselves complex, being both *śraddhā*, the characteristic of confidence in the efficacy of the teachings necessary to engage in practice, and *cittaprasāda*, the mental equanimity attained at a very advanced stage of the path. In a fashion typical of the thought of medieval Japanese Buddhism, medieval Buddhists such as Shinran perform what Paul Groner has referred to as the “shortening of the path,” that is, the equation of the beginning of the path with the end.<sup>38</sup> Another very important aspect of the meaning of *shinjin* is that throughout his major work, the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, Shinran equates *shinjin* with *bodhicitta*, the intent to awaken, a central theme running throughout the entirety of Mahayana Buddhism. Smith’s failure to indicate to the reader that there are any relevant nuances distinguishing *shinjin* and faith simultaneously binds Pure Land thought to a Christianized conception of it, and unnecessarily obscures its continuity with the rest of Mahayana Buddhism.

Richard K. Payne

As alluded to above, another one of the concepts that has been raised to universal status is mysticism as definitive for all forms of religion. This idea is central to perennialism, a view of religion made popular by Aldous Huxley. According to this view, all religions are based upon, founded upon some mystical experience, and all of these mystical experiences are “ultimately” the same; that is, any differences between the records of these experiences is explained away as “merely cultural.” (The reductionist character of this approach does not seem to bother Smith and many others who object to other kinds of reductionisms.) Thus we find Smith claiming that

Mystics are people who have a talent for sensing places where life’s carapace is cracked, and through its chinks they catch glimpses of a world beyond.<sup>39</sup>

He then cites several examples, such as Isaiah, Christ, Arjuna, John, Saul, Augustine, St. Francis, St. Ignatius, and Jacob Boehme. Included in this list is “The Buddha finding the universe turning into a bouquet of flowers at the hour of his enlightenment.” First, which description of the Buddha’s awakening is he referring to? Second, other descriptions do not fit into Smith’s generality about mystics—the Buddha did not see through the “carapace” of life to some “world beyond.” He simply saw the way things actually work, understanding that this is different from how we want them to work. This is not access to a transcendent realm—despite the tendency of authors influenced by perennialist assumptions to reduce all founding narratives to reports of a unitary and universal mystical experience.

When we consider Smith’s interpretation of Hōnen and Shinran we find that it is itself based on another author’s work (see below, “Appendix: Smith’s Plagiarism”<sup>40</sup>), one which presents an interpretation of Hōnen and Shinran as if they were German Idealists, thereby accord- ing them an appearance close to the Romantic-Traditionalist view to which Smith is himself committed. Taking representative selections from this section of Smith’s description of Shin and Pure Land Buddhism, Smith begins by describing Hōnen and Shinran as “world-class meta- physicians who hear in the formula [*Namu Amida Butsu*] reverberations of eternity.”<sup>41</sup> He then goes on to assert that Shinran claims that

Ultimately all religions are paradoxical. . . . Our “abysmal sinfulness” is identical with the Unthinkable Power that saves us. The “I” in the I-Thou relationship is identical with the “Thou” and the finite “I am” is identical with the “Eternal I Am. . . .” Our dying to our finite selves is our rebirth in the Universal Self.<sup>42</sup>

Smith claims that this is “Shinran’s voice,” yet, the description is loaded with anachronisms of the worst kind. Smith’s unthinking assertion of anachronisms is evidence of the dehistoricized character of his approach to religion—he doesn’t care about understanding a religion in terms of its own time and place, but only as an instantiation of what he conceives to be the singular and universal religious tradition.

To call Hōnen and Shinran, or any Buddhist thinker, a “metaphysician” is to impose a category that is effectively absent from Buddhist thought. The closest Buddhist analogue to metaphysics is abhidharma, which is itself highly psychological in character, and which does not propound any notion of a transcendent absolute. Not only is Buddhist thought distinctly different from Western philosophical metaphysics; an adequate understanding of the significance of Smith’s attribution of the title “metaphysician” to Hōnen and Shinran entails a digression through the thought of Frithjof Schuon, noted above as having been formative for Smith’s religious views after 1969–1970. Schuon begins his book *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* by making a three-way distinction. Philosophy, according to Schuon, derives from reason—“a purely individual faculty”<sup>43</sup>—and is the lowest of his three epistemological categories. Higher than philosophy is religious faith, which, although it “proceeds from Revelation,” is an “indirect and passive participation” in the divine through the vehicle of symbolic representations. Metaphysic (Schuon seems to imply that there is only one by using the singular form) surpasses religion, because it is “a direct and active participation in divine Knowledge.”<sup>44</sup> Because an individual’s “innermost essence . . . is not distinct from his Divine Principle,” one capable of direct intellectual intuition of the divine has an absolute certainty, and is able to perceive the higher truths through the veils of religious symbolism and dogma.<sup>45</sup> Thus, Smith’s ascription of the title “metaphysician” to Hōnen and Shinran has very specific Traditionalist significance, but which he avoids making explicit.

Continuing then with the other anachronistic features of Smith’s portrayal of Shinran, while “reverberations of eternity” has a nice poetic ring to it, the idea of eternity per se does not play the same religious role in Buddhist thought as it does in Christian thought, where it is tied into discussions regarding the doctrine of creation and God’s role as creator. The notion of “all religions” is certainly not one that Shinran could have possibly concerned himself with, as the idea had not yet been formulated anywhere at that time—not in Japan, but also not in Europe. While “paradox” is central to Neoplatonic conceptions of how one achieves

Richard K. Payne

direct insight into the nature of the One, it is actually not part of Buddhist thought regarding the path—despite the existence of misleadingly Neoplatonic interpretations of *kōans* and Indian logic.

“Unthinkable power” is another nice-sounding phrase, one pointing toward the Kabbalistic character of Smith’s emanationist metaphysics. It is a phrase, however, that entirely misrepresents Shinran’s thought. Central to all Pure Land Buddhism, including the forms propagated by Hōnen and Shinran, is the practice of *nenbutsu* (Ch. *nianfo*; Skt. *buddhānusmṛti*), which means to hold the Buddha in mind, either through visualization of an image or through recitation of the name. If Amida is “unthinkable,” as Smith asserts, then the entire structure of Shin doctrine is based on a fallacy—for we are constantly assured that it is by thinking about Amida—that is, *nenbutsu*—that one is assured of birth in *Sukhāvātī*.

The formulation of “I and Thou” is from Martin Buber, a twentieth-century Austrian Jewish mystical theologian. How could Shinran, working several centuries earlier, have made the assertion that “I” and “Thou” are identical? And Buber’s distinction between an “I-Thou” and an “I-it” relation is itself based on Kantian philosophic conceptions post-dating Shinran by several centuries, and located in an entirely different philosophic discourse. Similarly the “I Am” movement was started in California in the 1930s, and so assertions about the identity of the “finite ‘I am’” with the “‘Eternal I Am’” are equally anachronistic, inaccurate, and misleading. Finally, the idea of being reborn in “the Universal Self” is incoherent in a Buddhist context, as there is no “universal self.” Even if Smith were to assert a loose and entirely misleading equation between Amida and the “universal self,” this would not accurately represent Shin thought, as one is not born into an identity with Amida but rather born in his presence in *Sukhāvātī*.

An accurate understanding of the thought of the Pure Land lineage-holders requires that they be understood in the context of the Indo-Sinitic Buddhisms that had been transmitted to Japan, and which had been developing there for over seven centuries by the time of Hōnen and Shinran. This is what they were thinking of, and to fail to place them in this context will necessarily lead to misunderstanding them and the religious significance of the Pure Land teachings.

## Conclusion

One straightforward way to summarize our critique of Huston Smith’s representation of both Pure Land specifically and Buddhism generally

is to ask: What does an author conceive the function of religion to be? Is the function of religion conceived to be reassurance, comfort, or disturbance? As mentioned already, religion is, of course, not a natural category but rather a socially constructed or intersubjective category. As such, the preconceptions an author holds about the function of religion will deeply structure the way in which that author represents religion.

More specifically, we can identify four different problems with Smith's representations of Buddhism. First, Smith's representation of Buddhism in general is a version of Buddhist modernism set within the narrative structure of Protestant historiography—an essentialized, ahistorical, and elitist representation. Second, the claim to represent "tradition" is a matter of bad faith; that is, it is not an accurate representation of any particular tradition, nor is it a generalization based on examination of actual traditional religions, but rather a modern construct, created on the basis of Romantic notions, perennialist thought, and anti-modernism. Third, Smith's Traditionalism asserts its own religious view as a hegemonic metanarrative, imposing theist, absolutist, dualist, and emanationist thought onto all religions, and giving epistemological privilege to mystical experience. Fourth, these are not the characteristics of Buddhism taken as a whole, nor are they the characteristics of Pure Land Buddhism in particular—though by overcoding by means of selection and interpretation, a representation of Pure Land that fits these universalized claims about religion can be constructed.

The proper application of comparison as a tool for understanding at the very least includes the necessity of not only stating in what ways two things are alike but also stating how they are different.<sup>46</sup> Huston Smith, in contrast, simply ignores inconvenient differences. The proper use of comparison is an issue related to the study of religion generally, and runs through all of the topics just considered. No doubt some would excuse these misrepresentations of Shinran's thought on the grounds that Smith is trying to make Shin Buddhism accessible to a Western audience. However, given the extent of his imposition of Western ideas onto Shinran's thought, it seems that what has happened instead is that Smith has represented Western religious conceptions under the guise of Pure Land Buddhism—Traditionalist perennialism and anti-modernism dressed in Buddhist robes.

Popular wisdom has it that some people think in terms of similarities and other people think in terms of differences.<sup>47</sup> To whatever extent this may be true, when—as in Smith's presentation of Shin Buddhism—the similarities obscure the differences, then the representation becomes a

Richard K. Payne

misrepresentation. In turn this would suggest that any such natural biases of thought need to be controlled for by principled scholarship.

To my mind, and I believe that Roger Corless would agree with me, there is an important difference between Buddhism and other religions, a difference that makes choosing to be a Buddhist, or choosing to remain a Buddhist, a choice that has consequences—a choice that is meaningful and significant in a person's life. This would not be the case were it true that all religions—or spiritualities, if one prefers—are ultimately the same.

### Appendix: Smith's Plagiarism

Smith gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Taitetsu Unno in writing his "Afterword."<sup>48</sup> He then goes on later in the chapter to pay Unno the ultimate compliment of plagiarizing him. Having discovered plagiarism in another of Smith's works (*Why Religion Matters*),<sup>49</sup> I was not surprised to find him engaging in a paraphrase so thinly reworded as to seem, to this reader, to be problematic (the standard I am using is, "Would I find such an instance problematic in the work of a student?" And the answer in this case is "Yes"). One of the issues making this problematic is the length of the parallel sections—were they shorter, it would not be so clearly a case of stepping over the edge into plagiarism. In this case, however, the sections are extensive and it is clear that he is presenting the work of another as his own, without even acknowledging that it is a paraphrase from Unno. It is his failure to even acknowledge the source he is so closely paraphrasing that I find crosses the bounds into intellectual dishonesty.

That the reader may judge for him- or herself, the two relevant sections are quoted in full, first from Smith:

Ultimately all religions are paradoxical. . . . The towering paradox that religion confronts us with is its insistence that the opposites that texture the world we normally experience are, when rightly understood, actually one. This is the famous doctrine of the *concidentia oppositorum*, the coincidence of opposites. Addressing this point, Shinran argued that we have not gotten to the root of things until we perceive the Absolute Unity that is their foundation. The consequences of this perception (as Nāgārjuna saw) are momentous, for if we take them seriously they pull us up short with realizations like these: Our "abysmal sinfulness" is identical with the Unthinkable Power that saves us. The "I" in the I-Thou relationship is identical with the "Thou" and the finite "I am" is identical with the "Eternal I Am." We utter the Nembutsu but really Amida utters it through us. Our longing to become eternal is actually

## How Not to Talk about Pure Land Buddhism

Amida's longing that we become so. Our love for Amida is his love for us. The indwelling Light in our hearts is His Holy Light. Our dying to our finite selves is our rebirth in the Universal Self. Our passivity is Tireless Activity working within us. This sordid world is the Pure Land. And on and on, with every dichotomy collapsing into—what shall we call it? Amida's Infinite Light and Compassion? The Primal Vow? The Nembutsu? Eventually words give out and we are left with the wordless apprehension that we are always already free. Life's trials have been surmounted and we are at peace.<sup>50</sup>

And now, from Taitetsu Unno's introduction to Kenryo Kanamatsu's work *Naturalness: A Classic of Shin Buddhism*:

[I]t must be noted that at their deepest point, all religions transcend reason; in short, ultimately religions are paradoxical. For example those phenomena that stand in logical opposition to each other are declared to be One; that is, in a state of "coincidence of opposites. . . ."

In brief, he (i.e., Kanamatsu) refers to . . . man's "abysmal sinfulness" and its Oneness with the "Unthinkable Power" that save that abysmally sinful man. He writes of the Oneness of the "I" and the "Thou." Of the finite "I am" and the Eternal "I Am." Of our utterance of the Nembutsu and Amida's utterance of the Nembutsu. Of our longing to become Eternal and Amida's longing for us to become so. Of our love and His Everlasting Love. Of the indwelling light and Amida's Light. Of absolutely dying unto the self and the absolute rebirth of the self in the Universal Self. Of forms and the Formless. Of passivity and Activity. Of this world and the spiritual world, i.e. the Pure Land.<sup>51</sup>

Smith also plagiarizes from Hiroyuki Itsuki's work *Tariki: Embracing Despair, Discovering Peace*, though he confuses the situation by attributing the characteristics described to Shinran, while Itsuki is speaking of Rennyo. First Smith, then Itsuki:

[P]reaching to people who started working when the stars were still shining in the skies and continued long after dark to return to collapse like exhausted beasts of burden on beds of straw.<sup>52</sup>

[Rennyo] was telling these people, who started working when the stars were still shining in the skies and continued long after dark, only to return to their homes and collapse like exhausted beasts of burden on a bed of straw. . . .<sup>53</sup>

Richard K. Payne

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Huston Smith, *The Religions of Man* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1958); and *The World's Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991).
- <sup>2</sup> See Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999) for a sociological examination of this process.
- <sup>3</sup> Huston Smith and Philip Novak, *Buddhism: A Concise Introduction* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 2004).
- <sup>4</sup> Sarah LeVine and David N. Gellner note that Henry Steel Olcott's 1881 *A Buddhist Catechism* (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1904), which is still in print and considered authoritative in some circles, "took for granted Olcott's own anticlerical and antiritual Protestant background and specifically attacked 'ceremonialism,' 'rites,' and 'priests.'" LeVine and Gellner, *Rebuilding Buddhism: The Theravada Movement in Twentieth-Century Nepal* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 5.
- <sup>5</sup> See LeVine and Gellner, *Rebuilding Buddhism*, p. 7.
- <sup>6</sup> The term "Buddhist modernism" has come to be used to refer to a variety of not entirely congruent concepts. Here I am referring specifically to the programmatic efforts to reform Buddhism according to what was understood to be "modern" in the latter half of the nineteenth century. This is distinct from any sociohistorical discussions of the effect of modernization on Buddhist societies.
- <sup>7</sup> LeVine and Gellner, *Rebuilding Buddhism*, p. 11.
- <sup>8</sup> The "monasticization" of the laity is itself not unique to Buddhist modernism. It was part of the early modern development of Christianity, thus contributing to the model of what a modern religion ought to be that was accepted by Buddhist modernists. On the monasticization of the laity in Christianity, see Jean Delumeau, *Sin and Fear: The Emergence of a Western Guilt Culture 13th–18th Centuries*, trans. Eric Nicholson (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990).
- <sup>9</sup> Smith, *Religions of Man*, p. 97 (*World's Religions*, p. 96) and Smith and Novak, *Buddhism: A Concise Introduction*, p. 28, are virtually identical, except that "without. . ." has been changed to the more qualified "critical of. . ."
- <sup>10</sup> Smith and Novak, *Buddhism: A Concise Introduction*, p. 29.
- <sup>11</sup> Smith, *The World's Religions*, p. 98 (*Religions of Man*, pp. 96–97); Smith and Novak, *Buddhism: A Concise Introduction*, pp. 29–30.
- <sup>12</sup> For recent critiques of Buddhist modernism, see Ngakpa Traktung Yeshe Dorje and A'dzom Rinpoche, "Ignore the Man Behind the Curtain," <http://www.damtsig.org/articles/traktung.html> (accessed Tuesday, April 10, 2007); Stephen Prothero, "Boomer Buddhism," *Salon*, February 26, 2001, <http://archive.salon.com/books/feature/2001/02/26/buddhism/print.html> (accessed Tuesday, April 10, 2007). Each of these includes important critical reflections on the topic, but they are not without their own problems. The first expresses an anti-academic prejudice that ignores the importance of the

## How Not to Talk about Pure Land Buddhism

contributions to the study of Buddhism that originate in academia, while the second asserts that the only legitimate form of Buddhism is monastic.

- <sup>13</sup> Smith and Novak, *Buddhism: A Concise Introduction*, p. 23.
- <sup>14</sup> The pervasive quality of this historiographic pattern of decay and reformation is evidenced by the characterization of the Kamakura Buddhist “founders” as reformers.
- <sup>15</sup> Smith, *Religions of Man*, p. 5 (*World’s Religions*, p. 4).
- <sup>16</sup> We are using the term here as described by Jean-Paul Sartre—willfully remaining ignorant of one’s own choices, that is, treating oneself as unfree (a being-in-itself), in order to avoid the responsibility of free choice (a being-for-itself).
- <sup>17</sup> Reflection on the categories as identified in this sentence, which locate the topic in both cultural time and place, point to the very difference being suggested—“Buddhism” as distinct, for example, from “early medieval Indian Buddhism.”
- <sup>18</sup> Smith and Novak, *Buddhism: A Concise Introduction*, p. 188.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.
- <sup>21</sup> *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, “Sanctifying Grace,” <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06701a.htm> (accessed Thursday, March 22, 2007). Similarly, Wikipedia explains in the entry titled “Divine Grace,” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divine\\_grace](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divine_grace) (accessed Thursday, March 22, 2007):
- In Christianity, divine grace refers to the sovereign favour of God for humankind—especially in regard to salvation—irrespective of actions (“deeds”), earned worth, or proven goodness.
- More broadly, divine grace refers to God’s gifts to humankind, including life, creation, and salvation. More narrowly but more commonly, grace describes the means by which humans are saved from original sin and granted salvation. This latter concept of grace is of central importance in the theology of Christianity, as well as one of the most contentious issues in Christian sectarianism.
- <sup>22</sup> Huston Smith, *Why Religion Matters: The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), p. 226.
- <sup>23</sup> Smith, *Why Religion Matters*, p. 225.
- <sup>24</sup> Smith makes several fallacious moves in defending the idea of hierarchy. First, he claims that “reckless assaults on the word [“hierarchy”] from what Frederick Crews has called the eclectic left have all but ruined it by building oppression into its very definition” (*Why Religion Matters*, p. 225). This sentence alone contains two fallacies. The first is a *petitio principii* circularity, by characterizing whatever has been said—which we don’t know, because Smith fails to cite any examples so that we cannot judge for ourselves—about hierarchy as “reckless assaults.” The second is an *ad hominem* fallacy in the vaguely abusive term “eclectic left,” which is also left undefined and unspecified and is, therefore, as it is used here, at least simply a wonderfully vague catch-all term that allows the reader to project whatever negative associations he or she might have onto it. A third issue is the reference to Frederick Crews, who

Richard K. Payne

seems to be cited as a validating authority, but without any justification as to his authority on this issue, or even the relevance of the phrase Smith appropriates to the issue of hierarchy—beyond that perhaps of having created a slogan useful for Smith’s rhetoric.

Smith next introduces the idea of “empowering hierarchies,” saying that the idea that hierarchies are inherently oppressive makes an empowering hierarchy an oxymoron, when in fact there are “chains of command that are legitimate and enabling” (*Why Religion Matters*, p. 225). He then gives examples of empowering hierarchies, “A loving family with small children is an empowering hierarchy, as is a well-run classroom. The definitive example of a benevolent hierarchy is God’s relation to the world” (*Why Religion Matters*, p. 225).

Although this might initially appear either as an argument by analogy (something like: [1] Loving families and well-run classrooms are alike in being empowering hierarchies, and [2] God’s relation to the world is also a benevolent one; therefore, God’s relation to the cosmos is hierarchical) or as a fallacious extension of a particular claim (“Some hierarchies are empowering”) to a universal claim (“All hierarchies are empowering”). As is frequently the case with Smith’s writing, however, the argument is so poorly presented that it seems impossible to convert to a clear form. Indeed, as it stands it is nothing more than a simple assertion that God’s relation to the world is a benevolent one. Clearly, this is a theological claim and indeed one that is highly controversial. Even within Christian theological discussions, there are those who find the Christian God to be rather authoritarian, arbitrary, judgmental, and punitive.

More relevant to our considerations here, from a Buddhist perspective, there is no God and there is no presumption that the world is a benevolent one. (At the same time, this is not to say that the world is inherently evil, either. The Buddhist cosmos is morally neutral.)

<sup>25</sup> This tale appears in Smith’s introduction to the reissue of Schuon’s *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, rev. ed. (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 1993), as well as in David Ray Griffin and Huston Smith, *Primordial Truth and Post-modern Theology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990).

<sup>26</sup> Smith, *Why Religion Matters*, p. 34.

<sup>27</sup> Mark Sedgwick, personal communication, January 18, 2008.

<sup>28</sup> Smith, *Why Religion Matters*, pp. 34–38.

<sup>29</sup> Smith has offered a rather more detailed definition of religion in an article called “The Universal Grammar of Religion,” *Religion East and West* 5 (2005): pp. 1–5. In this article he sets out fourteen points that he claims constitute the “universal grammar of religion upon which all religions stand” (p. 1). His use of the term “universal grammar” is supposedly a borrowing of the idea from Noam Chomsky, but so misrepresents that idea that it seems little more than an attempt at appropriating Chomsky’s name and terminology for the sake of its authority. Smith offers these fourteen points as defining what *religion* is, and should, therefore, be true of *all instances of religion*. Closely paraphrasing, these fourteen points are:

## How Not to Talk about Pure Land Buddhism

1. Reality is infinite.
2. The infinite includes the finite.
3. The contents of the finite are hierarchically ordered in a “great chain of being.”
4. Causation is from the top of the hierarchy downward.
5. The infinite is singular, and when it descends into the finite it becomes multiplicity.
6. In ascent, distinctions merge into the simplicity that is the infinite.
7. The simplicity that is the infinite is absolutely perfect.
8. The external hierarchy is reflected internally.
9. Human knowledge is finite and cannot therefore know the infinite completely, but can receive partial revelations of the infinite.
10. Such revelations require interpretation and explanation.
11. Fundamentalist literalism makes the mistake of believing that human knowledge can encompass the infinite.
12. There are two kinds of knowing—rational and intuitive—and religious knowledge is intuitive, not rational.
13. All religions have exoteric and esoteric aspects, the difference depending on ability to deal with abstractions; the esoteric is more abstract, the exoteric more reified.
14. Because we are limited and finite, the infinite will always remain a mystery to us.

The reflective reader will no doubt note that many of these ideas are quite contrary to fundamental Buddhist teachings, and therefore, the claim that these are characteristics of religion per se is quite evidently not a generalization based on any evidence but rather part of Smith’s universalizing rhetoric.

- <sup>30</sup> Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre, *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2001), pp. 70–71.
- <sup>31</sup> Smith and Novak, *Buddhism: A Concise Introduction*, p. 186.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 186–187. Personally, I think that Smith is correct in this diagnosis. Tibetan lamas in red robes and with shaved heads get much more media attention than do Shin priests who are only rarely shaved and commonly wear business suits.
- <sup>33</sup> For a treatment of this issue, see Richard K. Payne, “Hiding in Plain Sight: The Invisibility of the Shingon Mission to the United States,” in *Buddhist Missionaries in the Era of Globalization*, ed. Linda Learman (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2005).
- <sup>34</sup> It should be noted, however, that there are different modes of engagement with Pure Land thought, in some of which Amida is indeed treated as an intercessor. This is not in accord with Pure Land doctrine, however, and at least in Western forms may be suspected of revealing the influences of Christian models of religiosity.
- <sup>35</sup> Smith and Novak, *Buddhism: A Concise Introduction*, p. 189.
- <sup>36</sup> The difficulty of using the category of religion in relation to Buddhism is reflected in the extensive qualifications that some scholars feel are necessary when doing so. See for example, Michael von Brücke, *Einführung in den*

Richard K. Payne

- Buddhismus* (Frankfurt am Main and Leipzig: Verlag der Weltreligionen, Insel Verlag, 2007), pp. 18–19.
- <sup>37</sup> Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn't* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007), pp. 87–92. It would seem that because religious commitment has been structured around this oppositional dualism, which is itself in no way a natural one, it has contributed to the kinds of conflicts seen in contemporary American society. The resolution of these would seem to be in recognizing their correlation with one another, rather than siding with one pole of the opposition or the other.
- <sup>38</sup> Paul Groner, “Shortening the Path: Early Tendai Interpretations of the Realization of Buddhahood with This Very Body,” in *Paths to Liberation: The Mārga and Its Transformation in Buddhist Thought*, ed. Robert Buswell and Robert Gimello (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1992).
- <sup>39</sup> Smith, *Why Religion Matters*, p. 29.
- <sup>40</sup> That Smith is plagiarizing here is no excuse for his repetition of these anachronisms; see my “Appendix: Smith’s Plagiarism,” pp. 166–167.
- <sup>41</sup> Smith and Novak, *Buddhism: A Concise Introduction*, p. 194.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 194–195.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxix.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxx.
- <sup>45</sup> It may be worth noting that one of the differences between Smith and Schuon is that while the tone of the former’s religious epistemology is a kind of Kabbalistic mystical a-gnosticism, the latter’s epistemological tone is distinctly Gnostic.
- <sup>46</sup> See Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) on the proper use of comparison as a method in the study of religion.
- <sup>47</sup> This is a very loose expression of the difference between feeling types and thinking types in Jungian theory.
- <sup>48</sup> Smith and Novak, *Buddhism: A Concise Introduction*, p. 185, note.
- <sup>49</sup> See my review in *Theology and Science*, vol. 5, no. 1 (March 2007): pp. 109–117.
- <sup>50</sup> Smith and Novak, *Buddhism: A Concise Introduction*, pp. 194–195.
- <sup>51</sup> Taitetsu Unno, introduction to Kenryo Kanamatsu, *Naturalness: A Classic of Shin Buddhism* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2002), pp. xii–xviii.
- <sup>52</sup> Smith and Novak, *Buddhism: A Concise Introduction*, p. 196.
- <sup>53</sup> Hiroyuki Itsuki, *Tariki: Embracing Despair, Discovering Peace* (New York: Kodansha America, 2003), pp. 115–116.