

Particular and universal norms of Shinran's religious experience

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Introduction

Shinran (1173-1262) is one of the leading figures of the "reformed Buddhism" of the Kamakura Period (1185-1333), along with Hōnen (1133-1212), Dōgen (1200-1253), Nichiren (1222-1282) and others. Buddhism, originally from India and introduced via China and Korea, eventually became the practice and resort for most of the people in medieval Japan. The great schools of Kamakura Buddhism promulgated by these personalities have exerted a definitive influence on life in Japan, as well as, to a certain extent, on life in the West. The Kamakura period for Japanese Buddhism was an age of religious reformation and for the selection of a "single practice or teaching" by respective thinkers and/or practitioners.¹ Buddha-Dharma was thus singled out or reduced to a particular path by these respective reformers. In this regard, they differ from each other in doctrine, having understood the historical process and man's nature differently and thus selected their own practices and ways. Yet it should be said that their teachings are not of a different nature, when viewed from a larger and universal perspective, an observation of their teachings as applied to the needs of people in particular and in general.

This paper examines the religious experience of Shinran with regard to the concepts of particularity and universality, analyzing the particular or individual position of his religious conviction; and, at the same time, expounding that his teachings and experiences are universal. One problem, however, most likely arises from exclusiveness or exclusion that a religion fundamentally possesses, which is, to some extent, a natural consequence of religious sectarianism. Living in the 21st century of the technologically highly-developed world of science, we witness wars and terrorist outrages, caused by human egoism, taking place as if it were

routine in many parts on this planet. With the development of scientific technology, the degree and extent of disasters is vast and immense. Science and technology, however, are useless and hopeless when we meet with devastating calamities, such as typhoons, tornadoes, earthquakes and tsunami. Every day life is then filled with *duhkha* or suffering – birth, old age, sickness and death – accompanied by blind passions or *kleśa*, such as greed, anger and ignorance. The paper focuses on the relationships between particularity and universality as they interrelate and coincide with each other – particularity being an individual expression or experience of universality, as universality manifests in particularity, examining the meanings and roles of religious values in this contemporary world.

Particularity and universality

The notions of particularity and universality in any given scheme have hinted at quite an important and significant impact on students of religious studies when a methodology is required as to how to study religion and its values. The terms particularity and universality are often used on a different scale and in a varied context:

- particularity is here referred to as a certain, particular position of the teaching or dogma that a religion advocates, while
- universality is referred to as a common ground of certain values with which the religion can be shared and appreciated together in a globally communal sense.

The end of universal values involves an ultimate goal of all humans, a goal like "peace," "equality," or "love," which can be achieved when people seek it together, understanding what sorrow and joy in life is all about in its very fundamental import. Religions in many parts of the world may have particularity and variously call it salvation, emancipation, liberation, deliverance, refuge, realization, awakening, enlightenment, etc. In this paper,

- **particularity** is used in terms of a concrete and subjective norm of an individual position and experience, while
- **universality** involves a common and universal value of this particular position that can be shared by all humankind.

Before a discussion of Shinran's teachings in terms of particularity and universality, we will look at a problem that arises when particularity does not coincide with the quality of universality.

Truth-claiming, sectarianism and absolutization

There are various religions in the world, and most religions claim the truth and absoluteness of their own creed. They have developed as they have been assimilated according to the needs

of local conditions and have branched out as denominations. Each denomination then claims its truth, insisting on its own creed and denying other dogmas from time to time. This can be called “truth-claiming”: it can be seen in any religion or denomination, and it goes hand in hand with “sectarianism.” Followers of a sect commit themselves to its creed, law or regulation, leading religious lives accordingly. Through totally devoting themselves faithfully to the teaching, followers or practitioners undergo a religious experience, as they let go of themselves, often embraced by something unsurpassed and/or unbound. This extraordinary experience, which might last only for a short period of time,² differs from ordinary day-to-day experiences. To the practitioners, it is a unique and extraordinary experience that they had never undergone before. Then, they often “absolutize” their experience.³ This feeling of absolutization makes them feel that this experience is superior to other daily experiences, or that they are superior to others. They feel comfortable and secure spending time together with those who have had similar experiences, or with those who belong to a group with the same creed. In this sense, religion is categorized or defined as a “sense of belonging.”

As far as truth-claiming is concerned, a problem seems to arise, when truth-claiming is misread or misunderstood. The problem is often derived from exclusiveness or exclusion that a religion fundamentally possesses. When this exclusiveness exceeds a certain limit, however, the religion will have a hard time coexisting with other religious value systems, and that often results in conflicts or clashes against each other. Living in the 21st century, one still witnesses many conflicts among nations or races due to this religious exclusiveness or intolerance. It is then fairly important to keep in mind that we, from time to time, need to objectify and relativize some value of the creed and to reevaluate its commonality among others in order to coexist peacefully, especially in this contemporary world of highly developed technological science where conflicts can lead to the sudden and quick deaths of countless thousands. Embracing commonality should be a worthy aim for humankind to survive better on this planet and to share it together. Otherwise, excluding and cursing other value systems with misunderstanding and prejudice could cause more troubles and problems. Exclusiveness that occurs as a result of blind truth-claiming results most likely, we would have to say, from one’s ignorance.

The other side of this problem regarding blind truth-claiming is closing off or confining oneself. Instead of actively denying other value systems, one is closed or confined as one is fearful of exposing oneself to a new value system. One once had a “superior” or “extraordinary” experience and felt relieved and saved. One was born again, and truth-claiming or absolutization took place. Then, one encounters new value systems or people of other systems, finding out that those people are as convinced or confident in their system as one is in one’s own. When one begins to realize some point in the other system that makes sense, one closes off or confines oneself. One is afraid of the fact that one may have to question one’s experience that is believed to be absolute. One does not want to get closer to a new value system, which one fears will lead to the denial of oneself, the denial of absolutization or superiority. The problem of not being able or willing to coexist with others emerges.

Two qualities of Shinran’s religious experience

The core of Shinran’s religious experience can be seen in a scheme known as *nishu jinshin* (“two kinds of profound realizations”):

- one is the awareness of sentient beings (*ki no jinshin*) or the “profound realization of oneself as incapable of enlightenment”; and,

- the other is the awareness of Dharma (*hō no jinshin*) or the “profound realization of Amida’s working partaken in one.”

The profound realization of oneself as incapable of enlightenment is to “believe deeply and decidedly that you are a foolish being of karmic evil caught in birth-and-death, ever sinking and ever wandering in transmigration from innumerable kalpas in the past, with never a condition that would lead to emancipation.” The profound realization of Amida’s working partaken in one is to “believe deeply and decidedly that Amida Buddha’s Forty-eight Vows grasp sentient beings, and that allowing yourself to be carried by the power of the Vow without any doubt or apprehension, you will attain birth.”⁴ Therefore, the religious experience in *nishu jinshin* requires a person first to become aware of one’s limited mode of being in terms of attaining enlightenment all by oneself and to simultaneously become aware of the power beyond one’s self-endeavor or self-power. The self-negation in a profound sense thus takes place; yet, one cannot negate oneself by oneself without encountering something unbound or unsurpassed – one is led to realization through encountering “the inconceivable working of Amida’s Vow” (*mida no seigan fushigi*),⁵ religious experience of inconceivability. Shinran says in the *Tannishō*,⁶ “Concerning the nembutsu, no working is true working. For it is beyond description, explanation, and conceptual understanding.”⁷

Amida as a particular Buddha

Amida is the name of a Buddha, the Buddha of Infinite Light (*Amitābha*) and Infinite Life (*Amitāyus*). In the Larger *Sukhāvatīvyūha-sūtra*, Bodhisattva Dharmākara undertook 48 vows in order to save all sentient beings, especially those who are suffering.⁸ Upon having spent five kalpas contemplating on the ideal place where beings can all be saved, Dharmākara spontaneously manifested as Amida Buddha. Amida Tathagata constantly shares the wisdom of enlightenment with all beings, transforming into the Name or *myōgō*, the formula of *namu amida butu*, *namu* referring to an ordinary being or oneself and *amida butsu* referring to Amida Buddha (Tathagata). By becoming aware of Amida’s compassion (sharing) and by becoming aware of one’s limited and self-centered mode of being, one will be born in the Pure Land (*ōjō*). This whole process is made to come about, in an ultimate sense, through Amida; and the nembutsu, the recitation of the Name, serves as an expression of one’s gratitude with the realization that one has already been and always will be encompassed by Amida’s compassion.

Amida is the Buddha categorized as *sambhōga-kāya* or the fulfilled body of *buddha*. Two other forms or bodies of *buddha* are *dharma-kāya* (or the Dharma-body) and *nirmāna-kāya* (or the personified-body). The fulfilled-body of *buddha* is a manifestation emerged from the vows a bodhisattva undertakes, revealed as light (wisdom) and life (compassion). There are many *sambhōga-kāya* or fulfilled-bodies, one of which is Amida Tathagata. Amida Buddha is not the only fulfilled-body of *buddha*, which means Amida is a “particular” Buddha. To Shinran, as a result of having encountered his teacher or master Hōnen (1133-1212), Amida is the only Buddha. Shinran says in Chapter 2 of the *Tannishō*:

As for me, I simply accept and entrust to what my revered teacher told me, “Just say the nembutsu and be saved by Amida”; nothing else is involved ...

I have no idea whether the nembutsu is truly the seed for my being born in the Pure Land or whether it is the karmic act for which I must fall into hell. Should I have been deceived by Master Hōnen and, saying the nembutsu, were to fall into hell, even then I would have no regrets.⁹

Here, we can see Shinran’s deep entrusting and adherence to Hōnen and Amida Buddha. Shinran met a good teacher, and

encountered a “particular” Buddha. Yet Shinran’s profession reveals a “universal” value. Amida is particular, and is universal in terms of the merging of Infinite Light or Wisdom (space) and Infinite Life and Compassion (time), together constituting the whole universe. Shinran says in the *Shōzōmatu wasan* (*Pure Land Hymns of the Right, Semblance, and Last Dharma-Ages*):

Although I am without shame and self-reproach
And lack a mind of truth and sincerity,
Because the Name is directed by Amida,
Its virtues fill ten quarters.¹⁰

Shinran here talks about his deep sense of retrospection of his self-centered mode of being, and about Amida, who, permeating throughout ten quarters or the whole universe, then encompasses him. This shows a universal scheme of religious experience.

In Chapter 3 of the *Tannishō*, a well-known verse by Shinran goes:

Even a good person attains birth in the Pure Land, so it goes
without saying that an evil person will.¹¹

In our general understanding of good or evil, a good person will receive a good reward and an evil person will not. From a point of view of religious truth, however, an evil person who is to fall into hell is the one to be saved first. The evil person in an existential sense is the one who becomes aware of Amida’s compassion by self-negation through encountering that which is unsurpassed – Amida. Shinran throws a universal message of encountering and being encompassed by something unbound through a total letting-go of self-centeredness.

Five kalpas of profound thought

In the postscript of the *Tannishō*, Shinran talks about his personal or individual realization of the Vow of Amida Buddha:

When I consider deeply the Vow of Amida, which arose from five kalpas of profound thought, I realize that it was entirely for the sake of myself alone! Then how I am filled with gratitude for the Primal Vow, in which Amida resolved to save me, though I am burdened with such heavy karma.¹²

Shinran says that Amida’s Vow arising from five kalpas of profound thought *gokō shiyui no gan* is entirely for the sake of Shinran alone. A kalpa.*kō* is an immeasurable long period of time, i.e. aeons. According to the *Larger Sutra*, when Bodhisattva Dharmākara was in his causal stage, the stage of a bodhisattva before becoming Amida Buddha, he spent five kalpas profoundly contemplating, to make sure that all the sentient beings are to be saved without any fail in his Pure Land. Therefore, Dharmākara’s vows are meant for all beings, not limited for certain people – good or evil, young or old or rich or poor. Shinran says in Chapter 1 the *Tannishō*:

Know that the Primal Vow of Amida makes no distinction between people young and old, good and evil; only shinjin is essential. For it is the Vow to save the person whose karmic evil is deep and grave and whose blind passions abound.¹³

When one undergoes a religious experience, however, it is a personal, individual experience. Although the teaching is meant for everybody without any discrimination, one spontaneously takes it to oneself as one’s own when it comes to an actual experience. It is existential, subjective and individual. Amida therefore took five kalpas of profound thought only for the sake of himself. In this manner, Amida’s compassion was particularly for Shinran alone, directly reaching into Shinran’s heart/mind. This is the individual, particular realization of Shinran, though this particularity also carries a “universal” norm of religious experience.

Universalism (the teaching is meant for everybody) is to be understood or realized through particularity (individual realization). Thus, particularity and universality correspond to and coincide

with each other. The particular experience takes place in the here and now, sustaining and being sustained by the universality of religious experience for everybody. When Shinran says that profound thought was only for the sake of Shinran himself, he is in and with it at that time, revealing a particular, individual experience, which is universal.

Concluding perspectives

As particularity is defined as a certain position of the teaching that a religion claims, universality is something that can be shared and appreciated by all humankind in the religion as a common ground of certain values, such as peace, equality or love. This paper then, through an examination of Shinran’s experiences or teachings, defines the words particularity and universality in the following manner: particularity is an individual expression of universality while universality manifests in particularity. After having met Hōnen, Shinran encountered Amida Buddha, the Buddha categorized as *sambhōga-kaya* or the fulfilled body of *buddha*. Amida is particular, and is universal in terms of representing the whole universe of existence – the merging of *Amitābha* or Infinite Light (space) and *Amitāyus* or Infinite Life (time), representing Wisdom and Compassion respectively. Amida Buddha being a particular Buddha to Shinran, Shinran took Amida subjectively and existentially and became awakened through his experience of shinjin, which is universal in terms of the realization of Buddha-Dharma. Without taking a particular position, universality cannot be revealed.

A problem arises, however, when one absolutizes the creed of one’s religion and one’s experience through it with the exclusion of other value systems. Truth-claiming or absolutization of a religion is needed at one point while one is undergoing religious experience in a particular and individual norm. If it exceeds its limit and denies or even abuses others, however, coexistence of humankind in the world becomes very difficult. Especially in this technologically highly-developed modern world, one witnesses many devastating conflicts or confrontations taking place between nations and races today. The problems have been here with us since the beginning of human history, but the extent or degree of damage has been increased tremendously.

Absolutization is needed at some point in the course of seeking the path, yet objectifying or relativizing “one’s own” understanding is also important and needed today. Without universality, particularity is merely a matter of one’s one-sided claim. One then needs to conquer the exclusiveness of other value systems. Shinran says in Chapter 2 of the *Tannishō*:

Each of you has come to see me, crossing the borders of more than ten provinces at the risk of your life, solely with the intent of asking about the path to birth in the land of bliss. But if you imagine in me some special knowledge of a path to birth other than the nembutsu or of scriptural writings that teach it, you are greatly mistaken. If that is the case, since there are many eminent scholars in the southern capital of Nara or on Mount Hiei to the north, you would do better to meet with them and inquire fully about the essentials for birth.

As for me, I simply accept and entrust myself to what my revered teacher told me, “Just say the nembutsu and be saved by Amida”: nothing else is involved.¹⁴

Particularity in the nembutsu is an individual expression or experience while universality manifests in the particularity.

The 21st century is facing so many problems in spite of the fact that we are leading a comfortable and convenient life. For the convenience that we enjoy today thanks to the development of modern technology, we are sacrificing too many things, not only are we destroying the environment but also killing other people. Our ego-centeredness of humans seems to have grown larger than ever, even though we say that this is intrinsic to us.

The problem seems to be that we are not able to become aware of our own self-centeredness or our ego-centricity. We know that we are all self-centered, but realization of this does not come about unless we encounter that which is unsurpassed. That which is unsurpassed is not that which governs or controls us, but that which frees us from the bondage of birth-and-death. If we put that which is unsurpassed above us, or put it out there, then we give some authority to it, and disputes and conflicts cannot be avoided as we witness them among many religions in the world today. Disputes or wars are not the purpose of any religions when they talk about love for humankind. Religious values lie in the core of the person who seeks freedom and liberation from the bondage of *duhkha* or suffering, and it should be very subjective and particular. Through a particular path, one comes to realize a universal norm of religion. Exclusiveness or exclusion of others is the issue that we have to conquer especially in this confused world of ours today.

Notes

1. Hōnen, the founder of the Jōdo sect of Pure Land Buddhism, spearheaded the reformation of Kamakura Buddhism, by selecting the nembutsu as the only path for attaining enlightenment in the age of *mappō* ("last Dharma"). The nembutsu is what leads one to *ōjō* ("birth in the Pure Land") in the end. Shinran, the founder of the Jōdo Shin sect (or Shin Buddhism), succeeded his teacher Hōnen, and advocated *ōjō* through shinjin ("entrusting or awakened heart/mind") alone. Dōgen, the founder of the Sōtō sect of Zen Buddhism, selected zazen ("seated-meditation") as both the means and the fruit of enlightenment. Nichiren, the founder of the Nichiren sect, reevaluated the Lotus Sutra of the Tendai sect and took it as the ultimate teaching of Śākyamuni the Buddha.
2. William James in *Varieties of Religious Experience* says that there are four characteristics regarding religious experience, such as ineffability, noetic quality, transiency and passivity.
D.T. Suzuki in *Zen to nembutsu no shinrigaku-teki kiso* [*Principles of Psychology in Zen and Nembutsu*] points out eight features of religious experience, such as irrationality, intuitive insight, authoritative-ness, affirmation, sense of the beyond, impersonal tone, feeling of exaltation and momentariness. *Suzuki Daisetsu zenshū 4* [*Zen Collection of Daisetsu Suzuki 4*] (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1975).
Hideo Kishimoto in *Shūkyō shinpi shugi: yōga no shisō to shinri* [*Religious Mysticism: Yogic Thought and Psychology*] says mystic (or religious) experience involves four special features, such as particular intuitiveness, sense of noumenon, feeling of ecstatic uplift and unexplainability. (Tokyo, Daimeidō, 1988), pp. 48-9. First publication, 1958.
3. D.T. Suzuki talks about a person's giving authority to his or her religious experience, pointing out that this may even lead to extremely unreligious persecution or the most violent war, in "*Zen to nembutsu no shinrigaku-teki kiso*" [*Principles of Psychology in Zen and Nembutsu*] in *Suzuki Daisetsu zenshū 4* [*Zen Collection of Daisetsu Suzuki 4*] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1968), p. 346.
4. *CWS 1*, p. 85. *SSZ 2*, p. 52. The theory of *nishu jinshin* presented by Shinran is originally taken from Shan-tao's *Kangyosho* (*Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*), *SSZ 1*, p. 534.
5. *CWS 1*, p. 661.
6. *Tannishō* (*A Record in Lament of Divergences*), said to have been written by Yuien (c. 1288?), consists of eighteen chapters with two prefaces and a postscript. The first ten chapters are the words that Yuien heard from his Master, Shinran (1173-1262), while the rest are Yuien's expositions against heterodox views or understandings about the nembutsu teachings in his times.
7. *CWS 1*, p. 666.
8. In Buddhism, the Second Noble Truth of the Four Noble Truths is, "Life is *duhkha* or suffering." There are eight sufferings, such as "death," "old age," "sickness," "death," "separation from beloved ones," "meeting with disliked ones," "not obtaining what one seeks" and "the suffering or pain which comes from the vigor of the five aggregates composing one body and mind."
9. *CWS 1*, p. 662.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 421.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 663.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 679.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 661.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 662.