



# Queering Trans(theo)phobia

## A Comparative Analysis between Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism and Roman Catholicism on Transgender Issues

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### Resumen

En este artículo busca crear un diálogo entre el budismo Jōdo Shinshū [de la Tierra Pura], la tradición católica romana, y las experiencias transgénero con el propósito de discernir los aspectos de cada tradición que perpetúan la violencia sistémicos y personal y aquellos aspectos que puede desafiar esa violencia. Las actitudes del budismo Shin hacia el matrimonio entre personas del mismo sexo y la ordenación se evalúan en términos de su actitud hacia el género, y cómo esto afecta a las cuestiones transgénero. Además, también se evalúan las declaraciones públicas de la Iglesia Católica Romana sobre los transgénero y otras cuestiones relacionadas. El diálogo evalúa aspectos potencial y mutuamente correctores de ambas tradiciones y sugiere pautas sobre aquello que el campo de la teología comparada, la teología de las religiones y el diálogo interreligioso pueden decir acerca de la violencia contra las personas transgénero, especialmente las mujeres trans.

**Palabras claves:** Asuntos transgénero, Budismo Jōdo Shinshū, Catolicismo Romano, violencia religiosa.

### Abstract

This article creates a dialogue between Jōdo Shinshū [Pure Land] Buddhism, the Roman Catholic tradition, and transgender experiences for the purpose of discerning aspects of each tradition that perpetuate systemic and personal violence and those aspects which can challenge that violence. Shin Buddhist attitudes towards same-sex marriage and ordination are evaluated in terms of what its attitude towards gender is, and how this affects transgender issues. In addition, Roman Catholic Church public statements concerning transgender and related issues are also evaluated. The dialogue evaluates potentially mutually corrective aspects of both traditions and suggest guidelines for what the field of comparative theology, theology of religions and interreligious dialogue can say about violence against transgender people, especially trans women.

**Keywords:** Transgender issues, Shin Buddhism, Roman Catholicism, religious violence.



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## Resumo

Este artigo cria um diálogo entre o budismo Jodo Shinshu [da Terra Pura], a tradição católica romana, e as experiências transgênero com o propósito de compreender os aspectos de cada tradição que perpetuam a violência sistêmica e pessoal e aqueles que podem desafiar essa violência. As atitudes do Shin budismo em relação ao casamento de pessoas do mesmo sexo e a ordenação são avaliadas em termos de como elas são na relação de gênero, e como isso afeta as questões transgênero. Além disso, as declarações públicas da Igreja Católica Romana sobre questões transgênero e afins também são avaliadas. O diálogo avalia aspectos potencialmente mutuamente corretivas de ambas as tradições e sugere diretrizes sobre o que o campo da teologia comparativa, da teologia das religiões e do diálogo inter-religioso podem dizer sobre a violência contra as pessoas transgênero, especialmente as mulheres trans.

**Palavras-chave:** Questões transgênero, Budismo Jodo Shinshu, Catolicismo Romano, violência religiosa.

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## Introduction

Transgender people, especially transgender women and transgender women of color, experience violence at a higher rate than national average. The National Center for Transgender Equality states that, «One in five transgender people in the U.S. have been refused a home or apartment, and more than one in ten have been evicted, because of their gender identity» (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2011). In terms of employment, «More than one in four transgender adults have lost at least one job due to bias, and more than three-fourths have experienced some form of workplace discrimination» (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2011). This lack of access to the economy creates for many trans women, most especially trans women of color, to participate in sex work. Janet Mock (2014) writes:

A leading factor that makes young trans women of color, like myself, more likely to engage in survival sex work is economic hardship. Family rejection and hostile, unwelcoming school environments can push a trans girl to leave these spaces, and anti-trans bias coupled with racism and misogyny and a lack of education heightens joblessness.

If Kwok Pui-lan (2012) says that, «The challenge of gender is the challenge of otherness, in that a woman in dialogue might be doubly other, if she is a woman of another faith in a gathering consisting predominantly of men» (31-22), then it seems that transgender is the challenge for otherness within otherness. It is important, in the face of this sort of violence, to ask about the ways in which religions have perpetuated violence against transgender people.

The purpose of this article is to place transgender experiences in dialogue with Jōdo Shinshū — a Japanese branch of Mahāyāna Buddhism inscribed in the Pure Land Tradition — and Roman Catholicism in order to bring out aspects of both religious traditions that can aid transgender people and aspects which perpetuate the systemic violence that transgender people face. Transgender experiences are incredibly diverse, and the political discussions taking place online, in community spaces, and in the academy are incredibly diverse and difficult to pin down. In



general, when I talk about transgender experiences I am specifically referring to the challenges that our lives pose to myths that our religious traditions have internalized about gender. The spectre of violence will also be a major focus, though I realize that by reducing our experiences to violence and challenges the rich diversity of transgender life is lost. Since this is still a field in its infancy, this sort of reduction seems to me to be acceptable in the hope that further studies can expand on what the transgender experience is.

Specifically, in my analysis I discuss ordination and marriage. Because Jōdo Shinshū is not as explicit about transgender issues as the Roman Catholic Church, I have attempted to use issues relating to same sex marriage and ordination of women as a way of understanding the way Jōdo Shinshū views gender. As a way of introduction, as my use of «our» should indicate I am myself transgender. The reality of my existence as a transgender woman is the main impetus for this article. The fact that my experience as a Roman Catholic has led me to study and participate in Jōdo Shinshū due to my perception that this branch of Buddhism is more open to my experience as a transgender woman is why I have chosen Roman Catholicism and Jōdo Shinshū as subjects of my comparative analysis. Although I pursue to discuss Jōdo Shinshū in general, at times it is necessary to discuss its North American branch, the Buddhist Churches of America (hereinafter also cited as BCA) separately. Additionally, I make references to Shin or Shin Buddhism, which are other ways to refer to Jōdo Shinshū in English. Additionally, because I am myself Roman Catholic, I use some examples from my own experiences as a Roman Catholic transgender woman. Ultimately, I hope to demonstrate that while both traditions have potential to combat transgender discrimination and violence, they have failed to articulate this or even considered it a worthy objective.

This article is composed of three main sections. The first section discusses Jōdo Shinshū approaches to same-sex marriage and ordination, the second discusses Roman Catholic approaches to marriage, ordination, and explicit teachings regarding transgender individuals, and the third compares Roman Catholic and Jōdo Shinshū responses in light of transgender experiences. In that third section I show that, «Each religion, challenged by the other



religion's unique approach to the liberationist aspiration of the poor [...] discovers and renames itself in its specificity in response to the other approaches,» (Pieris, 1996: 161). The focus on transgender individuals will help demonstrate that each tradition has its own resources for combatting the violence which transgender individuals face.

The goal is to find ways in which each religion can help the other to find these resources and build on them in order to challenge violence, specifically violence against transgender people. This is not be a process that begins and ends in this article, nor it is limited only to Jōdo Shinshū and Roman Catholicism. Instead, the process will hopefully be an ongoing one, one in which transgender people from each religion can bring their traditions into dialogue with each other focused on transgender needs. Kwok Pui-lan (2012) said that,

As we look at the events and publications on dialogue by the World Council of Churches and the Vatican, or at various gatherings of the Parliament of World Religions, we can find that gender was not an integral part of conversation (31).

As before, this is especially true for transgender issues. We should claim this space for ourselves, in order to have our issues discussed by the religious bodies that often join in attacking us. We need religion to take responsibility for the violence it helps to justify.

## **Jōdo Shinshū and Trans Identities**

There is at least one recorded official statement concerning transgender people as they relate to marriage in Jōdo Shinshū . In April 2000, a minister was asked by two women, one of whom was both a member of his congregation and a male to female transsexual. Reverend Masao Kodani was concerned and wanted to receive confirmation that this was appropriate. Jeff Wilson (2012) writes:



The Kangaku (highest doctrinal experts) of Nishi Honganji replied that there was no reason for concern. So long as the couple had a legitimate reason to seek a Buddhist service, and the event was not merely a publicity stunt, they had no objections to marriages involving same-sex couples and/or transsexuals. Given that Nishi Honganji is the headquarters for more than 10,000 affiliated Shin temples throughout the world, this is an important statement to note (39).

It seems that the most relevant part of this decision is that there is no objection about same sex couples or transgender people; marriage is still valid so long as the participants have a legitimate desire for marriage. However, it is difficult to extrapolate a general statement on transgender identities from this statement. For one thing, marriage is not usually a central issue when discussing transgender issues. Admittedly it is a difficult topic, considering the laws are seemingly arbitrary. If a married man begins to identify as a woman and transition, she is now in a same-sex marriage. To put it simply, the problem is whether or not a transgender individual's gender is validated in the ceremony. It can be definitively stated that transgender people are able to participate in marriage. The fact that same-sex marriage is permissible as well seems to either indicate that gender is not the source of validity for marriage or that transgender identities are specifically acknowledged and respected. Jeff Wilson (2012) states that, «[t]he only change to the ceremony was the use of the word 'spouse' instead of 'husband and wife'» (39), which seems to indicate the former. Laverne Cox, a transgender actress and activist, said that, «I've come to understand that when a trans woman is called a man that is an act of violence» (*Bluestockings Magazine*, 2014). In many ways, misgendering is an act of violence which justifies greater violence, so it is essential that rituals relating to marriage involving transgender individuals be precise in their language.

From here, it is necessary — due to a lack of information —, to discuss issues facing women in general in Jōdo Shinshū and extrapolate from there what it means for transgender people. When it comes to discussing Jōdo Shinshū's relationship with women, it



is important to note that what separated Shinran<sup>1</sup> from other monks of his era was that he was openly married and incorporated married life into his teachings. Simone Heidegger says that, «An early source assigns to Shinran's wife, Eshinni, her own disciples. Today it is also assumed that, at least temporarily, Shinran and Eshinni spread the Shin Buddhist teachings together» (Heidegger, 2010: 166). Temple structure evolved out of this relationship between Shinran, Eshinni, and spreading the teachings of Shin Buddhism. Heidegger (2010) also says,

[...] a hierarchal structure in the division of roles emerged early on (although at the beginning it seems to have been less developed than in later times). Accordingly, the husband and wife who managed a temple came to be known as *bozu*, “temple master,” or “temple chief priest,” and *bomori*, “temple guardian, respectively [...]. While *bozu* [...] were ordained priests, *bomori*, “temple guardians,” seem to have been usually lay women whose role was clearly defined in the course of time as assistants to their husbands (167).

Thus, it can be said that there exists, at least in the history of the tradition, a sense of gender essentialism. Women are relegated to certain roles in the structure of temples by nature of their gender. This has remained part of the Jōdo Shinshū tradition:

Until 1991 in the Otani-ha there was a regulation which restricted the administration of a temple exclusively to the masculine gender. From 1942 onwards women could receive ordination as priests, and perform basic priestly activities in substitution of, or assistance to, the temple chief priest. However, in the Otani-ha, if there were no sons in a temple family, a daughter of a chief priest had to marry a man who was prepared to become a priest, and who assumed the role of successor to the temple chief priest (Heidegger, 2010: 168).

It was possible in any Jōdo Shinshū Honganji-ha — the largest Pure Land Buddhist association — for a woman to succeed a temple, but this only occurred if there were no men capable of leading it. Heidegger notes that, «Therefore, the percentage of

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<sup>1</sup> Shinran (1173–1263) is the founder of Jodo Shinshu Buddhism (Dobbins, 2004: 766).



women chief priests in 1995 was only 2%» (Heidegger, 168) It should be noted that according to Jessica Starling (2013), «[...] a few scholars have speculated that congregational wives in the Shinshu likely acted as priest in the case of the husband's absence or premature death» (277).

This sort of gender essentialism has many negative consequences for women in general, but in context it can be difficult for transgender people especially. Who counts as a man and who counts as a woman? It is not clear in context if transgender people would have had difficulty being integrated into Jōdo Shinshū life as the gender they identify as, but it seems clear that it would need to be argued that a transgender man could head a temple or that a transgender woman could be a temple wife. Linking temple leadership to gender means that there is some way of understanding gender as being intrinsic to a person, at least in this life. Starling (2013) says:

Although women in early Buddhism had their own difficulties in achieving soteriological parity with men, in Mahayana Buddhism, which has dominated the religious landscape of East Asia, it was believed that women could not become Buddhas (the religious goal of the Mahayana) in their own bodies (277).

In this sense, Jōdo Shinshū was not very different from other forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism. In Shin soteriology, it is believed that humans are not capable of achieving Nirvana on their own. The only way anyone, women or men, could enter the Pure Land was because of Amida's Primal Vow. Women's salvation, however, was described as being the example of Amida's compassion. The mechanism in which this took place, however, was in the woman's transformation into a man in the Pure Land (Starling, 2013: 277-278). In the 1980s, however,

[...] female attendees of doctrinal workshops at Nishi Honganji repeatedly asked instructors to justify the continued reference to the mechanism of 'a woman's transformation into a man' (*kenjo nanshi*) in the sect's educational materials and official funeral liturgy for women. As a result, passages that referred to this now controversial doctrinal concept were removed (Starling, 2013: 279).



What this shows is several interesting points. For one, gender is considered to be a part of the human person, even in reference to rebirth in the Pure Land. Women were thought to require a special salvation, which means that gender is essential to the teachings. This sort of gender essentialism is present, of course, in temple structures as previously mentioned but here they are given even more immediate worth. The second interesting point is that regardless of women's current deprived condition, rebirth in the Pure Land is possible and requires a sort of gender crossing. It would be ridiculous to say that this is related to transgender identities, especially since it specifically affects only women. However, it does point to an idea that gender, while having an essential characteristic, is not necessarily fully immutable. What is perhaps most important, though, is that the Shin tradition listened to the concerns of these women, and perhaps in part due to national trends, shows a willingness to correct previous teachings that have proven to be harmful. This sort of self-correcting nature is necessary when examining transgender identities, because it means that the influence of transgender people — lay and, potentially, priest — could bring about a more full understanding of transgender needs.

While these points help to contextualize Jōdo Shinshū's potential views of transgender people, it is important also to discuss what is central to Shin Buddhist teachings: the primal vow of the Amida Buddha. Perhaps no other avenue could better illustrate how transgender Shin Buddhists might navigate their religious identifies alongside their gender. According to Shinran,

In reflecting on the ocean of great *shinjin*, I realize that there is no discrimination between noble and humble or black-robed monks and white-robed laity, no differentiation between man and woman, old and young. The amount of evil one has committed is not considered, the duration of any performance of religious practice is of no concern [...] it is simply *shinjin*, that is inconceivable, inexplicable, and indescribable (Amustutz, 2008: 36, cited by Starling, 2013, 279-280).



While this egalitarian stance was not necessarily echoed by later contributors to Shin Buddhism, this does demonstrate that in Shin Buddhism there is the idea that there is some parity in discussing gender. It did not matter to Shinran whether one is man or woman because either way, one is fundamentally unable to achieve the ends of Buddhist practice. Thus, gender is one of many different polarities in premodern Japan that is seen as being irrelevant; religious practice, ordination, and age are also considered to be pointless in discussing someone's ability to achieve enlightenment. This sort of gender blindness can be both helpful and hurtful. While it can create some sense of parity between men and women practitioners of Jōdo Shinshū, and thus be open to transgender practitioners, it does fail to address issues of women in society. If gender is considered irrelevant to practice, it can be difficult to bring that sort of attitude into one's lived experience of gender. Regardless, the reality that Shin Buddhism teaches is that humans are completely incapable in this day and age to achieve on their own the ends of Buddhist practice. This is the reality that requires the Primal Vow of the Amida Buddha.

The Primal Vow is considered to be the 18<sup>th</sup> vow in the Sutra on the Buddha of Infinite Life, which reads,

If, when I attain buddhahood, sentient beings in the lands of the ten directions who sincerely and joyfully entrust themselves to me, desire to be born in my land, and think of me even ten times should not be born there, may I not attain perfect enlightenment (Inagaki, 2003: 14).

To understand precisely how this is understood, I turn to a description of this vow by Takamaro Shigaraki, «Let me recast this Vow into more personal terms: if I do not become a buddha, then Amida will not become a buddha [...]. My attainment of buddhahood and Amida's attainment of buddhahood are simultaneously and mutually identical events» (Shigaraki, 2013: 37). Thus it can be said that the solution to humanity's incapacity to achieve anything is the vow by Amida to bring all who call on him to his Pure Land. This connection is guaranteed, because it is linked to his enlightenment. In order for humanity to achieve enlightenment, they must rely on the Amida Buddha. In order for Amida to be a Buddha, he must bring all humans to enlightenment.



Thus, in *shinjin*<sup>2</sup> there is no differentiation between men and women. While there might be some aspects of Shin teachings which refer to women's inability to be reborn in the Pure Land as women, the main point seems to be that no one, by their own merit, is capable of achieving this. To predict what these concepts mean for transgender people especially, it is necessary to look at how this teaching could have contributed to BCA's acceptance and performance of same sex marriages.

Jeff Wilson, discussing why BCA has affirmed same sex relationships at a time when other Buddhist sects and Christian churches have not, lays out several doctrinal reasons why. Focusing on the Primal Vow in this article, I would like to quote Wilson (2013) when he says,

In the interpretation favored in the West, the belief that Amida saves all beings without exception means Jodo Shinshu leans in an egalitarian direction, within which no group has the right to judge another—more to the point, all people are saved together in the universal embrace of Amida Buddha, and therefore many ministers teach that it is the duty of Buddhists to always look for ways to become more inclusive and supportive of one another (52).

Thus, in western Shin Buddhism, the Primal Vow is one that is meant to speak towards inclusion and a shared sense of tolerance. All are equal in the eyes of Amida, and so it does not matter whether one is a woman or a man, gay or straight, and likely it does not matter if one is transgender or cisgender, Amida's Primal Vow points to radical inclusion and an imperative to see oneself as equal with all people regardless of circumstances. William Briones (2008) has said,

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<sup>2</sup> *Shinjin* is a very important concept in Shin Buddhism, often translated as «faith.» Takayama (2000) explains that, «Shinran showed by his explanation of this term an important clue to his understanding of *shinjin* as the mind that is single. *Shinjin*, free of double-mindedness, is the true cause of birth in the pure fulfilled land» (127).



Amida's Primal Vow does not discriminate between the young and old, good and evil [...] the rich and poor, Japanese and American, Black and White, gay and straight [...] if it doesn't include them [...] there can be no meaning to Amida's salvation. It is within Amida's Primal Vow we become aware of the intimate interconnectedness with others. To truly realize this interdependence, one can only manifest a profound sense of responsibility for our fellow human beings (1-2, 4).

Thus it can be said that the interpretation of the Primal Vow of the Buddha has been used to legitimize a liberal tolerance for diversity, including sexual diversity. We can see, then, that in practice the Primal Vow of the Amida Buddha, taken with Shin teachings of human depravity, have been deployed as ways to understand issues of race and sexuality. The creative deployment of doctrinal concepts in this way can give some clue as to how Shin Buddhists would officially, and potentially privately, respond to transgender people.

In sum, while it is not explicitly clear what teachings, if any, Jōdo Shinshū in general and Buddhist Churches of America in particular have concerning transgender identities, it seems clear that we can deduce what these teachings would probably be. While gender seems to have been an important part of the division of roles in premodern and modern Shin Buddhism, it seems that these constructions have come under close scrutiny by women and women's organizations from the 80s onwards. A national campaign for women's equality has found equivalent success in Jōdo Shinshū, so that it seems that women's influence in Shin Buddhism has been a powerful force for reform.

In addition, the West has interpreted the Primal Vow and the teaching of universal human depravity to mean that there should be explicit support for gay couples in Shin Buddhism. Taking into account the way that Shin Buddhism has self-corrected issues with gender, as well as the way in which the teachings have been deployed to discuss sexuality (and, interestingly, race and nationality), it seems clear that while there might not be a completely accurate understanding of transgender, Shin Buddhism would still embrace those who are transgender and likely would not require those with transgender identities to refrain from



transitioning (or reverse transition) as some Christian churches have. Transgender people would likely see Amida as a source of legitimation, someone for whom their gender does.

## Roman Catholicism and Trans Identities

In this section, I wish to discuss Roman Catholic issues with marriage and ordination for transgender people. Unlike Jōdo Shinshū, there are plenty of statements about transsexuality and gender identities. As I mentioned earlier, I will also give some of my own impressions as a transgender Roman Catholic in an attempt to examine from a more personal place these issues. To begin with, I want to look at a 2003 news report about Vatican teachings on transgender individuals. It states that:

After years of study, the Vatican's doctrinal congregation has sent church leaders a confidential document concluding that “sex-change” procedures do not change a person's gender in the eyes of the church. Consequently, the document instructs bishops never to alter the sex listed in parish baptismal records and says Catholics who have undergone “sex-change” procedures are not eligible to marry, be ordained to the priesthood or enter religious life, according to a source familiar with the text (Norton, 2003).

The Roman Catholic Church, then, blatantly denies the reality experienced by transgender people, instead pathologizing us as mentally ill and condemning our existence. Where Jōdo Shinshū might not make explicit that transgender people are the gender they identify as, the Roman Catholic Church explicitly denies our lived reality. In fact, because transgender people are not able to be ordained, enter the religious life, or be married it can be said that the church does not, in fact, consider us to be the gender we were assigned at birth. Instead, we are in a place where we are too much like men for the religious sisterhood and too much like women for the priesthood. Unable to be priests, nuns, married, or have our names recognized makes participation in Roman Catholic liturgy difficult. It is difficult to even say if transgender individuals who live as the gender they self-identify are able to receive communion.



Since changing one's sex is considered to be sinful, it seems that transgender individuals would not be able to receive communion unless they start living as the gender they were assigned at birth, though this is not made explicitly known to the public and is likely not applied consistently internationally. The fact that the current standards of care for transsexual patients is hormone replacement therapy followed by cosmetic and necessary surgeries to complete what each person feels is necessary for them to be comfortable in their own bodies seems to escape the Vatican. By condemning these potentially lifesaving procedures, the Roman Catholic Church enacts social violence against transgender people.

This is clear in a more recent statement on the issue of gender given by pope emeritus Benedict XVI. Discussing issues concerning the family, he makes mention of a French rabbi who quotes Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that woman is created, not born. Disputing this idea as a fundamental destruction of what he believes to be the proper order of creation, Benedict (2012) says,

The words of the creation account: "male and female he created them" (Gen 1:27) no longer apply. No, what applies now is this: it was not God who created them male and female – hitherto society did this, now we decide for ourselves. Man and woman as created realities, as the nature of the human being, no longer exist. Man calls his nature into question.

Benedict opposes the social construction theory of gender, which has in many ways displaced his own biblical view of gender essentialism. Men are born men and women are born women and each has their own nature, never to be mixed. This statement has many implications for various aspects of Roman Catholic life, perhaps most especially for the ordination of women, but I would like to remain within the topic of transgender identities. He asserts that we are who we are because we are born that way; our very biology is our constant. Chromosomes, genitalia (though not including intersex ones, intersex people are not necessarily included in these discussions), and the bible have more to say about whether you are a man or a woman than you can. If you do not see things that way, then it is because you are mentally ill and should receive counseling to return to the true path that God has set out for you. Needless to say, this sort of attitude informs the



ways in which society as a whole views transgender people. While it is not the only source of this attitude, the fact that the Roman Catholic Church's stance on transgender people supports the systems of violence against transgender people should be a cause for reflection on the part of the Holy See.

To combat this attitude, which is not exclusive to Roman Catholicism, many transgender theologians re-read the Holy Scriptures, tradition, and dogmas such as Christology from their lives as transgender people and reconstitute them in trans-affirming ways. In this article I focus on what transgender people say about Christ and God specifically, leaving issues of scripture to theologians better equipped for biblical analysis. In reference to Christ, Justin Tanis (2003) states:

Just as we need to free ourselves from our rigid gender constructs, so too do we need to free Christ from our limited and limiting understanding of Christ. By rearticulating Christ, we are able to see ourselves in Christ and Christ within ourselves. This approach is a critical component of a movement for spiritual liberation. Christ becomes then the spiritual force behind liberation, rather than the right-wing vision of Jesus as the enforcer of social norms and limitations (141).

In order for transgender people to find themselves in Christ, it is necessary to open up our understanding of Christ. Christ cannot, for us, be the same as Christ is for the pope; Christ does not call us to a limited sense of gender, but to expand upon it. By allowing ourselves to rename Christ according to our own experiences, it is possible for us to find Christ not as a source of condemnation as Christ is used by the «right wing» and by the androcentric hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church. Along these lines, Tanis (2013) writes about Christ that,

Within his body, he contains both finite life and eternal life, both death and resurrection, in the way that transgendered people embody both male and female. The holiness of Christ is that he is both/and, both human and divine, both mortal and eternal (142).



Tanis links his own experience of being transgender, as well as the experience of many transgender people, to the existence of Christ. Christ's two natures as divine and human are used as a metaphor for crossing gender boundaries, and thus Christ is seen not as someone who condemns the transgender but as one who, fundamentally, has experienced the same sort of boundary crossing. In at least one sense, Christ is transgender.

Virginia Ramey Mollenkott (2001), though not herself transgender in ways most people would consider, has written a slightly different way of understanding Christ. She writes,

Whatever the reason, any lack of solidarity bothers me because it belies the all-inclusiveness of Jesus the Christ, who according to Matthew 5:43-48 taught us to include even our worst enemies in our love and practical concern (39).

Speaking in reference to the lack of inclusion of transgender people in queer activism at the time, Mollenkott hits on a similar theme as Jōdo Shinshū. Christ is, for her, a principle of inclusion. Everyone from our worst enemies to our friends and family are to be included in our community, because that is the teaching that Jesus gave us. Therefore, it makes no sense to not include transgender people because regardless of how one might feel about us, we are still people and therefore called by Christ to full participation. While Mollenkott also argues that transgender people are able to participate in the Christian life and should be included in society as they are, this passage still points to an idea about the necessity of inclusion in religion. Tanis (2000) also has a similar argument.

We worship God when we hold in reverence the wonders of God's creation [...]. This applies not only to galaxies and the universe but also to what we see around us every day [...]. What if we welcomed them all? How would it affect our churches and our world if our faith celebrated all this? Or if we exploded the barriers between us? We do this, I firmly believe it, but have we taken the next step of rejoicing in our queerness, our differences, our abilities to transform our bodies, minds, and souls? (52).



This sort of radical inclusion that Tanis is talking about goes beyond, in a sense, mere inclusion that Mollenkott discussed and into a more explicitly affirming place. Diversity, in Tanis' view, is a window to understanding God's own multiplicity, which reflects our own. The transgender experience, like the experience of blackness and cisgender women's experience, is a window to understanding God's own divine nature. Transgender people and our lives are thus ways to understand God that looks beyond rote reading of biblical or theological texts and seeks to be a dynamic faith. It is a faith that, essentially, seeks continual correction from the lives of those who worship and those who do not.

Before moving on to an analysis of the points of comparison between Jōdo Shinshū, Amida, Christianity, and Christ, I would like to briefly state how I as a transgender Roman Catholic have reinterpreted Jesus as accepting of my gender identity and what this means for my relationship with the Roman Catholic Church. For a variety of reasons that I do not wish to go into at the moment, I have come to a similar conclusion as Tanis and Mollenkott. Christ exists for the poor and the oppressed, and transgender men and women are among the poorest populations in the world and who experience violence more than most other populations. When race and nationality are added in, the transgender experience mirrors the experience of most poor and oppressed people in general, though in many ways more so. Because of Christ's identification with the poor and the oppressed, it makes sense to me that Christ would be present in trans men and women's lives and struggles. Christ intimately understands what it feels like when you are subject to stares, harassment, unemployment, homelessness, rape, assault, and too often murder.

In many ways, Christ and Christa — the feminist image of Christ — are windows to my own transgender experience of male to female. As for what this means for the church, I have to admit that in many ways I feel that I leave the church behind. I cannot be fully «out» with the church, or else I risk alienation and condemnation. Thus, I have not gone to mass in over two years, and likely will not even after what I consider to be necessary feminization surgeries. For me, Christology has replaced ecclesiology. This sort of internalization of the positive aspects of the Roman Catholicism I have as part of who I am is, in many ways, similar to the ways in



which Shin Buddhism can be understood and deployed to promote the lived realities of transgender people. In this next section, I will try to compare the deficiencies in both Shin Buddhism and Catholicism, as well as the strengths each possess. In the end, both Catholicism and Jodo Shinshu can be redeployed in a way that confronts the systemic violence against transgender people that exists in our society.

## What does this mean?

As I mentioned at the start of this article, transgender people face violence at levels higher than society at large. In 2013, there were 238 reported murders of trans people from across the globe (TVT research project, 2013). In August of 2013, an African-American trans woman named Islan Nettles was beaten in Harlem when her assailant found out she was transgender. She died a week later after being taken off life support. The man who murdered her has not been arrested, nor has the police made any real attempt to do so (Schwartz, 2013). Referring to the Transgender Day of Remembrance, Janet Mock (2013) wrote that, «Often times the only time our culture recognizes or shifts their focus on trans women of color, specifically, is in relation to violence, trauma and death.» To bring this back into the focus of the article, Andrea Quintero was a homeless transgender woman in Rome. A faithful Roman Catholic and an immigrant from Colombia, she was given a Roman Catholic funeral by a group of Jesuits after she died. What is noteworthy is that these Jesuits referred to Andrea as a woman throughout the funeral (McLaughlin, 2014).

Why is it that, in some cases, transgender women, especially transgender women of color, are only recognized when they are murdered? The fact that Andrea was able to be recognized in death begs the question; why could she not be recognized in life? In what ways do the current teachings of Roman Catholicism perpetuate transgender violence? Shin Buddhism is mostly silent on these issues, but in practice they seem to support the inclusion of transgender people in worship; is this response appropriate in the face of violence and death?



It seems obvious that the Roman Catholic attitude to transgender people perpetuate violence, especially against the most vulnerable transgender populations. By denying our gender identity and referring to us as mentally ill, or otherwise incapable of participating in Roman Catholicism without denying ourselves, the church perpetuates the idea that transgender people are not «really» the gender they present themselves as. This is the basis for much of the violence that we experience, as I mentioned earlier. However, while this is a very clear cut case in which the Roman Catholic Church has not incorporated transgender voices into its theological and social worldviews, this does not mean that the Shin Buddhist views are somehow the model. While the Roman Catholic Church outright denies transgender identity, Jōdo Shinshū does not strongly uphold it. When it comes to transgender issues and Jōdo Shinshū, it is true that transgender people can more freely practice Buddhism, but our experience of violence is not necessarily understood or advocated for. In a survey of women in the BCA conducted by Patricia Kanaya Usuki (2005), responses were placed in six categories, three of which were:

Those who felt comfortable with the traditional paradigm of distinct duties and roles for men and for women, which were termed ‘separate but equal.’ Most of the respondents in this group were in their seventies and eighties [...]. Those who noted that women, mostly Sansei, now fill leadership positions in temples, at the district level, and on the BCA National Board. This is a relatively new phenomenon that began in the last decade and is gradually gaining acceptance [...]. Those who maintained that Japanese socio-cultural values, including patriarchal attitudes toward women, still exerted a strong influence in the temple, whether by “older Niseis,”<sup>3</sup> or by ministers from Japan (165).

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<sup>3</sup> The Japanese term *Nisei* means «second generation,» from *ni* (two) and *sei* (generation). Although Japanese terms do not form plural by adding an «s,» many descendants in the West tend to add the «s» in order to form a plural like in this quotation.



What this demonstrates is that, even among Japanese American members of the Buddhist Churches of America, there is a large divide in attitudes about women's role within the temple and within society. While women are able to take part in leadership positions and have been making slow progress to some sort of gender parity, there still exist attitudes among older members that this is inappropriate. Thus, not only is it not likely that organization around gender, especially transgender issues, would be successful, there is no reason to believe that the attitude towards transgender people predicted earlier in the article would apply to all Jōdo Shinshū temples throughout the world. What this means is that both the Roman Catholic Church and Shin Buddhism fail to incorporate transgender issues at the institutional level. While the Roman Catholic Church can be called an active participant in the demonization of transgender people, especially transgender women, and thus actively participating in social and physical violence, Shin Buddhism can be said to be passively contributing to the same culture of violence. However, this does not mean that Roman Catholicism and Jōdo Shinshū have to remain in this state. Both Roman Catholicism and Jōdo Shinshū have aspects to their traditions that can be used to promote activism against this violence.

As I discussed earlier, the Jōdo Shinshū concept of the Primal Vow can render gender identity as a non-issue when it comes to worship. While this is not necessarily the best for activism, it does present a more accommodating view of gender than the Roman Catholic Church's current view. However, there exists within the scripture a tradition that can have a similar effect. In Galatians, Paul states that, «There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise» (Gal 3.28–9 NRSV).

In discussing this passage, Justin Tanis (2003) says, «In Christ, we are not to create categories in which some have power, influence, and privilege while others do not [...]. Rather, all would be welcome in the body of Christ» (80). What this passage emphasizes is that Christ erases boundaries that are created by humans. Gender, race, and all other social categories are erased through Christ. For transgender people, this would mean that there



is no need to live as your assigned gender, because in Christ gender does not exist. While this sort of attitude would potentially cause the problem of forcing transgender people to «let go» of gender before cisgender (non-transgender) people do, the potential for liberation remains strong.

In Jōdo Shinshū, the Primal Vow has a similar sort of connotation; it does not matter who it is that calls on Amida. While this application is not necessarily clear or consistent in Jōdo Shinshū, it seems clear that Roman Catholicism has within it the potential to emphasize a similar teaching. This could be a first step towards repudiating previous teachings which contributed to the marginalization and victimization of transgender people. Of course, stating that gender and race are no longer issues within Christ can lead to a sort of «colorblind» and «genderblind» way of looking at issues and some of that can be seen from Jōdo Shinshū. However, Catholicism has a tradition that emphasizes doing justice, and this tradition can be creatively deployed once transgender issues are no longer seen as «sinful» or otherwise deviant.

Since Pope Leo XIII, the Roman Catholic Church has made explicit social teachings that have been referred to as Roman Catholic Social Teaching. In *Rerum Novarum* (1891), Pope Leo XIII addressed specific issues that people faced in those times. Specifically, the encyclical was focused on issues concerning wages and the rights of workers. He wrote,

To defraud any one of wages that are his due is a great crime which cries to the avenging anger of Heaven [...]. The rich must religiously refrain from cutting down the workmen's earnings [...] because the laboring man is, as a rule, weak and unprotected [...].

Pope Leo's main thesis is that people have the right to own property, and that workers should be paid a wage which allows them to live and thrive. *Rerum Novarum* is concerned with preserving the lives and dignity of workers, while maintaining the right of business owners to own property and maintain a business.



This focus on the relationship between the rich and the poor, with an emphasis on protecting the powerless from the powerful, has continued on through to our current pope, Francis. In his 2013 apostolic exhortation, Francis (2013) writes, «Just as the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say “thou shalt not” to an economy of exclusion and inequality.» Furthering his theme of exclusion, Pope Francis (2013) writes,

Exclusion ultimately has to do with what it means to be a part of the society in which we live; those excluded are no longer society’s underside or its fringes or its disenfranchised – they are no longer even a part of it. The excluded are not the ‘exploited’ but the outcast, the ‘leftovers’

Here, Pope Francis expands upon the history of Roman Catholic Social teaching to talk about the ways in which our modern capitalist economy excludes many from the success of the few. These themes of relationship and exclusion, which these popes would not necessarily intend to refer to transgender people, can be especially powerful for us nonetheless.

If the Roman Catholic Church were to be inspired by Shin Buddhism’s primal vow, if the church were to re-read Galatians in the light of transgender experience, then it would realize that the sort of violence which transgender people face is a form of exploitation and exclusion. The economy of exclusion perfectly describes the economic experience most transgender people, especially women, face. Because of prejudice and a lack of legal protection, many are unemployed, harassed, and forced into an underground economy of sex work. Exclusion prevents many of us from achieving even a basic standard of living, and being transgender and a person of color makes escape from poverty extremely difficult, if not next to impossible. Bringing this commitment to the poor, the worker, and the exploited into a discussion of transgender issues would allow the Roman Catholic Church to take a more active role in protecting the lives of transgender people. What can this tradition of social activism provide for Shin Buddhism? Shin Buddhism has often been considered to be complicit with imperial power. Takamaro Shigaraki (2013) writes that,



The traditional notion of Shinjin's relationship with society was developed shortly after Shinran's death by Zonkaku [...] who was the third head priest of the Hongwanji. Zonkaku described the relationship between the Buddha-dharma (ultimate truth) and imperial laws (worldly truth) to be the same as that between two wheels of a cart or two wings of a bird. His position was that these two forms of law always depend upon and support one another [...]. For many years after, the Hongwanji organization became largely controlled by and subordinate to the ruling authorities and political system of Japan (123).

However, in the Meiji era there was an expansion of thinking. Shigaraki (2013) also wrote that:

It was at that time that a new doctrinal theme arose in Shin Buddhism that was referred to as 'the two truths: ultimate and worldly' [...]. Shin Buddhist studies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries offered a great range of scholarly theories regarding this theme (2013: 124).

I will focus here on one specific Meiji scholar, Takagi Kenmyo (2004), whose writing on socialism refutes the identification of Amida and *shinjin* with imperial laws and advocates for a renewed society which is concerned with the poor and common people. He begins this essay by framing his view of socialism, saying:

I think we need to reform the social system rapidly, and change the social structure completely from the ground up [...]. However, I consider socialism to be related much more deeply to religion than to politics. In proceeding to reform society, we have to, first of all, begin from our own spirituality (189).

Much like Pope Leo XIII, Kenmyo simultaneously distances himself from the rich in his era and from his socialist contemporaries by placing his political discourse in the form of a religious argument. However, unlike Leo XIII, Kenmyo is outspoken in his support for socialism as a proper ordering of society. In discussing the practice of the *nembutsu*,<sup>4</sup> Kenmyo (2004) writes that, «Even though it is working to provide peace

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<sup>4</sup> *Nembutsu* is the recital of *Namu Amida Butsu*, or the Name of Amida Buddha. It is a fundamental part of Shin Buddhist practice.



and comfort to intellectuals, scholars, government officials and the wealthy, Amida's main concern is with the common people» (189-190). Kenmyo's placement of the common people as Amida's primary concern is similar to Roman Catholic Social Teaching's primary orientation being the worker; this religious justification for socialism places Shin Buddhism as a defender not of the imperialist policies and the intellectuals, government officials, and wealthy but of the common people who are suffering. He also uses the *nembutsu* as a means of advocating pacifism. Kenmy (2004) writes that, «[...] I think that Namu Amida Butsu refers to peace and comfort as well as salvation and happiness provided equally to all. How can we misunderstand this Namu Amida Butsu as a command to subjugate the hated enemy?» (190). Kenmyo (2004) then goes on to mention another Shin Buddhist priest and scholar, Dr. Nanju, who advocates for soldiers to kill and die for their country (190).

This refutation of war and extension of Amida's «preferential option for the poor» — to borrow a phrase from Roman Catholic Social Teaching — beyond the borders of Japan is not only a powerful statement advocating for the poor, but a refutation of militarism and fascism. The point I am trying to make is not that Takagi Kenmyo is in some way a unique scholar in the history of Shin Buddhism, but that he represents a teaching that exists within Shin Buddhism that can be said to have comparable content as Roman Catholic Social Teaching. This is a tradition that Shin Buddhism can choose to emphasize, which would aid not only transgender people but all those who are poor and oppressed.

To conclude this section on comparison, I would say that both Jōdo Shinshū and Roman Catholicism have aspects to their traditions that enable the violence which transgender people experience every day. However, they also both have aspects to their traditions which can be utilized to advocate for transgender rights and to redress issues of injustice which society has perpetuated against transgender people. To restate a quotation from Aloysius Pieris (1996), «Each religion, challenged by the other religion's unique approach to the liberationist aspiration of the poor [...] discovers and renames itself in its specificity in response to the other approaches» (161).



By comparing the Shin Buddhist and Roman Catholic responses to transgender issues, it is possible to see the areas in which each faith tradition has a specific kind of approach to issues of injustice. The Shin Buddhist approach is focused on Amida's all-inclusive vow, which does not discriminate. The Roman Catholic approach is through advocacy and a focus on justice as a maintaining a relationship between the rich and the poor. By engaging these faith traditions with transgender life experience as a «third tradition,» it becomes possible to advocate for both faith traditions to learn from the other. Roman Catholicism can learn tolerance and acceptance from Shin Buddhism and Shin Buddhism can learn stronger advocacy for the poor.

This is obviously not to say that these traditions do not already exist, but that through the exchange it is possible to see aspects that have not been emphasized. If each faith tradition were to focus on justice for transgender people, it is possible not only that violence could be reduced but also that transgender people might be more comfortable participating in Roman Catholicism and Shin Buddhism.

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