Sovereign Subjectivities:
The Politics of Autonomy in English-Speaking Jodo Shinshu

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The tumultuous beginning of the 20th century, culminating catastrophically in World War II, had important implications for Japanese individuals on both sides of the Pacific Ocean. Before and during the war citizens in Japan experienced first hand the destructive potential of blind obedience to (political) authority. Japanese Americans, meanwhile, were officially turned into enemies and interned *en masse* by the United States government. The Japanese defeat in World War II induced a mood of self-reflection and self-criticism to which Jodo Shinshu institutions and individuals were no exception (Amstutz 37-42). A significant part of this process of self-reflection involved revising "doctrines promoting submission to political authority" (Toshio 38). Apologies for the discursive and material collaboration between both Honganjis and the Japanese wartime governments were made in the late 1980s and 1990s. Many Shinshu scholars have since disavowed the wartime doctrines and their unquestioning, state-supporting ethos (Victoria 152-153; Amstutz 34-36; Curley 140-147). American Shinshu voices started expressing an ethic of critical distance and independence, which also moved away from pre-War attempts to make Shin Buddhism compatible with the normative politics of the United States.

This attempt to move the Jodo Shinshu ethic away from subservience to the state marks a departure from previous formulations that aimed to present the Shinshu message in line with the established values of their polities. Although such a tendency can be traced back to Rennyo Shonin (1415-1499), or perhaps even to Kakunyo (1270-1351), as Japan entered modernity it became particularly significant through the parallel phenomena of migration and the Meiji revolution. The anxiety of presenting Jodo Shinshu as a non-threat to the state needs to be understood in a context in which the Shinshu institutions, or their individual members, were perceived as a potential threat to state sovereignty. The Shinto ideology of the new imperial Japanese state perceived Buddhists with absolute suspicion and eagerly sought to control and limit their influence (Blum 1-48). In America, though oppression was grounded on ethnicity

and culture, (Shinshu) Buddhism was also in the spotlight, as a cohesive element that enabled Japanese Americans to articulate a distinct communal identity. Moreover, the significant and active role that some Shinshu ministers (such as Imamura) took in fighting discrimination further alienated Buddhism from the American state. Thus, the writings of Konyo Shonin (1791-1871) and Bishop Imamura (1867-1932),[1] however seemingly diverging in their political agendas, can be said to fulfil a single purpose: to present Jodo Shinshu as aligned with the normative politics of Meiji Japan and early 20th century America. Although Imamura's position interrogates the state and its values much more than Konyo's, his ultimate aim is not to declare independence but demand inclusion and, thus, proving alignment and loyalty were crucial.

Nonetheless, as Amstutz points out;

> The *shinzokunitai* principle did not preserve the moral integrity of Shin under the wartime pressure of modern nationalism: the principle looked back to the premodern environment and could not provide a basis for adequate political resistance when faced with coercive modern totalitarianism and the intrusive state. (36)

Consequently, post-World War II Shinshu thinkers seem to question the state and its values in a much more critical and fundamental, though also oblique, way. This paper aims to look at the political implications of *shinjin* (as a subjective understanding of religious experience) in the work of post-WWII Nishi Honganji thinkers, as well as their ethical potential for resisting the state.

Unlike the Higashi Honganji, its Western counterpart did not have a Kiyozawa Manshi (1863-1903), a Soga Ryojin (1875-1971) or a Takagi Kemmyo (1864-1914), though there were also attempts at reform and innovative reformulations of the teachings in the first decades of the 20th century (e.g. Nonomura Naotaro, 1871-1946). An interest in critical pre-WWII Higashi Honganji thinkers, like Kiyozawa or Takagi, has notably influenced Nishi Honganji writers like Shigaraki Takamaro (1926-2014), Unno Taitetsu (1929-2014) or Alfred Bloom (1926) in their formulation of a post-WWII Jodo Shinshu ethic. A crucial element in both sets of authors (pre-War Higashi Honganji reformers and post-War Nishi Honganji reformulators) is a

[1] For slightly different English versions of Konyo's testament see Rogers (7-9) and Curley (141-142), for Imamura's writings see Imamura.

subjective understanding of *shinjin* as a personal and inner experience that can, nonetheless, be expressed socially through an ethic of critical independence. Due to the scope of this paper my discussion will be focused on the translated works of Shigaraki and the writings of Unno and Bloom, which represent some of the first attempts in the English language to weave a modern Shinshu ethic, independent of the state.

Like most reformers, modern Shinshu thinkers present their views not as innovations but as a return to the original teaching, that is, to the thought of Shinran Shonin (1173-1263). Although an ethic of independence from and even resistance to political authority can be deduced from the writings of Shinran, this is a far more modern concern, connected with the emergence of the Meiji state, Japanese war involvement in the first half of the 20th century and a certain American state-suspecting and individualist spirit. Thus, Shigaraki, Unno or Bloom are not only dialoguing with Shinran via his modern interlocutors (Kiyozawa, Takagi, Soga) but also responding to a recent and tragic history of coercion and collaboration with oppressive authorities. From this standpoint, I will explore their ethical formulations through the complementary notions of sovereignty and autonomy. Looking at the person of *shinjin* as a body politic in her or himself, I discuss various formulation of the Jodo Shinshu ethic that might construct him or her as an autonomous space under state sovereignty, a resistant autonomous zone or even a self-sovereign body free from external intervention.

Though its subversive implications are never fully spelled out, Shigaraki establishes an interesting link between objective understandings of *shinjin* and submission to the established order: "Shinjin, if grasped dualistically and objectively, could be made to coincide neatly with feudalistic society and its hierarchical social order" (77). Furthermore, he writes about this objective and dualistic *shinjin* in a way that echoes Marx's "opium of the people": "shinjin became a form of intoxication, for it encouraged people to close their eyes to the real contradictions present in their lives and submissively obey the political system" (78). In this scheme, the person of *shinjin* is automatically a good citizen or subject, a space where the sovereignty of the state prevails uncontested. By showing how objective and dualistic *shinjin* mimics the social system and, ultimately, enables the system to function, Shigaraki's subjective *shinjin* contains an implicitly subversive promise. Although his subjective non-duality is never openly discussed as disruptive or resistant in political terms, Shigaraki's ethic of "deabsolutization" and his notion of "establish[ing] a new subjectivity" (114) carry the seeds of a state-resistant narrative.

Much like Kiyozawa's implicit idea of "individual sovereignty" (Curley 161), Shigaraki's "new subject", transformed and reborn through *shinjin*, represents a critical and independent space that is not necessarily under the sway of state sovereignty. Moving away from Kiyozawa's conceptualization of the relative truth as a mere means to realize the absolute,[2] Shigaraki formulates a relative truth that is in harmony with the absolute truth, thus making the person of *shinjin* a self-sovereign space. In this space the ethics of the state are only accepted in so far as they accord with Buddhist principles. If contradiction emerges between those two ethical systems, Buddhist sovereignty ought to prevail, thus invalidating state sovereignty. A particularly poignant example is his critique of killing, which needs to be considered in the context of Japanese post-War reflections. Though framed through vegetarianism, his assertion that "The fundamental ethic of Buddhism […] teaches us the value of all living beings and cautions us not to take life", echoes the thought of Shinshu radicals like Takagi Kemmyo who did not "feel that a person of the 'Land of Bliss' should take part in warfare" (191).

Seen against the violent nature of state rule in pre-WWII Japan, Shigaraki's ethic is an invitation to disobey the state. Furthermore, his ethic of "deabsolutization" in which we are encouraged to "critically deabsolutize all things in this secular world as false and empty" (128), denies the moral authority of the state, enshrining a certain Buddhist moral standpoint as the only guideline. The "establishment of a new subjectivity" comes about through an experience of awakening and is expressed as living both in a spirit of independence and self-reliance and in accordance with a given Buddhist sensibility. Although the individual becomes thus subject to Buddhist sovereignty, this process is not identified with obedience to religious authority, but is described as a "personal" and "subjective" internalization of the teachings. Some of the stories used to illustrate Shigaraki's notion of the "new subject" involve individuals acting independently and disrupting socially established conventions such as loyalty to religious and political institutions. For instance, the story of Kaisen, the abbot of Erin-ji, who sat in the middle of the fire that Nobunaga had started in his temple, can be seen as an individual act of defiance towards the warlord, which transcends his religio-political position as abbot. Far from pleading with Nobunaga or trying to escape, which could be regarded as a concession to the warlord, Kaisen climbs to the roof of the temple and burns among the flames. Whatever Kaisen's motivation might have been, his willing acceptance of death contests Nobunaga's

[2] See Kiyozawa's essay "Negotiating Religious Morality".

coercive and punishing power. In other words, by actively making Nobunaga's aggression his own, Kaisen becomes a resistant agent.

The story about Genza and Naoji also contains a disruption of the teacher-student relationship, already a partially disrupted and complex relationship in Jodo Shinshu. On his deathbed Naoji calls for the presence of his teacher Genza, but Genza's response (through a messenger as he was on his deathbed too) is one of self-reliance: "It's ok to die just as you are" (119). Far from asserting his authority as a teacher, Genza effectively conveys to Naoji a message of independence: Naoji needs not Genza in order to face his death. This ethic of self-reliance is loosely based in Shinran's *hizo hizoku*, which can be construed as a double resistance to religious and political authorities.

Shigaraki's ethic is not devoid of absolute reference points, though (with the exception of respecting life) these are phrased as "universal values and truths essential to our human-ness" and are not spelled out as specific rules. Though Shigaraki's deems necessary the existence of a "societal authority" that sets the standard for "order and rules", in his "ideal society" (122) these are not imposed by a state but internalized (and presumably interpreted) by consenting individuals. In this way state sovereignty is replaced by an absolute and somehow abstract Buddhist sovereignty that might be autonomously interpreted by the individual.

This Buddhist liberal utopia manifests again in the writings of Unno and Bloom in a further non-prescriptive and relativistic fashion. References to moral absolutes and "order and rules" are replaced by a celebration of non-coercion and non-obligation (Bloom) and calls for a "creative basis for social action" (Unno *Shin* 124). Thus, the Shinshu liberal ideal is developed in a potentially libertarian direction. This tendency can be appreciated both in the ethical formulations of Unno and Bloom and in their reappraisal of "Shinshu rebels" from the past, such as the *myokonin* Shoma or the *Ikko Ikki.* By formulating a non-prescriptive and open ethic and rereading the Shinshu heritage in terms of its subversive potential, both Unno and Bloom show how Shinran's thought need not be married to a state-supporting or state-subservient ethic.

This is doubtlessly a prevailing concern in modern Shinshu thought, however Unno further identifies it as a specific "challenge for American Shin Buddhists" (*Shin* 124). In Unno's view "Buddhism, including Shin, does not give clear and firm directions for everyday living. It is not prescriptive" (*Shin* 133) and therefore "each person is challenged to respond

creatively to a given situation" (*Shin* 134). Although his ethic is based on "humility, repentance, and gratitude" (*Shin* 126) their meaning is meant to be interpreted and applied freely and "creatively" by the individual. Like Shigaraki, Unno enshrines a certain Jodo Shinshu Buddhist sensibility as the basis for a situational and fluid ethic that emerges from a personal experience of awakening. In this case, the person of *shinjin* becomes a sovereign subject, her or his creativity not being bound by external impositions or rules but only by a personal sense of humility and gratitude that is meant to develop spontaneously from engaging with the teaching.

Unno characterizes the life of *shinjin* as one of creative autonomy. In religious terms this is "the constant renewal of the *namu*-self as a creative act" (*Shin* 134) which results in "the awakening of an autonomous self […] embodying dharma" (*River* 87). Far from producing subservient citizens, religious experience seems to lead to a critical independence that can be at odds with established values. In fact, when describing how this ethic of independence might be applied socially Unno openly criticizes hierarchical thinking:

> the consequence for an ethical life is that one acts with humility and identifies with the lowliest in society –the neglected and downtrodden, the weak and disabled, the disenfranchised and excluded. And rather than trying to 'save' them from a superior, privileged position one serves them by affirming their dignity, self-worth, and human potential. (*Shin* 126)

Aside from offering an implicit critique of social hierarchy, Unno's idea of "salvation" or liberation comes very close to an anarchist or antivanguardist ethic which refuses to enshrine an "enlightened" or privileged elite leading the "lowliest of society" to empowerment, whether spiritual or social. Instead, identification is chosen as a model of liberation. This excerpt shows how humility has gone full circle from being used to instil a sense of obedience and gratitude towards the rulers (e.g. Konyo's testament) to providing a non-hierarchical and potentially subversive model for social relations.

Similar statements can be found in Bloom's image of Shinran, who in his commentary to *Tannisho* VI is characterized as "repudiat[ing] the Confucian social class discrimination which subordinated the so-called 'inferior' person to the 'superior' person in the five relationships of ruler and subject, parents and children, older and younger sibling, husband and wife, teacher and disciple" (*Strategies* 72). Whereas Shinran's relation to Confucian values can be said to be far more nuanced and complicated, Bloom's reading is very significant as it

postulates that "the authoritarian society based on class and status ha[s] no place in true Buddhism" (ibid.). Bloom's anti-hierarchical stance implies an autonomous subject that is not bound by the morality of the state (which at Shinran's time was to a large degree Confucian). If in the realm of "true Buddhism" the sovereignty of the state and its hierarchical ethic has no place, the individual who dwells in this realm is not obliged to abide by it.

Social critique is coupled in Bloom's writings with an emphasis on the non-obligatory and non-coercive nature of Shinshu. Thus he argues that Shinran "removed all obligatory aspects of religion" and "never required anyone to prove that he was saved" (*Strategies* 87). In this way a subjective understanding of *shinjin* as "a personal experience that, […] cannot be proven or disproven" (58) is coupled with an ethic of non-obligation and non-coercion. The connection between a subjective religious experience and a liberatory social ethic is further spelled out in Bloom's commentary of *Tannisho* XIII:

> Shinran's faith is a faith beyond good and evil, because it is not subject to the human criteria of good and evil for its realization. Therefore, on the social level, no one can presume to judge when that salvation is realized in a person or not. This is also why he said he had not even one disciple. No one was to stand in judgement of another. (*Strategies* 119)

Thus, Bloom puts forth a non-prescriptive and personal ethic removed from absolutes and based on the "experience of freedom and ability to choose" (*Strategies* 120). Furthermore, he does not believe "that Shinran would have entirely condoned subservience to the status quo" ("Shin Buddhism" 21)

This autonomous subjectivity is further celebrated when both Bloom and Unno revalorize historical Shinshu characters and movements by highlighting their subversive elements. Trying to counteract the perception of *myokonin* as passive and submissive, Bloom portrays them as endowed with an "inner autonomy that transcended the social order" ("Shin Buddhism" 19) and argues that Shoma's non-compromising attitude "represents the critical element in Shin and its awareness of social injustice" ("Engaged" 68). Analogously, Unno portrays the *myokonin* as embodying a number of divergent and contradictory attitudes: "Some are obedient and submissive; others critical and rebellious" (*River* 106). These characterizations of the *myokonin* are not only in harmony with the authors' ethical formulations, but also seem to fulfil the purpose of reclaiming the *myokonin* for a non-conformist agenda. By disassociating the *myokonin*, a traditional role model for the Shinshu

community, from a necessary ethic of obedience Bloom and Unno hint that rebellion and disobedience might also be a valid option. If even a "rare good person" or the "exemplary practitioners of nembutsu" (Unno *River* 104) can display a rebellious and critical attitude, it means that *shinjin* does not imply an obligatory subservience to the state and its ethic.

Another interesting example is Bloom's revalorization of the *Ikko Ikki*, which departs from the more established Shinshu view that their revolts expressed a misunderstanding of Shinran's teaching.[3] On the contrary, Bloom sees the social liberatory potential of Shinran's ideas instantiated in the *Ikko Ikki* rebellions:

> The outcome [of the spread of Shinshu ideas] was the emancipation of the peasants from spiritual oppression, based on the fear of *batchi* or divine retribution in forms of punishment if they did not obey the demands of their overlords, the temples, shrines, and *daimyo* (local warlords), who represented the divine power on the land. Their release from superstition later led to the single minded peasant revolts (*Ikko ikki)*". ("Introduction" xxxvii)

In this way, revolt against the established order, both religious and political, is not only presented as an option but is also naturalized as a logical consequence of Shinran's message. Regardless of whether the *Ikko Ikki* were acting merely out of religious convictions, which remains an issue of scholarly debate, Bloom's redemption of the revolts provides a historical blueprint for Shinshu rebellion and, perhaps, even revolution.[4] Although neither the *Ikko Ikki* nor Bloom were (or are) anti-statist, by drawing a link between rebellion and religious ideology, the *Ikko Ikki* come to instantiate a Shinshu ethic of independence from and resistance to the state. The self-sovereignty of the *Ikko Ikki*, which in fact resulted in the creation of an alternative sovereignty in the province of Kaga for about a century (1488-c.1580), contrasts

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[3] This understanding can be derived from Rennyo's *Ofumi*, which on the surface support the *status quo* in the form of a somewhat abstract and vaguely defined obedience to *obo.* However Rennyo condoned defensive violence against *hoteki* or 'enemies of the dharma' and his notion of *obo* in a period of multiple and conflicting sovereignties is at best ambiguous. Rennyo's ambivalence towards the revolts is highly complex and telling as Solomon, McMullin (35-40) or Tsang (79-82) have argued at length.

[4] Carol Tsang argues that although Shinshu ideas played a role in the revolts, the broader social context should not be overlooked and that the Ikko Ikki motives were in many cases personal (e.g. revenge), economic (e.g. resisting tax) and strategic (e.g. fighting along some *daimyo* while rebelling against another) thus complicating a socialist or Buddhist reading of the revolts.

with the "inner autonomy" of the *myokonin*, who in Bloom's words "transcended the social order" but did not attempt to change or subvert it.[5]

To conclude, although the political thought of Shigaraki, Bloom and Unno is largely liberal, with some elements of social(ist) critique, their non-prescriptive ethics and willingness to retain a critical independence from the state enable their writings to be read from a libertarian perspective. As Flathmam points out "the best proponents of moral and political liberalism are haunted by libertarianism, anarchism and antinomianism" (180, n. 9). By critically reflecting on the tragic consequences of collaborating / being oppressed by violent and authoritarian states, liberal post-War Shinshu thinkers reformulate the teaching in an open way that regards resistance and rebellion as one among many valid options.

In contrast to Rennyo's model which was traditionally understood as coupling the "inner" and spiritual autonomy of the person of *shinjin* with her or his external submission to the sovereignty of the state,[6] Shigaraki, Unno and Bloom, much like Kiyozawa or Takagi, propound a new model of self-sovereignty in which the individual is free to recognize or not the sovereignty of the state. A personal and subjective understanding of *shinjin* is crucial to the creation of this independence or self-sovereignty, as it critically dissociates any established or conventional social behaviour from religious experience. It remains to be seen whether the critical distance created by these liberal formulations will be used to simply interrogate the state or to challenge and subvert it in a more overt fashion. As Jodo Shinshu moves away from an ethic of submission to the state, and political authority at large, we might witness the emergence of a Shinshu anarchism that fully develops the subversive promise implicit in Shinshu liberal modernity.

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[5] In fact, the complex alliance of Honganji under Rennyo and the Ikko Ikki-ruled Kaga can be said to represent an alternative sovereignty or in McMullin's words "a competing world order, an order welded together by powerful bonds of religious loyalty" (40). This republic of 'farmers and priests', though well connected to the aristocracy and the feudal elites can be said to provide an alternative form of governance to that extant in other parts of Japan at the time.

[6] I am aware that this reading of Rennyo does not do justice to the complex ambivalences of his thought, however here I do not refer to Rennyo's ideas as such, but to their normative interpretation in the Tokugawa and Meiji periods. As both Toshio (41-47) and Curley (121-131) argue, Rennyo's *bupporyo* can be read as an enacted social space rather than a realm of personal interiority. If seen in this light, the injunction to keep Buddhist law within the *bupporyo* (i.e. within the Shinshu Buddhist community) and abide by civil law with outsiders can be seen as enshrining a resistant space of autonomy that claims exception from the state. As argued above this can be further developed into an alternative or competing sovereignty.

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