Particular and Universal Norms of Religious Values in *Tannishô*  

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*Tannishô (A Record in Lament of Divergences)*, said to have been written by Yuien (-1288?), consists of eighteen chapters with two prefaces and a postscript. The first ten chapters are the words that Yuien heard from his Master, Shinran (1173-1262), while the rest are Yuien’s expositions against heterodox views or understandings about the nembutsu teachings in his times. Yuien thus says in the opening preface:

> As I humbly reflect on the past [when the late Master was alive] and the present in my foolish mind, I cannot but lament the divergences from the true shinjin that he conveyed by speaking to us directly, and I fear there are doubts and confusions in the way followers receive and transmit the teaching….Here, then, I set down in small part the words spoken by the late Shinran Shônin that remain deep in my mind, solely to disperse the doubts of fellow practicers.¹

This paper examines Shinran’s teachings in terms of particularity and universality, quoting mainly from *Tannishô*, analyzing Shinran’s teachings of his particular position and expounding that his teachings and experiences are universal in the contemporary world. This paper begins by introducing how the words particularity and universality are generally used, and discusses the problems and issues of “truth-claiming” and “sectarianism” in religion as its particular norm. We then discuss, by extracting some of the main religious issues from *Tannishô* and citing passages from other sources as well, the relationships between particularity and universality as they interrelate and coincide with each other—particularity being an individual expression or experience of universality, and universality as it manifests in particularity.

¹ *The Collected Works of Shinran* (hereafter abbreviated *CWS*) 1, Shin Buddhism Translation series (Kyoto: Jôdo Shinshû Hongwanji-ha, 1997), p. 661.
Particularity and Universality

The notions of particularity and universality in any given scheme have hinted at a quite important and significant impact on students of religious studies when a methodology is required as to how to study religion and its values. The terms particularity and universality are often used on a different scale and in a varied context. Generally, particularity is referred to as a certain, particular position of the teaching or dogma that a religion advocates, while universality is referred to as a common ground of certain values with which the religion can be shared and appreciated together in a globally communal sense. The end of universal values involves an ultimate goal of all humans, a goal like “peace,” “equality,” or “love,” which can be achieved when people seek it together, understanding what sorrow and joy in life is all about in its very fundamental import. Religions in many parts of the world may have particularity and variously call it salvation, emancipation, liberation, deliverance, refuge, realization, awakening, enlightenment, etc. In this paper, particularity is used in terms of a concrete and subjective norm of an individual position and experience, while universality involves a common and universal value of this particular position that can be shared by all humankind. Before a discussion of Shinran’s teachings in terms of particularity and universality, we will look at a problem that arises when particularity does not coincide with the quality of universality.

Truth-claiming, Sectarianism and Absolutization

There are various religions in the world, and most religious claim the truth and absoluteness of their own creed. They have developed as they have been assimilated according to the needs of local conditions and have branched out as denominations. Each denomination then claims its truth, insisting its own creed and denying other dogmas from time to time. This can be called “truth-claiming”; it can be seen in any religion or denomination, often among the world religions, and it goes hand in hand with “sectarianism.” Followers of a sect commit themselves to its creed, law or regulation, leading religious lives accordingly. Through totally devoting themselves faithfully to the teaching, followers or practicers come to undergo a religious experience, as they let go of themselves, often embraced by something unbound. This extraordinary experience, which might last only for a short period of time, differs from ordinary day-to-day experiences. To

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2 William James in Varieties of Religious Experience says that there are four characteristics regarding religious experience, such as ineffability, noetic quality,
the practicer, it is a unique and extraordinary experience that they had never undergone before. Then, they often “absolutize” their experience. This feeling of absolutization makes them feel that this experience is superior to other daily experiences, or that they are superior to others. They feel comfortable and secure spending time together with those who have had similar experiences, or with those who belong to a group with the same creed. In this sense, religion is categorized or defined as a “sense of belonging.”

As far as truth-claiming is concerned, a problem seems to arise, when truth-claiming is misread or misunderstood. The problem is often derived from exclusiveness or exclusionism that a religion fundamentally possesses, which is, to some extent, a natural consequence of religious sectarianism. When this exclusiveness exceeds a certain limit, however, the religion will have a hard time coexisting with other religious value systems, and that often results in conflicts or clashes against each other. Living in the 21st century, one still witnesses many conflicts among nations or races due to this religious exclusiveness or intolerance. It is then fairly important to keep in mind that we, from time to time, need to objectify and relativize some value of the creed and to reevaluate its commonality among others to coexist peacefully, especially in this contemporary world of highly developed technological science where conflicts can lead to the sudden and quick deaths of countless thousands. Embracing commonality should be a worthy aim for humankind to survive better on this planet and share it together. Otherwise, excluding transiency and passivity.


Hideo Kishimoto in *Shûkyô shinpi shugi: yôga no shisô to shinri* [*Religious Mysticism: Yogic Thought and Psychology*] says mystic (or religious) experience involves four special features, such as particular intuitiveness, sense of noumenon, feeling of ecstatic uplift and unexplainability. (Tokyo: Daimeidô, 1988), pp. 48-9. First publication, 1958.

3 D.T. Suzuki talks about a person’s giving authority to his or her religious experience, pointing out that this may even lead to extremely unreligious persecution or the most violent war in “Zen to nembutsu no shinrigaku-teki kiso” [“Principles of Psychology in Zen and Nembutsu”] in *Suzuki Daisetsu zenshû 4* [*Zen Collection of Daisetsu Suzuki* 4] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1968), p. 346.
and cursing other value systems with misunderstanding and prejudice could cause more troubles and problems. Exclusiveness that occurs as a result of blind truth-claiming results most likely from one’s ignorance.

The other side of this problem regarding blind truth-claiming is closing off or confining oneself. Instead of actively denying other value systems, one is closed or confined as one is fearful of exposing oneself to a new value system. One once had a “superior” or “extraordinary” experience and felt relieved and saved. One was born again, and truth-claiming or absolutization took place. Then, one encounters new value systems or people of other systems, finding out that those people are as convinced or confident in their system as one is in one’s own. When one begins to realize some point in the other system that makes sense, one closes off or confines oneself. One is afraid of the fact that one may have to question one’s experience that is believed to be absolute. One does not want to get closer to a new value system, which one fears will lead to the denial of oneself, the denial of absolutization or superiority. The problem of not being able or willing to coexist with others emerges.

**Throwing It All Away**

Absolutization of the religious creed, which leads to one’s commitment and adherence to it on an individual basis, is needed at a certain point, yet relativizing “one’s own” belief is also crucially important at some point, for total freedom comes with departure from the absolutization of “one’s own” conviction: one lets go of oneself and throws it all away.

Myôkônin O-kara reads poems of awakening:

My inability to do anything (to bring about my enlightenment)…
That is why I am worthy of being “saved.”
Amida’s Imperial Order is to come just I am.
Even this (strong-willed) O-karu cannot hold up her head.
I shall be taken as Amida wills.
I have thrown away ôjô, birth in the Pure Land,
Thrown it all away!⁴

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O-karu was born in 1801 on the small island of Mutsure, offshore from Shimonoseki, Yamaguchi Prefecture. O-karu’s life was recorded for the first time in a work titled *Myôkônin-den* (*Lives of the Wondrously Devout*), published in 1847, while
O-karu’s realization of Amida Buddha’s working is thoroughgoing and complete, so that she throws away even desire for birth in the Pure Land, where universality of religious experience is revealed. O-karu is embraced and encompassed by the whole universe with Amida Buddha. One can see O-karu’s entrustment to Amida Buddha, but not exclusiveness and closing herself. She is totally free.

Dōgen, the founder of Soto Zen in Japan, elaborates continuous transformation or shinjin datsuraku (“casting-off of body/mind”). His well-known theory of shushō ittō (“practice and authentication are one”) means that enlightenment does not come sequentially after one finishes one’s practice. One is enlightened as one is in practice. Practice simultaneously leads to enlightenment as well as being the manifestation of enlightenment itself. Yet, one continues to cast off one’s body/mind.

Amida as a Particular Buddha

Amida is the name of a Buddha, the Buddha of Infinite Light (Amitābha) and Infinite Life (Amitāyus). In the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha-sūtra, Bodhisattva Dharmākara undertook forty-eight vows in order to save all sentient beings, especially those who are suffering. Upon having spent five kalpas contemplating on the ideal place where beings can all be saved, Dharmākara spontaneously manifested as Amida Tathagata. Amida Buddha constantly shares the wisdom of enlightenment with all beings, transforming into the Name or myōgō, the formula of Namu-amida-butsu. By becoming aware of Amida’s compassion (sharing) and by becoming aware of one’s limited and self-centered mode of being, one will be born in the Pure Land (ōjō). Since this whole process is made to come about, in an ultimate sense, through Amida, the nembutsu, the recitation of the Name, serves as an expression of one’s gratitude with the realization that one has already been and always will be encompassed by Amida’s compassion.

Amida is the Buddha categorized as sambhōga-kāya or the fulfilled body of buddha. Two other forms or bodies of buddha are dharma-kāya (or the Dharma-body) and nirmāna-kāya (or the personified-body). The fulfilled-
body of *buddha* is a manifestation emerged from the vows a bodhisattva undertakes, revealed as light (wisdom) and life (compassion). There are many *sambhóga-kāya* or fulfilled-bodies, one of which is Amida Tathagata. Amida Buddha is not the only fulfilled-body of *buddha*, which means Amida is a “particular” Buddha. However, to Shinran, as a result of having encountered his teacher or master Hōnen (1133-1212), Amida is the only Buddha. Shinran says in Chapter 2 of *Tannishō*:

> As for me, I simply accept and entrust to what my revered teacher told me, “Just say the nembutsu and be saved by Amida”; nothing else is involved….

I have no idea whether the nembutsu is truly the seed for my being born in the Pure Land or whether it is the karmic act for which I must fall into hell. Should I have been deceived by Master Hōnen and, saying the nembutsu, were to fall into hell, even then I would have no regrets.\(^5\)

Here, we can see Shinran’s deep entrusting and adherence to Hōnen and Amida Buddha. Shinran met a good teacher, and encountered a “particular” Buddha. Yet Shinran’s profession also reveals a “universal” value. Amida is particular, and is universal in terms of Amida as the merging of Infinite Light or Wisdom (space) and Infinite Life and Compassion (time), together constituting the whole universe. Shinran says in the *Shōzómatu wasan* (*Pure Land Hymns of the Right, Semblance, and Last Dharma-Ages*):

> Although I am without shame and self-reproach
> And lack a mind of truth and sincerity,
> Because the Name is directed by Amida,
> Its virtues fill ten quarters.\(^6\)

Shinran here talks about his deep sense of retrospection of his self-centered mode of being, and Amida, who, permeating throughout ten quarters or the whole universe, then encompasses him. This shows a universal scheme of religious experience.

In Chapter 3 of *Tannishō*, a well-known verse by Shinran goes:

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\(^5\) *CWS* 1, p. 662.

Even a good person attains birth in the Pure Land, so it goes without saying that an evil person will.\(^7\)

In our general understanding of good or evil, a good person will receive a good reward and an evil person will not. From a point of view of religious truth, however, an evil person who is to fall into hell is the one to be saved first. The evil person in an existential sense is the one who becomes aware of Amida’s compassion by self-negation through encountering that which is unsurpassed—Amida. Shinran throws a universal message of encountering and being encompassed by something unbound through a total letting-go of self-centeredness.

**Five Kalpas of Profound Thought**

In the postscript of *Tannishô*, Shinran talks about his personal or individual realization of the Vow of Amida Buddha:

> When I consider deeply the Vow of Amida, which arose from five kalpas of profound thought, I realize that it was entirely for the sake of myself alone! Then how I am filled with gratitude for the Primal Vow, in which Amida resolved to save me, though I am burdened with such heavy karma.\(^8\)

Shinran says that Amida’s Vow arising from five kalpas of profound thought (*gokô shiyui no gan*) is entirely for the sake of Shinran alone. A kalpa (*kô*) is an immeasurable long period of time, i.e., aeons. According to the *Larger Sutra*, when Bodhisattva Dharmâkara was in his causal stage, one stage of a bodhisattva, before becoming Amida Buddha, he spent five kalpas profoundly contemplating, to make sure that all the sentient beings are to be saved without any fail in his Pure Land. Therefore, Dharmâkara’s vows are meant for all beings, not limited for certain people—good or evil, young or old or rich or poor. Shinran says in Chapter 1:

> Know that the Primal Vow of Amida makes no distinction between people young and old, good and evil; only shinjin is essential. For it is the Vow to save the person whose karmic

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evil is deep and grave and whose blind passions abound.⁹

When one undergoes a religious experience, however, it is a personal, individual experience. Although the teaching is meant for everybody without any discrimination, one spontaneously takes it to oneself as one’s own when it comes to an actual experience. It is existential, subjective and individual. Amida therefore took five kalpas of profound thought only for the sake of himself. In this manner, Amida’s compassion was particularly for Shinran alone, directly reaching into Shinran’s heart/mind. This is the individual, particular realization of Shinran, though this particularity also carries a “universal” norm of religious experience.

Universalism (the teaching is meant for everybody) is to be understood or realized through particularity (individual realization). Thus, particularity and universality correspond to and coincide with each other. The particular experience takes place in the here and now, sustaining and being sustained by the universality of religious experience for everybody. When Shinran says that profound thought was only for the sake of Shinran himself, he is in and with it at that time, revealing a particular, individual experience, which is universal.

The Nembutsu and Jinen-Hôni
In the same postscript of Tannishô, Shinran talks about good or evil and claims the truth of the nembutsu. He says:

I know nothing at all of good or evil. For if I could know thoroughly, as Amida Tathagata knows, that an act was good, then I would know good. If I could know thoroughly, as the Tathagata knows, that an act was evil, then I would know evil. But with a foolish being full of blind passions, in this fleeting world—this burning house—all matters without exception are empty and false, totally without truth and sincerity. The nembutsu alone is true and real.¹⁰

Here again, we are able to see Shinran’s total entrustment and adherence to Amida Buddha. This time he does not expound good or evil as he refers to

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an evil person as the one who will be saved by Amida first. He rather talks about the unreliable qualities of people and the uncertain nature of things in the world—“all matters without exception are empty and false.” And he says, “The nembutsu alone is true and real.” This is the “truth-claiming” and “sectarianism” of a religion that we have observed before.

The statement “The nembutsu alone is true and real” is certainly a phrase of truth-claiming in a sectarian sense. Yet, it is the particular statement that embraces the universality of religious truth. One needs a position at one point. A universal position, love for humanity, for example, should essentially result from a particular position, from caring for a single person or from being cared for by a single person. Shinran realizes that Amida cares for him, as he says that Amida’s Vow arising from five kalpas of profound thought is entirely for the sake of Shinran alone. Therefore, the nembutsu alone is true and real. In this particular claim, the universality of Shinran’s exposition reveals itself. Universality manifests in particularity and particularity is an expression of universality.

Shinran in the Mattôshô (Lamp for the Latter Ages) expounds jinen hôni (“spontaneous working in accord with Dharma”), which rather shows a universalistic phase of his understanding of Amida Buddha. On Jinen-Hôni in the Mattôshô, Shinran elucidates jinen-hôni:

\[ Ji \text{ means “of itself”—not through the practicer’s calculation.} \]
\[ Nen \text{ means “to be made so”—it is not through the practicer’s calculation; it is through the working of the Tathagata’s Vow.} \]
\[ Hôni \text{ signifies being made so through the working of the Tathagata’s Vow. It is the working of the Vow where there is no room for calculation on the part of the practicer. Know, therefore, that in Other Power, no working is true working.} \]
\[ Jinen \text{ signifies being made so from the very beginning. Amida’s Vow is, from the very beginning, designed to bring} \]

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11 In the preface Shinran talks about the Primal Vow and the nembutsu in relation to good or evil:

Thus, for those who entrust themselves to the Primal Vow, no good acts are required, because no good surpasses the nembutsu. Nor need they despair of the evil they commit, for no evil can obstruct the working of Amida’s Primal Vow.

Ibid., p. 661.
each of us to entrust ourselves to it—saying “Namu-amida-butsu”—and to receive us into the Pure Land; none of this is through our calculation. Thus, there is no room for the practitioner to be concerned about being good or bad. This is the meaning of jinen as I have been taught.

As the essential purport of the Vow, [Amida] vowed to bring us all to become supreme Buddha. Supreme Buddha is formless, and because of being formless is called jinen. Buddha, when appearing with form, is not called supreme nirvana. In order to make it known that supreme Buddha is formless, the name Amida Buddha is expressly used; so I have been taught. Amida Buddha fulfills the purpose of making us know the significance of jinen.12

Shinran is saying here that jinen can be known through realizing Amida Buddha: Amida Buddha plays an important role in one’s coming to know the significance of jinen, and Amida Buddha is the Buddha through whom one is made to come to become awakened, enlightened or realized.13

### An Individual Value and Universality

O-karu composed poems of shinjin, some of which are about her becoming a bride in the Pure Land:

> Though mocked (in this world) as a crazy hag,  
> In the Pure Land I will be a radiant bride!14  
> I will be a bride in the land of Ultimate Bliss;  
> What have I to fear of being left alone?15

O-karu has encountered Amida Buddha, and Amida is very particular and personal to O-karu. She thinks and dreams of her being a bride in the Pure Land, a radiant bride that a woman often aspires to be. Her aspiration which, she dreams, is to come true in the land of Ultimate Bliss is not a mere hope that she wishes as something like an elusive or vain dream. Her dream is

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12 Ibid., p. 530.
13 The Sanskrit word buddha means “awakened,” “enlightened” or “realized” as past passive participle.
14 Hoyu Ishida, op. ct., p. 47
15 Ibid., p. 57
undertaking in the here and now through her having encountered Amida. Okaru’s experience in this manner is very particular and individual, yet this particular encounter possesses a universal value, which can be shared by all humankind.

Shinran in Chapter 5 of *Tannishô* says:

> As for me, Shinran, I have never said the nembutsu even once for the repose of my departed father and mother. For all sentient beings, without exception, have been our parents and brothers and sisters in the course of countless lives in many states of existence. On attaining Buddhahood after this present life, we can save every one of them.\(^{16}\)

The import of this statement is that the nembutsu is the act (practice) done for oneself but not for the sake of others, and that only the Buddha is able to save others. Since Shinran himself is a follower of Amida Buddha, he cannot transfer his merit to others as he is an ordinary person (*bombu*): he is the one who is to be saved by Amida Buddha. The act of the nembutsu is a subjective and individual matter; therefore, Shinran has never said the nembutsu for the sake of his departed father and mother.

One can assume that Shinran actually might have missed his father and mother in a spiritual or mental sense. But Shinran says the reason for not having said the nembutsu for his parents is that all sentient beings have been interrelated from time immemorial. This statement reveals universality itself like love for humanity. We have all been each other’s parents, brothers and sisters.

Shinran seems to be appealing to us questioning why we have to fight or hate each other. Shinran in his letter to Shōshin says:

> Those who feel uncertain of birth should say the nembutsu aspiring first for their own birth. Those who feel that their own birth is completely settled should, mindful of the Buddha’s benevolence, hold the nembutsu in their hearts and say it to respond in gratitude to that benevolence, with the wish, “May there be peace in this world, and may the Buddha’s teaching spread!”\(^{17}\)

\(^{16}\) *CWS* 1, p. 664.

Buddhism is particular in the world religions; through Buddha-Dharma peace in the world is sought, whose intent is to be shared by all mankind.

**Concluding Perspectives**

As particularity is defined as a certain position of the teaching that a religion claims, universality is something that can be shared and appreciated by all humankind in the religion as a common ground of certain values, such as peace, equality or love. This paper then, through an examination of Shinran’s teachings mainly from *Tannishô*, defines the words particularity and universality in the following manner: particularity is an individual expression of universality while universality manifests in particularity. After having met Hōnen, Shinran encountered Amida Buddha, the Buddha categorized as *sambhōga-kaya* or the fulfilled body of *buddha*. Amida is particular, and is universal in terms of representing the whole universe of existence—the merging of *Amitābha* or Infinite Light (space) and *Amitāyus* or Infinite Life (time), representing Wisdom and Compassion respectively. As Amida Buddha is a particular Buddha to Shinran, Shinran took Amida subjectively and existentially and became awakened through his experience of shinjin, which is universal in terms of the realization of Buddha-Dharma. Without taking a particular position, universality cannot be revealed.

A problem arises, however, when one absolutizes the creed of one’s religion and one’s experience through it with the exclusion of other value systems. Truth-claiming or absolutization of a religion is needed at one point while one is undergoing religious experience in a particular and individual norm. If it exceeds its limit and denies or even abuses others, however, coexistence of humankind in the world becomes very difficult. Especially living in this technologically highly-developed modern world, one witnesses many devastating conflicts or confrontations taking place between nations and races today. The problems have been here with us since the beginning of human history, but the extent or degree of damage has been increased tremendously.

Absolutization is needed at some point in the course of seeking the path, yet objectifying or relativizing “one’s own” understanding is also important and needed today. Without universality, particularity is merely a matter of one’s one-sided claim. One then needs to conquer the exclusiveness of other value systems. Shinran says in Chapter 2 of *Tannishô*:

> Each of you has come to see me, crossing the borders of
more than ten provinces at the risk of your life, solely with
the intent of asking about the path to birth in the land of bliss. But if you imagine in me some special knowledge of a path to
birth other than the nembutsu or of scriptural writings that
teach it, you are greatly mistaken. If that is the case, since
there are many eminent scholars in the southern capital of
Nara or on Mount Hiei to the north, you would do better to
meet with them and inquire fully about the essentials for birth.
As for me, I simply accept and entrust myself to what my
revered teacher told me, “Just say the nembutsu and be saved
by Amida”: nothing else is involved.¹⁸

Particularity in the nembutsu is an individual expression or experience while
universality manifests in the particularity.¹⁹

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 662.
¹⁹ This paper was originally presented at the IASBS European District