The Stories We Tell: The Study and Practice of Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism[1]

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INTRODUCTION

At the risk of being little more than a contrarian, here I would like to set aside the question of subjectivity not because I think it impossible to discuss or know what subjectivity is (though I have my doubts) but because I am more interested in another aspect of religious life—behavior. The focus of my scholarly work long ago drifted away from questions more usually confined to philosophy and psychology and toward the muddy waters of action, specifically ritual, and I am inclined more toward asking people what they do rather than what they believe as a marker for their religious self-expression. As I have argued elsewhere, and drawing on the work of Roy Rappaport and other ritual theorists, ritual does the work of creating, maintaining, and re-articulating performative identity. Such a performative identity is often expressed in community, and it is this behavior that contributes to demarcating what Anne Blackburn calls "collectives of belonging" (e.g., bounded communities). An analysis of performative identity, of ritual, allows one to clarify and define religious community regardless of any one individual's religious subjectivity. Whereas such behavior certainly has a relationship to matters of belief, doctrine, and even orthodoxy, this relationship is tenuous and, at times, irrelevant. People may act in religious ways while simultaneously denouncing religious belief.

In what follows, I argue that narrative functions similarly to ritual in that it supports the expression of a communal performative identity. In part because a narrative's meanings and values are often made

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explicit, the ritual-like aspect of narrative works hard at refining and clearly demarcating the boundaries of these collectives of belonging, often in a more direct way than formal religious treatises or statements of faith. Narratives are filled with and point toward, in Rappaport's words, "formal indices" of their time and location that, like ritual, allow changing cultural and historical circumstances to shape and refine performative identity. In what follows, I will revisit my work on North American Shin Buddhist *gāthās* and relate this religious practice to religious narratives that co-create what constitutes the boundaries of a North American Shin Buddhist bounded collective. These narratives are at times specific to the North American Shin Buddhist experience (the internment, for example) and at others are related to larger, pan-Shin Buddhist and canonical narratives (the three Pure Land sutras, the life of Shinran); however, they are more often narratives *about* canonical sources, especially where Shinran is concerned. I relate such narratives of Shinran—in particular the valorization of Shinran the failed monk turned proselytizer to the masses—to the pernicious narrative that divides "scholars" from "practitioners," a division that has consequences on both the study and practice of Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism, especially in North America.

RITUAL AND PERFORMANCE

In my earlier work on the performance of *gāthā* in North American Shin Buddhist contexts, I argued that these performances function as a mechanism by which shifting ideas, attitudes, and practices become normative within the community; they are idexical expressions of canonical orientations toward Buddhist practice and teachings.[2] This argument rests on Rappaport's analysis of liturgical hierarchies, which details how rituals reinforce orthodox continuity while accounting for ever-changing cultural and social circumstances.[3] At the top of the hierarchy are "Ultimate Sacred Postulates" (karma, *saṃsāra*, the reality of the Buddha and his teachings to transcend *saṃsāra*, and so forth).

2. Scott A. Mitchell, "The Ritual Use of Music in US Jōdo Shinshū Buddhist Communities," *Contemporary Buddhism* 15, no. 2 (2014): 1–17.
3. Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Below these are cosmological axioms that refer to relationships between cosmic forces (transfer of merit, Amida Buddha's compassion embracing even the most karmically bereft). These axioms are clarified, translated almost, into specific rules for how individuals are to behave toward both the realm of the sacred and between one another, and are often expressed in rituals and ritualized behavior (the *nenbutsu* as an expression of gratitude toward Amida and the ritualization of this expression during formal services). And, finally, "formal indices of prevailing conditions"[4] are imported into rituals. In other words, "while the second and third level dictate how persons are supposed to behave according to the Ultimate Sacred Postulate, the fourth level provides a space in which to negotiate temporal and physical circumstances that change due to different economic, environmental, and cultural conditions."[5] Thus, whereas the first three levels may suggest that one should make ritual offerings to buddhas out of gratitude for the teachings, the fourth level takes into account how those specific offerings may change over time (different fruits or flowers coming in and out of season, different types of music being performed). And as a result of this fourth level, there is a space for new ideas and cultural attitudes to be inserted into a ritual context that may alter how religion is *performed* without necessarily altering the sacred postulates (i.e., the *beliefs*).

In the case of North American Shin Buddhism, the singing of songs acts as way to insert into the community new ideas and orientations that originate outside the Shin Buddhist, the Japanese American, or the Japanese Buddhist context. For example, a songwriter may compose a *gāthā* in the style of Caribbean calypso and enjoin the *sangha* to sing the song in call and response. These indices have their origins not in the Buddhist tradition, but by being ritually sanctioned, if you will, they are incorporated into the community. The community that sings these new songs, that *performs* them, has altered what it means to be a North American Shin Buddhist at one level (the indexical) without altering the doctrinal orientations of the tradition. Something has been added (calypso music), but nothing has been lost (Amida Buddha).

The benefit of this analysis lies in its ability to allow the researcher to embrace the nuance and complexity of North American

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4. Ibid, 266.
5. Mitchell, "Ritual Use of Music," 11.

Shin Buddhism without falling into the familiar tropes of academic re-
search on the tradition. These tropes, on the one hand, reduce North
American Shin Buddhism to nothing more than a Japanese American
community (which elides its internal diversity) or, on the other hand,
dismiss it as an acculturated religious community that presumes that
the processes of adaptation necessarily pollute something that was
originally pure.[6] By focusing our attention on ritual behavior, we can
account for the elements of the tradition that have continuity with the
past while respecting ongoing development and change as authentic
religious expressions.[7]

PERFORMING NARRATIVE

Narrative—importantly the *social performance* of narrative—functions
in a way similar to ritual. To begin, it is important to note what narra-
tive is and what it is not. Narrative is not merely the ordering of facts
or events; it is the *process* by which one constructs and orders these
facts or events into a specific story. Such stories do not exist in the
abstract, in some ahistorical purity; narratives exist in the telling, in
being related by a specific person to a specific audience.[8] This "active"
sense of narrative is key for two reasons. First, by placing the telling
of a narrative within a specific cultural or historical context, we can
better discern the story's meanings and values. Second, that narratives
are *told* points to their connection to ritual; the telling of stories may

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6. For a detailed analysis of the problematic dynamics of representations
of Asian Buddhisms outside Asia, see Natalie E. Quli, "Western Self,
Asian Other: Modernity, Authenticity, and Nostalgia for 'Tradition' in
Buddhist Studies," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 16 (2009): 1–38.

7. Justin McDaniel's work on Buddhist leisure is important in this
regard insofar as it suggests that the field is beginning to embrace
the non-canonical and non-monastic aspects of Buddhist life as every
bit as relevant to Buddhist studies as a field. See Justin T. McDaniel,
*Architects of Buddhist Leisure: Socially Disengaged Buddhism in Asia's
Museums, Monuments, and Amusement Parks*, Contemporary Buddhism
Series (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017).

8. Richard K. Payne, "The Path from Metaphor to Narrative: Gampopa's
Jewel Ornament of Liberation," *Pacific World: Journal of the Institute of
Buddhist Studies*, 3rd ser., 16 (2014): 31.

certainly be ritualized, but even in the absence of a formal ritual, the telling of stories is a performative act. It is these performances within specific cultural locations that shape their meaning and point toward narrative's function within community.

The specific cultural and historical locations that shape a narrative's meanings are of course the indexical, which, like calypso and call and response, may be inserted into a community without, necessarily, disrupting the sacred postulates or axioms. In other words, narratives are filled with indices pointing beyond themselves. Michael Nichols' analysis of representations of Māra in contemporary popular culture (the British television show *Doctor Who*, the Canadian novel *Letters from Māra*) demonstrates well how narrative is embedded within, and shaped by, its cultural locations and differing media technology. Like the ritualized singing of *gāthā* that may incorporate new musical forms over time and place, narratives shift as well:

> Myths may be made, but we would be wrong to think they ever stop being made.... It is better, therefore, to understand religious narratives as being in a constant state of flux, the concept of "myth" as coextensive with "myth-making," and religious story-telling as inextricable from socio-political debate and imagination. Religious narratives exist in an ongoing process of reinterpretation and the affect of popular media as a factor in these transformations cannot be ignored.[9]

Māra, just as Amida Buddha, inhabits the upper reaches of Rappaport's liturgical hierarchy; his appearance in contemporary popular culture no more displaces his relevance for Buddhists than calypso displaces Amida Buddha from Shin Buddhism.

Narratives are, of course, more than myths; indeed, they often rely heavily on facts and history. However, even when narratives do play on facts, their value does not lay in their facticity. Consider the following, non-Buddhist example: In 1957, the Russians launched Sputnik. In 1969, a little more than a decade later, the Americans landed two men on the moon. These are historical facts. From these facts, we then construct a narrative. Most commonly, on this side of the Atlantic, this narrative is about the space race, the Cold War and the arms race, and

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9. Michael D. Nichols, "Māra Re-Imagined: Stories of the 'Evil One' in Changing Contexts," *Pacific World: Journal of the Institute of Buddhist Studies*, 3rd ser., 16 (2014): 2.

larger ideological battles between the West and the Soviet Union. Like all good narratives, there are good guys and bad guys, and the winner is clear. But there is nothing to stop us from overlaying the facts of Sputnik and Apollo 11 with a different narrative, a narrative about human hubris, innovation, and ingenuity, that we—as a species—first left the ground via mechanical flight at Kitty Hawk in 1903 and less than a century later had managed to travel more than 200,000 miles away from the Earth, an audacious feat of will and engineering that points to something profoundly important about humanity regardless of which side we were on in the Cold War. Neither of these narratives is "untrue"; both rely on the same set of historical facts, and neither negates these facts or cancels out the other narrative. They merely tell different stories, stories that in turn have different meanings for different audiences. Neither is less true or less valuable apart from the contexts in which it is told.

Importantly, the former narrative about the Cold War and, ultimately, American exceptionalism has become ubiquitous over the past fifty years as it has been told and retold in all manner of media, from television news reports to documentaries to feature-length Hollywood films. Because of this collective repetition, the audience of this narrative has come to understand in an implicit way that the story of the moon landing has but one meaning: it is a quintessentially American story that tells us something very specific about who we are as a people, as a bounded collective.

Ritual (and narrative in its own distinct way) contributes to the construction, maintenance, and re-articulation of social performative identity; put another way, ritual helps to clarify the boundaries of community. Put yet another way, the members of a community may be said to be all those persons who behave thus. To be clear, this rough definition of community should not be misunderstood as exclusive in nature; rather, following Blackburn, we are better served by viewing social actors not as imbued with a single cohesive identity but rather as inhabiting multiple and simultaneous bounded collectives. In her study of the late nineteenth century Sri Lankan monk Hikkaḍuvē Sumaṅgala, Blackburn notes how scholars of Buddhist modernism have tended to approach such figures through a single

analytical lens, unpacking their activities as representative of an ethnic identity as distinct from a political or religious identity. To the extent that Sumaṅgala inhabited multiple social realms, this single-lens approach proves limiting. "That is, rather than assuming a single dominant affiliation or 'identity' as the hermeneutical key to social action, it is more revealing to assume that the persons we study exemplify locative pluralism, acting simultaneously in relation to plural and shifting *collectives of belonging* to which they feel a sense of responsibility and emotional investment."[10] It is only when the contemporary Buddhist studies scholar attempts to force Sumaṅgala into a single box, a single category—"Buddhist modernist" as opposed to something else—that we have a problem; how to account for his multiple social locations if he must choose, as it were, between location A and location B? It is more accurate to note that he inhabits multiple social realms, and these collectives of belonging are not defined in contradistinction from one another—they are merely defined. Once one steps into them, one is then expected to act accordingly.

This perspective should be obvious to anyone who behaves differently at the office 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. than they do at a PTA meeting, or on Sunday morning at church or temple versus Saturday at the gym. Each of us inhabits multiple social realms that define our behavior *within that realm*. And whereas there may be overlap between these realms (I may behave in similar ways at the office as I do at the PTA meeting, or they may be populated by similar people), it is not the case that I cannot move between them, that my membership on the PTA precludes my membership in a religious organization.

How social actors behave within these social realms, then, contributes to defining the collective's boundaries. This behavior may be more or less ritualized; and it goes without saying

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10. Anne M. Blackburn, *Locations of Buddhism: Colonialism and Modernity in Sri Lanka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 210; italics in original.

that in religious contexts, such behavior becomes increasingly ritualized. Narratives in these contexts play a role similar to ritual; however, narrative functions differently than mere formal indices. Whereas flowers come in and out of season and their use within a ritual context merely points toward formal rules, axioms, and postulates, narratives often make their meaning explicit, and as such slip up the hierarchy. For example, it is hard to read the story in Matthew 19:16–24, wherein Jesus advises one to give up all their possessions to enter heaven, as anything other than a narrative about the vices of material wealth—how else to read, "Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter of the kingdom of heaven"? Thus whereas narratives may be performed ritually, and whereas the indices may change over time and place, narrative conveys in rather explicit ways not only relationships between individuals, and between individuals and the divine, but also cosmological axioms. As a result, while ritual and narrative function similarly, it might also be suggested that the boundaries of the collective of belonging are more explicitly clarified and defined through narrative. Through narrative not only do we say, "This is what we do as a people," we also, at the very least, say, "This is *why* we do what we do."

Finally, note that the work of narrative, of story-telling, may be the work of an individual, but it is collective narrativizing that creates shared value and meaning and reinforces the boundaries of the collective. While it is true that narratives require both a story and a story-teller, there is no requirement that the teller be a single individual—or even a person at all. Most of our cultural narratives are not the work of a single story-teller but are the result of collective and repetitive narrativizing embedded within all manner of media. The ubiquity of narratives about American exceptionalism mentioned above, for example, shape how we tell the story of Apollo 11 in everything from textbooks to major motion pictures, which makes it difficult to see past that narrative to alternate readings. It is this collective telling and re-telling of stories that leads to collective memory and social identity; and through the brute force of repetition, tradition emerges—the sense that things have always been thus. By the time tradition is set, it is almost unmovable; walk into any Buddhist Churches of America temple and mention

internment. The word by itself, seemingly free of any other context, carries with it the weight of collective memory, shaping the shared sense of who we are as a people, regardless of whether or not we are Japanese American, regardless of whether or not we were born during the War. Internment is part of the community's history, the community cannot be separated from that history, and this collective sense of identity emerges in the stories told by the community.

NARRATIVIZING JŌDO SHINSHŪ

The internment is one narrative that has come to define the bounded collective of North American Shin Buddhists. It is not the *fact* of internment that does this boundary construction, it is the way the story is told, the narrativization of the fact. Note that this is not a "canonical" narrative (i.e., it is not a story from the sutras, nor is it even a story *about* the sutras); but it does speak to the definitional power of narrative for community construction and maintenance. Moreover, it is not the only narrative that defines the North American Shin Buddhist experience; it exists alongside multiple narratives about the community as well as narratives about canonical sources. Taken as a whole, the telling of these stories works to define the boundaries of the collective.

One such narrative I would call our attention to is perhaps best known as "Shinran: Man of the People." This narrative is a particular reading of the facts of Shinran's life that highlights his failure as a monastic and embrace of lay life. This narrative—much like the narratives of Apollo 11 that highlight American exceptionalism—manifests in a range of media in both Japan and the US, from early modern fictional accounts of Shinran to contemporary anime.[11] The ubiquity of the narrative allows one to easily rattle off various events of Shinran's life as if they are factually certain and their meanings immediately known—his failure at self-power practices on Mt. Hiei, the dream at Rokkakudo, his exile to the Kanto region and proselytization to peasants, and his marriage to Eshinni. Each of these events become indexical pointers back to axioms and postulates: the failure at Mt. Hiei as a reflection of the centrality of other-power; the dream reflecting the compassionate

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11. For the development of modern biographies of Shinran both in line and at odds with pre-modern orthodox tellings see Michihiro Ama, "Shinran as 'Other': Revisiting Kurata Hyakuzō's *The Priest and His Disciples*," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 43, no. 2 (2016): 253–274.

power of buddhas and bodhisattvas; the marriage as a literal and sym-
bolic rejection of monasticism and by extension the path of sages.

Over time, these elements become re-narrativized in other con-
texts and in other ways. The embrace of lay life leads many contempo-
rary Shin Buddhist teachers to declare, unproblematically, that Shin
Buddhism is a tradition of farmers, a tradition for laypeople and not for
monks.[12] Shinran's marriage reinforces the claim that Shin Buddhism
is a tradition for those committed to the householder path and not
for those who are committed to monasticism. These narrative claims
reinforce the boundaries of the Shin Buddhist experience—a tradition
for one type of person (lay) over and against another (monastic). Such
interpretations of the tradition, especially those that play on Shinran-
as-husband, could resonate in the North American context, a context
that is broadly suspicious of celibate monasticism and celebratory of
(vaguely defined) family values.

Narratives work, in part, because of their inter-textuality. They
are inevitably bound up with other narratives both within and apart
from their home tradition; in other words, they relate to other canoni-
cal narratives as well as to broader cultural currents that exist out-
side of the tradition—their indexical referents, if you will. Narratives
are never free-floating abstract expressions but are always embed-
ded within specific cultural and historical locations that shape their
meanings. "Shinran: Man of the People" works as a narrative, in part,
because of a concomitant narrative, central in Shinran's thought and
writings, about *bonbu* and *akunin*—foolish beings and evil persons.
This narrative has two elements. On the one hand, it points directly to
sacred postulates and axioms about the reality of the Buddha and rela-
tions between sentient beings and larger cosmic forces, namely, the
compassionate power of Amida Buddha that embraces even the most
karmically bereft; even foolish beings and evil persons are born in the
Pure Land (albeit at a distance from the feet of the Buddha). On the
other hand, it is a narrative about who the Pure Land path is *for*; at the
end of the day, were it not for the declining age of the dharma, were
it not for the diminished spiritual capacity of persons living during

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12. For example, see Mas Kodani's presentation on Japanese Buddhist
hōraku: http://podcast.shin-ibs.edu/?p=141; see also Taitetsu Unno,
*River of Fire, River of Water: An Introduction to the Pure Land Tradition of
Shin Buddhism* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 3–5, 11–12.

mappō, one might be able to practice the path of sages; but we are living in *mappō* (so the claim goes), therefore better to rely on the power of the Buddha. "Shinran: Man of the People" implicitly plays on the narrative of *mappō* by implying that his failure on Mt. Hiei was not because he didn't *try* but because he was karmically *incapable* of engaging the path of sages. In valorizing "Shinran: Man of the People," his followers write themselves into this narrative and implicate themselves as fellow "foolish beings." This narrative has become particularly well-expressed in contemporary North American Shin Buddhist circles such that it is not uncommon to hear people refer to themselves, sometimes with great pride, as *bonbu*.

Whereas, on the one hand, this is a narrative about human limitation and the importance of being humble in the face of our inability to follow the path of sages, it is worth noting that this narrative is now told in a new historical context—the contemporary United States—a context that is dominated by the ever-present narrative of American exceptionalism. This and related narratives suggest that one can achieve whatever one desires through sheer force of will, a narrative of optimism and self-determination that is wholly contradictory to a Shin narrative that suggests that I, as an individual, am an "evil" person wholly incapable of changing my lot in life.

As something of an aside, I would argue that narratives of failure, foolish beings, and evil persons, however, are not at all out of step with American culture if properly understood as exactly that—as narratives. We are well familiar with sympathetic "evil" characters in American popular culture; if nothing else, we are familiar with narratives that complicate black-and-white dichotomies between "good" and "evil," thus opening the door to the possibility of "evil" within ourselves.[13] From complex comic book anti-heroes such as Batman to the Man with No Name in *A Fistful of Dollars* to (spoiler alert) Darth Vader's redemption at the end of *The Return of the Jedi*, it is not hard to find examples of supposedly good persons engaging in immoral behavior for some higher purpose, of morally ambiguous or even unlikable characters nevertheless doing the right thing, or of thoroughly evil characters ultimately being redeemed. In this context, a narrative of Shinran's life that focuses on his failure to attain the highest spiritual goal via meditation and struggles with his own moral limitations while doing his

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13. Many thanks to Diana Thompson for inspiring this line of thought.

best to be a good husband and father seems rather ordinary. It is not that evil is a word with absolutely negative connotations that ought to be avoided at all costs; it is simply part of a human narrative about the limitations of being human.

Narratives of American exceptionalism, optimism, and self-determination in some way define the edges of the bounded collective of "American"; these narratives shape how Shin Buddhism is received and understood in this particular culture and at this particular time. To these narratives we might also add a virulent strain of anti-intellectualism, a narrative that champions the role of individual experience over and against expertise.[14] There is some virtue in the narrative "Shinran: Man of the People"; but this narrative co-exists with this larger American anti-intellectual narrative, and we should be mindful of the consequences this meeting may have on how Shin Buddhism is received in the North American context, consequences that may lead to the further marginalization of Pure Land Buddhism from the mainstream of Western Buddhist thought.[15]

We need to be attentive, particularly at this cultural moment circa late 2017, to the persistent anti-intellectual narrative in American public discourse that suggests that one's intuitive or emotional reaction to events is more valuable than facts or reason; this is a narrative that

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14. For one example of how anti-intellectualism is narrativized in American media, see Dane S. Claussen, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Media: Magazines and Higher Education* (New York: Peter Lang International Academic Publishers, 2004). Claussen's work relies on a sizable body of work on the anti-intellectual discourse going back to Richard Hofstadter's *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963).

15. By "marginalized," here I mean the ways in which Pure Land Buddhism has received less scholarly attention than other forms of Buddhism or has been discredited as an inauthentic form of Buddhist practice both in the academy and in popular Western Buddhist imagination. For the marginalization of Pure Land in the academy, see Galen Amstutz, *Interpreting Amida: History and Orientalism in the Study of Pure Land Buddhism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997). For the marginalization of Pure Land in the popular imagination, one need look no further than the latest issues of such magazines as *Tricycle* or *Lion's Roar*.

dismisses the expert and valorizes the common man. In this context, we need to be mindful of how a *narrative* of Shinran the common man undermines the *fact* of Shinran the intellectual.[16] If we paint Shinran as an anti-intellectual, we subtly suggest that his thinking was not as nuanced or deep as that of the world's Great Thinkers. Therefore, it can be discounted, disregarded, and removed from such conversations as simplistic and irrelevant—so, too, can the whole of the Shin and, by extension, Pure Land tradition. This narrative contributes to a concomitant narrative of Pure Land Buddhism as nothing more than a tradition of "just faith," one lacking intellectual rigor or deserving of serious study or consideration. The power of narrative is not in its facticity but in its ability to convince, even in the absence of fact.

NARRATIVIZING STUDY AND PRACTICE

At the outset, I stated that I was more interested in discussing what people do rather than what they believe as an indicator of religious belonging or identity. Whereas narratives might impart specific ideas, beliefs, doctrines, and ideologies, they might also be thought of as a form of action, for they are, after all, the stories we *tell*. And in the telling we create and re-create what it means to be a member of a bounded collective, a community of co-religionists. By perpetuating narratives of *bonbu* or "Shinran: Man of the People," the edges of North American Shin Buddhism become clarified. Within that collective, persons then understand how they are to behave, the language to use, the rituals to engage. At some time, we might want to ask questions of subjectivity, of what all this story-telling and ritual making *means* for any one individual; but for myself, as a scholar of religion, I content myself with observing the behavior, of listening to the stories.

Of course, to even use that phrase—"a scholar of religion"—is to invoke a different bounded collective, the collective of religious scholars. By way of conclusion to this essay, then, I would like to reflect on the nature of scholarship and its relationship to practice—and, of course, how this relationship is narrativized.

To say that I am a scholar of religion, and to imply that scholars are content to "observe and report," is to subtly introduce a dichotomy between scholars and practitioners. This distinction, I argue, owes a

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16. As we will see, Shinran is, in fact, both, but the narrative suggests an either/or dichotomy that elides the full human person of Shinran.

debt to a larger rhetorical distinction between religious studies and theology. Religious studies is deeply informed by a secular, scientific (in the loosest sense of the word) approach to an object of study, and is in many ways the great-grandchild of the "Masters of Suspicion"—to borrow from Ricour[17]—of Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche, who held in contempt religion and religious behavior as reflecting, at best, some human psychological limitation in need of fixing. Leaving aside ongoing and important field-defining debates about the limits and purposes of religious studies, it is fair to say that the role of the religious studies scholar is to critically examine, analyze, and provide a *descriptive* account of religious behavior, texts, histories, and so forth, not as an insider of a tradition but from the outside. This approach differs from that of the theologian who is necessarily an insider and, if nothing else, is engaged in a *proscriptive* account of religion, often through philosophical, doctrinal, and textual exegesis. Of course, the category of "theology" is problematic when applied to Buddhist studies, and Richard Payne has helpfully argued for an alternative term—Buddhist praxis—that captures the sense of approaching the subject of religion through a dialogical relationship between doctrine, practice, and experience.[18] These disciplinary or methodological perspectives necessarily shape how one defines his or her subject and directs his or her studies.

Mutual animosity exists between these two camps, with the religious studies scholar being accused of alternately trying to disprove religious truth claims or being unable to grasp religious concepts, and the theologian being accused of lacking critical distance and objectivity. Within these mutually isolated tribes, the "other" can be easily dismissed. For practitioners, the scholar can be dismissed as not having had the *experience* of religion, of being, in short, merely and academic whose knowledge of Buddhism is purely textual. For the scholar, the practitioner can be discredited as being too invested in the subject,

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17. See Ann Gleig, "Researching New Religious Movements from the Inside Out and the Outside In," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 16, no. 1 (2012): 88–103.

18. Richard K. Payne, "Why 'Buddhist Theology' Is Not a Good Idea: Keynote Address for the Fifteenth Biennial Conference of the International Association of Shin Buddhist Studies, Kyoto, August 2011." *The Pure Land: Journal of the International Association of Shin Buddhist Studies,* n.s., 27 (2012).

as being an advocate rather than a reporter, for lacking important critical distance to say anything more than the purely personal and anecdotal.[19]

Of course, this mutual animosity is itself a narrative construct; it is an arbitrary and flawed dichotomization of social behavior, revealing more about our cultural locations and biases than about either religious studies scholars or theologians or their respective projects. To say that this categorization scheme of "scholars vs. theologians" is arbitrary is to admit that neither camp exists as some sort of Platonic ideal type; rather, they are human constructs, ways of categorizing particular modes of being in the world and, therefore, always poorly defined with fuzzy boundaries and all manner of exceptions. The process of constructing and maintaining boundaries around tribes of "scholars" over and against "theologians" is just that, a process, and is therefore ongoing and always contested. It is contested explicitly in self-critical essays, for example, and implicitly in managed social behavior, such as proper dress or behavior at professional conferences or during religious services. This process of boundary maintenance reveals the socially constructed nature of our work, its acceptable modes of behavior, and appropriate conduct in specific social settings, all of which is reflective of our specific social, historical, and cultural contexts.

By perpetuating this narrative of mutual animosity, by falling back again and again on this narrative of a distinction between religious studies and theology, we overlook the hybrids, the scholar-practitioners, who are both/and.[20] Rather than viewing these tribes as mutually

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19. For examples of how this division between scholars and practitioners is narratively constructed and perpetuated see the work of Charles Prebish, esp. "The Academic Study of Buddhism in America: A Silent *Sangha*," in *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship*, eds. Duncan Ryûken Williams and Christopher S. Queen (New York: Routledge, 1999): 183–214. See also the special section, "Special Focus: Blurred Genres," *Journal of Global Buddhism* 9 (2008): 81–163 wherein Ian Reader, John Makransky, and Duncan Williams debate the merits and limitations of advocacy (or non-advocacy) and critical-constructive approaches to Buddhist studies.

20. See Gleig, "Researching New Religious Movements"; Gerald James Larson, "Polymorphic Sexuality, Homoeroticism, and the Study of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65, no. 3 (1997):

isolated, we would be better off seeing them as laying on a spectrum. At one extreme, to be sure, we might find those secular atheists who have active disdain for religion, and at the other those so committed to their religious convictions that they hold active suspicion of those scholarly, ivory tower types; but these are surely caricatures, stereotypes, and outliers. The vast majority of persons engaged in the study of religion find themselves somewhere else along the spectrum, exhibiting, in Blackburn's words, "locative pluralism," moving happily from one location to another depending on time and place. Just as Sumaṅgala acted in relation to plural collectives of belonging, so, too, do those of us who inhabit multiple worlds to which we "feel a sense of responsibility and emotional investment."[21] Thus, these tribes necessarily exist in complex interrelationships of mutual reciprocity rather than in isolated silos of mutual distrust.

To champion one tribe over and against another is to do a disservice to the study and practice of Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism. To claim, for example, that Shinran was primarily or solely a man of the people and that this experiential aspect of Shin Buddhism is qualitatively better than academic study plays into the larger anti-intellectual narrative pernicious in current public discourse and is derogatory to Shinran himself. To be clear, Shinran was, indeed, a man of the people; he did in fact use his time in the Kanto region productively to spread his teachings among householders, farmers, and peasants. However, this does not mean that he was not *also* a great exegete, one who studied, deeply, the teachings both of the Pure Land tradition and of Buddhism generally. He no doubt knew multiple languages, was familiar with the customs of the court, of the monastery, and of the home. He was as much a great scholar as he was a dutiful husband as well as community organizer. In other words, he inhabited multiple social locations, as all of us do—moving happily and unproblematically from the office to the PTA meeting to the temple. It is

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655–665; Prebish, "Academic Study of Buddhism in America"; and Charles S. Prebish, *Luminous Passage: The Practice and Study of Buddhism in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), esp. 173ff.
21. Blackburn, *Locations of Buddhism*, 210.

anachronistic to claim that Shinran was anti-intellectual not merely because he was, in fact, an intellectual, but because this very category is a modern, contemporary, invention. It is we who are concerned with preserving the boundaries between religious studies and theology, not the objects (persons) of our study.

At the risk, ironically, of constructing an anachronistic narrative of Shinran, his biography can nevertheless inspire us in the present to embrace the fullness of ourselves, the fullness of our multiple locations. For myself, personally, this includes a commitment to the highest ideals of modern religious studies (e.g., academic freedom, critical thinking, and so forth) as well as a commitment to Buddhist teachings and communities (e.g., to be of benefit to sentient beings). These are not mutually exclusive; they are mutually supportive. Their distinction lies not in their orientations, their methods, or their motives; their distinction lies in their social location. Annually, I attend the meeting of the American Academy of Religion—a scholarly organization—and I play the part of an academic. At other times, I don a *kesa*, put my palms together in *gasshō*, and direct my energies toward supporting a religious community. To disregard one or the other perspective would be to limit the fullness of my human experience. I submit that it is possible to be, at times, a scholar, at others a practitioner, and yet at others both—but it is not necessary to be both at all times and in all places.