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The secularization thesis, rooted in the idea that “modernity” brings with it the destruction—or, at least, the ruthless privatization—of religion, is clearly grounded in specific, often oversimplified, interpretations of Western historical developments since the eighteenth century. In this article, I use the case of the New Buddhist Fellowship (Shin Bukkyō Dōshikai) of the Meiji period (1868–1912) to query the category of the secular in the context of Japanese modernity. I argue that the New Buddhists, drawing on elements of classical and East Asian Buddhism as well as modern Western thought, promoted a resolutely *social* and *this-worldly* Buddhism that collapses—or preempts—the conceptual and practical boundaries between religion and the secular. In short, the New Buddhists sought a lived Buddhism rooted in a decidedly “immanent frame” (Taylor), even while rejecting the “vulgar materialism” of secular radicalism.

Keywords: New Buddhist Fellowship, secularity, “social Buddhism,” progressivism, immanence

Introduction

As the editors to this special issue have noted, scholarly discourse on the topic of the secular was, until the past several decades, unabashedly Eurocentric. In particular, the so-called secularization thesis, rooted in the rather straightforward idea that “modernity” brings with it the destruction—or, at least, the ruthless privatization—of religion, is clearly grounded in specific, often oversimplified, interpretations of Western historical developments since the eighteenth century. While certainly not the first work to challenge these assumptions, this special issue is intended as an alternative look at the meaning and implications of the secular, using Japan as a locus for investigation. In this article, I use the case of the New Buddhist Fellowship (Shin Bukkyō Dōshikai 新仏教同志会) of the Meiji period to query the category of the secular in the context of Japanese modernity. I argue that the New Buddhists, drawing on elements of classical and East Asian Buddhism as well as modern Western thought, promoted a resolutely *social* and *this-worldly* Buddhism that collapses—or preempts—the conceptual and practical boundaries between religion and the secular. In

short, the New Buddhists sought a lived Buddhism rooted in a decidedly “immanent frame” (Taylor), while rejecting the “vulgar materialism” of secular radicalism.¹

Querying the Secular in Japanese Religion

Let me begin by raising some theoretical issues surrounding the concept of the “secular,” specifically how that term fits with Japanese religions in the premodern through modern periods. I was initially inspired to turn my attention to this topic by reading Mark Teeuwen’s article, published in volume 25 of this journal, on the late Edo-period text *Seji kenbunroku* 世事見聞録 (Matters of the World: An Account of What I Have Seen and Heard). Here, Teeuwen suggests that one of the reasons why the category or concept of the secular was so readily adopted by Japanese thinkers in the Meiji period was that, in fact, there were precedents for a functionally similar conception in what we might call “pre-contact” Japan.² As we will see, unlike the author of the *Seji kenbunroku*, there is no doubt that the late-Meiji New Buddhists borrowed significantly from Western thought—political, philosophical, and religious—in developing their distinctive understanding of “new” Buddhism. Still, they insisted that their palpably modernistic interpretation of Buddhism was resonant—at least in spirit—with a long-standing tradition, even if they did not go so far to insist that it embodied or recapitulated the “essence” of some “original” Buddhism.

And yet, while Teeuwen cites Peter Nosco’s argument concerning the Edo shogunate’s “pragmatic” efforts to bring about something like a separation of religion and politics—which Teeuwen rightly notes as a key feature of concepts of modern secularism (or “secularization”)—the New Buddhists were resistant to that separation, at least if it implied that religion must or should remain confined to the realm of the “private” and the “individual.”³ The “immanent frame” of the New Buddhists was both a *natural* and a *social* frame. Indeed, in their version of secular Buddhism, the most significant appeal of Buddhism was in fact its promise to address social, economic, and arguably political problems. That is to say, while the New Buddhist Fellowship rejected state-sponsored religion, they did not envision a *privatization* of Buddhist faith and practice. Quite the contrary, I suggest, they argued for the *socialization* of such—in line, perhaps, with alternative conceptions of modernity more familiar to radical than liberal (or conservative) social and political theory.⁴

1 Taylor 2007, p. 542. Taylor defines an immanent frame as one in which “the buffered identity of the disciplined individual moves in a constructed social space, where instrumental rationality is a key value, and time is pervasively secular.” Moreover, “this frame constitutes a ‘natural’ order, to be contrasted with a ‘supernatural’ one, and ‘immanent’ world, over and against a possible ‘transcendent’ one.”

2 Teeuwen 2013, p. 4.

3 Teeuwen 2013, p. 5.

4 Here I am influenced by the work of Sho Konishi, whose recent book *Anarchist Modernity* argues for a neglected but significant pattern of mutual influence between Russian and Japanese progressives in the late nineteenth century. While Konishi does not deal directly with the New Buddhists, the Japanese activists and intellectuals he writes about were very much of the same cultural, educational, and political milieu as the main characters in my study. Konishi claims that out of this “non-state, transnational” blending of Russian and Japanese ideas arose a “cooperatist anarchist modernity,” which served as an alternative model of modernity, one that would have a profound effect on “the expansion of knowledge in modern Japanese cultural life in spheres as diverse as language, history, religion, the arts, literature, education, and the natural sciences” (Konishi 2013, p. 3). In several interesting respects, Konishi’s model mirrors the notion of *altermodernity* developed by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri; see Hardt and Negri 2009, p. 102.

One way to clarify further this distinction is to revisit the Western roots and development of the concept of the “secular.” According to the recently published (and aptly-named) *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, cognates of the English word “secular” are derived from the ecclesiastical Latin term *saecularis*, which itself stems from *saeculum* in the sense of “world” or “worldly life.”⁵ In this sense, ordinary priests were classified as “secular” because of their pastoral, this-worldly activities, while monks and higher ecclesiastics would largely if not entirely lack this direct contact with the people (though see below for a contrast between Christian and Buddhist monasticism in this regard). Thus, though it would later come to indicate an antinomy between the “sacred” and the “profane” worlds, and eventually be seen as a key component of the process of modernization, the origins and nuances of the concept of the secular are in fact more complicated and, hence, more fertile. For instance, one nineteenth-century German writer, Richard Rothe, picked up on the ambiguity of the term’s roots in “this-worldliness” by arguing that, as the Christian church gradually undergoes “secularization,” the state and society at large are in fact “desecularized” or “Christianized” in a process of Hegelian dialectical sublation.⁶ In short, the process of secularization actually and ironically helps spread religion more deeply and broadly in “this world.”

This is a concept that seems particularly resonant to the New Buddhist project. I argue that, rather than setting up the “secular” against the “religious,” the New Buddhists were in fact appealing to an alternative model of religion, one that roots religious activity and belief very much within the realm of the rational and the real; a “this-worldly” Buddhism that, by rejecting the traditional monastic institutions and sectarian forms, hoped to stimulate a “Buddhicization” of Japanese society along the lines of the Western Romantic (and sometimes modernist) model of “spilt religion.”⁷

The New Buddhist Fellowship

In the following section, I provide a brief history of “New Buddhism” as it developed in late Meiji Japan, with a particular emphasis on the social and political context. The New Buddhist Fellowship (hereafter, NBF) consisted of roughly a dozen young scholars and activists, many of whom had studied under prominent mid-Meiji Buddhist scholars Murakami Senshō 村上專精 (1851–1929) and Inoue Enryō 井上円了 (1858–1919).⁸ Principal among them were Sakaino Satoru (Kōyō) 境野哲 (黄洋) (1871–1933), Watanabe Kaikyoku 渡辺海旭 (1872–1933), Sugimura Kōtarō (Jūō; Sojinkan) 杉村広太郎 (縦横; 楚人冠) (1872–1945), Katō Kumatarō (Genchi) 加藤熊太郎 (玄智) (1873–1965), and

5 Launay 2013, n.p.

6 Launay 2013, n.p.

7 The term “spilt religion” was coined by the literary critic T. E. Hulme in his classic 1911 essay “Romanticism and Classicism” to describe—disparagingly—the effects of Western Romanticism. On one level this seems very much like Casanova’s model of the “Protestant path” towards secularization, that is, the path of this-worldly reform (traced in great detail by Taylor) that effectively makes “the religious secular and the secular religious” (Teeuwen 2013, p. 17; Casanova 2010, p. 276); but I contend there are subtle yet significant distinctions in the way this dissolution of realms is framed.

8 Founded in February 1899 as Bukkyō Seito Dōshikai 仏教清徒同志会 (Buddhist Puritan Association), the group changed its name to Shin Bukkyō Dōshikai (New Buddhist Fellowship) in 1903. Some parts of the following section have been adapted, with revisions, from Shields 2012.



Figure 1. *Shin Bukkyō zasshi* masthead, volume 1, issue 1, July 1900. SB 1, 1 (July 1900).



具 經 編 〔 佛 教 〕
 (『新佛教』編輯員 5 卷 1 号)
 融版一、毛利柴庵、田中治六、境野黄洋、小野藤太、杉村縦横
 古川流泉、加藤咄堂、伊藤左千夫、高島園、結城素明

Figure 2. *Shin Bukkyō zasshi* Editorial Committee, 1904. Yoshinaga 2011, p. 222.

by industrial capitalism, the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905, the High Treason incident (*Taigyaku jiken* 大逆事件) of 1910–1911, and the slow but steady growth of the militarist ideologies that would flourish in the early Shōwa period.¹¹

In July 1900, a magazine called *Shin Bukkyō* 新仏教 (New Buddhism) was launched as the fledgling movement’s mouthpiece. The first edition of the first volume begins with the group’s “manifesto” (*sengen* 宣言; lit. declaration). By turns inflammatory, sentimental and self-consciously poetic, this short piece opens with an apocalyptic call to arms: “Humanity,” it begins, “is in a state of decline. Society has been corrupted to its roots, and the rushing water of a great springtide threatens to drown us all, as at the time of the Great Flood.

Takashima En (Beihō) 高嶋円 (米峰) (1875–1949).⁹ While the NBF was overtly lay-oriented—in fact, as we shall see, strongly critical of traditional monastic or institutional Buddhism—several of the New Buddhists had been ordained as Buddhist priests, and most had some sort of Buddhist educational background, especially within the Nishi Honganji branch of the Shin sect.¹⁰ While their occupations varied, many worked as journalists, educators, or writers. In short, while they hardly represented an elite stratum of society, they can be categorized as largely a movement of middle-class urban intellectuals.

The NBF emerged at an auspicious time, in the aftermath of the first Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) and the continuing political gridlock surrounding the 1890 Imperial Constitution. Furthermore, its sixteen-year existence was characterized by various economic, political, and cultural shocks, riots, and unrest in response to new social forces and contradictions brought on

9 This group of seven would be joined in the following years by a number of others, including tanka poet and novelist Itō Sachio 伊藤左千夫 (1864–1913), Katō Kumaichirō (Totsudō) 加藤熊一郎 (咄堂) (1870–1949), and Inoue Shūten 井上秀天 (1880–1945). Suzuki Teitarō (Daisetsu) 鈴木貞太郎 (大拙) (1870–1966), a.k.a. D. T. Suzuki, was a regular contributor to the *Shin Bukkyō* journal.

10 The prototypical New Buddhist was born into a Shin temple family, educated at the Nishi Honganji Normal School (Futsū Kyōkō 普通教校; later Bungakuryō 文学寮), and spent time as a student and/or instructor at Inoue Enryō’s Tetsugakkan 哲学館.

11 The year 1900 saw the implementation of the Public Order and Police Law (*Chian keisatsu hō* 治安警察法), quickly employed to proscribe the Social Democratic Party (Shakai Minshutō 社会民主党), Japan’s first socialist party, soon after its formation in May 1901. The same law would be employed against the New Buddhists throughout the last years of Meiji and early Taishō.

Moreover, religions, which are supposed to give light to darkness and provide solace, have been losing strength year by year.” This is immediately followed by a blistering attack on “old Buddhism” (*kyū Bukkyō* 旧仏教) as being little more than a rotting corpse, its adherents weeping “tears of joy” over their palatial buildings and fine brocades:

These people [that is, “old Buddhists”] know how to worship wooden statues and sutras, how to stand before monks at a temple, and how to listen to the sermons. Earnestly holding to the embedded prejudices of their respective sect, they are mutually well versed in worthless matters. They can skillfully mouth the chants, and know how to take the prayer beads and sutras in their hands. Have they not already abandoned the life of faith? If these things make up what is called “Buddhism,” then it is an “old Buddhism” that is on the verge of death.¹²

Here, as elsewhere, the New Buddhists borrow from the discourse of Buddhist decadence (*daraku Bukkyō* 墮落仏教) that first arose with Neo-Confucians of the Edo period and was adopted by a number of secularists and Shinto nativists in the early years of Meiji, before being internalized by early Buddhist modernists such as Inoue Enryō and Nakanishi Ushirō 中西半郎 (1859–1930)—both of whom sought, in different ways, to “cleanse” Japanese Buddhism of its historical accretions, superstitions, and corruptions.¹³ That is to say, this line of argument was hardly new with the NBF. And yet, as I will show, the New Buddhists occasionally pushed the envelope further, beyond the rather straightforward (“Protestant”) critique of Buddhist ritualism, monastic corruption, and materialist hypocrisy.

At the end of the manifesto we find the New Buddhist Fellowship’s “Statement of General Principles” (*kōryō* 綱領), summarized in the following six points:

1. We regard a sound Buddhist faith (*kenzen naru shinkō* 健全なる信仰) as our fundamental principle.
2. We will work hard to foster sound faith, knowledge, and moral principles in order to bring about fundamental improvements to society.
3. We advocate the free investigation of Buddhism in addition to other religions.
4. We resolve to destroy superstition.
5. We do not accept the necessity of preserving traditional religious institutions and rituals.
6. We believe the government should refrain from favoring religious groups or interfering in religious matters.¹⁴

12 SB 1, 1 (July 1900), p. 3; unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine. The NBF journal, *Shin Bukkyō* (SB) is cited by volume and issue numbers, followed by date of initial publication and page numbers in the Akamatsu and Fukushima compilation.

13 Along with Buddhism, traditional forms of Shinto reverence and folk worship also come under attack in the NBF *sengen*. Though Inoue’s “magical Buddhism” appears to be the primary locus of critique, other terms used to describe the “old Buddhism” are “pessimistic” (*enseiteki* 厭世的), for its denial of this-worldly happiness, and “imaginary” (*kūsōteki* 空想的), for its elaborate cosmology.

14 SB 1, 1 (July 1900), p. 3.

As the final point above shows, and as noted above, unlike some other reformers of the day, the New Buddhists were not looking for government support of Buddhism—in fact, they were highly critical of *any* government involvement in religious matters.¹⁵ This was largely based on their analysis of Buddhism during the late Edo and early Meiji periods, which, in their estimation, had become corrupted by state support.

As evidence of the changing interpretations given to Buddhist “reform” in the Meiji period, we might compare the NBF list of principles with that of the Association of Buddhist Sects (Shoshū Dōtoku Kaimei 諸宗同徳会盟, hereafter ABS), a pan-sectarian organization founded in a very different context over three decades earlier, in the first year of the Meiji period (1868):

1. The indivisibility of Imperial and Buddhist Law.
2. The study and refutation of Christianity.
3. The cooperation between and perfection of the three Japanese faiths: Shinto, Confucianism, and Buddhism.
4. The study by each sect of its own doctrines and texts.
5. The expurgation of evil habits.
6. The establishment of a new type of school to produce men of ability.
7. The discovery of new ways to use exceptionally qualified priests.
8. The encouragement of popular education.¹⁶

The differences between these two lists could hardly be starker. Whereas the ABS looked to bring together the modern (imperial) state and Buddhist law, based on the traditional notion of *ōbō buppō* 王法仏法, the NBF sought to establish separate spheres; where the ABS looked to defeat Christianity, the NBF, while not particularly sympathetic to orthodox Christianity, was in open collaboration with Unitarian thinkers of the day, as well as some Christian socialists; while the ABS sought to unify and harmonize the “three Japanese faiths,” the NBF was, if anything, hostile to “syncretism” with traditional religions, which were deemed superstitious and ritually-obsessed; where the ABS advocated sectarian study, the NBF was explicitly non or pan-sectarian; where the ABS sought to find ways to “use” priests for the state, the NBF rejected the priestly and monastic traditions, at least as conventionally conceived and practiced. The only possible points of contact lie in the shared emphasis of the two groups on education for society and the expurgation of “evil habits”—though even here one suspects the NBF would disagree with the ABS as to what constitutes both a productive education and good moral training. In the following section, I will examine some of the doctrinal and philosophical roots for these discrepancies, beginning with the idea of pantheism (*hanshinron* 汎神論).

15 As Klautau (2008, p. 290) notes, Okamoto Ryūnosuke’s 岡本柳之助 (1852–1912) *Seikyō chūsei ron* 政教中正論, published in 1899, exemplifies the plea among many within the Buddhist establishment for a “public recognition” of Buddhism as a state religion (*kokkyō* 国教). This idea was supported by the resolution drafted at the national Buddhism convention held on 8 May 1899 at Chion-in temple in Kyoto, and by the work of Okamoto’s younger contemporary, Tsuji Zennosuke 辻善之助 (1877–1955), though with important modifications. See Tsuji 1900, p. 84; Kashiwahara 1990, pp. 141–44.

16 Kishimoto 1956, p. 128.

Pantheistic Foundations

According to co-founder Sakaino Kōyō, the NBF fully embraces the “new” aspect of New Buddhism, even as they reject the notion that the movement is simply a form of Buddhist “liberalism.”¹⁷ While New Buddhism is based on a return to foundational Buddhist principles, it is inevitable that such a return will involve a certain measure of “reform” (*kairyō* 改良) and “making new” (*arata ni suru* 新にする). As such, he suggests, New Buddhists see no problem in calling their movement “new”—as opposed to “true” or “real.”¹⁸ But what, Sakaino goes on to ask, is it that lies at the foundation of this “new” Buddhism? His answer, rather surprisingly, is “pantheism.”

We New Buddhists wish to establish Buddhism on the basis of a pantheistic world view. A pantheistic perspective shall be the foundation of Buddhism. Upon this foundation, the Buddhism of the future can be continuously improved and purified. This is what we are calling New Buddhism.¹⁹

What, exactly, does Sakaino mean by a “pantheistic world view/perspective”? Here we might recall the rejection of pantheism by arch-modernist Paul Carus (author of the influential 1894 *Gospel of Buddha*), in favor of an Aristotelian monism of the “superreal.”²⁰ And yet, Carus was specifically rejecting the Western (that is, heretical Christian) notion—often attributed to Spinoza—of “God in all things.” Without a background belief in a single, omnipotent “God” to spread throughout the cosmos, a Buddhist pantheism is closer to a generalized animism (such as can be found, arguably, in Daoist and Shinto traditions) than to the monistically inclined Western version.²¹ Thus, we might say, it is a pantheism that works from the ground up (“heaven in a blade of grass”), rather than from the heavens down (“God in all things”). In Tanaka Jiroku’s formulation, which consciously mimics a famous line from the *Heart Sutra*, “everything is divine and divinity is everything” (*issai soku kami, kami soku issai* 一切即神、神即一切).²² For Sakaino, pantheism provides a “this-worldly” and secure foundation for a holistic and inclusive perspective when it comes to the objects or focus of belief.²³ As he puts it: “Standing on a pantheistic foundation, we New Buddhists are a religious organization that seeks freedom of belief.”²⁴

17 SB 2, 9 (August 1901), p. 325.

18 SB 2, 9 (August 1901), p. 325.

19 SB 2, 9 (August 1901), p. 325.

20 See Verhoeven 2004, p. 28.

21 In fact, Suzuki Daisetsu had already written on the importance of a pantheistic foundation for contemporary religion as early as 1896 in his *Shin shūkyōron* 新宗教論 (SDZ 23, 38). Suzuki argued that pantheism might be conceived as the “positive” or “pro-active” aspect (*sekkyokuteki hōmen* 積極の方面) of atheism; or perhaps as a “middle way” between theism and atheism.

22 SB 2, 10 (September 1901), pp. 350–51. Tanaka goes on to cite two famous passages from the *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra* (*Dai hatsu nehan-gyō* 大般涅槃經): “All beings without exception have Buddhahood nature” (*issai shujō shitsu u bussō* 一切衆生悉有仏性), and “Plants, trees, and soil—all will attain buddhahood” (*sōmoku kokudo shikkai jōbutsu* 草木国土悉皆成仏).

23 See in this regard Deleuze 1988, pp. 122–30; also Najita Tetsuo on pantheism and “freedom” in the work of Andō Shōeki (2002, p. 74).

24 SB 2, 9 (August 1901), p. 329; for more on pantheism, see SB 1, 5 (November 1900), p. 140; SB 2, 6 (May 1901), pp. 289–95; SB 2, 12 (November 1901), pp. 386–90; SB 4, 12 (December 1903), pp. 916–19; SB 8, 2 (February 1907), pp. 371–81; SB 8, 7 (July 1907), pp. 454–61.

We might conclude that “pantheism” for Sakaino and the New Buddhists is less an ontological or metaphysical claim than it is a methodological and ethical stance: “We did not arrive at our pantheism by simply jumping on the fast lane to philosophical theory. We believe that pantheism harmonizes nicely with ethics, as well as the latest theories of moral philosophy.”²⁵ And yet, it bears noting that even while aligning their pantheism with modern science and ethics, the New Buddhists were unwilling to accept the “pantheistic materialism” (*yuibutsuteki hanshinron* 唯物的汎神論) suggested by well-known socialist and occasional *Shin Bukkyō* contributor, Sakai Toshihiko 堺利彦 (1871–1933).²⁶ In response to Sakai’s charge of their inconsistency and vagueness on this issue—that is, their refusal to extend their pantheism further towards a more rigorous philosophical materialism—the NBF writers counter that they are merely looking for appropriate ways, in line with twentieth-century scientific thinking, “to express the mysterious workings of matter and mind” (*busshin no myōyō o hyōsuru* 物心の妙用を表する).²⁷ This desire to explain the mysterious connection of matter and spirit (*busshin no ichinyō* 物心の一如 or *busshin no ittai* 物心の一体) is one that was picked up later by New Buddhist Takashima Beihō.²⁸ I will return to the issue of pantheism below, in the context of a discussion of Spinoza and the materialist tradition of Western thought.

Towards a “Sound Faith”

In addition to pantheism, “faith” (*shinkō*) was another matter of great concern for the New Buddhists.²⁹ Despite their acknowledgment of significant differences between Buddhism and the monotheisms of the West, the New Buddhists followed the general scholarly consensus of the day in affirming that “faith” or “belief” must be the foundation of any religion worth its name. Indeed, as we have seen, the very first and arguably most significant of their six General Principles states: “We regard a *sound Buddhist faith* as our foundational principle.” Thus it is no surprise to see a number of essays in the pages of *Shin Bukkyō* dedicated to this general theme. A good example is the third article in the inaugural issue of *Shin Bukkyō*, “Shinkō itten no ki” 信仰一転の機 (Time for a change of faith), authored by Katō Genchi, who would go on to become professor of religion and Shinto studies at Tokyo Imperial University. Here, following on the heels of earlier Buddhist modernists, Katō begins by denouncing the “worldliness” and “degeneration” of the Buddhist monks and temples of his day, but then goes on to argue, against expectations, that “faith” is a product of religious and social evolution.³⁰ Thus, while the New Buddhists are adamant that “faith” must remain the foundation for New Buddhism, they are not necessarily calling for a return to the “stabilities” of traditional belief.

25 SB 8, 2 (February 1907), p. 381; also see SB 2, 6 (May 1901), pp. 289–95.

26 SB 12, 8 (August 1911), pp. 1313–14.

27 SB 12, 8 (August 1911), pp. 1315–16; see Taylor 2007, p. 547, on the “tension” surrounding “mystery” in materialist discourse.

28 We might also note here once again the work of Nakanishi Ushirō, whose writings helped set the stage for the New Buddhists. Like Sakaino, Nakanishi had argued for “pantheism” as the ultimate stage of spiritual evolution—a stage that Buddhism had always embodied and that Christianity was now struggling, with the “help” of modern science, to achieve; see Thelle 1987, p. 202.

29 See Hoshino 2009, p. 142; see the lead piece of the December 1901 issue for a useful summary of thoughts from various contributors on the “faith question” (*shinkō mondai* 信仰問題); SB 2, 13, pp. 398–404.

30 SB 1, 1 (July 1900), pp. 8–9.

While the root and foundation of religion is of certainty faith, the contents on this faith will depend on the particular period and circumstances. Thus, over time, religions have no choice but to gradually develop and evolve. Therefore it is clear that there will be differences between the faith that was necessary for the establishment of Buddhism as a religion during the ancient period of Śākyamuni, that of the period of Shinran and Nichiren, and that of our own (Meiji) times.... As such, when we see people trying to bring back the old faith of Śākyamuni, Shinran, or Nichiren today in the Meiji period, all we can do is laugh at such a stupid and worthless idea.³¹

As Katō goes on to explain, while the contents of faith today cannot be fully specified, it is also not quite true that “anything goes.” Any faith suitable to the modern period must pass the test of reason and “natural, experiential knowledge” (*shizenteki keiken no chishiki* 自然的経験の智識). Thus, “reliance on supernatural beings” is ruled out, as is anything that cannot be verified on the basis of information gleaned from our “ordinary, daily experience” (*bibi heijō no keiken* 日々平常の経験).³² Moreover, Katō insists that faith must be directly applicable to “practice” or “projects” (*katsudō* 活動 or *jigyō* 事業), thus moving towards the Marxist concept of *praxis*—or, at least away from the “Protestant” separation between faith and works.

For his part, Sakaino clarifies his thinking on the question of “sound faith” in a special issue dedicated to elaborating the founding principles of the NBF published in May 1901. Here he argues that faith is not *solely* rooted in emotion; if it were, he argues, there would be no way of distinguishing “blind faith” (*mōshin* 妄信) from “correct faith” (*shōshin* 正信). Thus, while faith must surely have a foundation in “refined emotions” (*kōshō no kanjō* 高尚の感情), it must also be supported by “clear reason” (*meiryō naru risei* 明瞭なる理性).³³ At this point, Sakaino goes on to make the following, rather extraordinary claim:

“To believe in Buddhism” does not mean to blindly obey what is written in Buddhist scriptures. The true essence of Buddhism must be pursued through free investigation. However, New Buddhism does not explain what the essence of Buddhism is. Because we value the free employment of reason, we are unwilling to restrict a person’s faith.³⁴

Here “faith” seems to be little more than an umbrella term denoting a sincere and enthusiastic commitment to the rational, ethical, and social aspects of New Buddhism; that is, practical wisdom, personal moral cultivation, and social reform. On one level, especially when contrasted to its perceived lack within “old Buddhism,” New Buddhist faith means “sincerity.” Elsewhere, however, it becomes clear that for Sakaino and other New Buddhists, “faith” includes a commitment to fundamental Buddhist ethical principles regarding the elimination of suffering.³⁵ A closer examination of New Buddhist “sound faith” reveals that

31 SB 1, 1 (July 1900), p. 9.

32 SB 1, 1 (July 1900), p. 9.

33 In a later work on Buddhist history, frustrated by being unable to reconcile the chronology surrounding the founder of Buddhism’s life, Sakaino would go so far as to wonder whether Śākyamuni Buddha might be a “figment of the collective oriental imagination”; see Ketelaar 1990, p. 73.

34 SB 2, 5 (May 1901), pp. 279–80.

35 See Yoshinaga 2011, p. 30.

it comprises the following elements: 1) knowledge; 2) respect for emotions, including poetic feelings; 3) a focus on this world; that is, setting aside transcendence and concerns about the afterlife; 4) pro-active engagement; 5) ethics; and 6) a positive or optimistic outlook.³⁶ It is, in short, the name for a particular, Buddhist, *style* of living; a commitment to fully investing in the *practice* (or “game”) of living a flourishing life according to generic Buddhist principles.

The Joys of Secular Buddhism

As I have indicated, a characteristic feature of the work of the New Buddhists is an unabashed affirmation of “this world” (*genseshugi* or *genseishugi* 現世主義). While the modernistic emphasis on free inquiry and a rational, ethical, and scientific outlook were also in evidence among the figures representing the earlier Japanese Buddhist Enlightenment such as Nakanishi Ushirō, the New Buddhists—at least some of them—took things much further in this direction, to the point where it could be legitimately asked what was left of “religion” (or “Buddhism”) as normally understood. For instance, Nakanishi Ushirō had contrasted the “materialism” of the “old” Buddhism with the “spiritualism” of the new, and, in similar fashion, the “scholarship” of traditional monastic Buddhism with the “faith” orientation of the new, lay Buddhism. In contrast, the New Buddhists to some extent reverse these positions, so that it is the “old” Buddhism that focuses on “spiritual” matters, while New Buddhism is content with addressing “real,” “practical” issues of this life: poverty, hunger, and so on.³⁷

Moreover, while the New Buddhists attempted to clarify a new form of “faith,” in doing so they radically transformed the ordinary sense of the term, so that it became, as noted above, a synonym for “moral commitment” or “sincere engagement” (or perhaps, to use traditional Buddhist terms, “right intention”). Although they began their movement as self-identified “puritans,” some, including Sugimura Jūō, were hesitant to push this idea too far, lest it begin to sound overly “renunciative,” “severe,” or “pessimistic.” Here, again, their “puritanism” was of a different sort than the “passive” and “world-denying” asceticism (*kin'yokushugi* 禁欲主義) of the monks and priests; rather, it denoted a sincere, focused and “pro-active engagement” with the world (*sekkyokuteki na katsudō* 積極的な活動), one that was also not averse to seeking “pleasure” (*tanoshimi mo motomu* 楽しみも求む).³⁸ This creates a fascinating tension played out in the pages of *Shin Bukkyō*, between, on the one hand, a renunciative impulse inherited not only from classical Buddhist monasticism but also from nineteenth-century liberal Protestantism and, on the other, an optimistic and this-worldly outlook emerging from Unitarianism, New Thought, Transcendentalism, and nineteenth-century progressivism.

Buddhist Secularism, Pantheism, Materialism?

The term *genseshugi*—one of Sakaino’s four pillars of New Buddhism—aptly summarizes the NBF ideal of Buddhism, and of “religion” more broadly conceived. Although often

36 See, for example, Sakaino’s “Confession of Practical Faith” (*Jissai shinkō no hyōhaku* 實際信仰の表白), SB 1, 3 (September 1900), pp. 82–89.

37 According to the results of a survey recorded in the July 1905 edition of *Shin Bukkyō*, more than half of the leading NBF figures expressed their disbelief in any sort of afterlife; Yoshida 1992, p. 331.

38 SB 1, 5 (November 1900), p. 159; see Yoshida 1992, p. 331.

translated into English as “secularism,” *genseshugi* has a different nuance than the English term, which usually denotes: 1) the specifically “modern” and “legal” view that religion should be kept separate from “politics,” that is, privatized; or 2) a general outlook on the world that may reject religion outright or at least attempt to limit its influence in society. The New Buddhists were not interested in either of these objectives, save for the fact that they resisted direct governmental intrusion into religious matters. One way to understand this difference better is to refer to the Buddhist etymology of *genseshugi*. In East Asian Buddhism, *gense* denotes “this life,” or “the present world.” The Sanskrit roots are *ihaloka* and *pratyutpanna*, which implies “existing in the present moment” but also the state of being “ready.”³⁹ Thus, we might (creatively) gloss *genseshugi* as “a focus on engagement in this world, including a readiness to act.” As such, it not only correlates with the NBF understanding of pantheism and faith, as discussed above, but also comes close to a materialistic perspective; and this is where, we might say, the troubles begin.

I have noted the reluctance among the New Buddhists to adopt the materialist viewpoint of their socialist peers; this was a trend that continued throughout the Taishō and early Shōwa periods. Part of this hesitancy, no doubt, arose from a concern about the other, usually pejorative meaning of *genseshugi*, which is akin to the English “hedonism” (or “materialism” in the most commonly-used sense); that is, the relentless pursuit of material pleasure and worldly fame or fortune. Obviously, this aspect is anathema to New Buddhism—just as it is, at least in theory, to “old” Buddhism. The question then becomes: Is there a way to advocate the first sense of *genseshugi* without abandoning oneself to the second? In other words, what are the parameters of a “secular” or “this-worldly” Buddhism? I suggest that one way to understand this problem—if not its solution—is to reexamine some ideas emerging out of the materialist-pantheist tradition in Western thought; specifically, the work of Epicurus and Spinoza, two thinkers who challenged philosophical orthodoxy in such a way as to render them in most instances anathema to the gatekeepers of philosophical as well as religious orthodoxy.

Epicurus, of course, makes an unlikely Buddhist, new or otherwise. After all, his name has become literally synonymous with hedonism (even more specifically, a love of fine food). And yet, an examination of the work of Epicurus and his heirs—including the prominent Roman poet Lucretius—reveals a number of “Buddhistic” aspects of the Epicurean School, including a tendency towards naturalistic perspective, a residual humanism, an acceptance of change, a critique of common delusions (such as a belief in gods, salvation, immortality) [§124], taking joy in *simple* pleasures [§130–31], and an emphasis on mental equilibrium (as well as physical health) as the key to human flourishing [§128].⁴⁰ In addition, though often labeled an atheist, Epicurus is perhaps more properly categorized as a pantheist, in ways

39 Here it is worth noting the work of David S. Ruegg (2001) on the distinction in Indian Buddhism between *laukika* (Jp. *seken* 世間, also *sezoku* 世俗) and *lokottara* (Jp. *shusseken* 出世間). Christoph Kleine (2013) has argued, following Ruegg, that this central organizing principle of early Buddhism maps onto the Western distinction between the realms of immanence and transcendence—and thus provides a functional equivalent for “religion” as understood via Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory perspective. I will return to this argument below in the conclusion.

40 See Stewart 2014, p. 88. All references are to Epicurus 1994.

similar to his most influential philosophical heir, Spinoza, and, I suggest, the New Buddhist Fellowship.⁴¹

In this regard, I am sympathetic to Matthew Stewart's conception of the "radical" perspective that anchors the Epicurean tradition and finds full expression in the work of Spinoza. Here, "radical" means more than simply the desire for change in the fundamental order of society (and/or consciousness); it includes a direct and penetrating critique of "common sense." Our everyday ideas and assumptions arise at least in part from our common, shared experiences, but while the "common consciousness is useful in a limited way for the purpose of making it through the everyday struggles of our lives"—that is, it has evolutionary resonance—"radical philosophers have maintained that there is something deeply flawed in these common ideas about things, something that induces us to betray ourselves and even participate in our own enslavement when those ideas are applied on any scale larger than that of daily life."⁴²

Again, it is Spinoza who best exemplifies this avenue of thought in his theory of the *conatus*, which he developed as a critical response to the work of Hobbes and which has been called a "second-order" form of materialism.⁴³ For Spinoza, unlike Hobbes, the *conatus* is less a physical property of something than a "mode of thought," and is thus not distinguishable from the thing itself. "The *conatus*, or that which causes a thing to persist in being itself, is also really the sum of everything that makes the thing what it is." What makes this particularly interesting, in a comparative perspective, is the way Spinoza's thought runs into some fundamental Buddhist conceptions about the mind, self, thought, and desire. In this view, our desires are not just "accidents attached to a pre-existing self" (as they seem to be in Hobbes), but are rather "the way in which we conceive ourselves."⁴⁴

And yet, Spinoza's emphasis on the centrality of desire to the mind (and thus, "self") hardly justifies the ways of humanity to God or nature. Our self-representations are often—perhaps usually—distorted, since they are primarily derived from the external experience of things. "Our very own actions, just because they come from us, are not always explained through our essence, or that which accounts for our persistence in being. Which is to say, we often don't know what we really want or who we really are. And when that happens, we are not free."⁴⁵ Spinozistic freedom is nothing other than the power of the mind to act

41 In his discussion of America's "revolutionary deists" (heirs to Epicurus and Spinoza), Matthew Stewart comments that "pantheism is really just a pretty word for atheism" (Stewart 2014, pp. 5–6), but I think there is a conceptual distinction to be made. Later, Stewart writes: "According to the history of ideas as it has been narrated for the past two centuries or so, 'pantheism' is the idea that all things are imbued with the animating spirit of a mysterious cosmic being, and in this form it has been generally construed either as an example of the magical thinking that preceded the Enlightenment or as artifact of the Romantic imagination that followed it. But pantheism is better understood as the idea that God and Nature are two ways of talking about the same thing, and in this sense it is the core religious sensibility of the Enlightenment, from its beginning with Bruno's rediscovery of Lucretius through Locke's proof of a God to the American Revolution. Spinoza did not invent this movement; he epitomized it" (pp. 166–67).

42 Stewart 2014, p. 6.

43 See, for example, Stewart 2014, p. 255.

44 Just as he allows no ontological distinctions between the laws of nature and the objects of those laws, or between the objects of knowledge and the representations that constitute those objects, Spinoza here allows no ontological order of priority between the drives that move a mind and the idea of the mind itself, or between desires and the agent of desire. "Desire, he says, 'is the very essence of man'" (Stewart 2014, p. 256). The tantric implications of this are intriguing, but will not be explored here.

45 Stewart 2014, p. 257.

“through ideas that adequately explain itself and its place in the world.... Freedom in this sense is obviously not a binary, take-it-or-leave-it thing like the imaginary ‘free will’; it necessarily comes in degrees—degrees that match the adequacy of our ideas or range of our consciousness.” Again, when read in this light, freedom for Spinoza begins to resemble at least some interpretations of classical Buddhist awakening.

As I have argued elsewhere, despite the frequent hostility to “materialism” one finds in both classical and modern Buddhism, there are important conceptual and practical links between the “heterodox” thought tradition of the West and classical as well as East Asian Buddhism.⁴⁶ Even with the precedents for secular Buddhism in the Nichiren tradition, the New Buddhists were the first, at least in the modern period, to breach this gap by emphasizing the pantheistic aspects of Buddhism and attempting to forge a place for both “freedom” and “desire” within Buddhist practice.⁴⁷ This is most evident in the New Buddhist paean to pleasure and joy, which New Buddhists insisted were essential to Buddhist practice:

They [that is, “old Buddhists”] cannot eat meat or have wives, cannot sleep at night or rest in the day. In addition, they cannot enjoy themselves, laugh, get angry or sad—this, they say, is what makes them different from everyone else. But New Buddhists have no interest in this. Our New Buddhism is simply about having faith in the power to experience the ordinary joys of life (*tada heibon naru yorokobi o nasan to suru chikara o shinkō ni uru nomi* 唯平凡なる喜をなさんとする力を信仰に得るのみ). And what is faith but the passion that comes from being struck by the actuality of the cosmos? In bringing back enjoyment and lightheartedness, we gain the strength to advance our mind and spirit. Our New Buddhism is a religion rooted in the ordinary, whose faith is in the actual, and whose fruits are of this world (*kekka wa genseshugi nari* 結果は現世主義なり).⁴⁸

Here it would seem that the New Buddhists are taking a cue from the Mahāyāna conflation of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, but filtering it through a reconceptualization of “joy” along lines familiar to the Epicurean tradition, where pleasure or joy is not merely a positive sensation, “nor is it fundamentally a distraction from our true purpose, ... *it is just the term that corresponds to an increase in our power to realize ourselves*. Pain is a decrease in the same. That is, pleasure (or joy) is a transition from a lesser to a greater state of perfection of [what Spinoza would call] the *conatus*; and pain [or suffering] when it works the other way around.”⁴⁹

Conclusion

Despite the fact that they may not have resolved the various problems associated with collapsing conventional distinctions—for example, between the “secular” and the “religious,” and between religion, philosophy, ethics, politics, and society—the New Buddhists should

46 See Shields 2013 for an extended discussion of “Buddhist materialism.”

47 It bears noting that, while Spinoza’s works do not show up with any regularity in the pages of *Shin Bukkyō*, Tolstoy’s writings are of undeniable influence on the NBF, and Tolstoy considered himself to be a disciple of Spinoza, among others.

48 SB 2, 12 (December 1901), p. 393.

49 Stewart 2014, p. 280; my italics.



Figure 3. Watanabe Kaikyoku, age 31. Photo taken in Strasbourg, 1903. Maeda 2011, p. 14.

be given credit for their experiments in formulating a this-worldly lay Buddhism, especially when we consider the tendency among Buddhists past and present to disassociate “awakening” from sociopolitical or “material” concerns. Among other things, their work opens up new possibilities for conceptualizing Buddhism in relation to the secular and material realms, especially when examined in light of comparative thought.

In a recent essay on religion and the secular in premodern Japan, Christoph Kleine argues that there are functional equivalents to the distinction between “transcendence” and “immanence” in early Indian as well as premodern Japanese Buddhism.⁵⁰ In soteriological terms, *lokottara*, defined by Kleine as “absolute transcendence” or the “supra-mundane,” “is characterized by complete liberation ... ideally represented by *nirvāṇa*, complete awakening, or Buddhahood.”⁵¹ As Kleine rightly notes, while this distinction also has ontological (one might even say “cosmological”) resonance, the soteriological encoding ultimately takes priority, given Buddhism’s strong soteriological emphasis. This is precisely where, we might say, the New Buddhists find their opening, for the soteriological or *praxis*-oriented aspect of classical and premodern Buddhism, combined with the (particularly Mahāyāna) intuition that *nirvāṇa* entails a “transcendence” of conventional categories (such as that of transcendence/immanence, this- and other-worldly, even monastic/lay), allows for a re-inscribing of value to the “secular” or “mundane” realm.⁵² As I have argued above, this collapsing of categories is also a feature of “pantheism,” which goes some way toward explaining the continuing appeal of Spinoza and like-minded thinkers in the modern period.

On another level, new Buddhist ruminations on *genseshugi* and “social Buddhism” resonate with Charles Taylor’s remarks on the “problem” of human flourishing in relation to religions like Christianity and Buddhism.⁵³ In the introduction to his *Secular Age*, Taylor suggests that:

we could construe the message of the Buddha as telling us how to achieve true happiness, that is, how to avoid suffering, and attain bliss. But it is clear that the understanding of the conditions of bliss is so “revisionist” that it amounts to a departure from what we normally understand as human flourishing. The departure here can be put in terms of a radical change of identity.⁵⁴

50 Kleine 2013, p. 14.

51 Kleine 2013, p. 15.

52 See Kleine 2013, p. 15, n. 26, where the author notes the distinction between the sacred (according to Luhmann) and transcendence, as normally conceived.

53 NBF member Watanabe Kaikyoku in his writings proposed a “social (or societal) Buddhism” (*shakaiteki Bukkyō* 社会的仏教), that is, a Buddhism in which social concerns are informed and to a large degree directed by a deep recognition of the social and historical forces that condition our existence. I have not been able to discern whether Watanabe was in fact the first to employ this term, but he is clearly the scholar who did most towards developing the idea. See Murota 2006.

54 Taylor 2007, p. 17.

While Taylor concludes that, as with Christianity, followers of Buddhism are called upon to renounce or “detach themselves from” their own flourishing for the sake of some “higher” (or “transcendent”) good like serving God or extinguishing one’s self in order to achieve awakening, this seems to push these distinctions too far, especially when looking at East Asian forms of Buddhism. Moreover, and this is a point that I touched on above but needs further work, I see in the New Buddhist understanding of “human flourishing” a strong resonance of “radical” (especially materialist and pantheist) thought traditions, both Asian and Western, which posit an ideal of human flourishing that is at once decidedly immanent and yet not entirely “worldly.”

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