Interpreting Amida: History and Orientalism in the Study of Pure Land Buddhism. By Galen Amstutz. SUNY Series in Buddhist Studies. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997. Pp. xii + 248.

Reviewed by **Gregory Smits**, Pennsylvania State University

The main outline of Galen Amstutz' argument in *Interpreting Amida: History and Orientalism in the Study of Pure Land Buddhism* is that (1) Jōdo Shinshū (True Pure Land Buddhism), "Shin" for short, has long been and continues to be an immensely important part of Japanese culture, (2) but it has been routinely ignored, dismissed, or misinterpreted by a wide range of both Western and Japanese scholars (3) for political and cultural reasons that may be characterized as orientalist. (4) This failure to give Shin its due weight has adversely affected Buddhist studies, Japanese studies, and comparative cultural studies. This book is a study of hermeneutical relationships, with Shin as the central focus and an emphasis on the politics of interpretation. Of the six main chapters, the first two provide a condensed history of the development of Shin. The next three chapters examine how and why certain groups of scholars have interpreted Shin (or failed to do so). A concluding chapter provides the author's assessment of whether, how, and to what extent the biases of the past are likely to continue and an examination of the possible benefits of sustained serious engagement with Shin. Approximately half the book consists of notes and other supporting material. In addition to scholars of Japan and Buddhism, *Interpreting Amida* may be read with profit by those interested in cross-cultural studies and interpretation.

The core of Amstutz' main argument is to be found in chapters 4 and 5, each identical in approach, the former covering the 1870s through the Second World War, the latter covering postwar interpretations of Shin. Amstutz argues that despite the existence of sophisticated descriptions of Shin by scholars such as A. K. Reischauer, Robert Armstrong, and James Pratt, the majority of modern interpreters of Japan have lacked interest in Shin. Much of each chapter consists of group-by-group explanations of this disinterest among missionaries, scholars of comparative religions, Buddhologists, sociologists, and others. Although Amstutz presents solid evidence for most of his assertions, the claim of widespread disinterest is, of course, difficult to document directly. His reasons for why certain groups would be inclined to overlook Shin's importance seem compelling. For example, academic Buddhologists in both Japan and the West have tended to search for the "pristine" original Buddhism of India as taught by Śākyamuni, a bias that tended to marginalize Shin by relegating it to the categories of "devotional" and "deviant." Amstutz further argues that postwar Buddhology, while slightly broader in its interests, has continued to perpetuate this same bias. I wonder, however, if Amstutz may sometimes push the disinterest argument too far. Certainly we find no disinterest or dismissal of Shin in the following passage from Alicia and Daigan Matsunaga's *Foundation of Japanese Buddhism,* a work not mentioned by Amstutz:

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> The most significant development of Pure Land belief during the Kamakura period was the rise of the single-practice Jōdo and Jōdo Shinshū sects. Insofar as this has been the most misunderstood form of Buddhism, we will now present an analysis of the historical, textual and doctrinal background of this controversial movement that became the mainstream of modern Japanese Buddhism.[1]

Matsunaga and Matsunaga then proceed with a lengthy and sophisticated analysis of Pure Land Buddhism in its various forms. Of course, their characterization of Jōdo as "the most misunderstood form of Buddhism" resonates well with Amstutz, and my citing their work is not intended to imply that Amstutz' argument is seriously flawed. Surely Shin has often been misunderstood and has, in general, not received attention commensurate with its importance. I am not convinced, however, that serious neglect of Shin remains widespread among scholars of Japanese Buddhism.

From the sixteenth century, when the Jesuit Allessandro Valignano identified Shin with "Lutheran" tendencies of salvation by faith and identified the source of both as the devil, European commentators continued to label Shin as "protestant" Buddhism into modern times. For this very reason, Shin seemed uninteresting to many modern Western observers of Japan; it being "nothing more than a dull substitute for mainstream Christianity ... it was inappropriately 'Other'" (p. 63). For example, nineteenth-century Western seekers of Japanese Buddhism sought doctrines of metaphysical monism along with a liberal, individualistic, humanistic self-effort theory—the opposite of Shin. The "inappropriately Other" characteristic of Shin is perhaps the most important reason for the tendency of both European and Japanese scholars to minimize or overlook its importance.

Amstutz explains many other possible reasons, most related to biases prevalent in specific academic disciplines. Scholars of comparative religion, for example, tended to exclude the broader social context, especially politics, from the realm of legitimate religious inquiry. Because Shin was embedded in a rich social and political context, therefore, it received relatively little attention from such scholars. And Western scholars were not the only ones to overlook Japan's largest religious denomination. "The invisibility of Shin in sociology was heavily influenced by the Japanese modern tradition of folklore studies based on the work of Yanagita Kunio" (pp. 73–74). Shin, which had made "pragmatic and survivalist" accommodations to modernization, was inappropriately Other with respect to Yanagita's political agenda of seeking "a common spiritual essence of the national ethnic group *(das Volk, minzoku)* which would serve as a spiritual compensation for the losses caused by modernization" (p. 74).

In the postwar era as well, discourses of Japanese nationalism such as the *Nihonjinron* (theories of Japanese cultural uniqueness) have been inimical to taking Shin seriously as an integral part of contemporary Japanese life. Furthermore, the cultural nationalist D. T. Suzuki effectively presented Zen to the Western world as the quintessential form of Japanese Buddhism. Postwar Western scholars of Japanese religion, while correctly rejecting the Meiji claim that Shintō and Buddhism had always been separate entities, became fascinated with *"shinbutsu* religion" to the exclusion of its major alternative, Shin. Underlying this tendency was an orientalist

bias: "Western scholars of Japanese religion remained more engaged with Japan's alleged underlying cultural uniformities and its 'otherness' vis-à-vis the West than with Japan's own internal tensions, discontinuities and potential cross-cultural resources" (pp. 88–89). Amstutz appropriately encourages a closer look at both the diversity within Japan and the similarities between Japan and other parts of the world.

This brief summary of certain arguments in *Interpreting Amida* cannot do justice to the subtlety of the analysis. Amstutz brings to his work an impressive knowledge of the literature in a wide range of academic disciplines, and he combines it with significant original insights. *Interpreting Amida* presents new perspectives on Japanese society, religion, and history and argues convincingly for the need to take a fresh look at Pure Land Buddhism with a self-critical awareness of hermeneutical biases.

Notes

1 – Alicia Matsunaga and Daigan Matsunaga, *Foundation of Japanese Buddhism,* vol. 2, *The Mass Movement (Kamakura and Muromachi Periods)* (Los Angeles: Buddhist Books International, 1976), p. 19.

The Will to Orthodoxy: A Critical Genealogy of Northern Chan Buddhism. By Bernard Faure. Translated by Phyllis Brooks. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997.

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Bernard Faure has established himself as the preeminent and most creative Chan scholar in the United States. Working with and going beyond recent Japanese scholarship, he has reevaluated the philosophical interpretation of Chan from a postmodernist perspective. In his latest work, *The Will to Orthodoxy: A Critical Genealogy of Northern Chan Buddhism,* Faure once again makes a vital contribution to the field, though this time from a historiographical standpoint. Expertly translated by Phyllis Brooks, this streamlined and concise text brims with insight.

Chan's internal dispute between "Southern" and "Northern" schools and its ninth-century emergence as an authentic form of Chinese Buddhism reflect a common theme in the development of religions—the struggle for and "will to" orthodoxy. Despite victors' claims to the contrary, orthodoxy is created from a confluence of factors both historical and theoretical. Often emerging only after identifying and eradicating opponents whose views may or may not be accurately characterized, orthodoxy and the heresiographer's art generally oversimplify the rival's theories,