Jōdo Shinshū in the UK: Impermanence, Precarity, and Change

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Abstract:
This article outlines the history of Jōdo Shinshū in the UK, and asks why it has remained little known despite being one of the largest schools of Buddhism in Japan, with sizeable overseas branches in the Americas. I argue that this can be understood partly in relation to the absence of a settled Japanese migrant population in Europe, in contrast to the Americas, where Jōdo Shinshū has been sustained historically by its ethnic Japanese base, although this has changed somewhat in recent years. Another important factor is the unfamiliarity of "other power" Buddhism in Europe. With its emphasis on reliance on Amida Buddha, rather than more familiar forms of Buddhist practice like seated silent meditation, Jōdo Shinshū challenges popular conceptions of Buddhism outside Asia, and this may affect its appeal in a European context.

Keywords
Jōdo Shinshū - European Buddhism – UK – practice – other power (*tariki*) – self power (*jiriki*)

Introduction

In August 2019, a small gathering of priests belonging to Jōdo Shinshū 浄土真宗 (also known as Shin Buddhism) took place in Southampton, on the south coast of England. Likely unnoticed by the wider UK Buddhist community, this was nonetheless a significant event in the short history of the movement in the UK. The gathering was organized to celebrate the ordination in July 2019 in Japan of four new UK-based priests, two men and two women, affiliated with the largest branch of Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism in Japan, Honganji-ha 本願寺派 (also known as Nishi Honganji 西本願寺).[1] Gathered in the Buddha shrine room of Chomon[2] 聴聞 House, a terraced house re-purposed as a Jōdo Shinshū center, and led by the resident priest, Gary Daichi 大智 Robinson, each new priest in turn led a short service and gave a dharma talk. For one day, starting from the morning and continuing into the evening, the

[1] The official spelling used by this branch is Hongwanji, but the spelling Honganji is standard in academic texts and is therefore used throughout this article.

[2] This is the romanisation used on all Shin Buddhist Fellowship websites and printed materials – although 聴聞
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would normally be romanised as *chōmon*, the macron is omitted in locally produced UK materials.

house was filled with chanting and the smell of incense, with the ritual events punctuated by the sharing of food, informal conversation among the participants, congratulations offered to the new priests, and a commemorative photograph taken in front of Chomon House.

As the first gathering of the new priests since ordination, and their first opportunity to lead services as ordained priests, this gathering served as a sort of a rite of passage, marking their reintegration into the Jōdo Shinshū UK community as priests after the liminal period of their eleven-day ordination training in Japan, in which they had been secluded in the training center in Nishiyama, near Kyoto. Their new status as priests was visually marked by their robes and *wagesa* 輪袈裟, or priests' stole – a thin strip of brocade cloth worn over the robes and knotted together at the end – a gift from the head temple following ordination.[3]

The two men were also readily identifiable as new priests by their shaven heads, where the stubble was just beginning to grow out. Generally in Jōdo Shinshū, priests do not have shaven heads, but it is compulsory for men taking ordination during the training program.[4] The ordination training program is the closest that Jōdo Shinshū comes to a period of monasticism, as it lacks a monastic tradition. The shaving of men's heads prior to entry to the program, together with the imposition of a strictly regulated regime during the training, contributes to the program's monastic character. The treatment of hair during ordination training and the ceremony itself forms a symbolic marker that emphasizes the special ritual status of the candidates for ordination, and links them with a broader Buddhist monastic tradition.[5]

The Chomon House gathering was also an occasion for celebration both for the newly ordained priests and for the sangha as a whole. As Reverend Robinson pointed out in his talk at the event, until 2019 there had only been two ordained UK priests associated with the Honpa Honganji[6] branch of Jōdo Shinshū in the 40 years or so of its history in the UK – Jack Austin, ordained in 1977, who died only a few years later, and Reverend Robinson himself.

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[3] There are different types of *kesa* 袈裟, or stoles, which denote different statuses. For example, a shorter *kesa* is received on taking *kikyōshiki* 帰敬式 (an optional ceremony of confirmation for new members of Jōdo Shinshū) and a special black training *wagesa* is worn by aspirants during the ordination program. There is also a range of colors and styles that may be purchased by priests from specialist robe suppliers in Kyoto. The ones gifted to the new UK priests were all in the same design, selected by Honganji, and produced to commemorate the accession of the current head Abbot (*monshu* 門主) of Honganji in 2014.

[4] Women may shave their heads when entering ordination training, but it is not compulsory. Women who do not shave their heads must have their hair tied up and kept close to their skull during the training ceremony with the help of large amounts of hair gel, and this is regularly inspected. Hair must not be allowed to touch the collar of the priest's robe.

[5] Post ordination, very few priests retain a shaved head, and the main visual marker of a priest's status is when s/he wears the robes for services. In daily life, then, ritual authority attaching to priests is related in visual terms to their dress and mastery of ritual form, rather than tonsure, but on another level, authority is derived from having undergone the ordination training in Japan, complete with its monastic elements, and this constitutes a significant rite of passage.

[6] Honpa Honganji is another name for Nishi Honganji, or Honganji-ha.

With this increase in the number of ministers to a total of five came a feeling of optimism for the future.

I take this occasion as a point of departure for thinking about Jōdo Shinshū in the UK not only because it seemed at the time to constitute something of a milestone in looking towards the future, but also because it offers an opportunity to reflect on some of the characteristics of the movement, and the challenges that it has faced.[7] For instance, very few people attended the event other than the priests themselves; there was also a Japanese priest and academic linked to the head temple in Japan who happened to be visiting England at the time, and a German priest invited for the occasion. The event was not widely publicized: it was intended as a celebration for the new priests and for people already affiliated with Jōdo Shinshū in the UK and their friends.

The size of the gathering also reflects the small number of people affiliated with this branch of Jōdo Shinshū in the UK. There is no formal membership, but those who subscribe to the newsletter produced by Chomon House or attend occasional larger events are very widely distributed geographically within the UK, making it challenging to come together in the same physical space. Face to face meetings are typically small, except for special events such as the biennial European Shin conference.[8] On the other hand, the UK Jōdo Shinshū community maintains close transnational links with other Jōdo Shinshū groups in Europe, the U.S. and Japan.

In what follows, I draw upon secondary sources, archival materials, interviews and field notes taken since the late 1990s to consider the history of Jōdo Shinshū in the UK and its positioning in relation to other Shin Buddhist groups in Europe and the USA.[9] I also discuss why Jōdo Shinshū in the UK has remained so small, as well as broader issues concerning the glocalization[10] of Shin Buddhism. My main focus is on the Honganji-ha, the largest branch of Jōdo Shinshū in Japan and in the Americas, and also one of the largest Buddhist organizations in Japan, even though it remains very small in Europe.

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[7] It is also relevant to note here my own dual positioning in this research – I was one of the newly ordained priests participating in this event, but I have also been studying Jōdo Shinshū from an academic perspective for over twenty years. The material presented below draws on this dual involvement. For further discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of ethnographic research on an area with which the anthropologist has a close personal involvement, see e.g. Matsunaga (2000), Okely and Callaway (1992).

[8] This combines an academic-style conference at which delegates present papers relating to Jōdo Shinshū and their experiences as Shin Buddhists, a confirmation service (*kikyōshiki* 帰敬式) for new members, and short morning and evening services. For more details see Matsunaga (2019: 250-252).

[10] I use the term glocalization here following Robertson (1992) to refer to the interplay of global and local in the spread of religions, resulting in multiple forms which are shaped by both global and local processes. See also Roudometof 2014.

Jōdo Shinshū: Historical Background and First Visits to Europe

Jōdo Shinshū remains almost unknown outside scholarly and Buddhist circles in Europe, despite the fact that Jōdo Shinshū priests first visited Europe in the late nineteenth century. In this section I will explore the initial reactions to Jōdo Shinshū in Europe, in particular the view that Jōdo Shinshū is not an "authentic" form of Buddhism. Here, I argue that this reaction can in part be related to the core teachings of Jōdo Shinshū, and the ways in which they have been interpreted in the European context.

In brief, Jōdo Shinshū, a Japanese school of Pure Land Buddhism, teaches that one should entrust oneself to Amida Buddha, and to Amida's primal vow, which assures (re)birth in Amida's Pure Land. The Primal Vow is described in the Sutra on the Buddha of Immeasurable Life, also referred to in the Pure Land tradition as the Larger Sutra. The Larger Sutra describes Amida Buddha's forty-eight vows, made while he was a bodhisattva, known as Dharmakara. In the eighteenth vow, known as the Primal Vow, Dharmakara states that:

> If, when I attain Buddhahood, the sentient beings of the ten quarters, with sincere mind entrusting themselves, aspiring to be born in my land, and saying my Name perhaps even ten times, should not be born there, may I not attain the supreme enlightenment. Excluded are those who commit the five grave offenses and those who slander the right dharma. (CWS 1997:59)

Pure Land Buddhism teaches that since we know that Dharmakara became Amida Buddha, we also know that this vow was fulfilled, and therefore the (re)birth of all sentient beings who say Amida's name in Amida's Pure Land is assured. Exactly how the Pure Land is best understood is the subject of some debate within contemporary Jōdo Shinshū, but it could perhaps be briefly summarised as a Buddha land created by the power of Amida's vow.

There are two key points here. Firstly, in Pure Land Buddhism the path to liberation, through rebirth in the Pure Land, takes place through the workings of Amida Buddha's vow. Jōdo Shinshū is thus categorized as "other power" (*tariki* 他力) Buddhism. This is contrasted with "self power" (*jiriki* 自力) Buddhism, considered by many within Jōdo Shinshū to include practices such as meditation, although this characterization of meditation has come under increased scrutiny in recent years, as explored further below. And, in accordance with the eighteenth vow, Jōdo Shinshū emphasizes the saying of the *nenbutsu* 念佛 (*namo Amida butsu* 南無阿弥陀佛) or the Name, seeing this as a practice of entrusting oneself to Amida. Indeed the phrase *namo Amida butsu* can be translated as "entrusting in Amida Buddha" (Honganji International Center 2002: 74-75). However, the current orthodox position as taught by Nishi Honganji in Japan is that it is not the saying of the *nenbutsu* itself that produces a result, but rather the state of entrusting, which comes from Amida Buddha. This is summarized in the phrase taught in the Nishi Honganji training for Jōdo Shinshū priests as the

fundamental teaching of this school of Buddhism: *shinjin shōin shōmyō hōon* 信心正因称名報恩– translated into English as “*Shinjin* 信心 is the true cause [of birth in the Pure Land.] Saying the Name is a response [in gratitude] to the [Buddha's] benevolence.”[11] *Shinjin* is itself a difficult term to translate, with early translations rendering it as “faith,” while current translations favour “entrusting heart,” or even “awakening” or Buddha-nature.
Thus, the orthodox interpretation within Jōdo Shinshū is that *nenbutsu* recitation is an expression of Amida's vow in action, and of gratitude for Amida's generosity. It is not centered on the practitioner's own efforts (self power), but on reliance on Amida (other power). The *nenbutsu* is, however, a feature of all Jōdo Shinshū services, and some members say it frequently in a range of contexts. I have also heard members express the view that the *nenbutsu* is Amida calling us, or sometimes that the *nenbutsu* is “saying us” rather than the other way round.

The emphasis on *shinjin* has been widely misunderstood outside Japan to categorize Jōdo Shinshū as a faith-based religion. This has contributed to misleading comparisons between Jōdo Shinshū and Protestant Christianity, which in turn have led some Europeans and Americans to regard Jōdo Shinshū as an “inauthentic” form of Buddhism. As Amstutz (1997) has explored in detail, this depiction has a long history, going back to sixteenth century accounts of Jesuit missionaries to Japan (Amstutz 1997: xi). Jōdo Shinshū's global reputation has also been influenced by interpretations of Buddhism in nineteenth century scholarship, which tended to dismiss Shin Buddhism as not fitting with the dominant paradigm of Buddhism as understood in the West. In the postwar period, the rendering of *shinjin* as “faith,” and the comparison of relying on Amida to the doctrine of grace in Christianity became particularly problematic. Amstutz writes:

> an appearance of comparability between Shin and Christianity was achieved by lining up the rhetorical structures developed in each tradition around that concept of “faith.” However… insufficient critical examination took place… about what the comparison of Shin and Christian concepts as “protestant” or as oriented to “grace” was supposed to mean at anything more than a superficial linguistic or psychological level.
> Amstutz 1997: 86-87

The complexities of Shin teachings, and the superficial analogies drawn between Shin Buddhism and Christianity, have thus contributed to its neglect in popular writings on

[11] It has been pointed out, however, by the Shin scholar Dake Mitsuya, that this formulation does not derive from the work of the founder, Shinran 親鸞(1173-1263), but from the writings of his great grandson, Kakunyo 覚如(1270-1351). Kakunyo's formulation has become the orthodox position within Jōdo Shinshū Honganji-ha, but Dake is critical of this interpretation as being in conflict with Shinran's original teaching, which emphasizes the “inseparability of practice and *shinjin*” (Dake 2005:114).

Buddhism in Europe and the Americas. Shin Buddhism has also, until fairly recently, been marginalized within (Western) Buddhist scholarship, as not fitting the Orientalist constructs of 19th Century Buddhologists (see introduction of this issue, also Amstutz 1997:68-70, Porcu 2008).

This marginalization conceals a long history of contact between Shin Buddhism and Europe. A number of Japanese Shin Buddhist scholar priests were sent to study with Max Müller at Oxford University in the late 19th century.[12] There were also some limited attempts at propagating Shin Buddhist teachings in Europe. The most prominent figure in this regard was Akamatsu Renjo 赤松連城 (1841- 1919), a priest from Honganji-ha, who came to England as part of a mission in 1872 to study the religious situation in Europe.[13] The purpose of the mission was to gather information to inform internal Japanese debates relating to the positioning of religion – in particular, Buddhism – in the emergent Meiji nation-state.[14] However, Akamatsu stayed on in England for two years, and extended his activities to the translation of a number of Japanese texts on Buddhism and on Jōdo Shinshū into English.

According to Edward J. Reed, Akamatsu intended "to prepar[e] the way for the conversion of Europe to the Shinshu faith" (Reed 1880: 83-84, cited in Shields 2017: 25). While this may be an exaggeration, given the overall goals of the mission, Akamatsu was later closely involved in overseas propagation of Buddhism, through the Society for Communication with Western Buddhists（*Ōbei Bukkyō Tsūshinkai* 欧米仏教通信会), founded under Akamatsu's leadership in 1887, and later reorganized as The Buddhist Propagation Society (*Kaigai Senkyōkai* 海外宣教会 – literally Overseas Missionary Society). The Buddhist Propagation Society established a branch office in London in 1889, headed by the Irish-born Charles J. W. Pfoundes (1840-1907), and published an English language journal, *Bijou of Asia* (Bocking et al. 2014:2).[15] However, despite its links with Jōdo Shinshū in Japan, this organization aimed at propagating a non-sectarian form of Buddhism, and no distinct locally based Jōdo Shinshū group seems to have been established. Although there were some British converts to Buddhism by the end of the nineteenth century, there is no record of British converts to Jōdo Shinshū during this period, and even for Buddhism as a

[12] In 1876 Nanjō Bunyū 南条文雄 (1849-1927) and Kasahara Kenju 笠原健寿 (1852-1883) of the Ōtani-ha branch of Jōdo Shinshū went to Oxford University to study Sanskrit and comparative religion with Max Müller. Other Japanese students of Buddhism who later became influential within Japan followed: for example, Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 (1866-1945) studied with Müller at Oxford from 1890, and subsequently became professor at Tokyo Imperial University as well as a well-known educator and Buddhist scholar (Kokusai Bukkyō Bunka Kyōkai 2010: 4-6).

[13] Akamatsu was a prominent modernizer and reformer within Honganji during the Meiji period and later became president of Bukkyō 仏教 (later Ryūkoku 龍谷) University in Kyoto (Shields 2017: 24). The well-known scholar-priest Shimaji Mokurai 島地黙雷 (1838-1911) also visited Europe as part of the same group.

[14] See Deneckere (2014).

[15] For more on *Bijou of Asia*, as well as early English language publications dealing specifically with Jōdo Shinshū, see Nakanishi et al. 2018.

whole, the number of British adherents remained very small (Almond 1988: 36). Thus, from the beginning of the twentieth century until the 1950s, Jōdo Shinshū largely disappears from the history of Buddhism in Europe.

Overseas propagation for Jōdo Shinshū did not end at this point, however: the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was precisely when Jōdo Shinshū established a substantial and permanent presence in the United States, mainly in California and Hawaii. The reason for this sharply different trajectory in Europe and in the Americas is that the early history of Jōdo Shinshū in the Americas is associated with Japanese migration. Jōdo Shinshū had a particularly large number of members in the parts of Japan that provided migrant labour to the Americas in this period (Moriya 2019: 260-261). Jōdo Shinshū missions followed these migrants, providing essential social and religious support, including services for the dead, a key role for contemporary Japanese Buddhism. In Europe, on the other hand, there has been no large scale long-term Japanese migration, and thus Europe has lacked the permanent resident ethnic Japanese migrant communities that have historically sustained American Shin Buddhism.[16]

In addition, Jōdo Shinshū in Europe continued to suffer on the one hand from a lack of information available on this form of Buddhism, and on the other, a continuing negative evaluation of Jōdo Shinshū as "inauthentic" from the few who encountered it within Buddhist circles. In the UK context, the comment of Christmas Humphreys, founder of the Buddhist Society (initially known as the Buddhist Lodge of the Theosophical Society) in London, has been widely cited: "Here … is a form of Buddhism which on the face of it discards three-quarters of Buddhism. Compared with the teaching of the Pali Canon it is but Buddhism and water … This is easy, simple religion, for all the work is done for one … and it may be better than no religion at all. But is it Buddhism?" (1990: 164-165). Finally, as Baumann (2002) has noted, Buddhism in Europe before the second world war was largely composed of small, scattered groups and individuals, with the greatest concentration in Germany, and, to a lesser extent, Britain. Although many of these were eclectic in their approach, with the British in particular being influenced by Theosophy, in general – especially in Germany – Theravada Buddhism was a dominant influence.

Post-war: The Formation of Local Shin Buddhist Groups in Europe and the UK

The first Jōdo Shinshū group in Europe was established in 1956 by Harry Pieper, a German Buddhist living in Berlin who had converted to Buddhism in the 1930s. Pieper was secretary general of Arya Maitreya Mandala, a group based on Tibetan Buddhism, but later became

[16] In recent decades this has been shifting somewhat in the Americas, with an increasing number of non-ethnic Japanese members of American Shin Buddhist temples.

interested in Pure Land Buddhism. He received a form of ordination as a priest from Ōtani Kōsho 大谷光照(1911-2002), then *monshu* (Head Abbot) of Nishi Honganji, and in 1956 he founded the German branch of Jōdo Shinshū in Berlin. Though Pieper's active involvement in the Berlin group was short-lived, owing to the decline in his health from the 1960s onwards, he had a larger impact elsewhere, as other Europeans interested in Shin Buddhism contacted him for information. This notably included Friedrich Fenzl and Jean Eracle, who established Shin Buddhist groups in Austria and Switzerland respectively (see Pokorny in this volume).

In 1954 Pieper met Jack Austin, who later co-founded the Shin Buddhist Association of Great Britain. Pieper's direct influence on Austin does not seem to have been significant, but there are some parallels between them. Like Pieper, Austin was a long-standing Buddhist. He had been a member of Arya Maitreya Mandala and was ordained as a Sōtō Zen 曹洞禅 priest, and through Ernest Hunt, a Sōtō Zen priest based in Hawaii, who had formerly been ordained in Jōdo Shinshū, he later became interested in Shin Buddhism. In the 1970s he began to correspond with a Jōdo Shinshū priest in Japan, Reverend Inagaki Zuiken 稲垣瑞剱, who in turn introduced him to his son, Inagaki Hisao 稲垣久雄, who was then a lecturer in Japanese Buddhism at SOAS (the School of Oriental and African Studies), University of London, and was also an ordained Shin priest in the Honganji-ha branch of Jōdo Shinshū. In 1976, Austin arranged for the *monshu*, Ōtani Kōshō, to participate in an interfaith conference at the University of Kent, and later that year the *monshu* came to London and conferred *kikyōshiki* (Buddhist confirmation) on several people, including Austin and two others who were to become significant in the development of Pure Land Buddhism in the UK, Max Flisher and Jim Pym. The following year, Austin was ordained in Honganji in Japan, together with a young follower (and subsequently the successor) of the Swiss priest Eracle, Jérôme Ducor. Also in 1977, Austin founded the Shin Buddhist Association of Great Britain, together with Inagaki Hisao, and regular meetings were held at Inagaki's house in London.[17]

In the UK the Shin Buddhist Association of Great Britain became inactive from the early 1980s, when Inagaki returned to Japan following the death of his father, while at the same time Jack Austin became ill. The focus for Shin Buddhists in Britain thereafter became the Pure Land Buddhist Fellowship (hereafter PLBF), a non-sectarian group which evolved out of the Shin Buddhist group which had met at Inagaki's house. The PLBF described itself as "an organism" rather than an organization and had no official leaders. One outstanding figure within the PLBF was Jim Pym, who was a long-time friend of Jack Austin, and had also been involved in a number of different Buddhist groups before his affiliation with Pure Land Buddhism.

[17] Like Pieper, Austin's impact extended beyond his own country: he was an important influence on Adrian Peel, who established a Shin center in Belgium in 1979.

The PLBF maintained links with other British Buddhist groups, but for a time experienced difficulties in gaining acceptance by some among the various Buddhist networks. One view expressed by some British Buddhists at the time was that Pure Land Buddhism was somehow not "real" Buddhism, echoing the views of Christmas Humphreys cited above. In this context, it seemed like something of a landmark when the Buddhist Society finally allowed the Pure Land Buddhist Fellowship to meet at their premises in London in 1995, and in the following year placed Pure Land Buddhism on the syllabus of one of their courses.[18]

Recalling the intentions behind the establishment of the PLBF, Pym wrote: "We would be open to any who were interested in any aspect of Other-power Buddhism, and we would be a 'Fellowship', without hierarchy and willing to learn from each other" (Pym 2013: 2). I came across the PLBF in the mid 1990s and attended several of their meetings at the Buddhist Society in London. Although there were services that followed one of the prescribed Honganji formats – for example, when priests from Honganji visited – overall I remember Pym being quietly firm that he did not wish to go down a sectarian route, and wanted to keep the PLBF open to a range of forms, practices, and traditions. However, Pym maintained close links with Honganji through its international office as well as two linked organisations: the International Association of Buddhist Culture (IABC), founded in 1980, and the International Association of Shin Buddhist Studies (IASBS), founded in 1982. In 1998, Pym organised the first Shin Buddhist conference to be held in the UK.

In 2002, Pym moved from Oxfordshire, which was in easy reach of London and the Buddhist Society premises there, to Devon, in the south west of England. Subscribers to the group's journal, *Pure Land Notes*, were directed to meetings organized by a recently established Shin Buddhist temple in London, Three Wheels, which is affiliated to a different branch of Shin Buddhism, Shōgyōji 正行寺, and to the Amida Trust,[19] an independent Pure Land Buddhist group.

From the early 2000s, the main organizational role in the PLBF was increasingly taken by Gary Robinson, a member of the PLBF who had received *kikyōshiki* in 1998. Robinson established a small Shin Buddhist group in Southampton in the late 1990s, and in 2003 moved

[18] Subsequently, a number of courses and lectures on aspects Pure Land Buddhism have been offered at the Buddhist Society by the Shin Buddhist priest Reverend Sato of the Three Wheels temple in London (discussed in greater detail below). Reverend Sato is also a member of the board of directors of the Buddhist Society, a further indication of the integration of Pure Land Buddhism within the wider Buddhist community in the UK since the mid 1990s.

Founded in 1996 by David and Caroline Brazier, and originating in the UK, it identifies itself as Pure Land, rather than narrowly Jōdo Shinshū. It also has its own independent system of ordination and rules, which are entirely distinct from those of any Jōdo Shinshū organization based in Japan.[19] Caroline Brazier later left the Amida Trust and set up the Tariki Trust in 2011, as an umbrella for her work, which includes Buddhist psychotherapy training and events as well as retreats. She was one of the new Shin Buddhist priests ordained in 2019 at Honganji, and her work with the Tariki trust is informed by Pure Land Buddhism,. However, the Tariki trust remains independent of Honganji, and is not an exclusively Shin Buddhist organization.

to the place that was to become Chomon House.[20] Robinson initiated some significant shifts in the PLBF: he created a website through which a range of resources could be accessed, including the journal (he became editor of the *Pure Land Notes* in 2005) and information on forthcoming events. He also created the first dedicated premises of the Honganji-ha branch of Jōdo Shinshū in the UK through re-purposing the house in which he lived in Southampton. He was ordained at Honganji in Kyoto in 2012, and organised two European Shin Buddhist conferences, in 2014 and 2018, which were attended not only by European Shin Buddhists, but also by members from the United States, Canada, Brazil, and Japan. With Robinson taking the lead, the focus of the PLBF became more specifically Shin Buddhist, and more closely linked to Honganji, although retaining good relations with other Buddhist groups. In 2014 he launched the Shin Buddhist Fellowship UK (SBFUK), which from then on became the main organisation for Honganji-ha affiliated Shin Buddhists in the UK, although the PLBF continued to exist as a loose network for those wishing to pursue an interest in Pure Land Buddhism in general. In 2015, Robinson also started an on-line course on the *Shōshinge* (full name *Shōshin nenbutsuge* 正信念仏偈, translated as *Hymn of True Shinjin and the Nenbutsu*), a key text in Jōdo Shinshū, composed by the founder, Shinran 親鸞 which summarises Shin Buddhist teachings and is regularly chanted in temples (the *Shōshinge* must be memorised by all aspirant priests). This course was followed by all the UK priests who were ordained in 2019, but has also been taken by others not immediately intending to apply for ordination. Despite Robinson's initiatives, however, SBFUK has remained small.

The UK also has a Shin temple in London, but this is associated with a different branch of Shin Buddhism. Three Wheels is the UK branch of Shogyōji 正行寺, an independent branch of Jōdo Shinshū loosely connected with Ōtani-ha 大谷派, or Higashi Honganji 東本願寺 in Japan, from which it formally became independent in the 1970s. Higashi Honganji provides ordination for Shogyōji priests, and their liturgy also follows that of Higashi Honganji. Three Wheels was established in 1994 in a suburban house in west London, an area with a high concentration of expatriate Japanese thanks to the nearby Japanese school. The head priest, Kemmyō Taira Sato 佐藤顕明(佐藤平), a Japanese national, is a former university professor, and also a former pupil of D.T. Suzuki(1879-1966). Reverend Sato is very active in organizing classes on aspects of Shin Buddhist teachings at Three Wheels and the Buddhist Society in London as well as in translating key Shin Buddhist texts. Three Wheels also organizes a range of activities, not necessarily aimed solely at Shin Buddhists. These include study classes, retreats, meditation classes, and monthly or bi-

[20] The name Chomon House was adopted in 2013 and means "listening to the Dharma." An email from Honganji International Center concerning the adoption of this name states: "Since ascetic religious practices cannot be a cause of enlightenment in the understanding of Jōdo Shinshū, 'listening to the dharma,' that is, CHOMON, is always stressed and encouraged. Using that word as your Pure Land Center is a very good idea" (Robinson 2013:20).

monthly meetings comprising a short service and dharma talk followed by a pot-luck buffet lunch for attendees, which provides an opportunity to mix and socialize informally. For the past twenty-two years, Three Wheels has also organized an inter-denominational annual reconciliation ceremony for survivors of WWII. In addition, they offer a range of ceremonies on request, including weddings, funerals, and memorial services for the dead.

The events that I have participated in at Three Wheels have always been well attended, with on average thirty to forty people filling the two rooms that have been put together to form a gathering space and room for the Buddhist altar. However, talking to those present reveals a mix of backgrounds and religious affiliations. These span expatriate Japanese living in the UK, not all of whom are Buddhist; some who come from Japan specifically to stay at the temple and participate in training courses; as well as British and other nationalities. Some of these are there because of an interest in Buddhism, but by no means all. In an interview with Reverend Sato in 2000, he commented:

> We don't aim to convert people; people keep their own standpoints. If people agree with my standpoint and want to convert, it's OK, but I don't want to insist that they convert… People who attend meetings may be of many different faiths. I think people get something from Three Wheels. Our original direction was: harmony within diversity.

Reverend Sato said in the same interview that there was no membership of the Three Wheels temple in a formal sense. My impression was of an open space for people to gather and to explore Pure Land Buddhism further if they were interested, but with a relatively small group that might be called followers of Pure Land Buddhism. In the mid 2000s, Reverend Sato estimated that there were around 30 people that he termed "dharma friends" associated with the temple, of whom approximately one third were Japanese and two thirds European.

Three Wheels maintains cordial connections with the various Nishi Honganji groups in Europe, and Reverend Sato regularly attends the Honganji sponsored biennial European Shin Buddhist conferences. A number of PLBF members have also been regular attendees at Three Wheels at various times, and some of them were among the 21 people who received *kikyōshiki* at Three Wheels on the occasion of the visit to the UK of the head abbot of Higashi Honganji in 2003. The two groups remain distinct, however, both in their affiliation to different branches of Jōdo Shinshū in Japan and in their ritual practice. The other important difference between them is the strong connection that Three Wheels has with the local Japanese community in London, including links with the Japanese embassy, representatives of which have attended the annual reconciliation ceremonies referred to above. Also, both the priests at Three Wheels are Japanese. In contrast, Chomon House and the SBFUK has mainly European members and priests, most, though not all, of whom are British.

Jōdo Shinshū in the UK: The Contemporary Context

As has been well documented (see Baumann 2002), Buddhism enjoyed a rise in popularity in Western Europe and the United States from the 1960s, spreading beyond the migrant populations from East Asia who had brought their own Buddhist traditions with them, and creating a new category of convert Buddhists. This rise in popularity was uneven, however. In the UK, Zen became one of the most popular forms of Buddhism, with public awareness of Zen aided considerably by the writings of popularisers such as D.T. Suzuki, and Alan Watts. Other Buddhist traditions which have attracted a substantial UK membership include Tibetan Buddhism, which grew in popularity from the 1970s onwards; Sōka Gakkai 創価学会, a new religious movement originating in Japan based on Nichiren 日蓮 Buddhism; various branches of Theravada Buddhism; and some independent Buddhist groups founded in the UK.

Numbers are difficult to ascertain for several reasons. First, membership of the various Buddhist groups in the UK is often not clearly defined, so even the groups themselves may be unable to give an exact number of members; indeed, in some cases, they may be resistant to the whole concept of membership. It is also likely that there are a substantial number of people who consider themselves Buddhist, but are not affiliated to any particular group, and others who are interested in Buddhism, and may even attend Buddhist groups, without necessarily self-identifying as Buddhist.[21] In addition, there is a more or less invisible category of short term visitors from East and South East Asia, who may self identify as Buddhist back home, but do not on the whole feel the need to make contact with any UK Buddhist organisations during their stay. The picture is further complicated by the array of different, and sometimes independent, groups and networks within any one tradition.

However, to give a general sense of the numbers, in the most recent census of England and Wales in 2011,[22] 248,000 people self identified as Buddhist, 0.4% of the population (Office for National Statistics 2012), a substantial increase on the previous census of 2001, in which 149,157, or 0.26% of the population identified as Buddhist (British Academy n.d.), but still a comparatively small number. These figures are not broken down by tradition, but as a point of comparison, if we consider two other forms of Buddhism linked to Japan, Zen and Sōka Gakkai, a Sōtō Zen priest based in London that I spoke to in early 2020 estimated that those linked to the various Sōtō Zen groups in the UK probably number in the thousands, while Soka Gakkai International UK states on its website that it has 620 local groups in the UK, with over 14,000 members (SGI UK https://sgi-uk.org/, accessed 4 April 2020). Jōdo Shinshū in the UK, by comparison, is very small. I would estimate that there are probably no more than twenty or so people affiliated with SBFUK, with, in the mid 2000s at least, another

[21] See Tweed (1999) on "nightstand Buddhists."

[22] Scotland has a separate census which does not ask the same questions.

thirty or so affiliated with Three Wheels.[23] This disparity between the size of Jōdo Shinshū membership, and that of other better known Buddhist schools, is broadly reflected across Europe.

There is a marked contrast here with the situation in the Americas, where Jōdo Shinshū has a relatively large membership, although this has declined in the postwar period. Considering Nishi Honganji alone, at the time of writing, in the United States there are over 60 temples affiliated with the Nishi Honganji organization, Buddhist Churches of America (BCA) with around 12,000 members, and there are a further 30 or so Shin Buddhist temples in Hawaii.[24] There are also significant Jōdo Shinshū communities in Canada and Latin America (in particular, Brazil).

The reason for this disparity lies in the composition of the local populations, and hence the membership. In the Americas there is a large ethnic Japanese diaspora, the descendants of waves of migration dating back to the late nineteenth century, that has historically provided the core membership of Jōdo Shinshū (Porcu 2018). This has been a source of vulnerability for American Shin Buddhism in some ways, as a reliance on ethnic Japanese membership has limited Jōdo Shinshu's expansion into the wider population, and this has contributed to the characterization of Jōdo Shinshū in the United States as "ethnic Buddhism," exacerbated by the persistence of what Amstutz (2014) terms "ethno-chauvinism" within the temples.

This has led to a dilemma for American Shin temples: reliance on an ethnic Japanese (*nikkei*) membership leaves the temple vulnerable to defections from a younger generation for whom the temple may play a less important role as a focus for ethnic Japanese identity compared to their parents and grandparents (and who may be less concerned to preserve such an identity anyway) within the context of overall decline in institutionalized religion in the United States. On the other hand, shifting the balance towards a larger non-ethnic Japanese membership risks alienating older, more conservative *nikkei* members (Amstutz 2014:162). However, these issues notwithstanding, North American Jōdo Shinshū temples have in many ways benefitted from the support of their Japanese ethnic base, which has enabled Jōdo Shinshū in the United States to develop an extensive network of temples, with salaried priests and a ministerial education program. Temple priests are also engaged in the provision of a range of services to the local *nikkei* community, including funerary services, which remain an important aspect of the temples' role.

The situation in Europe is very different, principally because Europe lacks a permanently settled ethnic Japanese community. Although there are some areas in Europe

[23] I do not have access to more up to date numbers for Three Wheels.

[24] Numbers from Buddhist Churches of America website: https://www.buddhistchurchesofamerica.org/about-bca (accessed 6 March 2021) and Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii website: hongwanjihawaii.com (accessed 24 July 2020).

which have a large number of Japanese residents, such as the area of West London—where Three Wheels is located—and Düsseldorf in Germany, the home of a large Jōdo Shinshū temple, Ekō-ji 恵光寺 or Eko Haus, the Japanese living in these areas are almost all short-term residents, who are in Europe for the purpose of work. Typically, they are families where the father has been transferred for a period of few years, accompanied by his wife and children. Unlike the ethnic Japanese in the Americas, these Japanese expatriates are unlikely to become involved with Jōdo Shinshū in Europe, even though many of them may belong to families that are formally attached to Jōdo Shinshū temples in Japan.

As I have argued elsewhere (Matsunaga 2019: 245), this can be explained with reference to the role that Buddhist organizations play in most people's lives in Japan. There is no expectation of regular attendance at temples; rather, Buddhism is closely associated with funerals and the care of the ancestors (Reader 1991:77). Thus, most people's contact with their family's Buddhist temple is either in this context or for the two principal ceremonial occasions of the year: *O-bon* お盆, or the festival of the dead (held in July or August, depending on the region of Japan); and the new year, when many people go to listen to the tolling of the temple bells.

In the Americas, as noted above, funerary and memorial services have also been important for the ethnic Japanese community. In the ordination training in Japan, which is followed by both Japanese and overseas candidates (most of whom are from North America), there is a strong emphasis on learning the correct format for funeral services, and on practicing the required forms of chanting. This is still important for priests' roles in the Americas, although it is perhaps less central than in Japan. In Europe, on the other hand, there is relatively little demand for funerary services. As the expatriate Japanese in Europe are mostly short-term residents, family funerary and memorial services will generally be taken care of by their home temples in Japan. And if they did require such services in the UK, they would be much more likely to ask a temple headed by a native Japanese priest, such as Three Wheels in London, rather than any of the smaller centers led by European-born priests. Although some European Shin priests have been asked to conduct Buddhist funerals and memorials, most of these have been for other Europeans (including occasionally ethnic Chinese from a Buddhist background), and the requests have not necessarily been for a specifically Jōdo Shinshū funeral or memorial, but rather for something more generally Buddhist, adapted to the individual's or family's wishes.

Another important point is the absence of the kind of developed material infrastructure that is found in American Shin Buddhism. Without a stable membership base of sufficient size to provide financial support for temple buildings and full-time priests, with the exception of Ekō-ji in Dusseldorf and Three Wheels in London referred to above, the typical pattern in Europe is of part time priests holding services in the adapted rooms of private houses. This limits the type of ceremonies that can be performed, and also the visibility of the groups and

their potential appeal to local Japanese temporary residents. For example, in the absence of purpose built temples with temple bells, the New Year ceremony of tolling the temple bell is not possible for most, aside from Ekō-ji;[25] (in fact, the tolling of the temple bell at the New Year in Ekō-ji does attract a number of local Japanese residents). Overall, there is relatively little interest or active involvement of local Japanese people in Shin Buddhist groups in Europe, with some limited exceptions in the case of Three Wheels and Ekō-ji.

Three Wheels and Ekō-ji aside, the remainder of the Jōdo Shinshū groups in Europe can be categorised as convert Buddhists. Their priests are European born, although ordained in Japan,[26] and they have few, if any, Japanese members. But while this can explain many of the differences between Jōdo Shinshū in the Americas and Jōdo Shinshū in Europe in terms of the characteristics of the membership, it does not explain why, in comparison to other convert Buddhist groups in the UK (and in Europe more broadly), Jōdo Shinshū has attracted relatively little interest.

Jōdo Shinshū, Meditation, and Practice

A key point here concerns the expectations of most Europeans with regards to Buddhism. The popular image of Buddhism in Europe, including the UK, has a number of features that do not apply to Jōdo Shinshū – most importantly that Buddhists meditate[27] - with meditation understood as the practice of silent seated meditation. This is by no means an issue specific to Europe. Writing on Jōdo Shinshū in the United States, Amstutz (2014: 143) notes the apparent lack of interest from non-ethnic Japanese in Shin compared to other forms of Buddhism present in the US such as Zen, Tibetan, or Theravada, and suggests that part of the explanation for this, together with the problem of ethno-chauvinism in US Shin temples noted above, is that "Shin does not meet stereotypical (Orientalist, White) Western expectations of Buddhism which are based on monasticism or meditation." Amstutz also notes that Shin, with its teaching of other power, runs counter to the discourse of self-help which has become deeply embedded in US society (and, one might note, in much of Western Europe).

Dessì (2013: 70-76) takes up the question of meditation in North America, noting that meditation sessions have begun to be offered in a number of temples in the United States and Canada over the past few decades, at least in part in response to interest from non-ethnic Japanese approaching the temple. In 2005, a symposium on meditation in Jōdo Shinshū was

[25] At least, the tolling of the temple bell in its traditional form is not possible, although the UK sangha organized a modified online version of this using a singing bowl for the New Year service in 2021.

[26] There was at one time a move to have Europe-based ordinations for Jōdo Shinshū priests, but these were few in number, and, with the exception of two special cases (both now deceased), these ordinations were not recognized by the head temple in Japan, or by other Shin Buddhist communities outside Japan. For further details ,see Matsunaga (2019: 240-241).

[27] Other features popularly attributed to Buddhists are vegetarianism and abstinence from alcohol. Although some Shin Buddhists in Europe choose to be vegetarian and/or to abstain from alcohol, neither is a requirement of Shin Buddhism.

co-organized by the Jōdo Shinshū affiliated Institute of Buddhist Studies in Berkeley and the Stanford Center for Buddhist Studies. Also in 2005, official public support emerged both from overseas bishops and from the directors of the BCA for "the integration of meditational practices within Jōdo Shinshū…provided that meditation remained a preliminary practice for *chōmon* 聴聞, namely listening to the Jōdo Shinshū teaching" (Dessì 2013: 74). However, Dessì also notes that opinion among Shin ministers in the United States remains divided on this issue, with a number resisting the shift towards greater incorporation of meditation within Jōdo Shinshū (Dessì 2013:73).

Elsewhere, focusing on Jōdo Shinshū in Hawaii, Dessì (2017) traces early efforts to introduce meditation to Hawaii starting in the 1970s and explores the ways in which both priests and lay members have sought to reconcile this with Shin teachings. Interestingly, Dessì's research shows that those who participate in meditation groups within Jōdo Shinshū in Hawaii currently span both *nikkei* and non-ethnic Japanese as well as longstanding temple families and newcomers, suggesting a shift that goes beyond a straightforward *nikkei* – non-*nikkei* opposition (Dessì 2017: 128). This development echoes a broader debate within Jōdo Shinshū on the meaning of practice and the opposition between self power (*jiriki*) and other power (*tariki*), and the ways in which meditation may be understood and related to Jōdo Shinshū teachings within this framework.[28]

In the Brazilian context, Matsue (2014) has examined the introduction of meditation in Brasilia's Shin Buddhist temple, initially with the introduction of Zen style meditation by Imai Kyoya, who was sent from Japan to take up the position of head priest of the temple from 1989 to 1992. Subsequently, a second generation Brazilian-Japanese priest, Ademar Kyotoshi Sato, who was appointed to the temple in 1998, introduced chanting meditation and meditation classes based on one of the canonical sutras of Pure Land Buddhism, *the Contemplation Sutra*. Matsue points here to a process of hybridization and "glocalization," and a "local reinvention of Pure Land practices" (Matsue 2014: 243) in which various factors, including a demand for meditation from the local population, and broader shifts within Jōdo Shinshū combine to create distinctive new local configurations.

These recent moves towards the integration of meditation practices into Jōdo Shinshū in North America, Hawaii, and Brazil have been seen as problematic by some. In mainstream Jōdo Shinshū terms, insofar as meditation is practiced as a means to enlightenment, it tends to be characterised as self-power – in Japanese, *jiriki* – that is, relying on one's own efforts.[29] The conventional understanding of Jōdo Shinshū teaching is that adherents should solely rely

[28] For a discussion of doctrinal issues relating to the use of meditation within Jōdo Shinshū, see Dake (2005).

[29] It is worth noting here that some would contest this self-power/other-power distinction, especially in regards to meditation. When discussing this with a British member of a Zen group, he explained that seated meditation, as practiced in Zen, is far from being "self-power". Rather, it results in the falling away of self, and the distinction between self and other.

on Amida Buddha and Amida's vow, discarding all other practices and not relying on their own efforts, therefore discouraging any practices seen as self-power. As noted above, one way of addressing the tension between the local demand for meditation, and Jōdo Shinshū teachings on self-power and other power, that has been adopted in the United States is to frame meditation as a preparatory practice for listening to the dharma, while emphasizing that it should not be seen as a path to enlightenment. Another perspective is to present meditation as something that may have benefits in terms of relaxation and well being, but that is peripheral to the core teachings of Shin. This second perspective is probably the most common within Europe, where many Shin priests will say that they are not opposed to the practice of seated meditation, but they do not wish to offer it themselves.

One of the Shin Buddhist priests in Germany explained:

> People in Europe expect that Buddhism equals meditation and vegetarianism. People may come to the *dōjō* 道場 [the Jōdo Shinshū center] once, ask about meditation, and when you say you don't meditate they say, "Can you offer meditation classes?" Then I say, "I could, but what's the point?" Then often they don't come back!

In a similar vein, one of the UK priests commented that he had offered silent seated meditation in the past, but no longer does so, as he feels that this could lead to confusion with other practices. On the other hand, he feels that the ritual of the Shin services, including the chanting and offering incense, could be seen as a form of meditation.

Partly in response to the demand from people making contact with Jōdo Shinshū centers, some Shin Buddhist priests in Europe do however offer meditation classes. Three Wheels in London is one example. But many Shin Buddhist priests in Europe, if asked to provide meditation classes, will simply direct the enquirer to an alternative Buddhist group. It is also pertinent to note here that (silent, seated) meditation does not form part of Shin Buddhist priests' training, and not all Shin Buddhist priests feel confident about leading meditation groups, even if they would wish to do so, while some remain firmly opposed.

As indicated in the comments of the UK priest referred to above, some European Shin Buddhist priests suggest that we need to revisit our conceptions of what meditation is. Taking a broader view of meditation, the chanting that forms part of Shin Buddhist services may be seen as a meditative practice – it has been described as "sound meditation" – and indeed Matsue's (2014) research gives us an example of chanting explicitly presented as meditation in the Brazilian context. Another UK priest has made the argument that from this perspective, meditation could be seen as integral to Shin ritual, and that the resistance to meditation within parts of European Jōdo Shinshū is the result of, on the one hand, a very narrow view of what

meditation is,[30] and on the other, a misunderstanding about the role of practice in Jōdo Shinshū. This echoes the Shin scholar Dake's (2005) argument that we need a deeper interrogation of the understanding of practice, and to return to Shinran's position that practice and *shinjin* are inseparable (Dake 2005: 114). Overall, however, the debate on the role of meditation, and whether or how it should be incorporated into Jōdo Shinshū, remains relatively undeveloped in Europe compared to the United States, with local groups responding to this on a more or less ad hoc basis. One European priest who has also spent some time in the United States suggested that this may be partly explained by a tendency for Jōdo Shinshū in Europe to be more closely aligned with Honganji orthodoxy than is the case in the Americas, perhaps because European Shin Buddhist groups are more recently established and much smaller than their American counterparts, and therefore more dependent on Honganji.

Another perspective on practice in Jōdo Shinshū that resonates with many Europeans is offered by a well-known writer on Shin Buddhism, Taitetsu Unno. Unno remarks, "The question most frequently asked of a Shin Buddhist is, 'What is your practice?'" (Unno 2002: 5). Unno suggests:

> As a Buddhist the obvious answer is the practice of compassion… But when one really tries to practice compassion… one encounters a huge obstacle… one's own self-centered ego. This awareness is the starting point of the Shin Buddhist path.

This quote echoes sentiments I have often heard expressed by Shin Buddhist converts in Europe: that they tried other paths, but in the end felt they could not progress because of their own limitations (and sometimes difficulties with other practices). Turning to other power Buddhism, and the teaching that they are accepted and embraced just as they are by Amida Buddha and Amida's vow, was experienced as liberating.

However, as argued above, for many in Europe, the teaching of reliance on Amida is problematic. Europeans unfamiliar with Shin Buddhism may see the teaching of entrusting oneself to Amida Buddha as redolent of faith in Christian teachings. In addition, teachings regarding birth in Amida's Pure Land, to some, sound like the Christian idea of heaven. Many (though not all) who are interested in Buddhism in Europe are looking for something different from Christianity, and may not wish to engage with a form of Buddhism which they see as resembling Christianity. Addressing this issue, Reverend Inagaki Zuiken wrote to Jack Austin in the 1970s:

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[30] Some within Jōdo Shinshū make the argument that the term "meditation" as used in English and other European languages is itself problematic, and that the narrow view of this as solely referring to seated meditation is a misunderstanding, and a result of the particular history of how meditation has come to be understood outside Asia. From this perspective, it could be argued that a range of practices encompassed in Shin Buddhism, such as chanting the *nenbutsu*, could be seen as meditative, and that Jōdo Shinshū does not exclude meditation in this sense – always with the proviso that it is not done in a self-power spirit.

> Why does Shin not flourish in Europe and America? Because the Christian God resembles Amida Buddha, and most scholars think Shin Buddhism is not Buddhism from a historical point of view.
> (letter to Jack Austin, published in *Pure Land Notes* 2012: 5)

While the second part of Inagaki's comment – that most scholars think Shin Buddhism is not Buddhism – is now somewhat dated, communicating the idea of entrusting in Amida Buddha in a way that is differentiated from the Christian idea of faith, but accessible to Europeans, can still be a challenge. One UK priest explained their approach in the following way:

> I talk about it in terms of being in touch with the mystery of things, the things that support us, whether that be the ecosystem, the planets, the spiritual mystery. The felt sense that people have of wanting to trust something that's bigger than themselves. Wanting to relax into something, take refuge in something, yet not having to sign up to a set of beliefs that they find improbable. I think we haven't found a way of putting this across that speaks to Westerners.

Another suggested that the problem arises from the personalization of Amida, which in their view evokes Christianity, arguing that it might be more helpful to speak of entrusting to the *nenbutsu*, the *dharma*, or the vow, although this is a view that would be contested by others within Europe. [31]

In any case, Jōdo Shinshū followers in Europe have been concerned to situate Jōdo Shinshū teachings within the broader frame of Buddhism. A UK priest commented: "It's got to go back to its Buddhist roots, concepts like interdependence and refuge." A further point to note here is that UK Shin Buddhists have on the whole preferred to respond to expressions of interest rather than to actively proselytize, or to seek to convert others. This contrasts with some other Buddhist movements, in particular Sōka Gakkai, which has been extremely active in proselytizing, and is another factor in limiting the number of potential adherents.

Conclusion

Jōdo Shinshū Honganji-ha in Europe is largely a convert religion, which lacks the ethnic Japanese base which historically sustained the establishment of Jōdo Shinshū in the Americas. This has resulted in some marked differences in the size and stability of the membership and

[31] Some other European priests, although probably a minority, are adamant that it is vital to understand, and to entrust oneself to, Amida Buddha in very concrete and personalized terms. This is an ongoing subject of debate within Jōdo Shinshū.

financial base as well as the social roles of Shin Buddhism in Europe as compared to the Americas. Jōdo Shinshū in Europe has played at best a marginal role in the local Japanese community, and services for the dead are not a significant aspect of European Shin Buddhism.

On the other hand, Jōdo Shinshū faces some of the same issues in both Europe and the Americas. It has been marginalized in popular representations of Buddhism in general, and Japanese Buddhism in particular, by an orientalist perspective on Japanese Buddhism and Japanese culture which has privileged a particular representation of Zen Buddhism(as also argued by Porcu 2008), and the practice of silent seated meditation. Paradoxically, the teaching of reliance on other power, described in Shin Buddhist texts as "the easy path" because it does not rely on demanding practices by the individual follower, seems to be difficult to accept for many encountering Shin for the first time.

In comparison with other forms of Buddhism in Europe and the Americas, Jōdo Shinshū has also faced obstacles arising from the teaching of reliance on Amida. This has been widely misinterpreted by overseas commentators as being similar to Christianity. This may contribute to Shin Buddhism's lack of appeal to many of those European converts to Buddhism looking for something different, and has also contributed to the perception of Jōdo Shinshū as an "inauthentic" form of Buddhism. Despite determined efforts from Shin followers in Europe to counter these misconceptions, they continue to create obstacles to the wider dissemination of Jōdo Shinshū. Communicating the teachings of Jōdo Shinshū effectively to a European audience remains challenging.

As noted above, Jōdo Shinshū in the UK is also constrained by its small size and geographical dispersion. This has made it difficult for all the members to meet up on a regular basis and has also made Jōdo Shinshū vulnerable over the years, as it has tended to be dependent on a few active individuals. When those individuals are no longer able to be active – owing to age, ill health, or changes in personal circumstances – it is difficult to keep the sangha going. This is a pattern that has been replicated across Europe, and is one of the reasons why the ordination of four new priests in 2019, referred to at the outset, was seen as a cause for celebration. One way of countering this vulnerability is the encouragement of closer links between the various European Jōdo Shinshū groups.

Another way of countering the issue of geographical dispersion is the increasing use of the internet, something that has become a focus of attention as I write, owing to the current Covid-19 international lockdown. The promotion of the internet as a means of both linking existing members of Jōdo Shinshū and potentially drawing in new members is not new; Porcu (2010: 214) notes that the use of the internet for this purpose was proposed as part of a plan produced by Honganji-ha for Shinran's 750th memorial project, and websites and a range of online discussion groups have been around for some time (see e.g. Mitchell 2003). However, the combination of the restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 crisis and recent innovations in technology, allowing live meetings and services via platforms such as Zoom, has led to a

marked increase in virtual meetings, talks, and services in recent months, largely as a result of locally based initiatives, but with participation spanning regional and national boundaries. These developments suggest the possibility of new contours of belonging, based less on geography and more on factors such as shared language, access to the internet, or other forms of connection.

Although Jōdo Shinshū in the UK is very small, I argue here that it provides a window through which to consider some of the ways in which Buddhism has been understood in the European context. Its small number of followers makes it an interesting case to contrast with other forms of Buddhism which have been more successful in attracting local converts. The contrasts between the histories of the different branches of Jōdo Shinshū in varying cultural contexts alluded to here also offer an insight into the uneven channels of glocalization of this particular school of Japanese Buddhism, while recent developments in virtual technologies suggest possible de-territorialized futures.

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Abbreviations:

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