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Some problems in Shinran's Life : Facts and Interpretations

If we had to draw a summary of Shinran's past historiography four periods could be described :

1. The first biographies and chronics written by Shinran's descendants like Kakunyo, Zonkaku and Jūkaku. This material would include both historical and religious elements mixed together.

2. Then the religious elements of the previous material would be over emphasized so as to eventually create works belonging the apologetics. This second period lasted until the Meijie era.

3. Then as a reaction from the modern scientist historians came the period of hyper-criticism where most of the previous materials were compared with sources foreign to the Jōdo-Shinshū tradition. Consequently most of these materials were rejected although there was no attempt to distinguish wether they belonged to the first or to the second period.

4. From the Taishō era begun a new period where the historians try to rediscover the original sources bringing in light such precious items as the holographs of Shinran and Eshin-ni. These new materials were used and sometimes over-used by historians hoping to be able to reconstruct in full the life of Shinran.

I believe that we have now enter a period of revaluation of the way to use this material and I shall give some examples.

It is dubious that we are to discover a completely new material that would revolutionize the study of Shinran's life as did the discovery of Eshin-ni's letters by Washio Kyōdō in 1921.

Nevertheless I believe that secondary sources can still provide valuable informations. By secondary sources I mean those historical documents that are not directly dealing with Shinran but with people and institutions associated with him. I have already mentioned informations gleaned from the *Mon'yōki*, which is the chronicle of the Shōren'in temple¹. From this source we know that the imperial decree appointing for the first time Jien as patriarch (*zasu*) of the Tendai school was written by Shinran's uncle Hino Munenari : this hapened in 1192 and at that time Shinran had already been ordained by the same Jien eleven years ago. We know also the other uncle of Shinran, Hino Noritsuna, attended in 1194 the inaugural ceremony of the Daijōin temple on Mount Hiei that had been built by Jien and his brother Kujō Kanazane. Those informations do not explain anything about Shinran himself. But they are important in so far as they enable us to understand the frame of Shinran's life trough the relations of his family to Kyōto's society at that time.

More important informations from the same *Mon'yōki* concern Shinran's brother Jin'u, who is mentionned at least from 1229 until 1260, which means he turned to be as old as Shinran. There it is

¹ Cf. *The Beginning of Jōdo-Shinshū and the Tendai School of Japanese Buddhism*. The Pure Land, N. S., No. 6 (Dec. 1989), p. 178-184.

also possible to see how Jin'u, unlike Shinran, went through a classical career inside the Tendai community. Even the name of Sôe, that is Shinran's grand-son Kakue, appears in the *Mon'yôki*, thus confirming the accuracy of such chronicle of the original Honganji as the *Saishun-kyôjue-shi*.

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Beside that kind of research in secondary material there is also a need to revalue informations contained in very-well known sources of Shinran's biography. I shall take one example related to the Shinran's infancy. According to the *Saishun-kyôjue-shi* (SSZ 3, p. 821) just mentioned before Shinran was raised by his uncles because his father Arinori passed away when he was still a child. This was refuted years ago by Yamada Bunshô because there is a reference (a 1351 colophon by Zonkaku) to a copy of the *Infinite-Life Sûtra* that has been dedicated to the memory of Arinori by Shinran and his brother Ken'u during the *chûin* period that followed Arinori's death. If Ken'u was old enough to dedicate a sûtra at that time then, concluded Yamada, Shinran himself was not a child any more at the time of Arinori's death.

According to genealogies Shinran was the eldest of Arinori sons while Ken'u was the third of them. Consequently Ken'u was born at least three years after Shinran, that is around 1176. Even if we suppose that Arinori passed away about one year before Shinran's ordination in 1181 it would mean that Ken'u was then four years old (five years according to the old Japanese comput). Actually it seems difficult to imagine such a young child being able to copy the 17,473 Chinese characters of the *Infinite-Life Sûtra*. But the fact is that the reference quoted by Yamada does not state that Ken'u actually copied the whole *Infinite-Life Sûtra*. Rather it declares that Ken'u provided the "*katen*", that is the punctuation of the sûtra. There could be various ways to punctuate a sûtra. One of them is simply to add round marks next to the Chinese characters in order to show whether they are to be sonorised during the sûtra chanting. To add round marks under dictation does not seem impossible even for a four years old child. In comparison, at exactly the same age, Shinran's great-grand son Kakunyo started the study of classical Chinese and Japanese with his teacher Chôkai. Accordingly this reference to Zonkaku's colophon does not constitute the definite proof that Shinran did not lose his father while still a child.

That Hino Arinori passed away when Shinran was still a child explains also why Shinran and some of his brothers had to be adopted by their uncle Hino Noritsuna as recorded by the *Godenshô* and old genealogies.

In any case the early death of Arinori was certainly a decisive opportunity for Shinran to experiment the transience of life that would eventually lead him to ordination as a Tendai monk.

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Hino Arinori will again provides us with the next example of problem in Shinran's biography. From the *Godenshō* and various genealogies we know that Arinori was a secretary in the household of the empress dowager (*kō-taiko-gū no daishin*). According to some historians he would have been attending Kōka-mon'in (1121-1181), spouse of emperor Sutoku who became dowager in 1141; while according to others he was attending Kinshi (1134-1209), spouse of emperor Go-Shirakawa who became dowager in 1172. Still others say he was attending Kenshun-mon'in (1142-1176), another spouse of emperor Go-Shirakawa, but actually she did not receive the title of "dowager". We could also mention Tashi (1140-1201), spouse of emperor Konoe who became dowager in 1156, but two years later she was appointed arch-dowager (*tai-kō-taiko*).

Still my personal feeling is that Hino Arinori was in the service of Kujō-in (1133-1176) who was another spouse of emperor Konoe and who became dowager in 1158. The fact is that there is some connection with Hino Arinori and Kujō-in as Munenari, one of Arinori's brothers, was himself attending the household of Kujō-in where he had been appointed *hōgan-dai* in 1159 (*Kugyō-bunin*). Also she passed away in 1176 a date which could pretty well be the circumstance that lead Hino Arinori to retire at Mimurodo, a fact that is testified by genealogies and by the above-mentioned colophon by Zonkaku.

Here my supposition may be the right one, may be not. In such a case the historian can but acknowledge in humility that there is no way to make up the point - at least with the available sources.

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I would like to deal next with the well known dream that occurred to Shinran in the year 1203. According to the record of this dream and the *Godenshō* (vol. 1, ch. 3) about 4 in the morning of the 5th of the 4th month of that year the Kuse Bodhisattva of Rokkakudō appeared to Shinran as a holy monk wearing a white *kesa* and seated on a white lotus. He addressed to Shinran calling him by the unusual name of "Zenshin" and said this verse :

"Practitioner ! If ever you were to break celibacy,
I shall transform myself in a body of a beautiful woman and you will break celibacy with Me :
Of your whole life I shall be the adornment
and at the time of death shall guide you to [the Land of] 'Supreme Bliss!'"

First of all let us notice that it is not stated that the dream happened at the Rokkakudō but that the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara of the Rokkakudō appeared to Shinran in the dream. The main object of worship (*honzon*) of the Rokkakudō is a form of Avalokitesvara known as "Nyoirin Kannon", that is "Avalokitesvara who fulfils wishes". Some years ago Nabata Takashi discovered that there is a close similarity between the verse in Shinran's dream and a ritual of esoteric buddhism devoted to Nyoirin-

Kannon¹. This ritual is preserved in the *Kakuzenshō* collection of Shingon rituals, in the chapter devoted to Nyoirin, and which is entitled "How the *honzon* transforms into a beautiful woman"². It says :

"It is said : 'If someone produces a thought with wrong views and is burned by sexual desire so that he should fall within the secular world,
I Nyoirin-Kannon shall become a beautiful woman and be the wife of this man living together with love.
His whole life I shall adorn with happiness, creating infinite goods.
In the Pure Land 'Supreme Bliss' of the West he will realize Buddhahood.
Do not produce any doubt !"

The comparison between the two texts confirms that Shinran's dream is directly connected with his aspiration to assume his sexual life with a woman. There is no evidence that Shinran ever read the *Kakuzenshō* which is contemporary to Shinran. Nevertheless because this is a collection of various material it is safe to consider that the *Kakuzenshō* is reflecting teachings and beliefs that were already widespread at that time.

Now we still have to interpret this dream. It happened two years after Shinran became the disciple of Hōnen who had given him at that time the name of "Shakkū". This name was used by Shinran when he signed the "Seven Article Pledge" (*Shichijō-kishōmon*) of 1204. At that time he signed as "the monk Shakkū" (sō Shakkū 僧絆空), thus implying that he was still keeping the vow of chastity. Then in 1205 Shinran was allowed by Hōnen to copy his main work, *Senjākushū*. After Shinran had completed his copy Hōnen wrote himself the title and the epigraph on it together with the name of Shinran that still was "Shakkū". Shinran was then also permitted to make a copy of Hōnen's portrait. All this happened on the 14th of the 4th month. Four months later, the 29th of the 7th intercalary month, Hōnen wrote a dedication on the copy of the portrait, this time changing Shinran's previous name of "Shakkū" into the new name "Zenshin"³.

What did happen between those two dates that would justify the changing of the names ? Because the name "Zenshin" had been announced to Shinran in his dream of the year 1203, it is self-evident that making use of this name from the year 1205 only means that it was at this time that his dream had been accomplished : Shinran became married.

It is clear that the woman Shinran married at that time is Eshin-ni. This we may conclude from the Japanese traditional use of Chinese characters of their names, both sharing together the same

¹ *Shinran Shōnin no Rokkaku musō no ge ni tsuite*, Shinshū-kenkyū 8 (Oct. 1961).

² Vol. 49. In T. 89, p. 480b 11-15. *Dai-Nihon-bukkyō-zenshō*, n. ed., 54, p. 178a. *Taishō-daizōkyō*, vol. 89 (Zuzō, 4), p. 866b.

³ *Kyōgyōshinshō*, vol. 6, § 118.

character "shin" 信 : *Zenshin* 眞信 and *Eshin* 恵信. With Hōnen's permission Shinran started to be called "Zenshin" according to the revelation of Nyoirin-Kannon in his dream because he had married. In the same way Eshin-ri got her name because she married Shinran and was granted with one of the Chinese characters of her husband's name.

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The last controversial event in Shinran's life I would like to mention is his participation to the collation of the Buddhist Canon (*Issaikyō kyōgō*). This episode has been generally rejected by modern historians as spurious.

This event is reported basically by the *Kudenshō* which was first dictated by Kakunyo to his disciple Jōsen in 1331. Because there remain later copies of this work by the hand of Kakunyo himself (preserved at Ryūkoku University, Senshōji) most of the historians would refer directly to the manuscripts of his. Nevertheless those manuscripts are somewhat misleading. As a writer Kakunyo was not too much concerned by historical precision and much of his works are filled with elementary mistakes. For example the *Godenshō* mistakenly calculates the generations between Hino Arikuni and Hino Arinori as five generations instead of six generations. In the same chapter Kakunyo states that Jien (1155-1225) was the older brother of Kujō Kanazane (1149-1207) while historically the opposite is correct. Again the chapter 2 and the chapter 3 of *Godenshō* include some mistakes in the date of Shinran becoming Hōnen's disciple and the Shinran's dream of 1203.

As far as the collation of the Buddhist Canon is concerned the Kakunyo's mss of the *Kudenshō* state that it happened when Kaiju-dono, the future *shikken* Hōjō Tokiyori (1227-1263) was 9 years old (8 years western style), that is in 1235. But it also states that this happened during the rule of Taira Tokiuji (1203-1230), the father of Tokiyori. The problem of course is that Tokiuji was already dead for 5 years when his son Tokiyori was 9 years old. Also it seems difficult to speak of "the rule" (*seitoku*) of Tokiuji, while such a word does not fit with Tokiuji's functions as a bakufu's legate in Kyōto (*Rokuhara tandai*).

In order to solve this contradiction the historian Akamatsu Toshihide advanced the hypothesis that the event doesn't concern Hōjō Tokiuji and his son but rather Utsunomiya Yasutsuna (1203-1261) and one of his sons, possibly Kagetsuna (1235-1298). Akamatsu would also relate the episode with the time when Kasama Tokimoto (1204-1265) presented the Kashima Shrine with a copy of the Song edition of the Buddhist Canon in 1255¹. Still this hypothesis is not satisfactory especially as it does not fit with neither the characters nor the dates provided by the *Kudenshō*.

However a more convenient solution is possible if we refer to the two oldest mss of the *Kudenshō* written down by Jōsen before 1343 (mss preserved by the Kishibe Family and the Ryūkoku

¹ Akamatsu Toshihide, *Shinran* (1961), p. 159-162.

University). According to those mss the collation of the Buddhist Canon actually took place in 1235 when Tokiyori was 9 years old and during the rule of his great-father Hōjō Yasutoki (1183-1241)¹. This is historically quite correct as Yasutoki was the *shikken* of Kamakura government and the actual ruler of Japan from 1224 to his death in 1242.

5/ The next important point is that such a collation of the Buddhist Canon as recorded by the *Kudenshō* could pretty well have happen in 1235. I am here referring to the *Azuma-kagami* which mentions a *Issaikyō kuyō*, that is a ceremony of presentation of the Buddhist Canon, being performed the 18th day of the 2nd month of 1235 at Turugaoka that is the temple of the shōgun in Kamakura, this ceremony being attended not only by the *shikken* Hōjō Yasutoki but also by the shōgun Fujiwara (Kujō) Yoritsune himself². It seems then quite natural that a collation or proofreading of the Canon was realized beforehand.

The question is to know whether Shinran could possibly be invited in such an occasion. It is evident that Shinran was the right man for a collation the Buddhist Canon because of his deep acquaintance with those Scriptures : suffice it to recall that the bulk of his *Kyōgyōshinshō* is an anthology of about sixty various buddhist texts. Moreover to be invited on such occasion Shinran was not lacking of relations with Kamakura people as he has been living in the area for about twenty years. Consequently we may say on the whole that there is no historical reason to deny the accuracy of the collation of the Buddhist Canon by Shinran in 1235.

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From these few examples I would compare the method of the nowadays biographers of Shinran with the method presently used in the restauration of western pieces of art. Previously it was understood that any element missing in a piece of art had to be reconstructed or recreated even when completely unknown so as to get a piece of art absolutely complete. Later one it was considered that a missing part would be restored provided that enough testimonies about its original state would be available. But nowadays' policy is that only the original elements of a piece of art are to be kept without any attempt to reconstitute what has been destroyed. This is called "respectful restauration" where the only authorized operations are those considered as essential for the conservation of the piece. But the piece itself would contain nothing else than its original elements.

The sources available today for Shinran's biography are important and precious. However they are not sufficient to reconstitute Shinran's life in every details. Accordingly a respectful biography of Shinran would first of all have to acknowledge its own limitations.

¹ The name of Yasutoki also appears in the record of the collation of the Buddhist Canon mentioned in the Bukkōji version of the biography of Shinran (*Zenshin Shōnin Shinran Denme*, vol. 2, ch. 6).

² *Azuma-kagami*, vol. 30.

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