

TEXTUAL JOURNEYS—INTEREST GROUP

Topic: Essentials of Faith Alone: Works of Shinran (1163–1273)  
Convener: Marianne Farina, C.S.C., Dominican School of Philosophy and  
Theology  
Moderator: Frank X. Clooney, S.J., Harvard Divinity School  
Presenter: James Fredericks, Loyola Marymount

Under James Fredericks' guidance, the third session of this interreligious textual reading group considered a work of Buddhist Master Shinran (1163–1273). Fredericks clarified that "Essentials of Faith Alone" differs in style from the poetry of Shinran's hymns and the comprehensiveness of his major work, the *Kyōgyōshinshō*. He noted that the value of this text lies in what it reveals about its author as a Pure Land Buddhist who is deeply rooted in the tradition and also an innovator of that tradition. Early in the year, Fredericks wrote and provided for members a reading guide (and English translation) providing historical background for Shinran's text, identifying his controversial doctrinal positions and suggesting intriguing issues for Christian theologians to consider.

In reading the text with us, Fredericks illustrated how Shinran takes extensive liberties with original meanings of the Chinese words in order to challenge traditional Buddhist ideas and practices. He pointed to the question of Shinran's rejection of ethical precepts, and his emphasis on the recitation of the name of *Amida* in the Primal Vow. In this way, followers of all classes and moral standard reach the Pure Land. They then return as Bodhisattvas and lead others to the Pure Land. Fredericks asked whether Christians reading this text might too quickly translate *shinjin* as "faith," missing subtler differences in meaning. He also questioned whether it is helpful for Christians to "use" Pure Land Buddhist teaching, such as Shinran's work, as a "stepping stone" to other forms of Buddhism, thus locating Pure Land Buddhism somewhere between Christianity and "regular" Buddhism. Finally, recognizing that critique of Shinran's texts from within and outside of the tradition, Fredericks wondered what we might consider to be the normative status of texts we read across traditions. As he noted, right reading is essential, and requires context: "the full hermeneutic complexity of this problem arises only when we read texts with a friend who is religiously committed to the tradition out of which the text has come to us."

We broke into small groups and read parts of the text in light of perspectives from Christian texts and other religious traditions. Leo Lefebure then provided some critical points for dialogue. He suggested that the organization of Shinran's text resonates with Augustine's distinction between *res* and *signum*: we cannot understand the *signa* without the *res*, which for Augustine is *caritas*. He asked, "To what degree does the Augustinian/Lombardian hermeneutical principle of *caritas* offer an analogy to Shinran's reading Buddhist texts in light of the compassion of *Amida* in the Primal Vow?" He also highlighted how Shinran's text challenges the notion of "the self" that gains entrance to the Pure Land (*nirvana*). To imagine that the "I" has made a Vow, rather than it arising in the disciple, is to remain caught up in dualistic thinking. We then discussed the role of the will and personal responsibility in this movement. Such considerations folded into other ideas concerning the *Tetragrammaton* in Exodus 3, and whether the paradoxes of the Vow can be likened to God's declaration of God's name to Moses. Though questions remained unresolved, we all benefited from the

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intellectual honesty and humility at work in our reading of Shinran, as allowing this reading to challenge some of our fundamental theological views.

The session exemplified the goal of this interest group, which was to read *together* primary texts from various religions and place them in dialogue with Christian texts. Drawn into the wisdom of another tradition, we discover vital issues related to our own teachings. We look forward to finding ways of continuing this important practice at the CTSA each year.

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