

Biography as Interreligious Dialogue:

The Case of Modern Biographies on Shinran

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Abstract

This article discusses the possibility of reading biographies as interreligious dialogues. It focuses on Shinran and three modern biographies influenced by Christianity: Murata Tsutomu's *The True Biography of Shinran*, Ishimaru Gohei's *The Passion of Shinran*, and Kurata Hyakuzō's *The Priest and His Disciples*. Most of the previous research on religious biographies has addressed the question of the biography's historical adequacy or analysed the texts from the standpoint of the history of literature. However, there has been hardly any attempt to clarify the potential of biographies in the doctrinal discourse. This article contributes to this field of study by analysing the dialogical structure of biographies that extensively use the Christian language and refer to similarities within the development of both religious traditions. The three biographies contribute to the interreligious dialogue by describing Shinran's life in the context of a Christian background. This approach allows the reader to observe connections between thematised religions because the religious practice of Shinran in his life is a touchstone to prove the compatibility of the Jōdoshin Buddhist and Christian teachings. Murata's biography conducts interreligious dialogue through comparison. Ishimaru's narrator uses the Christian language to tell the story of Shinran's struggles. Kurata creates a new language and understanding of Jōdoshin Buddhist teachings that cannot be clearly assigned to either of the two religions. The article clarifies how biographies contribute to the interreligious dialogue and intrareligious discourse on doctrine.

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1. Introduction

The life of Shinran 親鸞 (1173–1262) has gained attention in a high number of contexts. It stands in the centre of the most crucial ceremony in Jōdoshin Buddhist practice—Hōonkō 報恩講 (Assembly to return in gratitude [Shinran’s] benevolence).¹ Shinran is one of the most recognised priests in biographical literature. He has also become the object of studies aiming to confirm the historicity of his biography. However, despite this relevance to academia and ritual practice, we can hardly observe equal importance in terms of approaching Shinran’s teachings. One reason for this problem is easy to conceive: biographies do not directly deal with doctrinal problems in most cases. However, because a biography is not only a chronology but creates a causality to connect the events of a person’s life, it makes usage of certain axiology.² At this level, the question of a biography’s author is irrelevant because it is the content of the narrator’s argument within the story, not the author’s motives, which must be the basis for analysing the message of the biography.

Another reason lies in the widespread concept that those interested in doctrinal questions should read texts discussing points of the teachings in the style of a treatise. This idea is further supported by the fact that reading a biography as a text discussing doctrine requires considerable prior knowledge. The research literature also reflects this tendency because most of it tries to clarify the historicity or the development of Shinran’s images in the context of the history of literature.³ This article takes the opposite approach

¹ The most prominent examples in the context of religious practice are Kakunyo’s 覚如 *Godenshō* 御伝鈔 (Essentials of the Life [of Shinran]) and Zonkaku’s 存覚 *Tandokumon* 嘆徳文 (Scripture to Praise the Virtues [of Shinran]).

² The point is not whether the biography is presented as a table or in sentences but where an author uses for example subordinating conjunctions such as “because” or “whereas.”

³ Although much research discusses the historical truth within Shinran biographies and clarifies the development of Shinran images, both approaches do not go beyond the study of history. In this context, the most notable works are Akamatsu, *Shinranden no kenkyū*; Imai, *Shinran no denshō to shijitsu*; En’ya,

and detaches the biographies of Shinran from history. This will allow us to use the biographies as a tool to discuss the teachings of Shinran. The condition for this reading is to conceive the biographies as fiction, thus facilitating uncovering new elements in this text genre.⁴ Based on this, I will discuss how biographies can contribute to the interreligious dialogue.

2. Interreligious Dialogue and Biographies of Shinran

Before beginning the analysis of the biographies, it is necessary to define the term “dialogue.” A dictionary defines it as “a formal discussion between two groups or countries, especially when trying to solve a problem, end a disagreement, etc.”⁵ The main point lies in the existence of a specific question. On this background, the parties compare their view on a topic and try together to “solve a problem.” In most cases, interreligious (or interfaith) dialogue means that two or more discussion participants share arguments on a specific topic derived from their religious standpoint.

My approach slightly differs from this structure because I do not want to focus on dialogues with multiple participants that one biography may include as part of its story. I want to consider the narrator as one participant and the characters - especially the protagonist - as another. The first standpoint appears in the shape of the biography’s language, whereas the content of the figures’ actions expresses the second standpoint. One simple example of such kind of interreligious dialogue can sound as follows: “Shinran was moved by the blessing that he surely will reach heaven.” The participants engaging in dialogue are not distinguishable. Therefore, my understanding of the term interreligious dialogue differs because it is a dialogical monologue that includes two or more positions. Moreover, as the example made clear, one standpoint often appears implicitly in the shape of a religious position expressed by Shinran’s figure. If we apply this to the example above, the sentence does not become a dialogue as such, but only if the reader anticipates the Buddhist terminology of kindness (*onkei* 恩恵) and Pure Land or Nirvana as (un)equal terms compared with blessing and heaven. Therefore, the author of such a biography needs to include both positions sufficiently in terms of content and rhetoric.

In the case of the biographies of Shinran, the above-mentioned problem of the dialogue is Shinran’s life and his struggles. Because the purpose of the dialogue is not simply to exchange information, the meaning of biography as dialogue cannot solely provide historical data about Shinran. Instead, his life serves as a means to discuss various problems he had as a religious thinker. Therefore, if we read biographies as a type of religious dialogue, the specific problem rarely appears in the title or subtitle of the text.

Katarareta Shinran; Taira, *Rekisho no naka ni miru Shinran*; and Matsuo, *Shirarezaru Shinran*. The two works that have a similar approach to this article are Umehara, *Shinran ‘yottsuo no nazo’ o toku*; and Sueki, *Shinran*.

⁴ For a detailed discussion of the possibility and method of connecting studies in biography and doctrine, see Rüsche, *Argumente des Heiligen*.

⁵ Turnbull, *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English*, “Dialogue,” 418.

Instead, the author addresses various topics by stressing their image of the characters - particularly the protagonist - in the novel. In this sense, a biography functions similar to a doctrinal treatise. The author expresses their interpretation of the teachings through the practice and daily life of the characters. Therefore, a biography can, on its own, contribute to the doctrinal discourse by clarifying aspects that tend to be overlooked in more abstract discussions of the teachings.

Notably, we cannot read every biography as interreligious dialogue. The question is, what are the two or more groups that represent the condition for dialogue? In this article, I want to understand dialogue as the use of terminology from a religious tradition that differs from the context of the thematised story. Therefore, in our case, the first dialogue partner is Shinran, his life, and the language of Pure Land Buddhism. The second partner is the narrator, who uses a non-Buddhist language, which is the vocabulary of Christianity in this article. Only the author of such a biography creates a dialogue where the dialogue partners are parts of the narrative. Such dialogues are conceivable from a macro perspective between Christianity and Buddhism and as intrabuddhist or even among Jōdoshin Buddhist dialogues.⁶ As I will discuss in the following, this approach to Shinran's life runs the risk of creating a new religion that is neither Christian nor Buddhist. However, the three examples show that a successive dialogue clarifies the similarities and differences between the two partners and can provide new insights into one's own tradition.

Among the many biographies on Shinran written until today, the novels and dramas from the late 19th and early 20th centuries are notable in the context of interreligious dialogue. However, we cannot maintain that the authors wrote the biographies with the motivation or consciousness to conduct a dialogue. Therefore, in this article, I do not refer to the putative motivations or biographies of the authors; however, my purpose is to conduct an intratextual analysis. The thesis of this article is not that the authors wrote their biographies to conduct a religious dialogue. I aim to maintain that their biographies are (unwittingly) cases of interreligious dialogue as long as we read them from the standpoint of doctrinal studies. Concerning biographies of Shinran before Christianity's strong impact, we can observe interreligious dialogue between Jōdoshin Buddhism and Shinto. This dialogue does not stand in the centre of these biographies. However, referring to Shinto within the biographies is a crucial sign of the self-consciousness of the Jōdoshin Buddhist community and the understanding of the teachings towards Shinto. Examples of such a dialogue between Jōdoshin Buddhism and Shinto are the *Godenshō* 御傳鈔 (Essentials of the Life [of Shinran]) and *Shinran shōnin eshiden* 親鸞聖人繪詞傳 (Illustrated Biography of the Saint Shinran).⁷

⁶ We also can call parts of the stories on wondrously excellent people (*myōkōninden* 妙好人伝) an intra Jōdoshin Buddhist dialogue since they thematise the two standpoints within the dispute “confusion [concerning] the three [types of] acting” (*sangō wakuran* 三業惑乱). See for example Shinshū Shiryō Kankōkai, *Taikei Shinshū Shiryō: Denkihen*. Vol. 8, *Myōkōninden*, 265.

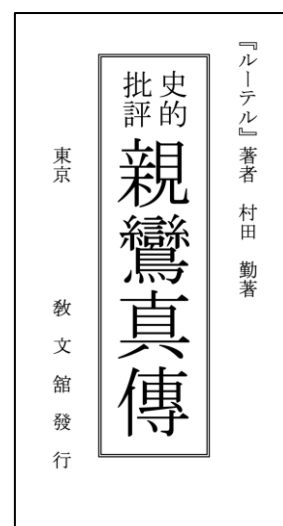
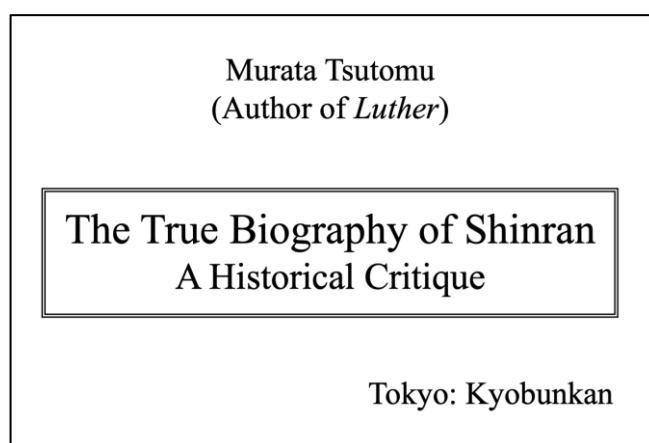
⁷ See Jōdo Shinshū Honganjiha Sōgō Kenkyūjo, *Jōdo Shinshū Seiten Zensho*, vol. 4, 97–102 and Shinshū Shiryō Kankōkai, *Taikei Shinshū Shiryō: Denkihen*. Vol. 1, *Shinranden*, 365/368.

In this article, I analyse the biographies *Shinran shinden* 親鸞真傳 (The True Biography of Shinran, first published in 1896), *Junan no Shinran* 受難の親鸞 (The Passion of Shinran, first published in 1922), and *Shukke to sono deshi* 出家とその弟子 (The Priest and his Disciples, first published in 1917) as examples of interreligious dialogues between Jōdoshin Buddhism and Christianity.⁸ Especially in the cases of *Junan no Shinran* and *Shukke to sono deshi*, we can hardly say that such a dialogue was the purpose of the authors when writing their texts. However, both authors describe the life of Shinran by extensively using the Christian language, whereby the dialogical context is automatically given. This article aims to clarify the intratextual tools to look at Shinran's teachings from a Christian perspective. Further, I want to discuss the potentials and limits of biographies as dialogue to determine how they can contribute to the doctrinal discourse in general.

3. Examples of Biographies as Interreligious Dialogue

3.1 Murata Tsutomu, *Shinran shinden*: Comparison as Dialogue

As the title of Murata's biography indicates, the author tries to account for the so-called historically true parts of Shinran's life. He informs the reader about this approach already on the front page which contains a "subtitle" in smaller letters that reads "a historical critique." Further, this page also includes an essential paratextual element—namely, the note that Murata is the author of a book titled "Luther." Therefore, the reader can expect a biography of Shinran that shows high awareness of Christianity and, presumably, will provide several comparative notes on the relationship between the religions that followed Luther (1483–1546) and Shinran.



⁸ I use the following editions of the biographies: Murata Tsutomu, *Shinran shinden* (1896), Ishimaru Gohei, *Junan no Shinran* (1922), and Kurata Hyakuzō, *Shukke to sono deshi* (1921). The biography written by Kurata is the only one that has also been translated. In this article, I use a reprint of the English translation by Glenn W. Shaw, first published in 1922. *Shukke to sono deshi* has also been translated into Dutch (*De priester en zijne discipelen*) in 1926 and French (*Le prêtre et ses disciples*) in 1932.

A perspective on Shinran's life, strongly influenced by Christianity, is apparent in the entire biography. The author is interested in providing a solid basis for discussing the facts of Shinran's biography. However, the point that the author provides many references to Luther shows that his interest in knowledge does not stop with simple historical data. In that case, no reference to the relationship between Luther and Shinran would be possible. Murata can pursue this latter interest only by referring to similarities in their teachings, which demands a distinct interpretation of the writings of these two figures. At this point, he does not argue on the level of historiography but theology. Here, Murata's text becomes interesting in the context of biography as interreligious dialogue. One example is the third chapter titled "The Origin of the Pure Land Sect and [Shinran's] Joining the Yoshimizu [Group],"⁹ which Murata writes as follows after an explanation of the achievements of the Pure Land monk Ryōnin 良忍 (1073–1132):

In other words, the Pure Land sect before Hōnen developed step by step in that way. But at that point, the time was ripe, the people's hearts got tense again due to [new] demands, and finally, it came to the appearance of a great religion through the efforts of Hōnen. The role of Hōnen is very similar to Luther's. Although there were a high number of minor Luthers before Luther, there was the need to wait for the grand talent of Luther so that the important mission of founding a new sect finally got done, visible to all people. [Similarly:] Although there were a high number of minor Hōnens before Hōnen, in the end, the great work of establishing the Pure Land sect got public due to the great virtues of Hōnen.¹⁰

We may describe Murata's comparison of Luther and Hōnen 法然 (1133–1212) as directed to the historical formation of the two sects and the function Luther and Hōnen played in this context. His interest lies less in referring to doctrinal points. However, because Murata writes this part within a biography of Shinran, it is remarkable that the most critical turning point in the development of Pure Land thought came not with Shinran but with Hōnen. If we consider the popularisation of Christianity and an emphasis on one's inner faith as Luther's achievements, the "great work" of Hōnen lies in the founding of the Yoshimizu group and the accentuation of faith within religious practice. In contrast, although Pure Land thinkers such as Ryōnin spread their understanding of Buddhist teachings, their activities cannot break free from the existing organisations.

Murata's decision to put Hōnen on top of the development of Pure Land thought has an important impact on the function of Shinran within the interreligious dialogue. The first consequence is that Hōnen and his teachings became the centre of the religious movement. It is noteworthy that this must not necessarily be equal to what the modern or contemporary Jōdo sect conceives as Hōnen's teachings. However, the achievements of Shinran cannot exceed those of Hōnen, and therefore, his unique function lies at most in clarifying the teachings of his master. Hōnen belongs to one of the Seven Patriarchs in the Jōdoshin Buddhist sect. Hence, there is no problem in comprehending Hōnen's teachings as consistent with Jōdoshin Buddhism. Instead, the rhetoric of Hōnen as the

⁹ The Yoshimizu Group refers to the community around Hōnen.

¹⁰ Murata, *Shinran shinden*, 26.

zenith of Pure Land history complicates the construction of Shinran as the central figure of a religious community.

The second consequence concerns the understanding of Pure Land thought itself. Further reading would be necessary to clarify Murata's understanding of the completion of Pure Land thought. However, the part above shows that Shinran's significant development cannot clarify a new element in the teachings.¹¹ If the author wants to present Shinran as an eminent monk, his life must conform to the religious goal described in Hōnen's teachings. Similarly, to some extent, this applies to Luther's teachings. Although the reader is dependent on the statements of Murata on what he understands as Luther's religion, the reference to Luther sets another frame in which Shinran's attainments must be contextualised. Therefore, the religious valuation of Shinran's life is connected to the teachings of Hōnen and Luther.

Comparison as a type of interreligious dialogue provides a means to ease the approach to an unknown figure and their thinking. In this sense, Murata's *Shinran shinden* can function as an effective tool by which a reader who is already familiar with Luther and Hōnen may be led to the figure of Shinran. The efficacy of such an approach to a new readership is constrained by the fact that the extent of the reader's understanding of Shinran's teachings is limited to the reader's knowledge of the object of comparison. Hence, *Shinran shinden* requires an understanding of Luther's role in the history of Christianity and the central points of his teachings. The biography may only attract readers with such a background. Otherwise, one could not explain the function of the paratext that emphasises Murata's expertise in the Christian context. In addition to the problem of prior knowledge, the ability to reach new readers risks hindering an approach to Shinran for someone who bears a negative image of Luther. Therefore, the case of Murata shows us the potentials and limits of comparison as a type of interreligious dialogue. The comparison tends to clarify only the connections between the two traditions without discussing specific problems, such as the salvation of human beings. Instead, the construction of this distinct dialogical function is left to the reader, whom the author challenges in drawing doctrinal connections based on the comparisons given by Murata.

3.2 Ishimaru Gohei, *Junan no Shinran*: Heterogenous Language as Dialogue

Ishimaru's *Junan no Shinran* is the biography analysed in this article that most clearly depicts its protagonist using a Christian background. The author does this primarily through the specific use of language that the book's title and its chapters have already revealed. *Junan no Shinran* is divided into five chapters that deal with Shinran's married life, the reactions at Mount Hiei, the collapse of Hōnen's Yoshimizu group, and the banishment of Shinran. The titles of the chapters are as follows.

¹¹ We can call this a typical element in the hagiography of Shinran, such as the completion of his main work *Ken jōdo shinjitsu kyōgyōshō monrui* 顕浄土真実教行証文類 (Collection of Passages Revealing the True Teaching, Practice, and Realisation of the Pure Land [Way]) that marks—in this rhetoric—the beginning of Shinran's original thinking. On this basis, the author has the best conditions to argue that Shinran fulfils the conditions of a notion of a saint based on this new kind of Buddhist teachings.

1. Tumult at Mount [Hi]ei
2. Shinran's Marriage
3. The World of Faith (*shin* 信)
4. The Collapse of the Yoshimizu [Group]
5. The Passion (*junan* 受難)

The first detail I want to point out is the usage of the word “faith.” The translation obscures Ishimaru's use of the term that we cannot principally find in Shinran's writing. In the second context, we can find the character compounds *shinjitsushin* 真実信, *shinjin* 信心, or *shingyō* 信樂. Although some less representative parts in Shinran's commentary writings use the word *shin* 信,¹² we can assume that Ishimaru uses *shin* as a reference to Shinran's *shinjin*. This approach is made even clearer by the choice of the word *junan*, which means “meeting with hardship” in general, but in a religious context, is used for the sufferings of Jesus on the cross.¹³ Considering that the lifetime of Jesus ended with his death on the cross, it is difficult to compare this state with the banishment of Shinran. This point makes two characteristics of Ishimaru's novel clear. First, if we analyse this work from the standpoint of comparative religion, we may identify more differences between the lives of Shinran and Jesus than similarities. For example, while the hardship of Jesus refers primarily to his death, in the case of Shinran, it implies only a banishment over a comparatively short period and personal suffering over an uncommon long lifetime. Another example is the relationship between God and Jesus as father and son, whereas Amida and Shinran are not even similarly connected.

These limits of simple comparison show us that this could not be the main intention for Ishimaru to write his novel. This aspect is related to the second point. If we assume that Ishimaru's motive does not suggest the equivalence of Jesus and Shinran, we must ask what kind of new Shinran's image his unorthodox language usage creates. By this method, Ishimaru brings the Christian and Jōdoshin Buddhist teachings into a dialogue because he uses the Christian language to describe the life of Shinran. This approach also makes it apparent that the objective of this novel is not to present several facts of Shinran's biography but to tell the reader the religious attitude of the protagonist. Thereby, Ishimaru not only produces a new image of Shinran but discusses, at the same time, the differences as well as shared features of the teachings of both religions.

What could be an adequate interpretation of “passion” in the context of Jōdoshin Buddhism? The lives of Shinran and Jesus have in common that both became the object of hate by following the religious path they considered as truth. Although Shinran and Jesus proselytised other people, their activities were less explicitly directed against other religious groups. Nevertheless, both were subjected to great suffering because of their views of true teachings. However, the type of consequence and its meaning differ in the

¹² One example is the *Yuishinshō mon'i* 唯信鈔文意 (Notes on ‘Essentials of Faith Alone’) where we read: “Faith [*shin*] is the heart and mind without doubt,” see Hirota, *The Collected Works of Shinran*, 451 (italics in the original) and Jōdo Shinshū Honganjiha Sōgō Kenkyūjo, *Jōdo Shinshū Seiten Zensho*, vol. 2, 683.

¹³ Nihon kokugo daijiten dainihan henshū iinkai, *Nihon kokugo daijiten dainihan*, “Junan,” 1420.

main points as indicated above. In the case of Jesus, his crucifixion and voluntary suffering are connected to the salvation of all humans. In contrast, the sufferings of Shinran do not imply any good karmic seeds for others or even their—or his own—enlightenment. We may even call the teachings of Shinran the one in Japanese Buddhism, which is far from such thinking.

For example, terms such as “praying for empowerment” (*kaji kitō* 加持祈祷) and “making merit and offering it to the deceased” (*tsuizen kuyō* 追善供養) are for many Buddhist sects in Japan central in their practice. However, the Jōdoshin Buddhist understanding of Pure Land thought exhaustively negates the view that one can atone for the sins of oneself or others. Although several biographies of Shinran describe him as one of Amida’s transformation bodies (*keshin* 化身), even in these examples that may look similar to Jesus’ case, Shinran does not act as an individual but functions as a mediator of the working of Amida. Instead, Ishimaru’s decision to treat passion as the main topic in his novel thematises suffering as the fundamental problem of human existence and the fact that one cannot overcome this situation by its power. The greatest sufferings, such as Jesus’ crucifixion and Shinran’s banishment, were not the result of an intentional act such as violent missionary. Therefore, both cases are characterised positively by a high proportion of passivity. Following this interpretation, Ishimaru refers to passion to apply it to an individual’s experience (Jesus) and express a *conditio humana* using Shinran as an example and Jesus as a reference.

Junan no Shinran includes many cases where the author describes Shinran’s suffering with Christian terminology. The following three passages serve as examples:

1. What does the Venerable Hōnen teach? I do not know any details. But after I directly heard your own intimate confession (*kokuhaku* 告白) after you left Mount Hiei, I was not at all surprised about the planned marriage.¹⁴
2. [Shinran:] “It is a fact that I am still impure (*kegareteiru* 汚れて居る). Equal to what I confessed to you earlier, I am a human with deep passions (*bonnō* 煩惱). However, I cannot agree with [the view] that I have been pure (*kiyokatta* 清かつた) when I lived at Mount Hiei.”¹⁵
3. Practise is part of the Path of the Sages. Practise means morality (*dōtoku* 道徳). Needless to say, morality is necessary in this world. However, is there not something that makes salvation impossible for [humans] by precepts or morality? — The Buddha Amida puts the [question of] salvation at an unconditional (*zettai* 絶対) level. Does the true realm of a firm mind (*anjin* 安心) not lie in developing the faith [in this kind of salvation] in the greatest despair? — This does not mean that someone with faith (*shinjin* 信心) must throw away morality. “Salvation” means the unconditional realm that even transcends (*chōetsu* 超越) morality. “Namo Amidabutsu, Namo Amidabutsu.”¹⁶

As these three paragraphs illustrate, Ishimaru tries to approach the Jōdoshin Buddhist teachings through language largely detached from Jōdoshin Buddhism-specific word

¹⁴ Ishimaru, *Junan no Shinran*, 39.

¹⁵ Ishimaru, *Junan no Shinran*, 57.

¹⁶ Ishimaru, *Junan no Shinran*, 168.

usage. This approach risks oversimplifying the doctrine and even causing misinterpretations. Concerning the above-cited paragraphs, the following terms derive from a non-Buddhist context: confession, morality, unconditional, and transcend, and to some extent also pure and impure. Because these terms belong to Christian and philosophical terminology, someone who demands consistency with the Jōdoshin Buddhist doctrine in a narrow sense may easily criticise Ishimaru's novel. However, if a reader keeps this risk in mind, there are no other means to conduct an authentic dialogue that tries to overcome a comparison that focuses on the similarities of specific terms.

However, what is the unique potential of this approach? What do we gain through the dialogue? The first quality lies in bringing together two traditions that were separated through their languages. Nevertheless, a supposedly even more significant capability lies in providing new perspectives or revealing weak points of another religion. The strength of Ishimaru's approach lies in creating a language frame that sheds light on the life of Shinran from a new direction. As mentioned above, if we understand a biography only as a genre that informs the reader about specific historical data about a figure, Ishimaru's novel would be of nearly no interest. However, by considering the life of an eminent religious figure as a story of fulfilling a religious goal, a new aspect of Shinran's life leads to a new aspect of his teachings.

The parts cited above reveal that the novel tells the reader that the Jōdoshin Buddhist faith is not connected to anything that is described as morality. Because morality is a topic that Shinran did not thematise directly, Ishimaru connects Shinran's teachings to new fields of human life. Another example is the emphasis on passion, which clarifies that suffering is immediately connected to salvation. As explained above, although suffering does not lead to salvation equal to Jesus' crucifixion, Ishimaru shows that an individual's suffering stands in a direct relationship with the salvation by Amida because it can be a chance to gain insight into the own powerlessness. Finally, in addition to widening the readership, the group of participants in a dialogue increases. Therefore, the discussion of a religious topic—such as the liberation of human beings—gains depth. Therefore, Ishimaru's approach of applying the Christian or philosophical language to Shinran's thinking does not mean that the parts in his Buddhism are similar to Christianity. Instead, Ishimaru invites new participants to the Jōdoshin Buddhist discourse and, therefore, contributes to interreligious dialogue and the interpretation of the Jōdoshin Buddhist doctrine.

3.3 Kurata Hyakuzō, *Shukke to sono deshi*: The Rhetoric of Intermixture

Kurata's approach is similar to Ishimaru's approach, but Kurata introduced Christian teachings to a considerably larger extent. In *Junan no Shinran*, we observed an attempt to express Jōdoshin Buddhist thinking using primarily Christian terminology. However, Kurata's understanding of Shinran and his use of language are characterised by a complex mixture of both positions, making it nearly impossible to divide the parts. The following sections will clarify that Kurata tries less to give an account of what one may call an orthodox understanding of Shinran's teachings. Instead, he tells the reader his personal view of religion and the problem of suffering. His tool to undertake this task is Shinran's

life and his disciples. However, both Jōdoshin Buddhist and Christian thought fundamentally influence these teachings. The following citation illustrates Kurata's rhetoric of combining the language of the mentioned two religious traditions.

Yuien. Please leave all to Buddha. I'm praying [*inotteimasu* 祈っています] for you with all my soul [*kokoro* 心, heart]. (*With emphasis.*) That you may realize your long cherished desire of happy rebirth in Paradise [*ōjō no hongai* 往生の本懐, the original purpose of being born (in the Pure Land)].

Shinran. To die has long been my wish. It's been my single hope. Now I've dreamed of the blessing [*shukufuku* 祝福] awaiting me on the other side of the grave! Now has come the time for that dream to be realized. The happy time. (*Pauses.*) Last night as I prayed, I fell into a sleep. It was blessed [*shukusareta* 祝された] with a grateful dream. The unworldly Pure Land, bright with majesty [*shōgon* 莊嚴, adornment] and beauty, spread out before my eyes. My soul [*tamashii* 魂] was filled with a mysterious joy [*kōfuku* 幸福]. I don't know how to convey to you that unearthly [*chijō no kagiri o koeta* 地上の限りを越えた] happiness. The Amida Sutra says, "All the men of highest virtue come together in one place [*shojō zennin kue issho* 諸上善人俱會一處]." I was surrounded by a throng of saints [*shōju no mure* 聖衆の群れ]. They all wore beautiful crowns. Abashed, I hung my head. When I heard that I had that day been added to that company, I wept for joy [*ureshisa* うれしき]. Then looking, I saw that beautiful crown was set on my head as on the rest. Then far off in the sky began to sound ethereal [*mimyō* 微妙] music. To this the throng of saints joined their voices and sang songs of praise [*homeru uta* 讃める歌] to Buddha. Then flowers fell from heaven, and all the air was filled with [pure] perfume [*kiyoi kaori* 淨い香り]. As I looked fascinated at the flowers raining down on the earth all covered with golden sand, I thought, "Ah, these must be the lotus blooms of Paradise [*mandarake* 曼陀羅華, flower of the Mandāra (tree)]." Then I awoke.

Yuien. What a holy [*tōtoi* 尊い, precious] dream!¹⁷

[...]

Shinran. What of Senku?

Kenchi. This spring he went to Ōshū. (*Tearfully.*) He can't get here in time.

Shinran. I'd rather hear that than see him. (*Pauses.*) All live together amicably. After I'm gone, all work for the law [*hō* 法, dharma] with united strength. Never quarrel. No matter what arises to give you painful or outraged feelings, don't curse [*noroi* 呪ひ] Buddha or man. Bless [*shuku seyo* 祝せよ] everything. Endure your pain. To endure is to make virtue your own. Love your neighbor [*rinjin o ai seyo* 隣人を愛せよ]. Treat the stranger kindly. In the name of Buddha [*butsu no na ni yotte* 佛の名によつて], all be bound together. (*His voice becomes thinner and thinner and has a tendency to break.*) It's wrong for you not to treat others as you'd be treated. (*YUIEN dips a fine-haired little brush in water and moistens SHINRAN's lips. The disciples follow his example.*) The judging heart [*sabaku kokoro* 裁く心] and the vowing heart come of devils. Be the servants [*shimobe* 僕] of others. Wash their feet [*hito no ashi o arattheyare* 人の足を洗つてやれ]. Bind the thongs of their shoes. (*Pauses.*) Glorious Buddha! [...] A miracle [*kiseki* 奇蹟]!¹⁸

¹⁷ Kurata, *The Priest and His Disciples*, 228–229 (italics in the original, underline added) and Kurata, *Shukke to sono deshi*, 274–275.

¹⁸ Kurata, *The Priest and His Disciples*, 242–243 (italics and small capitals in the original, underline added) and Kurata, *Shukke to sono deshi*, 289–290.

As the underlined parts indicate, Kurata uses Christian and Buddhist terminology to express Shinran's sufferings and thoughts. By this means, he widens the perspective on Shinran's teachings. However, this method simultaneously risks reaching a stage where it becomes difficult to distinguish between religious traditions. We can call this a consequence of Kurata's religious standpoint, characterised by a high degree of eclecticism. Examples of distinct Christian terminology are as follows:

Blessing: God's help and protection, or a prayer asking for this.¹⁹

Earthly: The place where humans are dwelling and that is created by God.

Love your neighbour: Refers to the Great Commandment in *Luke* 10:27, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself."²⁰

It's wrong for you not to treat others as you'd be treated: Refers to the Golden Rule in *Luke* 6:31, "And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise."²¹

Wash their feet: Refers to the Christian maundy (foot washing).

Miracle: An act or event that does not follow the laws of nature and is believed to be caused by God.²²

In addition to such terminology, Kurata also uses many typical terms from Pure Land Buddhism. For example, he refers to the Pure Land as the goal of birth, describes it as a place that is beautifully adorned, and the holy crowd (*shōju raigō/raikō* 聖衆來迎) accompanies people who reach that place. The characteristic of Kurata's writing style lies in establishing a multi-layered language in which neither the Christian nor the Buddhist terminology dominates. This means that Kurata uses Christian expressions to describe the Pure Land Buddhist process of someone being liberated by the holy crowd. In this case, he uses Buddhist terms to refer to visible aspects of salvation, while the Christian language serves to describe Shinran's personal feelings. If we positively value Kurata's drama, we can maintain that he uses the strengths of both religions to create a new path that can ease human beings' anxiety about death. Although it is questionable whether the two religions could perform this task on their own, we can see Kurata's motivation for this approach in combining the positive relationship of Christianity to this world with the spectacular world of the after-life in Pure Land Buddhism. We can observe this understanding of Kurata because he uses Buddhist terms to describe the human after death and Christian language for worldly concerns.

One key term of the second part of the citation above is "love," which is also a central topic in *Shukke to sono deshi* in general. Kurata maintains that the love of a human being should be equal to the unlimited love of the Buddha Amida. Therefore, his understanding of the Jōdoshin Buddhist doctrine demands humans' peaceful coexistence based on evident individualism. In this context, Amida serves less as the saviour of humankind than as a model for binding morality. This view implies that humans must

¹⁹ Turnbull, *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, "Blessing," 148.

²⁰ See *The Gospel according to St. Luke authorized (King James) Version*, 25.

²¹ See *The Gospel according to St. Luke authorized (King James) Version*, 12.

²² Turnbull, *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, "Miracle," 977.

manifest the love of Amida in their actions. Shinran in Kurata's narrative is a person bearing deep anxiety towards his own afterlife. However, at the same time, he is concerned with religious morality that guarantees a peaceful community. A reading of Kurata's drama shows that he considered the Christian system of values more appropriate for solving mental problems in this world. However, in the context of interreligious dialogue, *Shukke to sono deshi* also provides the reader with the opportunity to question whether the Pure Land Buddhism of Shinran lacks a moral meaning, as described above. The multi-layered usage of religious language by Kurata is an impressive example of such a dialogue because the Christian description of the narrative points at a problem one may tend to overlook in the context of a pure Buddhist discourse. Therefore, the use of the Christian language to describe Shinran's sufferings puts the questioner in a dialogue that forces the partner to discover new elements in the own standpoint.

The following last citation clearly shows Kurata's understanding of the Pure Land teachings. In this example the description is influenced by Christianity, but, at the same time, we can also observe an interpretation of Pure Land thought that has noticeable elements of self-power. Notably, we may call this the orthodox variant of Pure Land Buddhism in Japan. However, from the standpoint of Shinran's teachings, the quotation also shows problematic points whose harmonisation with the writings of Shinran may be complex. Kurata describes the scene of the moment of Shinran's death, and the purity of his deathbed as follows:

Shinran. It's drawn near. The omen [*kizashi* 兆し],—the room's all cleaned, isn't it?

Yuien. To the last speck of dust.

Shinran. My body's cleansed, isn't it?

Shōshin. You were bathed yesterday.

Shinran. Call the disciples. Call them all. For me to take leave of them. To give them my last blessing.

Shōshin. I go. (*Rises.*)

Yuien (*suppressing his great agitation and speaking to SHŌSHIN*). The doctor.

(*SHŌSHIN hurries out.*)

Yuien (*gripping SHINRAN's hand*). Master [*oshishōsama* お師匠様], please make your spirit [*oki* お氣] firm.

Shinran (*nodding*). A taper. Light a taper in the shrine [*butsudan* 佛壇, Buddhist altar]. Namu Amida Butsu.²³

[...]

Zenran. I'm unfit. I've heaped up many sins [*tsumi* 罪].

Shinran. Amida [*Amidasama* 阿彌陀様] atoned [*tsugunōtekudasareta* 償ふて下された] for those sins aeons ago. They're forgiven, they're forgiven. (*His voice grows thin and stops. The Physician raises his brows.*) Now I'm going to leave this world. (*Thinly but firmly.*) Do you believe in Buddha? (*ZENRAN makes no reply.*) Don't refuse his mercy [*jihi* 慈悲]. Say

²³ Kurata, *The Priest and His Disciples*, 234 (italics and small capitals in the original) and Kurata, *Shukke to sono deshi*, 280.

you believe. Give peace to my heart on the day my soul returns above. (ZENRAN *turns pale with the anguish in his soul.*) All you have to do is receive it.²⁴

These descriptions resemble the deathbed rites (*rinjū no gyōgi* 臨終行儀) found in Genshin's *Ōjō yōshū* 往生要集 (Essentials for Attaining Birth).²⁵ In *Shukke to sono deshi*, Shinran is so anxious about the circumstances of his death that he even instructs the people around him to guarantee an ideal and pure environment. If we interpret this scene favourably, Shinran's doubts concerning his faith are emphasised. However, even in that case, this scene gives to a significantly greater extent the impression that the salvation by Amida would not be unconditioned, which is in strong contrast to Shinran's teachings. One characteristic of Shinran's Pure Land Buddhism is the grounding on the notion of salvation that does not relate to a distinct environment or state of mind as the condition for being born in the Pure Land. From the perspective of interreligious dialogue, we can observe the conception that a priest grants a blessing in the moment of death—the Christian aspect—and that in this situation, the dying person must prepare a pure place—the Pure Land aspect—. We can argue that the coexistence of Christian and Buddhist terminology is the most direct way to conduct an interreligious dialogue.

In contrast, comparative religious studies tend only to list the religions' answers to specific questions. The characteristic of interreligious dialogue must lie in being confronted by a shared problem that the religions try to solve together. If we apply this to the passage quoted above, the shared problem is how one should behave in the moment of death. The type of dialogue that Kurata performs allows a distinction between the division of roles of each religion. However, Christianity and Pure Land Buddhism are intertwined in a new religion from the perspective of drama. The meaning of creating a religion that cannot be subsumed by an existing religion may be controversial. However, we can call *Shukke to sono deshi* a constructive literary work that can provide both religions with new perspectives and problems in their community.

Shukke to sono deshi ends with a stage direction that verifies that Shinran's soul well returned to heaven (*ten* 天). The conception that human beings on earth finally return to the realm above is based on the Christian worldview. As discussed above, this approach may direct readers towards the similarities between the Christian heaven and Amida's Pure Land. However, the last comments by Kurata in his drama also show the problems inherent in this proceeding. One example of a severe misunderstanding would be the concept that—equal to Christianity—Pure Land Buddhism teaches life in the Pure Land as the final goal within the process of salvation.

However, if we connect both concepts by focusing on the human returning to a land filled with joy after one's death, the interreligious dialogue can deepen while clarifying the differences between religions. Therefore, the purpose of interreligious dialogue should not be to create as many points in common as possible but to clarify the shared features and differences. From the viewpoint of spreading the teachings of Shinran, we

²⁴ Kurata, *The Priest and His Disciples*, 244–245 (italics and small capitals in the original) and Kurata, *Shukke to sono deshi*, 291–292.

²⁵ Genshin, "Ōjō yōshū," 170–181.

must consider *Shukke to sono deshi* as a text that is prone to misunderstandings. Yet, the strength of this tool by Kurata lies in describing parts of the life of Shinran, and especially Yuien, which are mostly not thematised in biographies. Because the sections with historical evidence are very limited and mostly already fully uncovered in Kurata's lifetime, it is evident that the attraction of this drama is not historiographic. Kurata uses these grey or dark parts of Shinran's biography and the liberties of writing a drama that resulted from these circumstances to present a new understanding of Shinran as an individual and his teachings. An obvious advantage of this approach is a biography of Shinran that is easier to understand for a reader with a Christian background. However, even for a Jōdoshin Buddhist reader, this drama can become an opportunity to reconsider their religion. Moreover, one can gain insight into the concrete relationship between Christianity and Jōdoshin Buddhism concerning similar and different standpoints towards shared questions. *Shukke to sono deshi* realises this type of interreligious dialogue not by discussing various aspects of the teachings but by presenting how religious people spend their lives and respond to particular problems. This method is a unique feature of biographies understood as interreligious dialogue because they clarify parts of religious teachings and practices that doctrinal texts alone cannot make evident.

4. Conclusion

The analysis above showed how biographies could contribute to interreligious dialogue. This article aimed to demonstrate that this genre does not only provide information about a person's life, but that biographies can be part of the discussion about doctrinal questions. All three authors used events from Christian history or the Christian language to describe the religious life of a Jōdoshin Buddhist. Therefore, the reader can clearly understand where both religions are similar and different. We can compare this method with an experiment that intentionally tells the story of Shinran in an alien environment. This method allows the reader to observe which situations and struggles in Shinran's life fit the Christian worldview and identify passages that cannot satisfy both dialogue partners. For example, the last citation from *Shukke to sono deshi* showed a concept similar to that of unconditioned salvation. However, we may regard the view of Amida as someone who atones the sins of human beings quite different from the Jōdoshin Buddhist conception of salvation regardless of one's sins. However, the judgement on the adequacy of several interpretations is part of the Christian and Jōdoshin Buddhist teaching discourse, equal to any doctrinal writing.

As I pointed out, one function of biographies on Shinran that uses the Christian language or events from the history of Christianity can lead a new type of consumer to Shinran and his teachings. Although this is essential potential of biographies as interreligious dialogue, there is little evidence to claim that the three biographies analysed in this article fulfilled this function regarding their contemporary readers and listeners. In particular, the translations of *Shukke to sono deshi* might have contributed to spreading knowledge about Shinran among Christians. The high popularity of that drama in Japan

may be related to another fact. All three authors described Shinran's life from outside of the sectarian community and, presumably, without attempting to contribute to the flourishing of the sect as an institution. Considering this, we should perceive the value of the three biographies for a Japanese-speaking person in modern Japan in approaching Shinran from an entirely new direction. In this historical dimension, the essential point was not that the biographies were interesting for Japanese Christians, but that the Christian language in Japanese was alien enough to liberate the content from the sectarian boundaries while leaving the topic in a religious context. This point indirectly connects to one goal of religious dialogue, which in my opinion lies in clarifying fundamental questions shared by all humans, which religions answer with more or less significant differences.²⁶

In this article, I did not address the rhetorical function of that type of interreligious dialogue. In addition to the new doctrinal insights obtained through biographies, they also play an essential role in intercultural communication. Although an exhaustive use of the Christian language bears the risks described above, it also can allow readers with little or no prior knowledge to become familiar with an unknown religion. For example, even though the concepts of heaven in Christianity and Amida's Pure Land in Buddhism differ in fundamental respects, a combination of both parts within the narrative can allow an uninformed reader to gain access to the teachings of Shinran. We can observe this function of heterogenic language for intercultural exchange not only in modern times where, for example, Mori Ōgai 森鷗外 (1862–1922) refers to an old church at Kloster street in Berlin as “an old temple (*koji* 古寺).”²⁷ Even today, the Jōdoshin Buddhist community in America calls themselves “Buddhist Churches of America” and their leader a “Bishop.”²⁸ In the context of biographies and the usage of the Christian language, the author can access a new type of readership. Especially concerning Kurata's drama, his most crucial attainment is the spread of the name of Shinran and elements of his thought to a kind of recipient not limited to Jōdoshin Buddhist followers. Therefore, the meaning of intercultural exchange implies the crossing of country borders and can occur, as in the case of Kurata, even within one country and between different social groups.

I argue that one essential potential of biographies on Shinran has not yet been sufficiently examined. Most research focuses on the historical adequacy of texts or meaning in the context of the history of literature. The examples analysed above demonstrated that there is a function of biographies that do not primarily rely on historical dimensions. In this context, the life of Shinran and his inner thoughts are a means to present the application of religious teaching. On this basis, biographies with a dialogical structure as defined above can undertake the function of determining the dis/similarities of different religions and providing new impulses for the intrareligious discourse.

²⁶ My approach to religious pluralism follows the concept of Perry Schmidt-Leukel. See especially Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology*.

²⁷ Mori, “Maihime,” 10.

²⁸ Buddhist Church of America, “Leadership,” <https://www.buddhistchurchesofamerica.org/leadership>.

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