Societal Influence of The Teaching of the Two Truths on Jodo Shinshu

The following is from the JSCC History of Jodo Shinshu section. As always, I strongly encourage anyone who is interested in learning more about Buddhism and our Jodo Shinshu traditions to sign up for the JSCC. Please note that this example is simply my response to the question posed by the course and not the only answer to this question.

Question:
Historical events which occurred from the end of the Edo period to the postwar era, strongly influenced Buddhist schools in Japan, namely, the governmental decrees and laws. How did the Hongwanji handle and “react” to the restrictions by the Shogunate and military governments, and also the new freedoms, such as freedom of religion and reconstruction of the religious institutions and organizations? Also, how do you think we can learn from these events of the past to assist us in challenges we are currently facing in today’s society?

John’s Response:

To best understand the effects of the changing government on the Hongwanji, it is necessary to examine historical background. As the control of Japan shifted with the ebb and flow of political power, the specific interests of the controlling party influenced the policies that affected the Hongwanji. First the transition from shogunate rule to Imperial rule during the Meiji Restoration will be examined. Then the expansion of Japan’s control over Asia and the increasing control of the military over the government from the Taisho Period through the early Showa Period will be discussed. Finally, areas in which these past events may give guidance to address current challenges will be discussed.

The transition from the Edo Period to the Meiji Restoration saw a major realignment in governmental control that affected all major classes of Japanese society. The entire feudal system of daimyo and samurai surrendered control of their domains to the emperor in order to avoid continued civil war. While the feudal system closed, many of the daimyo were incorporated into the new governmental structure with new titles of nobility. The merchant class welcomed the political changes because their status would be able to grow in conjunction with their economic growth and power. The zaibatsu, industrial conglomerates, began to dominate the economy of Japan. At the close of the Edo Period, the Hongwanji sided with the Emperor to the extent of ordering priests and members to guard the Imperial Palace during the Boshin War. Despite the support given to the Emperor, when the Meiji government took control, its aim was to re-establish Imperial control. As part of this effort, Shintoism was promoted and all other religions, including Buddhism, were pushed aside. However, the government soon found that the population that was raised with Buddhist customs could not easily be lead away from Buddhism’s influence. It is under this context that Konyo promoted Buddhism as loyal to the Emperor and in support of social morality. The application of shinzoku nitai was to make Buddhism beneficial to the new Japanese society.

“Of all born in this imperial land, there is no one who has not received the emperor’s benevolence. These days especially, he labors from morning to night in his deliberations, administering the just government of the restoration, maintaining order among the people within [the country], and
standing firm against all foreign countries. Is there then anyone, priest or lay, who would not support the imperial reign and enhance its power? Moreover, as the spread of Buddha-dharma is wholly dependent on the patronage of the emperor and his ministers, how can those who trust in Buddha dharma disregard the decrees of imperial law?"  

This response is aligned with Rennyo’s interpretation of the relationship between Buddhism and secular law. While in Rennyo’s time, the secular was based on the feudal system; the same application of shinzoku nitai was used in many of the ofumi that he issued to ensure survival of the Hongwanji. Just as Rennyo took measures four hundred years prior to adapt Jodo Shinshu to conform to feudal rule, Konyo guided the followers of the Hongwanji to do the same with imperial rule.

After the death of the Meiji Emperor in 1912, the Taisho Period began with the ascension of Yoshihito to the Imperial throne. Economic growth continued and with it the realization that Japan’s dependence on overseas areas increased. In order to secure its control over more of Asia, Japan entered World War I when Great Britain entered the war, based on the Anglo-Japanese alliance. Under this agreement, each country was to support the other if a third party attacked it. Japan demanded the surrender of German holdings in China. As Japanese control of Asia grew, so did the influence of the military on governmental control. All major Buddhist denominations were required to participate in the Japanese expansion of control over Asia. Temples were established as teaching and cultural centers not only Japanese stationed overseas, but also to educate local peoples in Japanese language. Also, the Temples were used as civil recorders of the local people. Since these areas were under Imperial military control, even the actions of the Buddhist Temples were highly regulated. The response of the Hongwanji is again one that relied on an interpretation of shinzoku nitai, which emphasized support of the state.

“In other words, Buddha-dharma is subordinated to the interests of the state. The content of the zokutai or secular area comprises either governmental relations of the requirements and obligations of citizenship and the principles of ethics such as the five major values of Confucian morality and later the Imperial Rescript on Education promulgated in 1890.”

Again with a shift in the political structure and control, Jodo Shinshu adapted to conform, this time to military rule that lead to Japan’s entry in to World War II.

“In wartime doctrine, Amida was even identified with the Emperor, Yasukuni with the Pure Land. The principle of the selflessness of the devotee of Amida was used to encourage devotion to the Emperor and country, putting aside personal ambition. Kamegawa Kyoshin stated, ‘The joy of religion is to be found in the life of gratitude where the self is cast.

---


away. In this crisis, what is demanded of us is to do away with our petty selves and become shields of the Emperor.”

At this time, the application of shinzoku nitai was exploited to increase commitment and devotion to the Emperor.

The major learning from these past applications of shinzoku nitai, is that while conformity to the political norms may be necessary for continued survival of a religious organization, there is a need to keep zokutai, or the mundane truth, relevant to individuals. The relationship between Jodo Shinshu and society has changed over the past in response to the political change. Application of shinzoku nitai in response to these changes has made Jodo Shinshu a religion without strong social influence or strong social critique. As Jodo Shinshu tries to grow, especially in America and other western societies, this lack of strong social commentary creates a void in what many Western people seek in a religion. This void is the inspiration to question the ethics of society and to affect positive social change. The ability to use Jodo Shinshu teachings to question society and affect positive changes must become the manner in which individuals realize zokutai, the mundane truth. Just as the analogy of the finger pointing to the moon can be used to explain shinzoku nitai, we need to build another analogy. In this one, zokutai is alignment with political and societal norms in a manner that affects positive change. Without such an alignment, a religion cannot be relevant to its member’s lives. Once a religion can become relevant to individual’s lives, then realization of shintai, the highest truth, becomes attainable. In other words, relevance to everyday life is the “finger” which allows realization of the highest truth, the “moon”.

---