Divergent Responses to the Human Predicament: A Case Study in New Comparativism

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DIVERGENT RESPONSES TO THE HUMAN PREDICAMENT:
A CASE STUDY IN NEW COMPARATIVISM

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Faculty of the University of Denver and the Iliff School of Theology
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Doctor of Philosophy

by
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August 2011
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ABSTRACT

The enterprise of comparison has been regarded by some as one of the most vital characteristics of a healthy academic study of religion. However, the failed legacy of Eliadian Comparativism has caused others to suggest that the art of comparison has not yet lived up to its promise. This study brings together the best tools of what the author calls “Smithian New Comparativism.” In order to demonstrate concretely a rigorous and responsible critical comparative analysis, and to chart a course for academically beneficial future cross-cultural comparisons, this project presents a case study that compares two religious traditions’ doctrinal responses to a conceptually analogous ontological presupposition. Specifically, it comparatively analyzes the Reformed Christian doctrine of limited atonement and the Jōdo Shinshū Buddhist doctrine of akunin shōki. The comparative examination of these teachings illuminates the respective traditions’ doctrinally divergent responses to a common understanding of the human predicament, reveals previously unseen structural and conceptual parallels between the traditions by examining deeply-rooted Western ideas through the lens of Buddhist theories, and suggests finally that despite the appearance of surface resemblances between Shin Buddhist and Reformed Christian thought the two religious paths lead ultimately to differing religious ends.
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Chapter One: Introduction

Each of the modes of comparison has been found problematic. Each new proposal has been a variant of an older mode . . . We know better how to evaluate comparisons, but we have gained little over our predecessors in either the method for making comparisons or the reasons for its practice.—Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion* (1982)¹

Comparison—“Surely It Is Possible”

The enterprise of comparison has been called the “most central and distinguishing characteristic” of the modern academic study of religion.² Some have suggested that cross-cultural and trans-historical comparisons are perhaps “our greatest claim[s] to originality as an independent academic discipline, distinguished from other disciplines like theology or anthropology.”³ Others have argued that critical comparative analysis is “intrinsic to the process through which we construct and apply” categories to interpret religious phenomena “such as symbol, myth, ritual, scripture, law, ethics, and mysticism.”⁴ One of the leading historians in the field of religious studies has even characterized the subdiscipline of comparative religious studies in this way:


So compelling has comparative religion become that it now tends to pervade religious studies in all of its aspects. It belongs to the context, the framework, of religious studies. It helps define the field’s direction and compelling interests. Indeed, from this time forward, no aspect of religious studies can be thought through systematically—no aspect of religious studies can even be approached—without explicit acknowledgement of its cross-cultural dimensionalities. Already it is impossible to conduct scholarly research in religious studies except within an intellectual framework that treats cross-cultural sensitivities as being regulative.  

These ringing endorsements of the comparative endeavor in religious studies are not only apt but also inevitable, as comparison is the principal means by which humans interact with the world.  

When confronted with something “new,” something “other,” something “different,” we instinctually begin a process of comparative analysis and interpretation. We ask ourselves “Is this phenomenon ‘like’ anything else I’ve seen before?” This question is essential to our well-being, as the ability to recognize “sameness” enables us to construct order and make meaning out of our world. Jonathan Z. Smith, the preeminent contemporary comparative scholar, once noted that the “process of comparison is a fundamental characteristic of human intelligence . . . without it, we could not speak, perceive, learn, or reason.”  

The problem, however, is that the comparative enterprise has largely failed us. On the whole, comparison has been too concerned with similarities, too arbitrary, and largely devoid of meaningful analysis or interpretation. Just as Smith has

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deemed comparison to be invaluable, he has also posited that comparative scholars “stand before a considerable embarrassment.” The art of comparison has not yet lived up to its promise.

Despite the historical problems found within the discipline, some comparativists rightly argue that there is a responsible way to ask critically comparative questions that advance the academic study of religion. These scholars maintain that problems with the theories and tools of the past should not result in abandonment of the discipline itself, because the benefits of cross-cultural comparison far outweigh the liabilities. As Gregory D. Alles once put the matter, if “multicultural studies are to mean anything besides atomized, specialized accounts of different peoples, places, and times juxtaposed at random, cultural scholars will need once more to compare, and compare seriously and vigorously.” A crystallization of the issue can be heard in Wendy Doniger’s rhetorical question, “Surely it is possible to bring into a single (if not necessarily harmonious) conversation the genuinely different approaches that several cultures have made to similar (if not the same) human problems.” In other words, it must be possible to examine divergent responses to common quandaries cross-culturally.

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7 Smith, Imagining Religion, 24.

8 Gregory D. Alles, The Iliad, The Rāmāyaṇa and The Work of Religion: Failed Persuasion and Religious Mystification (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 5. A similarly urgent call to study cross-culturally is found in the work of comparative theologian Francis X. Clooney. “Diversity in and among religions is not novel, but its impact has intensified in recent decades as a pronounced and defining phenomenon that is global . . . [thus] we need to learn deeply across such borders . . . Our time and place therefore urge upon us a necessary interreligious learning.” Francis X. Clooney, Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 4-5.

9 Wendy Doniger, The Implied Spider: Politics & Theology in Myth (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 71. Doniger’s question is also born out of her understanding of the relative strengths of cross-cultural comparison. As she sees it, the “cross-cultural view is not an overview that subsumes the
My simple response to Doniger’s query is a direct and resounding “yes.” Comparing cross-culturally divergent approaches to common human problems is both possible and necessary, and the implications of this endeavor are manifold. First, cross-cultural comparison enables us to begin questioning deeply-rooted assumptions regarding what is normative.\(^\text{10}\) In other words, this methodological approach allows us to defamiliarize that which we take for granted, thereby preventing monolithic thinking and the calcification of standard beliefs.\(^\text{11}\) This approach to comparison also allows us to balance concern for particularity with concern for more generalizing explanations and analysis. Generalizations that are too broad inevitably lead to abstraction and vacuity, whereas overly particularistic interpretations lack useful cross-cultural application. Thus, we must strike a comparative analytical equilibrium.

Furthermore, responsible comparative analysis of this sort enables us to examine particular elements from religious traditions selectively rather than religions in toto. In other words, a framework of analytical control ensures that only “aspectual characteristic[s]” of a given tradition are examined, rather than entire religions.\(^\text{12}\) Finally, comparing cross-culturally divergent approaches to common human problems enables us to recognize and value difference as much as, if not more than, similarities. For, as Smith consistently argues throughout his scholarship, in any disciplined inquiry of comparison...
it is difference that is of most interest and use to the scholar of religion.\textsuperscript{13} An emphasis upon difference ensures interreligious and cross-cultural reflection. Such reflection, in turn, engenders reciprocal illumination and interreligious learning, whereby religious phenomena are seen anew through the insights of another religious tradition’s response to a given problem.\textsuperscript{14} As Smith rightly intimated, methodologically manipulating difference, or “playing across the gap,” is the key to a healthy and serviceable comparative discipline.\textsuperscript{15}

In order to demonstrate concretely this sort of vigorous and responsible critical comparative analysis, I compare in the following chapters two religious traditions’ doctrinal responses to a conceptually analogous ontological presupposition. Specifically, I analyze comparatively the Reformed Christian doctrine of limited atonement and the Jōdo Shinshū Buddhist doctrine of \textit{akunin shōki}.\textsuperscript{16} A comparative examination of these teachings illuminates the respective traditions’ doctrinally divergent responses to a

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{Smith2005b} Smith, \textit{Imagining Religion}, 35.
\bibitem{ShinBuddhism} As a matter of convenience, I henceforth use the accepted abbreviation “Shin Buddhism” to refer to Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism. When discussing Shin Buddhism, I concern myself with the sectarian expression known as Jōdo Shinshū Honganji-ha. This branch of Shin Buddhism, one of the two largest sub-sects of the Shinshu Federation (\textit{Shinshū Kyōdan Rengō}), is more commonly referred to as Nishi Honganji or Honpa Honganji. Nishi (West) distinguishes the institution from Shinshu Otani-ha or Higashi Honganji (East Honganji), the other large sectarian expression of Shin Buddhism whose main temple and headquarters also reside in Kyoto.
\end{thebibliography}
common understanding of the human predicament. For the purposes of this project, I regard the “human predicament,” or “human condition,” in the manner of theologian Paul Tillich. Tillich understood the human condition as being one of existential estrangement from one’s essential nature and the ground of being. This state of estrangement, which the aforementioned traditions recognize, results in a sense of insecurity, inner conflict, and alienation.\textsuperscript{17} Thus, the human condition can be understood to “involve a \textit{predicament} [of existential estrangement] that religions address as a problem.”\textsuperscript{18}

Previous comparative scholarship has focused primarily on perceived similarities between the two traditions. However, I argue that despite a conceptually analogous understanding of the human condition as being defiled and depraved, the traditions’ divergent doctrinal responses to this condition imply different salvations ultimately. This case study is the first comparative analysis of these traditions to examine the differing scopes of transformational response (i.e., limited and universal) to a common ontological presupposition. Furthermore, this study shows that it is possible to bring divergent cultural approaches to a similar human problem into a single comparative “conversation” and that by responsibly asking critically comparative questions that “slice the problem in a different way,” the promise of comparative religious studies can still be fulfilled.\textsuperscript{19}

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\textsuperscript{18} Robert Neville Cummings, ed., \textit{The Human Condition} (Albany: State University Press, 2001), 5. As Neville notes though, the “notion of ‘the human condition’ and the associated references to existentialist literature, art, ethics, and the critique of traditional religion through generalization, is a twentieth-century idea. It has a European origin and global dissemination through the effects of modernity . . . [As such] Eighth-century Christianity would no more have recognized talk of ‘the human condition’ than would have eighth-century Buddhism, Islam, or Vedānta” (3).

\textsuperscript{19} Doniger, \textit{The Implied Spider}, 47.
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My argument supports Smith’s dual assertions that contemporary scholars’ ability to evaluate comparisons has improved beyond our predecessors’ and that we need new comparative theories and methods if comparative studies is to rightfully assume its place of prominence in the field of religious studies.20 This study’s comparative undertaking directly addresses Smith’s challenge to scholars to establish and employ a new and useful comparative methodology.

Unfortunately, the history of comparative analysis is filled with examples of weak applications of even weaker methodologies, which have typically engendered dismissive toleration, at best, and statements of cultural superiority at worst. Many of these prior comparative projects have done little in terms of responsibly and meaningfully advancing the academic study of religion. When scholars approach the comparative enterprise differently and new methodologies are employed, they will ask exciting new questions, eliciting dynamic new responses from which cross-culturally useful insights can be garnered. I have selected my case study as a vehicle for applying vigorous and healthy comparative methodology because the long history of comparing Reformed Christianity and Shin Buddhism is a perfect example of the “poverty of conception” that has habitually characterized many past irresponsible cross-cultural comparative endeavors.21 A telling example of this can be seen in renowned theologian, Karl Barth’s summation of the matter:

We can regard it as a wholly providential disposition that as far as I can see the most adequate and comprehensive and illuminating heathen parallel to Christianity, a religious development in the Far East, is parallel

20 Smith, Imagining Religion, 35.

21 Smith, Drudgery Divine, 47.
not to Roman or Greek Christianity, but to Reformed Christianity, thus confronting Christianity with the question of its truth as the logical religion of grace . . . [Thus] Yodoism can certainly be compared without violence to the simple Christian “Protestantism” which countless souls have thought of as the true Protestantism ever since the 16th century . . . Only one thing is really decisive for the distinction of truth and error [though] . . . That one thing is the name of Jesus Christ . . . Therefore the true and essential distinction of the Christian religion from the non-Christian, and with it its character as the religion of truth over against the religions of error, can be demonstrated only in the fact, or event, that taught by Holy Scripture the Church listens to Jesus Christ and no one else as grace and truth.\(^{22}\)

Barth’s use of the term “heathen” when seeking to introduce an “adequate . . . and illuminating parallel” for comparison, as well as his decision to frame the analysis in terms of “truth and error,” exemplify the type of apologetic assertions of uniqueness and poor methodological treatment that have marred many past comparative undertakings. Understanding the often-troubled history of the comparative endeavor is an important foundation for appreciating the responsible comparative analysis to follow.

Brief Reflections on the History of the Comparative Endeavor

We are always moving between worlds, trying to make sense of and orient our lives, and the trick of comparison is the trick of translating between these worlds.—Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider* (1998)\(^{23}\)

Ordering our lives as we seek to translate between the familiar and the unfamiliar has always been a difficult task. In fact, it might be argued that “the first ‘comparative religionist’ was the first worshipper of a god or gods who asked himself [sic], having first


discovered the facts of the case, why his neighbor should be a worshipper of some other
god or gods.”24 The systematic comparative study of religion only first gained public
attention however in the 1860s and 1870s, with the rise of the scientific method. Prior to
the mid-nineteenth century, the examination of religious traditions tended to take one of
two general approaches: (1) the Christian theological approach, which, through doctrinal
debate and reflections upon divine revelation, sought to establish the primacy of Christian
soteriology over and against any competing claims, and (2) the philosophical approach
(i.e., rationalism), which set forth criteria and theories by which to judge religions based
on reason rather than revelation. Ultimately, each methodological approach was
problematic enough to contribute to the embarrassing and inadequate comparative
activity to which Smith refers.

*Theological Approach to Comparison*

The heart of Christian belief and doctrine revolves around the affirmation of the
view that “Jesus Christ is the decisive, unrepeatable and unsurpassable ‘locus’ of divine
revelation, and that consequently it is only by following the way of Christ that we can
possibly hope for the ultimate salvation of mankind [sic].”25 Given this position, when
confronted with non-Christian traditions, Christianity has employed a variety of
theological approaches to account comparatively for and explain the “other.” These
approaches have included: (1) the contention that nonbiblical religions are
demonstrations of humanity’s separation from God and are likely of evil origin; (2) the

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conviction that “everything truly religious in religious history was in fact historically derived from the original monotheism of the biblical patriarchs, whereas everything false in other religions was a degeneration from that once pure source;”\(^{26}\) (3) the contention that the best of all non-Christian traditions should be interpreted as allegories of Christian truths;\(^{27}\) (4) the argument that non-Christian traditions, while perhaps partially true are demonstrably inferior, incomplete, and insufficient;\(^{28}\) and (5) an optimistic appreciation of the innate spiritual ability of all people to come into contact with the divine, or “the holy,” present throughout all of creation. Examples of these comparative theological approaches can be found in works such as James Garden’s *Comparative Theology, or, The True and Solid Grounds of Pure and Peaceable Theology* (1700), George Faber’s *The Origin of Pagan Idolatry Ascertained from Historical Testimony and Circumstantial Evidence* (1816), and James Freeman Clarke’s *Ten Great Religions: An Essay in Comparative Theology* (1871).\(^{29}\)


\(^{27}\) Examples of this can be seen in efforts to read the Hebrew scriptures as foreshadowing the life of Christ, and Greek and Roman myths as carriers of Christian messages.

\(^{28}\) An excellent example of this can be seen in James Freeman Clarke’s *Ten Great Religions: An Essay in Comparative Theology* (Cambridge: Riverside, 1871). William E. Paden has usefully interpreted and summarized Clarke’s perspective: “For Clarke, comparison demonstrated that Christianity embodies greater transethnic universality and more complete spiritual balance than other religions. Thus Hinduism has a full sense of the reality of the spirit, but it is ‘defective’ in its appreciation of matter and the created world. Buddhism appreciates man’s [sic] nobility, but misses the dimension of divinity in the world. Confucianism understands religious harmony, but lacks historical dynamism and vision. And so on. Christianity for its part is complete and universal, free of the specific faults and one-sidedness of other faiths . . . It therefore represents the consummate fullness of all religion” (*Religious Worlds*, 24-25).

Although possessing subtly different points of emphasis, each of the aforementioned theological approaches reflects a mode of intellectual inquiry into the dissimilarities among religious traditions that is firmly grounded in a commitment to the primary Christian statement of faith—the uniqueness of salvation in Christ. Each approach can be understood as a variation on a mode of interreligious reflection that is often referred to today as “comparative theology.” Comparative theology “marks acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more faith traditions.” In other words, comparative theological approaches to cross-cultural analysis are conducted in accordance with the goals and commitments of the Christian tradition. The terms of examination arise from Christian thought, and the comparison largely reaffirms Christian perceptions of uniqueness. Using these Christian theological approaches to account comparatively for non-Christian traditions has been done for centuries and persists to this day, and Barth’s comments comparing Reformed Christianity and Shin Buddhism are an excellent example of this comparative mode. Consequently, I return to Barth’s illustration again later in this study, as his approach demonstrates the poverty of conception implicit in many theologically comparative interreligious reflections.

*Philosophical Approach to Comparison*

A second general approach to examining and judging non-Christian traditions comparatively existed prior to the mid-nineteenth century as well. European rationalists of the time employed comparative methodologies, but they did so in an effort to

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30 Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 10.
counteract Christian explanations of religion that hinged upon revelation. By invoking reason and “natural” accounts of religion, rather than trans-human explanations, to demystify the universe, philosophers were able to examine histories of religion without resorting to Christian apologetics. This was an important step in the early history of the comparative endeavor, as rationalists sought to “seriously put forward a set of criteria by which religion might be judged, without calling in any kind of belief in revelation.”

We can look at Deist thought as an example of this sort of rationalist approach. Deists consciously discredited supernatural interpretations of history, seeing no need to affirm the existence of an intervening God who used miracles to reveal the divine. Rather, Deists believed knowledge of the divine could only be attained through reason and logic. By their reckoning, reason and logic would lead to the discovery of a “common denominator for all religions.” The common notions (communes notitiae) of the religions of the world were believed to be eternal truths inscribed upon the hearts of all of humanity and thus were thought to inform all religious outlooks. This hypothetical set of common denominators upon which rational comparative analysis was conducted involved: (1) an acknowledgement of the existence of a Supreme Power; (2) a sense of duty on the part of humanity towards this Supreme Power; (3) a commitment to pious worship; (4) reparation for one’s sins; and (5) a belief in a state of rewards and

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31 Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, 17.


punishments after this life.\textsuperscript{34} Examples of these views can be found in works such as Lord Herbert of Cherbury’s \textit{De veritate} (1625), Gottfreid Wilhelm Leibniz’s \textit{Essai de Théodicée} (1710), and Voltaire’s \textit{Essai sur l’esprit et les moeurs des Nations} (1756).\textsuperscript{35} In many ways, this philosophical belief in a commonality or unity undergirding all religious traditions of the world was a precursor to what would become one of the most ubiquitous and insidious forms of religious comparison—religious pluralism or universalism.

In addition to the Deists, other philosophers, such as David Hume, maintained that religious impulses arose not from the divine but rather from individual and social concerns such as an “anxious fear of future events.”\textsuperscript{36} Hume deemed the origins of religious sensibilities to be commonly held primal and base emotions. Consequently, he contributed to a comparative evolutionary theory of religious development in which some religious traditions were deemed more primitive than others. In \textit{The Natural History of Religion} (1755), Hume imagined a fictional dialogue between Catholic and Egyptian priests debating the relative merits of their respective practices.

How can you worship leeks and onions [ask the Catholic]? If we worship them, replies [the Egyptian], at least we do not, at the same time, eat them. But what strange objects of adoration are cats and monkeys says the learned doctor. They are at least as good as the relics or rotten bones of martyrs, answers his no less learned antagonist.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{34} Basil Willey, \textit{The Eighteenth Century: Studies on the Idea of Nature and the Thought of the Period} (New York: Columbia University, 1940), 7.


\textsuperscript{37} Hume, \textit{Dialogue and Natural History of Religion}, 168.
In a similar manner, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) employed comparative philosophical analyses as he sought to position comparatively the religious traditions of the world on the rungs of a developmental ladder, with Christianity at its apex. While Hegel “is commonly known (and routinely castigated) for the manner in which he makes the case for Christianity as the consummate religion, the critical edition [of his Lectures] clearly indicates that Hegel develops his argument by way of sustained attention to other religions and not in spite of them.”  

Hume and Hegel’s respective evolutionary and developmental theories of religion are each implicitly predicated upon a belief that comparable commonalities are found in all religions. These positions were yet another stream of thought that would ultimately enable the rise of universalist theories of religion.

Overall, these philosophical approaches to explaining religion regarded Christianity as simply one religion among many, no more unique than any other. “Rationalists like to show that whatever one religion, like Christianity, could boast of as its unique possession—like having a God-sent savior or a doctrine of salvation by divine grace—was present in other religions.” Thus, whereas Christian theological comparisons largely sought to establish a schema of true and false religiosity, secular rationalist comparative theories began to flatten and homogenize perceptions of religiosity as they sought an underlying universal source for religious development.

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39 Paden, Religious Worlds, 27.
Universalist Approach to Comparison

In the late 1860s, when the study of human culture began to include the application of the principles of scientific inquiry, such as inductive reasoning and pattern gathering (seen most especially in the fields of philology, archaeology, and history), it became possible to speak of the emergence of the social scientific study of religion, better known today as “comparative religion” or the “history of religion.” This approach to comparative analysis can be summed up in the words of one of the discipline’s founding fathers, Max Müller: “He who knows one, knows none.”

Put another way, to base one’s understanding of any cultural or religious phenomenon solely upon one example is to limit one’s knowledge of the human experience. For that reason, comparison is essential. As a more contemporary comparative scholar put the matter, “Whichever way one imagines religion and the study of it, it will not be possible to do so without the activity of comparison, without the evaluations of resemblances and differences.”

Modern historians, sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists began comparatively addressing variations on the same question: “Why had humanity ever found it necessary to be religious? What was there in the human make-up which made it seemingly imperative for man [sic] to perceive, or postulate, or imagine, a world beyond the senses?” In other words, is there some essential, trans-human religious consciousness that is responding to some transcendent dimension? The systematic comparative study of religion had begun.


First, modern social scientists began comparatively exploring religious phenomena such as ancestor reverence (Herbert Spencer); the centrality of social structures, relationships, and institutions (Emile Durkheim); mythology and language (Max Müller); cultural processes and customs that adhere and evolve over time (Edward Burnett Tylor); magical beliefs and taboos (James George Frazer); and dreams and neuroses (Sigmund Freud). Despite the invaluable contributions scholars such as these made to the general study of culture, not to mention the more focused study of religion, it is clear that the social scientific approach often reinforced particularism, which only marginally sought to compare religious traditions based on the cultivation of smaller and smaller areas of concern (e.g., translated texts and archaeological remains). The critical evaluation of differences began to wane in the systematic comparative study of religion.

Against this growing parochialism and discipline specialization arose a third approach to the comparative enterprise known as universalism, which only further reified the lack of concern for difference in the comparative enterprise. “Universalists are those who, from antiquity, have stressed the essential unity of all religion, interpreting all traditions to represent so many valid but varying versions of common spiritual truths.” In other words, universalism is predicated on the notion that ultimately there is more that binds religious practitioners than separates them. From the universalist perspective, there are certain religious sentiments, convictions, affinities, and concepts that are thought to be panhuman and transcultural, and thus imminently comparable. “Behind the facades of

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43 Ibid., 26.
44 Paden, Religious Worlds, 17.
local religious divergence [universalism] finds universal points of agreement." The essential, defining traits of a religious person, “his or her religious apprehensions, emotional states, and motivations for religious activities” were deemed by the universalists to be the same everywhere religion was found. All that varied were differing cultural descriptions of an otherwise universal reality. At the core of the universalist approaches to comparison lies the idea that, despite cultural distinctions, all religions point to the same notion of ultimate reality. Thus, when universalists spoke or wrote of God, Allah, the Dao, or Buddha-nature they tended to conflate definitions and obfuscate contextual differences. Other classic examples of universalist categories that have been employed by comparative scholars in the classification, analysis, and interpretation of religious phenomena include ritual practices, sacred space, sacred people, mysticism, rules of behavior and morality, and salvation. Fitting early twentieth-century examples of the universalist approach to comparison can be seen in Joseph Campbell’s study of universal patterns of narrative mythology (The Hero with a Thousand Faces, 1949), Carl Gustav Jung’s exploration of universal psychic archetypes (Memories, Dreams, Reflections, 1961), Mircea Eliade’s theory of hierophanies and dual modes of human experience (The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion, 1961), and William Cantwell Smith’s conviction that there exists but one religious history and one faith for all of humanity (Towards a World Theology, 1981).47

45 Ibid.
By the latter half of the twentieth century, this universalist approach to comparison, with its overemphasis upon similarity and commonality and its near complete neglect of difference, became the most pervasive position with regard to comparing religions. In fact, this “Eliadian approach,” named after the highly influential historian of religions, Mircea Eliade, became nearly synonymous with comparison itself. “Eliadian comparativism” is a manner of seeing cross-cultural phenomena filtered through the lens of universalism. Put another way, this approach involves seeing what Eliade called the “transcendent ‘sacred’ refracted in [all] the ritual and mythic behavior[s] of a cross-cultural human archetype called *Homo religiosus* [i.e. humanity as a religious being].” Eliade worked from the assumption that there are “two modes of being in the world, two existential situations assumed by humankind in the course of history, the sacred and the profane.” From this point of view:

Comparative studies in the field of religion under the influence of Eliade . . . are wedded to an essentialism and foundationalism which prevents them from seeing religions as patterns of human behaviour and assumes them rather to be representations of a transcendent reality known prior to the empirical examination and analysis of any specific religious behaviours. 

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This narrowing of hermeneutical perspective was only exacerbated by a tendency to privilege certain Protestant Christian interpretations of the phenomena in question, while marginalizing others. Evidence of this tendency can be seen in the inclination, in comparative religious studies, to “define religion as a ‘belief system’ and to give priority to categories such as faith, belief, doctrine, and theology while underprivileging the roles of practice, ritual and law.” A concrete example can be seen in Cantwell Smith’s pursuit of the universal property of human life he calls faith. Universalism of this sort, in which hermeneutical priority is consciously or unconsciously given to Christian construals of comparative analysis, is also seen today in the disciplines of “theology of religions,” “interreligious dialogue,” and “comparative theology.” Leading scholars and their seminal works from these disciplines include John Hick’s *A Christian Theology of Religions* (1995), Paul Knitter’s *No Other Name: A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (1985), and John B. Cobb’s *Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism* (1998).

It is undoubtedly this history of weak comparative methodology that Jonathan Z. Smith had in mind when he warned that comparative scholars “stand before a considerable embarrassment” and that the comparative enterprise has not yet lived up to its promise to responsibly further the academic study of religion. When one considers the

52 Holdrege, “What’s Beyond the Post?” 2.


history of comparison—universalism, foundationalism, privileging Protestant Christian essentialist categories of comparison, emphasizing similarity over difference, confusing similarity with identity, blurring definitions, ignoring context in favor of generalizations—it is easy to see there is a problem. It is no wonder some have noted that while “the field of religious studies is witnessing considerable creative work in socio-historical, cognitive, and hermeneutical analysis, it is less clear, with a few notable exceptions… how comparativist models have been advanced.”55 If we are to begin addressing Alles’s challenge to once more compare and to “compare seriously and vigorously”—if we are to answer Smith’s call for new comparative theories and methods, as well as Doniger’s rhetorical question regarding comparing divergent approaches to a common dilemma—then we must examine a concrete case study. 56 As suggested earlier, the history of comparatively analyzing Reformed Christianity and Japanese Shin Buddhism makes an excellent starting point.

The object of this analytical undertaking is twofold—to consider critically the state of the comparative enterprise, and to present a case study reflecting serious and vigorous comparison that demonstrates a means for successfully conducting cross-cultural comparison in the future. In Chapter Two, I examine the often-troubled history of comparing the Reformed Christian tradition with Japanese Shin Buddhism. This examination is followed by an exploration of the vital tools required for improving upon the comparative endeavor and a reframing of the Reformed Christian / Shin Buddhist comparison around the question of how these divergent religious traditions have


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responded to a common understanding of the human predicament. In Chapter Three, I present a “thick description”\(^5\) of the Shin Buddhist response to the human condition by examining the doctrine of *akunin shōki*, the Buddhist teachings and beliefs that most influenced its development, and the socio-contextual rationale for its establishment as an orthodox position within the Shin community. In Chapter Four, I similarly present a nuanced consideration of the Reformed Christian doctrine of limited atonement by investigating the theological and contextual influences upon its development. In Chapter Five, I then conduct a critical comparative analysis of these two doctrines by considering six points of similarity and difference, using a formula for a viable comparative methodology. Finally, in Chapter Six I reflect on the implications of applying this new methodology.

Chapter Two: From Poverty of Conception to “New Comparativism”

There is one aspect of scholarship that has remained constant from the earliest Near Eastern scribes and omen interpreters to contemporary academicians: the thrill of encountering a coincidence.—Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion* (1982)

In 1549, pioneering Jesuit Catholic missionary Francis Xavier landed in Kagoshima Bay at the southwestern tip of Kyūshū island of Japan. He soon succumbed to the same overwhelming thrill of encountering a coincidence that has shaped cultural observers’ descriptions of the “other” since time immemorial. After interacting with Japanese religious practitioners, Xavier is reputed to have exclaimed that the “accursed Lutheran heresy” had already reached Japan. By Xavier’s initial reckoning, the Catholic church’s missionary enterprise in Asia had been preceded by their new rivals, the followers of the teachings of Martin Luther. It’s not especially surprising that when he encountered Buddhist ideas that bore a surface-like similarity to the first generation Protestant Reformer’s conceptions of faith, grace, and salvation, Xavier sought to make meaning out of the perceived “sameness” that presented itself. Confronted with a phenomenon that seemingly resembled something he had previously encountered, Xavier sought comparatively to order his world. Although just six years earlier Xavier had

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engaged in interreligious learning in India for the purposes of furthering missionary
efforts, this is the first recorded act of comparative theological reflection based upon
perceived similarities between Japanese Shin Buddhism and Reformed Christian thought.

Twenty years later, in a letter sent from the town of Kuchinotsu, in Nagasaki
Prefecture, one of Xavier’s successors, Francisco Cabral, shared his joy in having
converted a local Buddhist priest to the Catholic faith. Cabral noted that he “had high
hopes for this convert, whose former doctrine he described as resembling Luther’s.”
Jonathan Z. Smith unknowingly explained these and similar ill-informed intuitions when
he noted: “Often, at some point along the way, as if unbidden, as a sort of déjà vu, the
scholar [or in this case missionary] remembers that he has seen ‘it’ or ‘something like it’
before . . . This experience . . . must then be accorded significance and provided an
explanation.” Xavier and Cabral’s positions are fitting historical examples of the sort of
past comparisons Smith criticizes; they function more as enterprises of magic than as
systematic projects of inquiry, “more impressionistic than methodical.” In other words,
perceptions of affinity, like magic, morph into arguments of casual influence and identity.
One can almost hear the thought processes of those early Catholic missionaries at work:

*Those Shin Buddhist teachings sure sound like Luther’s rants. It must be because
Protestant Reformers have been here before us, and now those Buddhists share their
delusions.* This assumption is a textbook case of emphasizing similarity over difference,
ignoring context, generalizing too quickly and too broadly, and confusing similarity with

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3 Galen Amstutz, *Interpreting Amida: History and Orientalism in the Study of Pure Land Buddhism* (New
York: State University of New York Press, 1997), 158.

4 Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 22.

5 Ibid.
identity—in other words assuming that because two phenomena seem similar they must be the same.

Less than a decade after Cabral’s observation, Alessandro Valignano (1539-1606), the Jesuit Visitor General for the Province of the East Indies, became one of the first people on record to concretely posit the existence of similarities between Japanese Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism and Reformed Christianity. So convinced was Valignano of these perceived similarities that in a series of letters sent to the Jesuit Superior General of Rome, Valignano speculated that the central teachings of Shin Buddhism were inspired by the very same “evil force that brought the tragedy of Reformation to Europe”:

[T]he very same doctrine [“Lutheranism”] has been bestowed by the devil upon the Japanese heathendom. Nothing is changed except the name of the person in whom they believe and trust, and the same effect being created among these heretics as obtains amidst these heathens: for these as much as the others are sunk in total carnality, divided in divers sects, and living therefore in great confusion of belief and in continuous wars.6

The perceived similarity that seemed to trouble Valignano the most concerned the process by which a person experienced ontological transformation, better known in common Christian parlance as “salvation.” Viewed as one of the more perceptive Catholic missionaries of his day, Valignano quickly came to regard Shin and Lutheran teachings concerning salvation, or soteriology, as nearly identical. In his estimation, each maintained that salvation is by grace through faith alone (sola Gratia—sola Fide).7 By


7 Amstutz, Interpreting Amida, 45. Sola gratia (by grace alone) and sola fide (by faith alone) are two of the five fundamental teachings of the Protestant reformers and are the beliefs by which early Protestants
Valignano’s reckoning, the achievement of the highest goal of each religious tradition—
transforming the human condition from one of estrangement and depravity—was for
Reformed Christians and Shin Buddhists contingent upon humanity’s total trust in an
outside force, which is best characterized by loving grace. Any efforts or works by
humanity play no role whatsoever. Specifically, Valignano wrote:

[certain Buddhists say that e]ven though humans commit as many sins as
they wish, if only they invoke [the Buddha’s] name saying Namu Amida
but—which is to say, sanctissima Amida fotoque [hotoke]—with faith and
hope in him and the merits of accomplishment . . . then by this they will be
rendered immaculate and purged of all their sins by the virtue and merit of
these fotoques, without any necessity to perform other penance or to involve
themselves in other works, for thereby injury would be done to the penances
and works which [the Buddhas] performed for the salvation of mankind. So
much that they hold precisely the doctrine which the devil, father of both,
taught to Luther. 8

It is important to remember that while a small minority of scholars argue that
Christian teachings were known in Japan one thousand years before the efforts of Xavier
and his fellow missionaries, the prevailing view is that Xavier’s arrival marked the
official introduction of the Christian message to the Japanese archipelago. 9 Lutheran
 teachings had not reached Japanese shores ahead of these groundbreaking Catholic
missionaries. In fact, contemporary Western and Japanese scholarship maintains that

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9 Sakae Ikeda and Ken Joseph, Kakureta jūjika no Kuni—Nippon (Kyoto: Tokuma Shoten, 1999). Ikeda and Joseph argue that Nestorian Christianity appeared in Kyoto as early as the fifth century, but this is not a widely accepted scholastic view.
Protestant expressions of Christianity did not begin to make inroads in Japan for another three hundred years, until the middle part of the 1860s.\textsuperscript{10}

These historic moments of comparative confusion resulted in three significant developments. First, the establishment of Catholic seminaries in Japan was temporarily delayed, as Jesuits feared the teaching of Christian doctrines to Japanese clergy would be received from a “quasi-Lutheran” perspective.\textsuperscript{11} Second, later efforts to analyze these two traditions comparatively (Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism and Reformed Christianity) became inextricably bound to Xavier and Valignano’s initial perceptions of Japanese Pure Land teachings. The taxonomy of comparative analysis with regard to these traditions was seemingly fixed quite early on, and later comparisons have largely focused on perceived notions of similar doctrines of soteriology and the role of key articulators of these positions, such as Martin Luther and Shinran Shōnin (親鸞上人). This fixed taxonomy has resulted in a rash of comparative endeavors that are unnecessarily ahistorical and too hermeneutically oriented. Third, due to the comparative emphasis upon soteriological orientations, as well as weak methodological approaches to comparison itself, Western scholars have largely interpreted Shin Buddhism through pluralistic and universalist theologies of religion. The history of the comparison of Shin Buddhism and Reformed Christian traditions is a history of impoverished conception.


\textsuperscript{11} Amstutz, \textit{Interpreting Amida}, 46. Admittedly, this Catholic institutional delay is not of large concern for the central thrust of this project.
Prior Comparisons of Shin Buddhism and Reformed Christianity

Individuals as far ranging in history as St. Francis Xavier, Karl Barth, Alfred Bloom, Dennis Hirota, John Cobb Jr., and Gregory D. Alles have noted striking similarities in conceptual structure between Protestant expressions of the Christian tradition and Shin Buddhism. Barth fervently maintained that “Yodoism [i.e., Shin Buddhism] can certainly be compared without violence to the simple Christian ‘Protestantism’ which countless souls have thought of as the true Protestantism ever since the 16th century.”¹² Nearly forty years later, Hirota agreed, suggesting that these similarities might consequently “offer an opportunity for close comparison,” which in turn might highlight “the potential resources for contemporary religious thought offered by Japanese Pure Land Buddhism.”¹³ Cobb similarly suggested that some doctrines and theologies might be critically and fruitfully evaluated and reappraised as a result of a deeper understanding of other traditions’ insights.¹⁴ Alles notes even more concretely that, “Shinran and Luther are eminently comparable.”¹⁵ However, after fifty-five years and nearly thirty scholarly attempts at comparative analysis of various aspects of these two traditions, comparability has fallen short. Undue emphasis has been placed upon similarities, while little attention has been paid to the traditions’ significant differences. This imbalance should be regarded as “demeaning to the individualism of each, [and] a


reflection of the old racist, colonialist attitude that ‘all wogs look alike.’”16 The comparative analysis in this study distinguishes itself from these prior short-sighted endeavors by attending especially to that which differentiates the two traditions, as well as by concentrating on the virtually unexplored interpretive implications of the traditions’ divergent responses to the human condition.

This project further sets itself apart in that it is one of the few manuscript-length treatments of this subject matter. Nearly all past scholastically comparative explorations of Shin Buddhism and Reformed Christianity have been brief expositions that merely scratch the surface of the potential for comparative insight. This dissertation mines the best of these prior comparisons, synthesizes their strengths, and applies a more comprehensive and rigorous comparative methodology.

The modern systematic comparative study of Shin Buddhism and the Reformed Christian tradition largely began in 1956 when Karl Barth weighed in. As mentioned in Chapter One, Barth’s famous analysis was a textbook case study in comparative theology and apologetics in which he privileged Christian conceptions of salvation and concluded that Christianity was the “religion of truth,” while Shin Buddhism was a “heathen development, which might eventually catch up with the differences we teach.”17 That same year, Alfred Bloom, soon to be one of the foremost authorities of Shin studies in the English-speaking world, was finishing his doctoral degree at Harvard Divinity School. At the time, he posited that the “character and quality of human existence” might be a useful


17 Barth, Church Dogmatics, 343.
ground for future comparative analysis of Christianity and Buddhism. Bloom did not pursue this particular line of comparative inquiry himself, but his statement set the stage for future investigations.

Eleven years later, Douglas A. Fox noted, “Christian observers have often remarked on the extraordinary similarities of Jōdo Shin and Christian thought, especially in their respective concepts of salvation.” Nearly four centuries after Catholic missionary Alessandro Valignano wrote that Buddhist practitioners sought salvation in faith and hope, Fox made a similar incorrect claim in his work, stating, “It is sometimes suggested that Shinran (the founder of the Jōdo Shin sect of Buddhism) was a sort of Japanese Luther who shared with the German a dynamic conviction that salvation is to be achieved through faith alone.” Paul O. Ingram reified this conviction when he closely hewed to Fox’s observations when he posited, “It has been pointed out by many knowledgeable western and non-western observers of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism that there are striking doctrinal parallels between the soteriologies of Shinran Shōnin, the founder of the Jōdo Shinshū school of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism, and Martin Luther.” However, Ingram rightly sensed that the differences in doctrinal formulation, rather than the similarities, would best enable us to understand the development of each religious tradition. Through his article-length treatment Ingram provided a first-ever

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20 Ibid.

attempt at examining what he perceived to be “the root cause[s] and essential nature of man’s [sic] estrangement”—sin and mappō (末法 later days of the dharma)—for the respective traditions.\textsuperscript{22} Ingram’s small decision to concentrate upon root causes of existential estrangement serves as a vital building block project’s larger comparative analysis.

Fritz Buri continued the trend of concentrating upon soteriology and the men who “show the way to salvation from the meaninglessness of existence [Paul, Shinran, and Luther],” but his brief study stands out from those of his predecessors by demonstrating concern for the historical context and situatedness of these three thinkers.\textsuperscript{23} His decision to examine phenomena \textit{in situ} presaged a vital element of strong future comparative endeavors, and is a methodological approach I employ further in this chapter and later in Chapter Five.

At the same time, Alan L. Kolp followed Barth’s line of thinking that “For the Western (and especially, Protestant) reader of Buddhism it is the Pure Land Tradition [i.e., Shin Buddhism] which seems to approximate most closely the religious tradition within Protestantism. Within the Pure Land Tradition itself as it developed in Japan, Shinran is the figure who most parallels Martin Luther in the West.”\textsuperscript{24} Kolp’s analysis of their thinking regarding salvation and liberation suggested that, “although Shinran and

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 432.


Luther represent two divergent cultures . . . their teachings reveal a basic similarity.”

However, Kolp betrayed his dependence upon the universalism of Eliadian comparativism when he recommended that:

the warrant for undertaking such a comparison lies in the assumption that man [sic] is homo religiosus and, therefore, even though the interpretation, articulation, and symbolization of the religious experience of each is dissimilar by reflecting each’s cultural and religious conditioning, still the basic experiential content is often similar. Such is the case, it seems, with Shinran and Luther.26

Western scholars are not unique in their universalistic tendencies to blur definitions, impose Protestant categories upon a study, and confuse dialogue with comparison. In his 1980 dialogical treatment of Pure Land and Christian thought, Japanese scholar Doi Masatoshi sought to trace parallels he saw between the respective traditions’ dynamics of faith. In so doing, he conflated Shinran’s exposition of the doctrine of the threefold mind (三心 sanshin) with Barth’s interpretation of God’s revelation (as seen in Romans 1:17), as well as the central Christian concepts of faith, hope and love (expressed in 1 Corinthians 13).27

In 1985, Gregory D. Alles offered a brief comparative analysis of Shinran and Luther that demonstrated potential for conducting responsible and healthy comparison by

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Doi Masatoshi, “Dynamics of Faith: A Dialogical Study of Pure Land Buddhism and Evangelical Christianity,” *Japanese Religions* 11, no. 2-3 (1980): 68. The elements of the doctrine of the threefold mind (三心 sanshin), derived from the eighteenth vow of the Muryōjukyō (無量壽経 Larger Pure Land Sutra), are sincere mind (至心 shishin), true entrusting (信業 shingyo), and aspiration for rebirth in the Pure Land (欲生 yokusho). Romans 1:17 (NRSV) states, “For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." 1 Corinthian 13:13 (NRSV) states, “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”
shifting the methodological approach. He noted that, despite a longstanding awareness of striking similarities between the traditions, “comparability has not fulfilled its promise.” While Alles did not specifically delineate the nature of that promise, he likely had the following benefits of cross-cultural comparison in mind: (1) understanding objects, theories, practices, and movements beyond the limited horizon of embedded cultural specificity, in other words, conceiving of all that transpires in human activity in more than a case-by-case manner; (2) expanding the taxonomical list of categories by which comparative analysis might be conducted, thereby countering the universalistic and comparative theological inclination to impose Protestant essentialist categories of meaning; and (3) examining religious traditions’ reflections upon common questions, in light of one another, thereby enabling “defamiliarization,” in the sense of “making the familiar seem strange in order to enhance our perception of the familiar.” By Alles’s reckoning, prior comparisons lacked systematic organization, comparative control, and concern for contextual influences, instead favoring “disjointed individual characteristics refracted across a narrow spectrum.” Examples of disjointed individual characteristics include an overemphasis upon faith, shinjin (entrusting heart), and grace.

The unique value of Alles’s article is found in the manner in which he posed his comparative question. Rather than adhering to the well-worn spectrum of analysis, Alles gave a clue as to how future healthy comparison should be conducted. He “slice[d] the

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problem in a different way . . . horizontally, instead of vertically.” Instead of focusing on the classic categories of comparison, he cut across universalizing structures of Western discourse by exploring “how Shinran and Luther advised their collaborators to conduct themselves in religious conflict.” More specifically, Alles explored Shinran and Luther’s similar recommendations for persistence in the face of conflict, as well as their differing modes of active opposition and nonopposition. His introduction of a new analytical category opened up a whole new horizon for the future application of comparative religious methodology to the modern academic study of religion. It is in this same vein that I question how two religious traditions have responded to a common sense of the human predicament. Contemporary comparative scholar William E. Paden would agree with this methodological approach, as he has argued that concepts of cross-cultural analysis do not have to be classically religion-specific. Rather, Paden envisions the examination of “prototypes . . . [such as] authority, power, order, purity, genealogy, space, or temporality,” or processes and functions such as “dramatizing sociopolitical tensions.”

Unfortunately, Alles’s new approach was not widely adopted. For example, in a 1987 journal article, Japanese scholar John Ishihara returned to the practice of examining previously identified striking parallels. While noting works by Barth, Ingram, and Buri in his introductory remarks, Ishihara admits that his efforts “break no new ground in the


sense of introducing something novel to the already established similarity between Luther and Shinran.” However, the one useful element of Ishihara’s work is his attempt to ground Luther and Shinran’s positions textually. Another critique regularly levied against Eliadian comparativism is its ahistoricity and lack of concern for textuality. Ishihara concretely compares Luther’s notion of being “simultaneously justified and a sinner,” as articulated in Luther’s lectures on Psalms (1513-1515), with Shinran’s understanding of the Shin Buddhist doctrine of the twofold aspect of the deep mind, as explained in his later writings found in the Shinshū Shōgyō Zensho II. This novel decision to closely examine comparative phenomena as found in specific texts, rather than as disembodied ideas, is one that Alles also employed in The Iliad, The Rāmāyaṇa and The Work of Religion: Failed Persuasion and Religious Mystification (1994). Here Alles argues that a text “is not simply a repository of disembodied religious meaning. It is also an act, or rather a set of acts, among them, the composition of the text, the portrayal and retrieval of the text, the effects of the text on the religious community, and vice versa.” The comparative investigation of specific texts in which one considers comparable ideas as “events” in time counters the problem of Eliadian ahistoricity and is a vital dimension of the healthy new approach to comparison for which I advocate.

Typical cross-cultural examinations of Shin Buddhism and Reformed Christianity rely on the use of the essentializing tools of comparative theology, theology of religions,

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and Eliadian comparativism. Numerous examples can be found in the scholarly work of the late 1980s and early 1990s, including Joseph Spae’s conflation of the Christian notion of sin with the Buddhist idea of karmic evil (罪業 zaigō), and the Christian notion of salvation with the Buddhist notion of coming undone from the cycles of rebirth (解脱 gedatsu). Paul Ingram insisted on continuing to compare Luther and Shinran based on what Ingram perceived to be common expressions of faith, while Tokiyuki Nobuhara was committed to “theological . . . research into the parallelism between Shinran’s thought and Protestant Christianity as professed by Reformer Martin Luther.” John B. Cobb Jr. and Ryūsei Takeda engaged the Christian notion of faith through a Buddhist-Christian dialogue conference held at Boston University, while Colin Noble made the Barthian assertion that while Shin Buddhism may present a form of grace that on the surface resembles the Christian concept of grace, “the uniqueness of Christian grace lies not just in its function but in the nature of the one who offers it . . . The concept of compassionate ‘other-power’ which has as its sole purpose the enlightenment of sentient beings for their own good, falls far short of Christian grace.”37

Among constructive exceptions to these trends was Douglas A. Fox’s suggestion that in Shinran’s interpretation of merit-transference we have “an idea somewhat similar to the teaching of St. Anselm that Christ’s merit is made available to men [sic] and is abundantly sufficient to achieve their salvation.” Exploring the parallels between

Christian thinking and Shinran’s view of the human predicament, Gerhard Schepers noted that one of the main problems with prior comparisons of Shin and Christian thought is “the fact that this is often done without a careful analysis of the respective terms and the different cultural and religious backgrounds.” Galen Amstutz studied Shin Buddhism and Reformed Christianity as political movements, wherein “especially at issue is the power-dispersing shift towards a new level of de facto self-reliance in religious thought, via revolutionary teachings about the radically independent relations of the individual to a deity or an existential vision,” and Kenneth D. Lee hinted at the possibility of comparing the salvific and redemptive processes of Amida and Jesus Christ.

The Call for “New Comparativism”

As practiced by scholarship, comparison has been chiefly an affair of the recollection of similarity . . . The issue of difference has been all but forgotten.—Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion* (1982)

A watershed moment in the history of the comparative endeavor occurred in 1982, when Jonathan Z. Smith published his seminal essay, “In Comparison A Magic Dwells.” “In Comparison” opened a deep rift among scholars regarding the task, tools, and methodological approaches best employed in the distinct discipline known as the

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40 Ibid., 19-35.
comparative study of religion. On one side of the divide stand traditional and classical approaches to the comparative endeavor, which are often referred to as universalism or “Eliadian comparativism.” Until recently these approaches have been deemed nearly synonymous with the comparative endeavor itself, an unfortunate development as their weaknesses and inadequacies have caused some to consider comparativism to be the biggest problem in religious studies rather than its best solution. The charges levied against Eliadian comparativism include the suppression of contextual and cultural significance through the imposition of Eurocentric and essentialist categories, the advancement of unfalsifiable universalist hypotheses, the perpetuation of theological foundationalism, the marshalling of comparative data simply to illustrate an a priori thesis, the confusion of similarity with identity, and a leveling of religious differentiation.

On the other side of the comparative rift resides “Smithian” or “New Comparativism.” This dissertation stands as a critical reflection upon the state of the

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43 Neither the term “Smithian,” nor “New Comparativist” are commonly employed; nevertheless, I am choosing to intentionally use them as labels and devices for noting (1) the comparative scholars of religion who have embraced Jonathan Z. Smith’s 1982 call for an efficacious and “methodologically defensible” comparison of religious phenomena, as well as (2) the vital tools of Smith’s intellectually creative comparative approach. This dissertation joins a small but growing body of New Comparative work. David Gordon White would describe this form of comparativism as OTSO-JZS—standing “on the shoulders of Jonathan Z. Smith.” See David Gordon White, “The Scholar as Mythographer: Comparative Indo-European Myth and Postmodern Concerns,” in Patton and Ray, A Magic Still Dwells, 52-53.
comparative enterprise, as well as a case study reflecting a healthy, vigorous, engaged, and critical “Smithian New Comparativism” for the twenty-first century.44

Smith argued in “In Comparison” that the modes of comparative analysis employed in the study of religion up until that point had “been found problematic.”45 He characterized prior comparisons as being emblematic of one of four primary approaches: (1) *ethnographic comparisons*, often based on an explorer’s chance interactions and intuitions, which Smith found to be too idiosyncratic and lacking any systematic analysis; (2) *encyclopedic comparisons*, which are contextless lists of cross-cultural material, also lacking rigorous analysis; (3) *morphological comparisons*, which tend to be hierarchical series of data placed into atemporal and ahistorical rubrics based upon a priori assumptions, or archetypes, of complexity, progression, aberrance, and so on; and (4) *evolutionary comparisons*, which provide the benefit of examining changes and developments over time, thereby establishing chronological priority, but which have rarely provided any richer insights with regard to comparative cultural material in the human sciences. The previously discussed theological, rational, and universalist modes of comparison use all four of these deficient approaches. Smith concluded that, on the whole, comparison was too concerned with similarities, too arbitrary, and largely devoid of meaningful analysis or interpretation. He concluded the essay by challenging scholars to develop new comparative theories and methods in an effort to salvage the discipline. In

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44 This project is deeply indebted to, and influenced by, the “New Comparativists” who, in *A Magic Still Dwells*, Patton and Ray’s edited collection assessing the state of the comparative endeavor, picked up Jonathan Z. Smith’s challenge to develop a responsible method for making comparisons, as well as the panelists who spoke at the 2001 American Academy of Religion (AAR) panel titled “Comparison in the History of Religions: Reflections and Critiques.”

45 Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 35.
effect, Smith had called for a bridge to be built across the comparative chasm, maintaining that the future of the study of religion depended upon it.

Eight years later, few scholars had heeded his warning, and Smith reiterated his exhortation with a greater sense of urgency.

Indeed, it may be argued, comparison has come to be, for many in the field, the sign of unscientific procedure, abjured in the name of responsibility towards the concrete specificity of their objects of study. This crise de conscience makes all the more urgent the task of rethinking the comparative enterprise in modes appropriate to the academy’s self-understanding as well as to its perception of the process and goals of disciplined inquiry.46

By Smith’s calculation, comparativism was still largely defined by a fixation upon establishing the relative superiority of one tradition over another or genealogically establishing the relative dependence of one tradition upon another. That many scholars in the comparative field had not met the aforementioned challenge may be seen by noting the poverty of conception that usually characterizes their comparative endeavors, frequently due, as has already been suggested, to apologetic reasons. It is as if the only choices the comparativist has are to assert either identity or uniqueness, and that the only possibilities for utilizing comparisons are to make assertions regarding dependence.47

Smith’s words certainly apply to the work of Eliadian comparativists of the 1980s who examined Shin Buddhism and Reformed Christianity, including Spae, Ingram, Nobuhara, Cobb, Takeda, and Noble.

In an effort to jumpstart the field, Smith delineated three primary requirements for responsible future comparative efforts. A formula for “New Comparativism” was finally


47 Smith, Drudgery Divine, 47.
being written, and scholars started paying attention. In The Iliad, The Rāmāyaṇa and The Work of Religion, Alles summarized Smith’s basic assertions and became one of the first scholars to take up his charge by beginning to employ critically the tools of “Smithian comparativism” to his own work.

Smith’s first assertion is that comparison should not “aim either to demonstrate that one cultural artifact possesses unique, superlative status, or to postulate that several cultural artifacts are the same. Instead . . . comparison must develop a ‘discourse of difference.’”48 As Smith put it, “It is axiomatic that comparison is never a matter of identity. Comparison requires the acceptance of difference as the grounds of its being interesting, and a methodological manipulation of that difference to achieve some stated cognitive end.”49 In other words, any real progression, when using the comparative tool in the field of religious studies, requires attending as much or more to what makes religious phenomena different than to what makes them alike.

Smith’s second assertion is that notions of “similarity and difference are not ‘given.’ They are [rather] the result of mental operations. In this sense, all comparisons are properly analogical . . . [C]omparison, in its strongest form, brings differences together within the space of the scholar’s mind for the scholar’s own intellectual reasons.”50 The strength of the comparison depends on the nature of the question being asked. Matters of genealogy, priority, or borrowing may be interesting, but ultimately they are not useful in the comparative endeavor, as they tell the scholar little with regard


50 Smith, Drudgery Divine, 51. Italics in original.
to critical inquiry that would advance the field. Responsible questions advance the academic study of religion, while irresponsible questions do not. Had the early Catholic missionaries in Japan used responsible questioning as a tool rather than assuming Lutheran borrowing or influence, they would have come to dramatically differently conclusions.

Smith’s third assertion was that comparison should not attempt to “preserve either ‘phenomenological whole entities’ or ‘local meanings.’” Instead, it [comparison] selects and utilizes specific elements from different contexts to elucidate a scholar’s theoretical concerns.” This assertion is an elaboration of Smith’s idea that comparison in religious studies should be about analyzing specific elements of religious traditions, not whole traditions, for the express purpose of addressing creative, scholastic, theoretical concerns and questions. This third rule for the production of comparisons is consistent with Smith’s earlier assertion that comparison is less a process of discovery than a procedure of invention. The question becomes “what matter of scholarly inquiry might a ‘New Comparativist’ pursue in an analogical manner?”

The basic formula for a responsible comparative methodology had finally been established and can be summarized as follows: (1) develop a discourse of difference, (2) compare analogically, and (3) compare only the elements of a given tradition that address fruitful theoretical concerns. The comparative case study in this dissertation is a model for Smith’s threefold formula, as it is an analogically cross-cultural comparison of two paradigmatic, yet divergent responses to a common human dilemma.


52 Smith, Imagining Religion, 21.
Meet the New Comparativists

A study is an advance if it is more incisive . . . than those that preceded it.
—Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973)\(^5^3\)

A handful of “New Comparativists” have stepped forward in the years since Smith’s call for the use of new theories and methods in the comparative study of religion and his establishment of an initial formula for responsible comparative analysis. Scholars have taken the best of Smith’s model and applied it to their own research in incisive ways that have advanced their respective fields of inquiry, and in doing they have strengthened the general discipline of comparative religious studies and laid the groundwork for all future endeavors in the field. These scholars have maintained that any problems with the theories and tools of the past should not result in an abandonment of the discipline itself, as the benefits of cross-cultural comparison far outweigh the liabilities. They argue that the key for scholars is simply to compare seriously and vigorously using the best tools at our disposal.

In his 1996 article, “Elements of a New Comparativism,” William Paden, an expert in the study of cross-cultural patterns of religious behavior, argued that comparativism is:

not just the study of religions, not just the classification of types, and not just a hermeneutic which reinvents the sacred for an otherwise desacralized age. Rather, it is the central and proper endeavor of religious studies as a field of inquiry and the core part of the process of forming, testing, and applying generalizations about religion at any level.\(^5^4\)


This view of comparison led Paden to elaborate on Smith’s formula. In his assessment of the field of comparative religious studies, in *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age* (2000), Paden, like Smith, contended that dynamic new cross-cultural discoveries will be found in the manipulation of difference and that comparison should always be a two-way process, revealing both similarities and differences.

“Comparativism misses its potential if it only collects parallels or only makes data illustrate an already conceived type.”

Paden also noted the importance of controlling aspectual focus when conducting comparison. According to him, comparison should focus only on individual points of resemblance that have interpretive utility. Rather than examining religious traditions *in toto*, the comparative scholar should limit the framework of analysis to those elements that will further the comparative inquiry. This recommendation was an elaboration of cultural anthropologist Fitz John Porter Poole’s position, as expressed in his 1986 article, “Metaphors and Maps: Toward Comparison in the Anthropology of Religion.” There Poole stated, “Analytical control over the framework of comparison involves theoretically focused selection of significant aspects of the phenomena.” This aspectual control ensures that the conceptual variables under consideration promote explanations of the scholar’s central theoretical concerns—in Poole’s case, his work regarding women’s social power in Papua New Guinea.

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55 Ibid., 182.


Yet another important New Comparativist is Barbara A. Holdrege, whose contributions to Smithian comparativism are illuminated in her book *Veda and Torah: Transcending the Textuality of Scripture* (1995). In this comparative historical analysis of the function and authority of scripture in rabbinic Judaism and brahmanical Hinduism, Holdrege places great methodological importance on contextual analysis.\(^5^8\) She maintains that any responsible comparison must begin with a tradition-specific investigation of historical influences on a given phenomenon, the meaning of terms and symbols within respective traditions, and the social dynamics that shape each religious manifestation.

A nuanced variation of Holdrege’s concern for textual embeddedness can be seen in Gavin Flood’s methodologically nimble comparative analysis of ascetic practice in Hinduism, Christianity, and Buddhism, titled *The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory and Tradition* (2004). Flood sees his scholarship standing at the confluence of phenomenology and hermeneutics. Specifically, he identifies two major tasks in the comparative endeavor: (1) *first-level phenomenology*, in which the world envisioned by a text is first illuminated, and then (2) *connecting the text to the wider world*. There is great value in interpreting the text’s expressions of social and cultural power in the real world. This confluence of sociological area-specific studies and comparative hermeneutics allows Flood to employ the best methodologies from these disciplines while avoiding their respective pitfalls. Flood posits that with his methodological approach the future of

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\(^5^8\) Barbara A. Holdrege, *Veda and Torah: Transcending the Textuality of Scripture* (New York: State University Press, 1995).
successful comparison is a “kind of comparative religion that is postfoundational and postcritical, and that respects diverse and divergent views.”

In a 2004 article in the journal Method & Theory in the Study of Religion, Jewish studies scholar David Freidenreich argues that “comparison of religions offers a valuable means of bringing into question deeply rooted assumptions regarding what is ‘normative’ in any given tradition as well as offering possible explanations for problems encountered in the study of a single tradition.” He suggests that the best approach is to use comparison to refocus our view of a tradition, practice, or belief. Freidenreich is correct in the sense that comparative scholarship should be designed to illuminate concealed elements that might otherwise not be seen and to prevent the calcification of standard beliefs and monolithic thinking. Further, he recognizes that a shift in perspective can often enable both self and cross-cultural understanding. A good example of this shift can be seen in his article “Sharing Meals with Non-Christians in Canon Law Commentaries, ca. 1160-1260: A Study in Legal Development,” in which he examines Christian conceptions of Jews and Muslims through the lens of legal commentaries and laws concerning meal practices.

Another excellent example of using “other” traditions to refocus standard views is Bernard Faure’s Double Exposure: Cutting Across Buddhist and Western Discourses

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(2004). Faure uses comparison to refocus and reinterpret otherwise normative positions in Western thought by providing a “Buddhist interpretation” of the Western radical polar abstractions of monotheism and atheism, faith and reason, immanence and transcendence, religion and philosophy, the material and the spiritual, and practice and theology. He argues that Buddhism has addressed some of the same questions found in Western thought but has produced different answers and pathways for proceeding. He further suggests that a shift in perspective, taking a Buddhist view when evaluating otherwise Western matters, leads to new insights. Similarly, J. J. Clarke’s Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought (1999), hermeneutically attempts to mediate “Western philosophical concepts through Eastern ideas rather than, as has traditionally been the case, the other way around.”

In her creative and visionary work The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth (1998), expert scholar of Hinduism and mythology Wendy Doniger tells us that the successful comparative scholar must have “double vision.” One must have the ability to see similarity and difference in the particular and in the general. According to Doniger, good comparison uses both microscopic and telescopic views of a given phenomenon. The microscopic view enables the scholar to see the sort of great particularity and detail that tends to interest area specialists, whereas the telescopic view enables the scholar to see larger unifying themes at work, typically the concern of universalists. This dual vision can be understood as a variation on Flood’s confluence-like, bilateral methodology. As Doniger poetically puts the matter, “the microscopic and telescopic

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63 Doniger, The Implied Spider, 9.
together provide a parallax that allows us to see ourselves in motion against the stream of
time. “64 This way of looking means attending to spatial and temporal contextuality when
examining a given phenomena, while still being able to move to hermeneutical
engagement.

Recall that it was Doniger who gave the New Comparativists their best clue as to
how to proceed with critical comparison when she asked, “Surely it is possible to bring
into a single (if not necessarily harmonious) conversation the genuinely different
approaches that several cultures have made to similar (if not the same) human
problems.”65 One cannot overstate the impact Doniger has made on comparative
scholarship through the methodological decision to conduct comparative questioning in
this manner. This mode of inquiry is the key and the new standard for all future
comparative work.

Another New Comparativist who understands the need to dramatically revision
methodological modes of inquiry is, of course, Gregory Alles. An expert on theories of
religion, cross-cultural analysis, and the religions of South Asia, Alles first picked up
Smith’s challenge to formulate new theories and methodologies in the service of a
renewed comparative enterprise. It was Alles who maintained that if “multicultural
studies are to mean anything besides atomized, specialized accounts of different peoples,
places, and times juxtaposed at random, cultural scholars will need once more to
compare, and compare seriously and vigorously.”66

64 Ibid., 25.
65 Ibid., 71.
As a critical comparativist he has done precisely that by developing his “cart and cargo” analogical methodology, which is examined later in this chapter. For now it can be understood as a device for exploring culturally divergent ways of addressing a common theme. Using this tool, Alles has variously compared how “two poems articulate and negotiate the threat of failed persuasion” in ancient India and Greece, as well as how two religious leaders (Shinran and Luther) “advised their collaborators to conduct themselves [during] religious conflict.”

Alles seeks in both cases to identify “paradigmatic instances” of differentiated response to a common problem. Along with Doniger’s methodological developments, this recognition of paradigmatic instances is a second key to a revisioned comparative enterprise.

The provocative opportunity that informs this dissertation is the speculation regarding what an application of the tools of New Comparativism might reveal if applied to a well-worn comparative case study. As suggested earlier in this chapter, the case study comparing Japanese Shin Buddhism and Reformed Christianity has been examined countless times but nearly always from the Eliadian side of the comparative chasm. By applying a New Comparativist methodology to the cross-cultural comparison of these two traditions, I offer to scholars of religion and culture an opportunity for reinvigorated interreligious learning and another model for healthy and responsible comparison.

Reformed Christianity and Jōdo Shinshū—Revisiting a Case Study Anew

This is an area of scholarly inquiry, not unlike others within the human sciences, where progress is made not so much by the uncovering of new facts or documents as by

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67 Ibid., 8; Alles, “When Men Revile You and Persecute You,” 149.
Like Smith in *Drudgery Divine*, I have chosen my case study not so much because of “its possible intrinsic interest, [but] rather, I have selected it because there is an unusually thick dossier of the history of the enterprise” of comparing these two traditions.\(^6^9\) Informal ethnographic comparisons of Shin Buddhism and Reformed Christianity first occurred over four hundred years ago when Catholic missionaries first arrived in Japan. Since the advent of the modern academic study of religion, there have been approximately thirty additional formal comparative examinations of elements of the two traditions. This literature provides the opportunity to ‘compare the comparisons’ and recognize the strengths and shortcomings of prior attempts. It also allows the application of the tools of New Comparativism in the pursuit of new perspectives.\(^7^0\)

Specifically, I am conducting a comparative examination of the Reformed Christian doctrine of limited atonement and the Jōdo Shinshū Buddhist doctrine of *akunin shōki*, also known as *akunin shōki setsu* (悪人正機説), the theory that the evil person is the object of Amida Buddha’s liberating power. Appearing in texts known as the Canons of Dort and the *Tannishō* (歎異抄 *A Record in Lament of Divergences*), respectively, these two doctrines were developed as responses to the perceived propagation of false or erroneous teachings during the formative years of the Reformed Christian Church and the Shin Buddhist sangha (*sōgya*).

\(^{68}\) Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, viii.

\(^{69}\) Ibid., vii.

\(^{70}\) Ibid.
Through a more nuanced comparative analysis than past scholarship on this topic has presented, I argue that within the doctrines of limited atonement and *akunin shōki*, thematic similarities provide a compelling rationale for an in-depth exploration of the religious traditions’ responses to the human predicament. These thematic parallels include similar expressions and interpretations of:

(1) the human condition as being unavoidably depraved and defiled;
(2) the human predicament being best characterized as inherently impure due to “original” conditioning actions, namely, past karma (*shukugō*) and original sin;
(3) the futility of the human effort to effectively change one’s own corrupted existence;
(4) transformative responses to the human condition that originate outside the capacity of the individual, namely the “Other Power” (*tariki*) of and entrusting (*shinjin*) in Amida Buddha, on the one hand, and the predetermined election and grace of God on the other; and
(5) the transactional quality of the processes of ontological transformation in response to each tradition’s understanding of the human condition, namely, Amida Buddha’s transference of merit (*shishin ekō*) to all sentient beings for their rebirth in the Pure Land, and the application of merit as seen in Anselm of Canterbury’s substitution or commercial theory of atonement.

I further maintain that the doctrines of limited atonement and *akunin shōki* provide different interpretations as to the scope of transformative response to the human condition. I argue specifically that the Reformed Christian doctrine posits a limited response, whereby only the predetermined elect are granted salvific redemption, and that
the Shin Buddhist doctrine posits a universal response whereby all sentient beings, and
most especially evil persons, are assured rebirth in Amida Buddha’s Pure Land. Through
this bilateral approach to comparison, in which both similarities and differences are
addressed, I accomplish four goals. First, I examine unexplored parallels in the process of
transformational response, thereby providing more ground for future comparison.
Second, by holding in tension alternative ways of addressing the question of who will be
“saved” or transformed, given the depraved state of the human condition, my analysis
reveals a more nuanced understanding of varied religious responses to a common
ontological presupposition than prior scholarship has shown and also prevents one
religious approach from being viewed as the ideal or standard. Third, this study sheds
new light on foundational doctrines of Reformed Christianity and Shin Buddhism,
thereby defamiliarizing doctrinal positions that may be taken for granted, as well as
providing a new lens for future doctrinal interpretation. Finally, I present a model for
healthy and vigorous Smithian comparative analysis.

In terms of scope, this project analyzes the unique historical manifestations of
each tradition’s doctrinal position as found in particular historical documents. The
Canons of Dort were formulated at the Synod of Dort in 1618-1619, and the Tannishō (歎
異抄 A Record in Lament of Divergences) was written in the late thirteenth century. This
comparative study also traces the influences that led to the development of each
document.

When considering the Reformed Christian tradition, I interpret the term
“Reformed” as an adjective that suggests Protestant in the Calvinist tradition, with
European continental roots, and constituted around doctrine rather than polity.\(^{71}\) Throughout this project, “Reformed” also reflects doctrinal developments that proceed the eighteenth century.

Few Christian doctrines have seen such a breadth of interpretation as the doctrine of limited atonement.\(^{72}\) For the purposes of this comparative analysis, the doctrine of limited atonement should be understood as follows: While Christ’s death and atonement on the cross were sufficient to effectively redeem the sin of all humanity, in accordance with God’s will, Christ’s atonement was only efficacious in the salvation of the elect.

Furthermore, in the consideration of the doctrine of limited atonement, the specific sectarian expression of Reformed Christian thought traced through this project is found in a particular doctrinal position that developed from a range of influences, including Augustine’s sense of the efficacy and particularism of God’s grace, as well as Anselm’s satisfaction theory of atonement articulated in *Cur Deus Homo?* (Why God-man?) This position also evolved out of the sub- or supralapsarian position maintained by individuals such as Thomas Bradwardine (1290-1349), Gregory of Rimini (1330-1358), and Martin Bucer (1491-1551), which argues that “electio [election] and reprobatio [(reprobation) are] positive, coordinate decrees of God by which God chooses those who will be saved and those who will be damned, in other words, a fully double

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\(^{71}\) Throughout this work, “Reformed” is interpreted as Calvinist, as opposed to Lutheran (with the differentiation marked not by the traditional division according to understandings of sacramental presence during the Eucharist but rather according to divergent views regarding predestination), and continental, as opposed to English or Scottish Presbyterian in origin. *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Religion*, 1979 ed., s.v. “Reformed,” by T. C. O’Brien.

predestination, or *praedestinatio gemina* [double predestination].” John Calvin’s conceptions of the particularism of the workings of grace and the transactionally substitutionary character of Christ’s death contributed to this line of thought, as did Theodore Beza’s writings on predestination, election, and specific atonement in works such as *Quaestiones et Responsorum* (Geneva, 1570), *A Breve Declaration of the Chief Poyntes of Christian Religion set forth in a Table* (London, 1575), and *Tractationes theologicae* (Geneva, 1570-1582). The position found unique expression in the five “Heads of Doctrine” of the Canons of Dort, issued at the Synod of Dort in 1619, in response to the *Remonstrance* of the followers of Jacobus Arminius. (These became generally recognized as the five points of Calvinism and, later, as one of the doctrinal standards used by the Christian Reformed Church and the Reformed Church of America.)

When examining the doctrinal position of limited atonement, or particular redemption, as presented in the Canons of Dort, I pay special attention to Anthony A. Hoekema’s 1968 translation from the original Latin into modern English. Given “the importance of the Canons as one of the doctrinal standards used by both the Christian Reformed Church and the Reformed Church of America,” Hoekema’s 1968 translation is a vast improvement over the English translations previously found in the *Christian

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Reformed Psalter Hymnal and Philip Schaff’s Creeds of Christendom, which are often paraphrases of the original Latin.⁷⁶

In interpreting the aforementioned influences upon the doctrine of limited atonement, I embrace the position articulated by Richard Muller, which posits significant continuity of thought among the Patristic and Medieval traditions, the Reformation era, and post-Reformation developments.⁷⁷ Additionally, my study’s position regarding “a basic harmony between Calvin and later orthodox Calvinism”⁷⁸ can also be seen in the contemporary work of Roger Nicole and John Owen.⁷⁹

The Shin doctrine of Akunin shōki setsu maintains that the evil person is the primary object of Amida Buddha’s Primal Vow to save all sentient beings. The vow is extended to all sentient beings because the human condition itself is understood to be defiled or evil in nature. In other words, it is Amida Buddha’s fervent aspiration that all sentient beings be liberated from their present state or condition by being reborn into his Pure Land, where they will ultimately achieve enlightenment. Within Shin thought, this teaching is often considered the culmination of all Mahāyāna Buddhist teachings. It is most famously articulated in Article Three of the Tannishō, which states since “even a good person attains birth in the Pure Land, how much more so the evil person.”⁸⁰

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⁷⁶ Ibid., 133-61.

⁷⁷ Richard Muller, Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins (Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1986).


When examining the doctrine of *akunin shōki*, I focus on the sectarian interpretation that argues that the Doctrine of Evil Persons as the Object of Salvation (*akunin shōki setsu*) was first found in the words and thoughts of Hōnen (1133-1212), specifically in the work transcribed by his disciple Seikan-bō Genchi, titled *Daigobon Hōnen Shōnin Denki* (Biographical Record of the Master Hōnen, Daigo Manuscript). The significance of the doctrine found its fullest expression in Article Three of the *Tannishō*, which traditional Shin thought maintains was written by Yuien-bō to reflect the words of his master, Shinran Shōnin (1173-1263). As it concerns *akunin shōki setsu*, I focus primarily on its expression as found in the *Tannishō*, using the translation *A Record in Lament of Divergences: A Translation of the Tannishō* (2005).

It has been said that the analytical comparison of religious traditions is “the examination, in a unified work, of sources from at least two distinct religious traditions addressing an aspect of religion common to the comparands.” The central aspect in

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82 This position has been well articulated by Eiken Kobai in *Understanding of Jodo Shinshu* (Los Angeles: Nembutsu Press, 1998).


84 Freidenreich, “Comparisons Compared,” 81.
common that I address is a doctrinal response to a perceived deviation from orthodoxy.
To do so, I employ Gregory Alles’s analogical cart methodology, along with the tools of
the New Comparativists.

Alles’s Analogical Cart

Alles’s analogical cart methodology is a means for identifying different ways of
addressing a common theme. The scholar’s task is to first isolate a scholarly, theoretical
theme or concern. This concern functions as a comparative frame or cart, which holds the
cargo of differing cultural responses to the theme in question. In The Iliad, The
Rāmāyaṇa and the Work of Religion, Alles explores how threats of failed persuasion have
been negotiated and articulated in the literature of divergent cultures. He works from the
premise that the act of social persuasion held great promise for the establishment of social
well-being, but he also recognizes that failure to persuade held the potential for great
social calamity. This framework of concern—threat of failed persuasion—serves as
Alles’s cart.

According to his methodology, the scholar’s second task is to analogically
identify two differentiated paradigmatic instances of response. These constitute the cargo.
In his case study, Alles examines the response to the threat of failed persuasion found in
two epics, the Greek Iliad and the Indian Rāmāyaṇa. He takes the important
methodological step of treating those texts as “events” in time, seeing the Iliad and the
Rāmāyaṇa as products of countless political and religious influences, rather than as
ahistorical documents. This prioritizing of “events” over “ideas” enables Alles to engage
in a deeply contextualized comparison, thereby avoiding the pitfalls of universalism and essentialism.

Applying the Tools of New Comparativism

The “New Comparativist” methodology I am advocating is predicated upon a conviction that comparative inquiry should be in the service of some question of importance to the scholar of religion. Whereas for Alles the question concerned failed persuasion, the central question of this project involves examining how two paradigmatic and differentiated religious traditions have responded to a common understanding of the human predicament. This question functions as Alles’s cart, while simultaneously addressing Doniger’s interest as to whether different cultures have made similar responses to common human problems.

The divergent cultural cargo in this methodological endeavor are the Reformed Christian doctrine of limited atonement and the Japanese Shin Buddhist doctrine of akunin shōki. In order to avoid the pitfalls of Eliadian comparativism, I prioritize the “events”—the Canons of Dort and the Tannishō—as responses to perceived deviations from preexistent “orthodox” positions.

In addition to Alles’s analogical cart, this study employs Wendy Doniger’s comparative methodology of exploring micro- and macromyths. This methodology defines the micromyth as the neutral scholarly construction that lies beneath any one particular text and that allows for the comparison of cultural variants on a basic narrative. For this comparative inquiry, the basic narrative, or macromyth, in question suggests that the human condition is best characterized as defiled or depraved. This statement then
serves as the hub to which various religious responses are connected like spokes. The particular responses of interest to this project, while superficially similar in many ways, will be revealed as being quite different in scope, namely, limited and universal. The subsequent interpretation and analysis of these differences constitute the macromyth.

Yet another tool of New Comparativism employed in this comparative analysis is Barbara Holdrege’s methodology of comparative historical analysis. This approach involves three principal phases. First, I perform separate, tradition-specific, contextualized historical analyses of how the Canons of Dort and the Tannishō are understood within their own traditions; that is, I explore the historical events that led to the establishment of these respective doctrinal standards, and I examine the doctrines’ loci within the broader Protestant Christian and Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions. Next, my comparative analysis delineates structural similarities and highlights significant differences, such as similar expressions and interpretations of the nature of the human condition, causes of that ontological status, responses to the human predicament, and mechanisms or processes of response, as well as divergent scopes of response. Last, I interpret what these similarities and differences convey regarding religious responses to perceptions of the human condition as being depraved.

Finally, this study employs William Paden’s methodology of controlling the aspectual focus of the comparison. Rather than attempting to compare these two traditions or even two of their doctrines in toto, the scope of analysis here is limited to the aforementioned six points of concern for comparative analysis. My presentation of contradictory impressions of the efficacious scope of redemptive action will thereby provide interpretative utility. The additional methodological implication of this
presentation is the attempt to defamiliarize doctrinal positions that may be taken for granted and to question deeply rooted assumptions regarding what is normative in a given tradition.

Implicit within the approaches taken within this dissertation lies Smith’s methodological concern that comparative endeavors should develop a “discourse of difference.” Therefore, this analysis does not stop at the implication of sameness or suggest a cultural artifact’s superiority. The appearance of similarity between Reformed Christian and Shin Buddhist interpretations of the human condition, the reasons for this condition, the responses to this condition, and the mechanism of response all constitute what Doniger calls “a useful base from which to ask about difference.” From this base, this dissertation is able to follow Smith’s basic assumption that comparison selects and utilizes specific elements from different contexts in order to elucidate the scholar’s theoretical concern—in this case, what can be learned from divergent scopes of transformational response to a common ontological presupposition.

Also implicit within this dissertation’s multifaceted methodological approach is David Freidenreich’s insistence that “comparison without analysis does little to advance the study of religion.” After giving contextualized, deep description of each doctrinal

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85 Smith, *Drudgery Divine*.

86 The most striking case of an implied position of theological superiority within prior comparative reflections on Protestant Christianity and Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism can be seen in Karl Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1, pt. 2, trans. G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), 340-44.


statement and its place within its respective tradition, I offer hypotheses as to what these statements collectively say about the nature of the human predicament.

Rationale for Methodology

According to Smith the primary skill of scholars of religion is their “relentlessly self-conscious” and strategic ability to clearly articulate why they have chosen to examine particular phenomena. Smith maintains that, as no expression of human experience possesses intrinsic interest, the examination of cultural datum “is of value only insofar as it can serve as exempli gratia of some fundamental issue in the imagination of religion.”

Like Alles, I am not ultimately trying to identify patterns (e.g., grace or faith) common to the two texts in question; rather, I am exploring differentials by which the two texts articulate divergent responses of scope to a conceptually analogous ontological presupposition. This approach heeds the counsel of Marsha A. Hewitt, who maintains that any “new comparativism” must avoid unduly privileging unifying patterns over local particularity. She states that a “dialectical methodology [of this sort] in the comparative study of religion allows for conceiving a relationship between universality and particularity that maintains them in a tensive relation rather than abolishing one element in favour of the other.”

Consequently, the significance of this dissertation rests in its ability to fill a gap in the existing scholarship by (1) examining the unexplored parallels between the

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89 Smith, *Imagining Religion*, xi.

transactionally substitutionary theory of Christ’s atonement and the Shin interpretation of the process of merit-transference (shishin ekō), (2) comparing the predeterminative dimension of Amida Buddha’s Primal Vow and the supralapsarianism found within the doctrine of limited atonement, and (3) attending to the bilateral function of comparison, specifically in the interpretive analysis of the doctrines of limited atonement and akunin shōki’s differing scopes of response to the depraved quality of the human condition.

Wendy Doniger maintains that a good comparative scholar “builds an argument like an Irish wall: a good Irish wall needs no mortar, for if the stones are selected carefully and arranged so that they fit together tightly, they will hold one another up and the wall will stand. So too, if a scholar selects her texts carefully and places them in a sequence that tells the story she wants to tell, she will need relatively little theory to explain why they belong together and what sort of argument they imply together.” Doniger’s statement also implies that if the analogical cart is well built and the cargo reflects paradigmatic instances of differentiation, then the comparison will need little explanation. Eliadian comparativists built shaky walls that easily crumbled, but with their Smithian training, New Comparativists are prepared to become master stonemasons.

Doniger, The Implied Spider, 60.
Chapter Three: Akunin Shōki Setsu

We must describe what we are comparing before we compare. — Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion* (1982)

In the ongoing endeavor to provide the basis for the comparative analysis that serves as the heart of this dissertation, this chapter describes the historical effort within the nascent Shin Buddhist community to address growing doubts and confusion arising amongst followers of the teachings of Shinran Shōnin (親鸞上人) in the years soon after Shinran’s death. These first generation followers of Shinran’s religious tenets were living in the heart of Japanese feudal power, the Kanto region, during the Kamakura period of Japanese history (1185-1333). As “Shinran left no instructions on the formation of a sectarian order after his death [however]… his followers were forced to shape the Shinshū as best they could from his teachings.” The effort to correct misunderstandings of Shinran’s teachings, a central concern for both this chapter and this project as a whole, first appeared in codified form in a text known as the *Tannishō* (歎異抄 *A Record in Lament of Divergences*). This chapter examines how and why the *Tannishō* was written,


2 Shinran, the founder of the True Pure Land School (浄土真宗 *Jōdo Shinshū*), lived between 1173 and 1262, while the Shinshū or “true Pure Land” sectarian Buddhist organization rose to institutional prominence in the years between Shinran’s death and the work of the Shinshū’s tenth-generation leader, Rennyo (蓮如), 1415-1499.

describes the influences upon the central doctrine found within the *Tannishō* (悪人正機説 *akunin shoki setsu*), and explores the meaning and scope of this doctrine of liberation.

The *Tannishō* was constructed out of sectarian necessity. Shinran’s religious views were quite different from the perspectives of more mainstream Japanese Buddhist leaders of the day, and with no direct source for guidance after his death, misunderstandings easily arose among his followers. As modern scholars of Shinran’s teachings have observed, “though Shinran was traditional in his outward forms, his thought was in reality, drastically revolutionary.”

One example as to how Shinran’s thoughts ran counter to contemporaneous normative Buddhist positions had to do with his view of monastic celibacy. Shinran extended the Mahāyāna notion that it was possible to “attain the transcendent while living in the mundane world” to its fullest expression, as he intentionally disregarded the centuries-old Buddhist distinction between monastic life and lay life when he married the nun Eshinni (惠信尼).

Another significant difference between Shinran’s religious views and more traditional Buddhist teachings involved his thoughts regarding how a person might be

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5 Yoshifumi Ueda, “The Mahayana Structure of Shinran’s Thought: Part I,” *The Eastern Buddhist* New Series 17, no. 1 (Spring 1984): 57. Most of what is known about Eshinni (1182-1268?) comes to us thru her letters (惠信尼文書 *Eshinni monjo*), which were discovered in 1921. Shinran’s repudiation of the classic distinction between the monastic life and the lay life found its fullest expression in his *hīso hizoku* (非僧非俗) theory of “neither monk nor layman”. A useful look at the historical differentiation between lay and monastic orientations in Chinese and Japanese Pure Land traditions can be found in Allan A. Andrews’ “Lay and Monastic Forms of Pure Land Devotionalism: Typology and History,” *Numen* 40 (1993): 16-37, whereas a good examination of the contemporary implications of Shinran’s *hīso hizoku* theory can be found in Richard M. Jaffe’s *Neither Monk nor Layman: Clerical Marriage in Modern Japanese Buddhism* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001).
liberated from the endless cycle of rebirth, known as samsāra (六道 rokudō). Shinran’s teachings were “predicated on the idea that Amida Buddha has provided human beings with a path to enlightenment (菩提 bodai) or Nirvāṇa (滅度 metsudo) . . . without the rigorous religious practices demanded in other forms of Buddhism.”6 In lieu of the traditional cultivation of wisdom and the disciplined practice of meditation (i.e., the path of sanctification, 聖道門 shōdō-mon), Shinran promoted the Pure Land path (浄土門 jōdo-mon), which advocates “a simple form of religious devotion aimed not at immediate enlightenment in the present lifetime but at birth in Amida’s Pure Land during one’s next life.”7 According to Shinran’s Pure Land thought, Amida Buddha (Skt. Amitābha - the Buddha of Infinite Light and Life), had in his boundless wisdom and compassion perceived the “problems of existence of those who are suffering in Samsāra from evil karma, and [thus] provides a means of emancipation.”8 That emancipation is said to take the form of rebirth, upon one’s death, in a land of utmost peace and bliss (Skt. Suḥkāvātī), the Pure Land of Amida (浄土 Jōdo). Shinran maintained that the conditions found in this Pure Land are so perfect, so devoid of corruption or defilement that anyone born there will more easily attain nirvāṇa than they ever would from the human realm of samsāra.

The religious devotion required for birth in Amida’s Pure Land, known as shinjin (信心), is most commonly explained as ‘faith’ or ‘piety’, but is better understood as

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6 Dobbins, Jōdo Shinshū, 3.
7 Ibid.
“awakening to Amida’s compassion [which is] constantly working on a person.” In other words, shinjin suggests the cultivation of an ‘entrusting heart’ that is open to and prepared for the compassionate work of Amida, which is continually endeavoring to shine light on the human condition and reveal the true nature of existence itself. The “central religious experience of Shin Buddhism, [shinjin] . . . literally means man’s [sic] ‘true, real, and sincere heart and mind’ (makoto no kokoro), which is given by Amida Buddha” as the unrestricted gift of wisdom and liberation.

The most unique elements of Shinran’s thought and the facets of most concern for both this chapter and this dissertation’s overall analysis are Shinran’s view of the human condition and his sense of the unlimited scope of liberation that is inevitable due to the compassionate efforts of Amida Buddha. These tenets of Shinran’s teachings will be explored in much greater depth through the aforementioned analysis of the Tannishô and akunin shoki setsu.


10 In translating shinjin as “entrusting heart,” rather than “faith,” I align my interpretation with the position taken by Hisao Inagaki and the editorial board of A Record in Lament of Divergences: A Translation of the Tannishô, 2nd ed. (Kyoto: Hongwanji Press, 2005), viii-x, as well as Dennis Hirota, Michio Tokunaga, and Ryushin Uryuzu, the translators of The Collected Works of Shinran, 2 vols. (Kyoto: Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-ha, 1997). The decision to translate shinjin as “entrusting heart” also better enables the comparative analysis that follows to avoid a classic mistake of comparative studies – the conflating of meaning found in the ideas and terminology of two religious traditions, or the reduction of an idea found in one tradition to the parameters outlined by a second tradition.

11 Dennis Hirota, ed. The Collected Works of Shinran Vol. 2 (Kyoto: Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-ha, 1997), 206.
The distinctive nature of Shinran’s teachings coupled with the lack of an obvious ideological successor inevitably led to faulty interpretations of his thought by numerous Shin practitioners in the years following his death. Due to this rising proliferation of errant teachings that started to replace Shinran’s core message, a clarifying response was developed around 1280. The response to a perceived increase in deviations from the “true faith” of Shinran, which this chapter concentrates upon, was intended to ensure the correct transmission of Shinran’s teachings, thereby preserving his ideas from distortion and corruption, and to effectively establish orthodox Shin thought.12

Of the historical clarifying responses made to those early followers’ misconceptions, this chapter pays particular attention to the early Shinshū’s articulation of an orthodox statement regarding the identity of the true object of Amida Buddha’s vow of liberation or Primal Vow (本願 hongan). Put another way, this orthodox declaration by the early Shin community centered upon the question as to who would ultimately be liberated from samsāra. As the Shin community rapidly began to grow in the decades after Shinran’s death, some followers challenged the traditional teachings by espousing that certain actions would prohibit a person from being released from samsāra (i.e., assured birth in the Pure Land). It was argued that individuals who did not read and study the sutras and commentaries would not be released, nor would those who were argumentative with other followers or were stingy with donations to the sangha (僧伽).

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12 Shinran’s “true faith,” his conception of the development of the Pure Land path, and his view of liberation are most clearly delineated in his Hymn of True Shinjin and the Nembutsu (正信偈 Shōshinge). This work can be found in the 102nd section of the chapter on practice (行行) in Shinran’s seminal work Collection of Passages Revealing the True Teaching, Practice, and Realization of the Pure Land Way (教行信証 Kyōgyōshinshō); Shōshinge, in The Collected Works of Shinran (京都: 本願寺 Hongwanji-ha, 1997), 69-74; and Alfred Bloom, Shoshinge: The Heart of Shin Buddhism, trans. Rev. T. Nagatani and Ruth Tabrah (Honolulu, Hawaii: Buddhist Study Center Press, 1986), 101-108.
sōgya). The clarifying response developed in the late thirteenth century was meant to demonstrate that Shinran’s teachings argued for a radically universal conception of ontological transformation rather than expressing prohibitions and limits to liberation. “Specifically, it contained the seeds of an egalitarian worldview by placing people on equal footing with each other within Amida’s vow to save all [sentient beings].”

Shinran maintained that Amida would never forsake an individual due to her station in Japanese society or even her actions towards others. In other words, birth in the Pure Land is meant for her and for everyone. No one would ever be forsaken by Amida (不捨 sesshu fusha), regardless of one’s thoughts, actions, or life circumstances. As Shinran put the matter in his Shōshinge (Hymn of True Shinjin and the Nembutsu):

> When the one thought-moment of joy arises, nirvana is attained without severing blind passions; When ignorant and wise, even grave offenders and slanders of the dharma, all alike turn about and enter shinjin, they are like waters that, on entering the ocean, become one in taste with it . . .

> When foolish beings of delusion and defilement awaken shinjin, they realize that birth-and-death is itself nirvana; without fail they reach the land of immeasurable light and universally guide sentient beings to enlightenment . . .

> With kind concern he teaches the three characteristics of entrusting and nonentrusting, compassionately guiding all identically, whether they live when the dharma survives as but form, when in its last stage, or when it has become extinct. Though persons have committed evil all their lives, when they encounter the Primal Vow, they will reach the world of peace and realize the perfect fruit of enlightenment.14

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14 Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha, Shōshinge (Hymn of True Shinjin and the Nembutsu), in The Collected Works of Shinran (Kyoto: Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha, 1997), 70-72.
As Alfred Bloom explains, Shinran’s declaration of equality in Amida’s salvation is remarkable as Shinran highlights “Amida’s intention to bring about the salvation of all beings, none to be excluded…. Salvation is essentially indivisible, and compassion would not be true compassion if even one were to be excluded.”\(^{15}\) Shinran believed that the liberation of sentient beings was a universal process and experience through the Pure Land path. No person could be excluded or make himself exempt. This dissertation builds upon the idea that this teaching is unique within the larger trajectory of Pure Land thought, as well as the pan-Mahāyāna world, and as such it serves as an important element in any successful comparison of Pure Land Buddhism with other non-Pure Land religious traditions. Consequently, the matter of universal scope of ontological transformation found within Shinran’s teachings is of central importance to this dissertation’s comparative analysis with the Reformed Christian doctrine of limited atonement. To understand the magnitude of this teaching though, it is important to first briefly understand its context.

Historically Pure Land Buddhist practitioners have revered a collection of texts above all other Buddhist sutras – the three Pure Land sūtras.\(^{16}\) Of these sutras, the “Larger Pure Land Sūtra” (無量壽経 Muryōjukyō), is by far the most important to the Pure Land movement as it “contains the forty-eight vows made by Amida in his quest to achieve Buddhahood, to establish his Pure Land, and to save all sentient beings. Among


\(^{16}\) The Three Pure Land sūtras include the Larger Sūtra of Immeasurable Life (無量寿経 Muryōjukyō), the Smaller Sūtra of Immeasurable Life (阿弥陀経 Amidakyō), and the Sūtra on Contemplation of the Buddha of Infinite Life (観無量寿経 Kanmuryōjukyō).
the forty-eight, the eighteenth vow is the crucial one on which Pure Land soteriology rests.\(^{17}\) Often referred to as the Primal Vow or the principal vow (hongan), it states:

> If, when I attain Buddhahood, sentient beings in the lands of the ten quarters who sincerely and joyfully entrust themselves to me, desire to be born in my land, and call my Name even ten times, should not be born there, may I not attain perfect Enlightenment.\(^{18}\)

This eighteenth vow, considered by Pure Land Buddhists to be the most important teaching, is viewed as the definitive statement of the Buddha’s compassion and wisdom, which results in universal liberation or salvation.\(^{19}\) It is the “soteriological norm” for Pure Land thought, as it is the “Buddha-dharma of all . . . [the] virtual guarantee of the eternal salvation of all sentient beings.”\(^{20}\) In other words, it is the central position regarding ontological transformation for Pure Land practitioners.

Given the magnitude of its place in Pure Land thought throughout history, it is critical to examine how the Shinshū came to interpret Amida’s Primal Vow. An important point for this comparative project is to note that Shin interpretations of the hongan were coupled with Shinran’s teachings regarding the nature of the human predicament to form a unique statement concerning who will be ‘saved’ or liberated by Amida’s compassion. As previously described, this unique statement of ontological transformation, or liberation, involves a radically universal scope as Amida’s salvific

\(^{17}\) Dobbins, Jōdo Shinshū, 3.

\(^{18}\) Inagaki, The Three Pure Land Sutras, 243.


activity is directed at everyone. Many scholars have suggested that these developments ultimately culminated in the prominent Shin Buddhist doctrine (説 setsu) known as akunin shōki (惡人正機). This doctrine of akunin shōki, which illustrates Shinran’s ideas about a universal scope of ontological transformation, will be directly compared with the Reformed Christian doctrine of atonement and its more limited scope of ontological transformation in Chapter Five of this dissertation.

Although akunin shōki setsu will be examined and explained in much greater detail throughout the chapter, for now it should be understood as follows: All ordinary, foolish sentient beings (凡夫 bonbu), despite being filled with an abundance of blind passions, ignorance and defilements (煩悩 bonnō), are the objects of Amida’s saving power. Further, as evidenced by the fact that they currently reside or exist in the cycle of rebirth, all sentient beings are deemed to be karmically bound or possessed with residual karma (宿業 shukugō). Put differently, consistent with the law of karmic causation, an individual’s current existence in samsāra is the direct result of a particular past action. As the human realm is a state defined by the three poisons — blind passion, defilement and ignorance — Shinran argued that any and every action is an ‘evil’ action and consequently all humans should be understood as ‘evil people’ (悪人 akunin). As Shinran

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put the matter, “There is never [any act]… that is not evil that we commit and [the working out of] past karma.”

Shinran’s intentional use of the term ‘evil’ (悪 aku) when describing all sentient beings is both a unique development in Buddhist thought and a vital component of the clarifying response to early followers misconceptions. Recall that some followers of the early Shinshū argued it was important to establish a list of the specific actions that should be deemed ‘evil’ and thus obstacles to rebirth in the Pure Land. Shinran maintained instead that as all actions occur within the realm of samsāra, all actions are in fact evil. Any differentiation between good actions and bad actions, or actions that result in rebirth in Amida’s Pure Land and those that prohibit rebirth, is useless. As evil people, karmically bound individuals are recipients of Amida’s salvific compassion, and since everyone in the human realm is ‘evil,’ according to Shinran’s thought everyone can and will be liberated. In summary, since individuals are the result of past karma, all sentient beings are evil and are beneficiaries of Amida’s salvific activity as it is meant for all sentient beings.

This matter concerning the true object of Amida’s compassion and accompanying salvific activity, as expressed in his Primal Vow, is of central importance to this comparative analysis as it directly addresses the comparative matter of scope of liberation.

Specifically, this chapter demonstrates that in response to a perceived fallen

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22 This is an adaptation of Tannishō 13 found in Ueda Yoshifumi, “Freedom and Necessity in Shinran’s Concept of Karma,” trans. Dennis Hirota, in Living in Amida’s Universal Vow: Essays in Shin Buddhism ed. Alfred Bloom (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2004), 105.

23 The notion of “salvation” or “salvific activity” is commonly found in Judeo-Christian traditions, while Buddhist thinkers and practitioners tend to speak and write of liberation, transformation, release, or rebirth. However, when writing for Western audiences contemporary Buddhist thinkers and scholars are often choosing to employ salvific language as a synonym for the aforementioned ideas. For example: Shōjun, “Shinran’s Indebtedness To T’an-luan,” 220; John Ross Carter, “Identity in Relation: The Buddha and the
or corrupted human condition, unlike the limited scope of salvation expressed in the Canons of Dort, the Tannishō demonstrates a universal scope of liberation in response to a similar ontological position.

Finally, the specific historic event that addressed misconceptions and repudiated deviations from Shinran’s teachings, preventing the fracturing of the young Shin community, and which most clearly articulates the doctrine of akunin shōki, was the creation of a brief religious tract known as the Tannishō (歎異抄 A Record in Lament of Divergences). Considered to be one of the world’s great religious and literary developments, the Tannishō’s “historical value lies in the vivid picture it paints of the Shinshū in this embryonic stage. The work also presents a powerful spiritual message which has made the Tannishō one of the Shinshū’s most popular religious texts in the twentieth century.”24 Additionally, the Tannishō is the most widely read religious text amongst contemporary Shinshū practitioners and can be thought of as a virtual summary of Shin thought and practice.25

The Tannishō consists of two major parts that are of particular interest to this project: 1) ten sayings attributed to Shinran; and 2) critiques by the author of the Tannishō of eight misunderstandings of Shinran’s teachings that were beginning to spread among his disciples. In the following pages, I will explain the Tannishō’s position

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24 Dobbins, Jōdo Shinshū, 69.

on the six matters that will later be employed in my comparative analysis, which are the
same as those covered in Chapter Two. The six matters are: (1) the nature of the human
condition or predicament;26 (2) the past conditioning action that leads to this human
condition; (3) the futility of any human efforts to effectively change this human
condition; (4) the ontologically transformative response to the human condition that
originates from ‘outside’ of any human efforts; (5) the transactional quality of this
process of ontological transformation; and (6) the scope of the transformative response.

At the conclusion of this chapter the reader will have a clear understanding of: (1)
which “dharmalogical” influences most significantly contributed to the creation of akunin
shōki setsu;27 (2) why this doctrinal statement was articulated in this manner within the
Tannishō; and (3) what akunin shōki means according to the Tannishō. An understanding
of the six aforementioned positions found within the Tannishō (ranging from the nature
of the human condition to the scope of transformation to said human condition), as well
as the three aforementioned questions (concerning the development of the Tannishō and

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26 When attempting to understand the human condition, Buddhist traditions have generally understood
the nature of human existence to be a defiled one. This is due to the fact that all inhabitants of the realm of
Saha (娑婆道 shabadō) are said to exist in the realm of delusion, and thus they are still subject to the three
poisons of greed, anger, and ignorance. Beyond the realm of desire, delusion and form exists the realm of
formlessness, sometimes referred to as nirvāṇa. It is within this realm that awakened beings (i.e., Buddhas)
are said to exist. f

27 I use the term “dharmalogical” to refer to Buddhist ideas, principles, and teachings in much the same way
the term “theological” is employed in Christian thought. For examples of prior scholastic uses of the term
in Buddhist Avadana Literature,” History of Religions 18 (1979): 221-237; Hirota, ed., Toward a
Contemporary Understanding, 1; John S. Strong, “Images of Asoka: Some Indian and Sri Lankan Legends
and their Development,” in King Asoka and Buddhism: Historical and Literary Studies, ed. Anuradha
Seneviratna, (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1994), 159. For a broader understanding of
what has also been referred to as “Buddhist theological” thinking see: Roger Jackson and John Makransky,
ed., Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars (New York: Routledge,
2000).
its view of rebirth in the Pure Land and liberation) will provide the foundation for the comparative analysis that occurs in Chapter Five.

Dharmalogical Influences on Akunin Shōki Setsu

Early Dharmalogical Developments

The articulation of Shinran’s unique conception of the evil person as the principal object of Amida Buddha’s salvific activity, as expressed in the Tannishō, is shaped by numerous influences. To explain the construction of akunin shōki setsu, this section briefly examines five developments that preceded the rise of the Shinshū and immeasurably shaped the Tannishō: traditional Buddhism’s understanding of samsāra, karma and liberation; Pure Land thought regarding Buddha-lands; Amida Buddha and his Primal Vow; Hōnen’s contention that the evil person (akunin) is the true object of Amida’s hongan; and Shinran’s view of karma and the human condition.

Samsāra, karma and liberation. The notion that existence is best understood as a continuous cycle of birth-death-and-rebirth with no beginning and no end is an ancient one. Appearing in the Upaniṣads, this conception of existence has been around since nearly 800 BCE and is foundational to a majority of the religions of South Asia.28 Samsāra or the samsāric cycle, (a Sanskrit word that literally means “flowing on” or “journeying”), according to Buddhist interpretations, is the idea that individuals transmigrate from one realm of existence to another based upon their past actions and/or

moral conduct. This transmigratory cycle is thought to last forever, or at least until an individual can find a form of release or liberation. Admittedly, in the Buddhist conception, this continuous cycle of rebirth “is not the transmigration of a self or soul but the continuation of a process, a flux of becoming in which successive lives are linked together by a causal transmission of influence rather than by substantial identity.” As Buddhists do not believe in an abiding entity or substance that transmigrates (i.e., an eternal self or soul) they tend to more regularly speak of this phenomenon as rebirth.

This is why when we explain rebirth, we make use of examples which do not require the transmigration of an essence or a substance. For example, when a sprout is born from a seed, there is no substance that transmigrates. The seed and the sprout are not identical. Similarly, when we light one candle from another candle, no substance travels from one to the other, and yet the first is the cause of the second. When one billiard ball strikes another, there is a continuity, the energy and direction of the first ball is imparted to the second. It is the cause of the second billiard ball moving in a particular direction and at a particular speed. When we step twice into a river, it is not the same river and yet there is continuity, the continuity of cause and effect. So there is rebirth, but not transmigration. There is moral responsibility, but not an independent, permanent self. There is the continuity of cause and effect, but not permanence.

Integral to a Buddhist understanding of rebirth is the corollary doctrine of karma. A Sanskrit term, derived from the root word kri that literally means ‘action’ or ‘doing,’ karma eventually emerges as the universal law of cause and effect that regulates the aforementioned cycle of rebirth. Karma is not a principle built on matters of reward or punishment as more commonly found in Christian doctrines of sin and salvation. Rather it is a natural causational law of the cosmos. Karma is commonly understood to teach the


concept that “one reaps the fruits of one’s own acts. Through good acts one obtains favorable life-conditions, through evil acts one undergoes pain.” In Buddhist thought karma refers to all deliberately willed or intended actions, whether they are for good or bad purposes. These deliberately willed actions lead to the generation of karmic merit (punya) or karmic fruit (phala). This karmic merit, or the consequential results of one’s actions, subsequently shapes the nature and quality of one’s rebirth. That is, intentionality leads to action (karma), which leads to karmic merit, which leads to rebirth in one of the six realms of samsāra. “When we die, we go from one state of existence to another according to the karmic value [i.e., merit] of our conduct while alive.” Thus, according to the principle of causal transmission, an individual’s wholesome intention leads to wholesome action, which produces positive karmic fruits thereby shaping one’s future rebirth into a more positive realm. Similarly, unwholesome intention leads to unwholesome action, which produces negative karmic merit thereby causing one’s future rebirth to be a more negative one. Put another way, karma, as a general Buddhist term, “denotes both good and bad acts. According to the law of karmic causation, past acts, whether good or evil, become causes manifesting their effects in the present, and likewise, present acts become causes of results that will appear in the future. Good causes

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32 Phala, meaning result or effect, is best understood as the “experienced effect or karmic maturation of prior deeds.” Daniel Keown, Dictionary of Buddhism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 215.

33 General Buddhist cosmology refers to the six realms of rebirth as: 1) devas (天神 tenjin), humans (人 nin), asura (阿修羅 asura), the realm of animals (畜生道 chikushōdō), the realm of hungry ghosts (餓鬼道 gakidō), and hell realms (地獄 jigoku).

necessarily result in good and evil in evil: this necessity between cause and result is the essential characteristic of karma.”

Interpretations of the workings of karmic causality vary across Buddhist schools of thought. For our purpose, karma should be understood as dharmalogical background for a clearer understanding as to how the Shinshū doctrine of akunin shōki interprets all of an individual’s past karma (宿業 shukugō) as evil. While Shinran’s specific views on karma and the human condition will be discussed in greater detail in a subsequent section of this chapter, it suffices for now to understand that Shinran regarded karmic influence from “the stance of the person who has awakened, through insight into the fundamental nature of human existence, to the impossibility of transcendence” through the traditional threefold path (三学 sangaku) of morality, meditation, and the cultivation of wisdom.

Specifically, Shinran regarded karma as that which has lost its causational ability to generate samsāric results due to the aforementioned reinterpretation of all past karma as evil. Recall that Shinran regards all acts as fundamentally evil. Thus, according to Shinran’s thought, as there is no longer a dualistic understanding of some acts as being ‘good’ and others being regarded as ‘bad,’ any and all acts result in rebirth in the Pure Land. This stands in stark contrast to the traditional view of karmic causation, whereby any and all acts continue to drive the wheel of samsāra. While Shinran was influenced by long-established Buddhist views of liberation, his reinterpretation of karma provided a foundation for a unique formulation of ontological transformation.


36 Ibid., 103.
Traditionally the Mahāyāna Buddha-Dharma, known more commonly as Mahāyāna Buddhism, has maintained that the goal of the Buddhist path is enlightenment or awakening (悟 satori). The Buddhist practitioner endeavors to awaken to her buddha-nature (仏性 busshō), the perfection and completeness of emptiness (Skt. śūnyatā, Jp. 空 kū), the true nature of all things. This awakening has sometimes been referred to as realizing or attaining buddhahood (成仏 jōbutsu), in other words, becoming a being who is awake to the oneness of her own nature and the nature of ultimate reality. “This is the idea that buddhahood is somehow inherent or innate to all sentient beings as a pure and enlightened core underlying the deluded mind.” The seminal Chan/Zen text, the Platform Sutra of the Six Patriarch (六祖壇經), provides a metaphor comparing a person’s Buddha-nature to the sun and the moon, which are always shining although occasionally hidden by clouds.

Thus, we know all dharmas are present in our nature. But our nature itself remains pure. The sun and the moon are always shining. It is only due to cloud cover that there is light above but darkness below and we can't see the sun or moon or stars. Then suddenly the wind of wisdom comes along and blows the clouds and drives the fog away…

In other words, an individual’s true nature, his Buddha-nature, is always present but may be obscured by the construction of false dualities or impurities. According to Shinran a perfect example of false duality is the arbitrary distinction between good acts and evil.

37 Unno, River of Fire, River of Water, 63.
acts. In traditional Theravāda Buddhist thought “good and evil are defined by whether actions bring joy or suffering.”\(^{40}\) Put differently, good and evil are typically understood in light of karmic consequence or recompense (業報 gōhō). At a rudimentary level, a basic goal of the Buddhist practitioner is to engage in more good acts than bad since doing so will directly influence the cycle of rebirth in a more positive manner. As Śākyamuni Buddha explained to his disciples, as remembered in verse 183 of the *Dhammapada*, “To avoid all evil, to cultivate good, and to cleanse one’s mind – this is the teaching of the Buddhas.”\(^{41}\) According to Mādhyamaka-influenced Mahāyāna thought, at the level of Ultimate Truth the key for the practitioner is to transcend all dualities, including notions of good and evil, so he might experience the oneness of the absolute and the relative. As Nāgārjuna (龍樹 Ryūju; ca. 150-250 CE), regarded as founder of the Mādhyamaka school of thought and the first patriarch of Shin Buddhism, stated in his *Śunyatasaptati* (*Seventy Verses on Emptiness*):

Duration, origination, destruction, existence, non-existence, inferiority, mediocrity and superiority were taught by the Buddha in accord with conventional usage, not by the power of the real. (verse 1)

Since the intrinsic being of all entities does not exist in the cause and conditions, either together or separately, or in any way, therefore they are empty. (verse 3)

Neither the happiness and suffering which depend upon an object in a dream, nor that object are existent. Similarly, neither that which originates dependently, nor that upon which it depends are existent. (verse 14)


Having comprehended apparent conditionality, the net of false views is swept aside. (Consequently), abandoning attachment, delusion and anger, without stain, one surely reaches Nirvāṇa. (verse 73)\(^{42}\)

Using the imagery of the *Platform Sutra* to further our interpretation, Nāgārjuna’s thinking suggests that when the clouds of defilement are washed away one’s Buddha-nature manifests. In other words, attaining buddhahood “does not mean that a man [sic] acquires some super-human quality from outside, but that he simply resumes or recovers the original quality inherent in him, e.g., Buddhahood, which had become beclouded by defilement [Skt. *kleśa*, Jp. 煩悩 *bonnō*].”\(^{43}\) When the radically non-dualistic thinking of Nāgārjuna is linked with Shinran’s aforementioned conception of karma, it is easy to see that Shinran was simply taking Mādhyamaka thought to its logical conclusion. For Shinran all acts are evil since there is no objective difference between good and evil at the level of Ultimate Reality. Consequently, all people are evil and, as a result, are the objects of Amida’s salvific activity.

Before examining “buddha-lands” and “pure lands,” a brief word on the oft-invoked ‘defilements’ is warranted. *Bonnō* (i.e., defilements or afflicting passions), defined as all things that cloud or dull the mind, allow unwholesome actions to occur, which generate negative karmic merit and act to further bind an individual to the cycle of rebirth. Examples of these samsarically-binding defilements include desire, pride, pride, pride.

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craving, doubt, false views, and hatred. Much of Buddhism has maintained that bonnō can be eliminated through insight and regular contemplative practice, which liberates the individual from the never-ending rounds of rebirth. However, remember that the Pure Land path differs from other expressions of Mahāyāna Buddhism as the jōdo-mon advocates a discipline of religious devotion as opposed to one of contemplative practice. Pure Land thought has historically maintained that the Path of the Sages, (i.e., the Holy Path or the Path of Sanctification; shōdō-mon), is simply too demanding for ordinary people to follow. As T’an-liuan (鸞鶴 Donran, 476-542), the third patriarch of Shin Buddhism, addressed the matter in his *Commentary on Vasubandhu’s Treatise on the Pure Land*,

Reverently contemplating the *Commentary on the Ten Bodhisattva Stages* of Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna, I find it stated that there are two paths by which bodhisattvas seek the stage of nonretrogression – the path of difficult practice and the path of easy practice.

With the path of difficult practice, it is seeking nonretrogression in this world of five defilements at a time when there is no Buddha that is difficult . . . The path of difficult practice may be compared in its hardship to journeying overland on foot. 44

T’an-liuan correctly understood Nāgārjuna’s explanation about the two paths to the stage of nonretrogression (不退転 futaiten), that precipice of awakening in which one finds it impossible to return to the cycle of rebirth. The two paths are the way of arduous religious practices (難行 nangyō), and the way of easy devotional practices (易行 igyō). Over time the latter path became the basis of the Pure Land path. Since the early sixth century, followers of the Pure Land path have understood the religious practices required

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by a life of meditation and the cultivation of wisdom to be too rigorous of an undertaking for an ordinary man or woman. Instead Pure Land practitioners have engaged in the simple devotional practice known as nembutsu recitation (念仏 Ch. nien-fo).

Originally the term “Nembutsu” simply meant the mindful contemplation of, or meditation upon, the image of Amida Buddha. Over time the term was used more broadly to cover many different elements of shinjin and makoto no kokoro, such as cultivating an entrusting and sincere heart, uttering and hearing the name of Amida Buddha in a state of joyful devotion, and possessing the desire to be born in Amida’s Pure Land. The practice itself involves the recitation of the phrase Namu-Amida-Butsu (i.e., “I take refuge in the Buddha Amida”), which is a declaration of trust in Amida’s Primal Vow, in which Amida promises that when he becomes an enlightened being anyone who calls his name will attain rebirth in his Pure Land. Shinran’s unique interpretation of this practice is based upon his view that the nembutsu is not a ‘self-powered’ (自力 jiriki) activity, but rather is a gracious ‘other-powered’ (他力 tariki) gift that is the result of the aforementioned vow.

As contemporary Shin scholar, Bando Shojun notes, Shinran ‘thereby implies that the name ‘Amida’ in itself is an upaya (skillful means), through which we are enabled to know suchness.’\(^{45}\) In other words, the recitation of the name Amida, through the nembutsu, is a skillful mean by which the nature of ultimate reality is apprehended, buddhahood is realized, and ontological transformation occurs.

Enlightenment or awakening then implies the realization that there is no longer a self upon which the law of karma can operate. The practitioner, seeing her true nature as

one of emptiness, eliminates or removes all bonnō, transcends all dualistic notions such as good and evil, becomes “liberated from worldly judgments and self-centered calculations,” ceases the generation of karmic merit, and finally finds liberation.\textsuperscript{46} While the concept of self-reliance to attain liberation from samsāra was a hallmark for Buddhist practitioners for centuries, Shin Buddhists began to question their ability to achieve this goal on their own.

\textit{Buddha lands or pure lands.} When the Buddhist tradition emerged in India, the general belief was that Siddhartha Gautama, otherwise known as Śākyamuni Buddha, was the only Buddha to have ever been in existence. However, according to later Mahāyāna Buddhist teachings, Śākyamuni eventually revealed that countless buddhas had appeared throughout time, and that each buddha had been enlightened to the same ultimate truth, the same Dharma.\textsuperscript{47} Some of the more significant and well-known buddhas are Maitreya Buddha (弥勒 Miroku), Akṣobhya Buddha (阿闍 Ashuku), Vairocana Buddha (大日 Dainichi), and, as described earlier in this chapter, Amida Buddha (Skt. Amitābha, Buddha of Immeasurable Light, or Amitāyus, Buddha of Immeasurable Life). Each buddha operated in his own unique world-system (Skt. cakrāvala) within the greater Buddhist cosmos. These independent world-systems, known as Buddha-fields (Skt. Buddha-kṣetra), are the realms of influence and activity of each buddha and serve as


\textsuperscript{47} Some examples of Buddhist sūtras that refer to the “Buddhas of the ten directions,” (i.e., the countless buddhas living and teaching in realms other than the Saha realm of Śākyamuni, at each of the eight points of the compass, plus the zenith and the nadir) include: the Akṣobhyavatya-sūtra, the Bhaisajyaguru-sūtra, the Astasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra, and the Sukhāvatīvyūha.
the domains within which each buddha works to guide sentient beings to liberation. Mahāyānist thought maintains that just as there are an infinite number buddhas throughout the vast expanse of the cosmos, so too are there an infinite number of Buddha-fields.

Not all Buddha-fields are equivalent though. Fields “vary in their degree of perfection and are divided into two basic categories, pure and impure. The world we inhabit now is an instance of an impure Buddha-field since beings here are still subject to the basic vices of greed, hatred, and delusion.” Greed, hatred, and delusion are the unwholesome mental states collectively referred to as the three roots of evil, or the Three Poisons. Ultimately it is these mental states of consciousness that prevent sentient beings from attaining liberation from samsāra. Pure Lands, on the other hand, are unspoiled realms in which beings are no longer subject to the Three Poisons. Thus, they are realms uniquely suited for a person to attain liberation, or enlightenment.

The term “Pure Land” (浄土 jōdo / Ch. jingtū), first used in China, originally suggested the notion of “purifying the land,” as in “leading all sentient beings inhabiting these [impure] lands into the pure way, in other words, the way of nirvāṇa.” The aforementioned Pure Land sūtras seem to describe these fields of buddha-activity as actual physical locations, which are seemingly different from nirvāṇa. Numerous Mahāyāna sūtras refer to these Pure Lands as realms of bliss (Skt. sukha, as opposed to duhkha, “suffering” or “unsatisfactory”), in which there exists only joy and happiness. They are variously described as heavenly realms replete with rows of jeweled trees

48 Keown, *Dictionary of Buddhism*, 44.

flanking sweetly scented rivers, upon which flow sweet-smelling flowers; heavenly music that emanates from rushing waters and the breeze blowing through the trees; ornamental railings surrounding jeweled ponds and lakes; towers and palaces adorned with priceless jewels; delicate scents wafting through the air as beautiful flowers fall from the sky throughout the day; countless birds, which proclaim the Dharma as they sing with heavenly voices; and a radiant light that floods the whole land, which emanates from the attendant Buddha. All objects found in a pure land are made of gold, silver, crystal, and lapis lazuli.\textsuperscript{50} “The Pure Land is thus full of glorious objects which are exceedingly pleasant to the senses, but they are not meant to gratify one’s sensuous desires.”\textsuperscript{51} Rather all ‘things’ or phenomena found in a Pure Land serve as expressions of the true Dharma, an expression of enlightenment. The important thing to remember though, is that the “essential feature of a Pure Land is… not its physical attributes, lovely as they may be, but the opportunity to live in the presence of a Buddha.”\textsuperscript{52} Being in the presence of a Buddha, without any distractions or defilements, ensures that a sentient being will in time be able to attain enlightenment.

Some contemporary scholars have further classified these Pure Lands into three categories: Common Pure Lands, Buddhist Pure Lands, and Mahāyāna Pure Lands.\textsuperscript{53} Common Pure Lands are any heavenly realm referred to in non-Buddhist traditions, such


\textsuperscript{51} Inagaki, \textit{The Three Pure Land Sutras}, 27.


\textsuperscript{53} Wong Kiew Kit, \textit{Sukhavati Western Paradise: Going to Heaven as Taught by The Buddha} (Sungai Petani, Kedah, Malaysia: Cosmos, 2002), 115-116.
as Shangri-La, as taught in some Indian Tantric schools, and Fenglai, as taught in some
expressions of Chinese Daoism. Buddhist Pure Lands are any heavenly realms that are
taught by all sectarian expressions of Buddhism; generally the heavenly realms of the
Saha world, of which the most well known example is Tuṣita Heaven. Finally, Mahāyāna
Pure Lands are those taught in Mahāyānist traditions, but which are not generally
accepted by Theravadin traditions, and are found outside the Saha realm, which serve as
the centers of activity for the innumerable buddhas of the cosmos. The best-known
examples of these include the Eastern Paradise of Akṣobhya Buddha, the Crystal Paradise
of Bhaisajyaguru Buddha, and of course the Western Paradise (Skt. Sukhāvatī, Jp. 極楽
Gokuraku) of Amida Buddha.54

Gokuraku, or the “Land of Bliss” is the Pure Land created by Amida Buddha
“through the power of his merit as a utopia where beings who invoke his name with faith
and devotion may be reborn. Once there, they may dwell in bliss and may reach nirvāṇa
easily.”55 The Muryōjukyō and Amidakyō both maintained that Amida’s Pure Land is
located 100,000 kotis of Buddha-lands away from the Saha realm to the west.56

Amida Buddha & his primal vow. While I have mentioned the Buddha known as
Amida in prior pages, it will be helpful to the reader to further describe both Amida and
his Primal Vow. Pure Land thought maintains that upon meeting Lokeśvararāja Buddha,

54 Ibid., 116.

55 Keown, Dictionary of Buddhism, 282.

56 A koti is an ancient Indian unit of measure equaling 10 million. A Buddha-land is thought to contain a
universe of a thousand million worlds. Thus 100,000 kotis is something of a figurative number invoked to
express an infinite distance.
Amida, who was still living in Saha as Bhikṣu Dharmakāra (法蔵比丘 Hōzō-biku), made a series of vows – including the seminal hongan, performed countless meritorious actions and eventually attained perfect Enlightenment, thereby becoming the Buddha of Infinite Light (Amitābha) and Infinite Life (Amitāyus).\(^{57}\) At this point he fulfilled his promise, articulated in the Primal Vow, to create a pure land, which embodied all the best of the myriad buddha-lands of the cosmos, and into which all sentient beings can be reborn.\(^{58}\) As Kyoto School philosopher Miki Kiyoshi (1897-1945) explained, “The Primal Vow is a loving aspiration for the salvation of sentient beings that is always apprehending historical reality.”\(^{59}\) In other words, for Pure Land practitioners, Amida is a Buddha, his Pure Land exists and, consequently, liberation is guaranteed for all. According to Pure Land thought, birth in the Pure Land (往生 ōjō) is solely the result of Amida’s salvific activity.

\emph{Hōnen’s contention that the evil person is the true object of Amida’s hongan.} While \emph{akunin shoki setsu} has become widely known through the work of Shinran and the articulation of his teachings as found in the Tannishō, I agree with the position taken by Kakehashi Jitsuen, Director of the Institute of Shin-shu Theology at Nishi-honganji in Kyoto, as expressed in his April 1993, paper titled “The Originator of the Doctrine of Evil Persons as the Object of Salvation (akunin shoki setsu) is Hōnen [Shinran’s

\(^{57}\) Keown, Dictionary of Buddhism., 21.

\(^{58}\) The legend of Hozo-biku, as delivered by Śākyamuni Buddha, can be found in the Muryōjukyō (The “Larger Pure Land Sūtra”), Inagaki, \emph{The Three Pure Land Sutra}, 236-253.

Kakehashi definitively established a position that had, for some time, “been running through the bottom of the Japanese Pure Land Buddhist researcher’s academic consciousness like a water vein.” Contrary to earlier thoughts on the matter, the academic consensus is that Hōnen, rather than Shinran, is the conceptual progenitor of akunin shoki setsu. This theory maintains that “the notion that the ‘evil person is the true object of the Vow’ was already present in Hōnen’s thought prior to Shinran’s elucidation of that idea.” While research suggests Hōnen never penned those exact words, it is apparent from the teachings attributed to him that he had a thoroughly envisioned sense of the human condition as being “evil” due to humanity’s ignorance and delusion. It is also apparent that Hōnen conceived of evil and foolish beings as the true beneficiaries of Amida’s Primal Vow. Evidence of both positions can be found in the Sanjin ryōken oyobi gohō (Clarification and instructions [related to] the three minds).

A key passage of the text further explains:

Even a good person attains birth in the Pure Land. So it goes without saying that an evil person will . . . That being so, bodhisattvas and wise sages aspire for birth, and these good beings attain birth by taking refuge in this vow. How much more so will foolish beings of sin and evil entrust themselves to this Other Power! They should understand that they are evil.

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60 Following Kakehashi’s presentation, NHK television broadcast a program in August of 1993, titled “Shinran: The Truth of the Doctrine of Evil Persons as the Object of Salvation.” This program stated the position that akunin shoki setsu was based on the teachings of Hōnen, which quickly became the standard position.


62 With the discovery of the Daigobon in 1917, Mochizuki Shinko, a high priest of the Jōdo Shū, and Ienaga Saburo, a revered authority on Japanese Buddhism, quickly published papers challenging the authenticity of the Daigobon and refuting the notion that Hōnen had preached ideas along the lines of what would later become known as akunin shoki.

63 Asai, “Exclusion and Salvation in Honen’s Thought,” 125.
and not dwell in false views. It is said that ‘both foolish, ordinary beings and sages together’ are able to attain this thought.  

The *Sanjin ryōken oyobi gohōgo* is the third part of a manuscript known as the “Biographical Record of the Master Hōnen,” (法然上人伝記) otherwise known as the Daigo manuscript, or *Daigobon* for short. (醍醐本), as it was discovered at Daigo-ji temple in Kyoto in 1917. While its authorship has been debated, the prevailing view is that the *Daigobon* was compiled by one of Hōnen’s leading disciples, Seikan-bō Genchi or his immediate disciples.

The important point for this discussion is to that the aforementioned expression regarding “foolish beings of sin and evil” is nearly identical to the famous passage found in Chapter Three of the *Tannishō* regarding the true object of Amida’s Vow. Recall that this passage is of central concern to this dissertation’s overarching argument.

Furthermore, as Tsuboi Shun’ei and Jōkai Asai point out this passage represents an internally consistent Buddhist instruction that emphasizes the salvation of the evil person especially. As Hōnen goes on to say:

> We are taught that the evil person is an individual person, and that this being will attain birth. This is the teaching of our Pure Land School. Our school takes the evil person as the model, one that includes the good person as well. The Path of Sages takes the good person as its model,

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65 The full title of this text is also known as 醍醐本法然上人伝記 *Daigobon Hōnen Shōnin Denki*.

66 Nearly two hundred men are known to have been Hōnen’s disciples including Shoko-bo Bencho, Risshi Ryukan, Zenne-bo Shoku, Ippen, Shinran, Kakunyo-bo Chosai, Jokaku-bo Kosai, Seikan-bo Genchi, Zensho-bo.
which includes the evil person … *All beings are included in this dharma.* The Eighteenth Vow speaks of ‘sentient beings of the ten quarters.’ [This means that,] throughout the ten quarters, no sentient beings are excluded, and that ‘[beings of] the ten quarters are all included within my vow.\(^67\)

To clarify, Hōnen conceived of the evil person as anyone who, due to the overwhelming nature of their ignorance and delusion, was unable to fruitfully follow the threefold practice otherwise known as the three learnings (三學 *sangaku*): morality (戒 *kai*), meditation (三昧 *sanmai*), and wisdom. Classically speaking the three learnings were understood to be the key for any Buddhist following the Noble Eightfold Path, and were thought to be the means by which liberation from the cycles of rebirth would occur.

In conclusion, with regard to the matter of Hōnen’s view of the evil person, Amida’s Vow, and the scope of salvation, there is great evidence suggesting Hōnen’s orally transmitted thoughts served as a foundation for Shinran’s later position. While it is true that some scholars hold onto the notion that the *Sanjin ryōken oyobi gohōgo* was a later redaction to the *Daigobon*, I maintaining that Shinran’s indebtedness to Hōnen extends even to his conception of the true object of Amida’s Primal Vow (i.e., the entire existence of humanity, both good and evil).

*Shinran’s view of karma and the human condition.* Shinran’s teachings served as the axis around which the Shinshū developed. However, some of his teachings were seen as unusual when compared to more traditional Buddhist tenets, thus engendering misunderstanding and criticism. For example, unlike his teacher Hōnen (法然 1133-

1212), who permitted and encouraged reverence for Gautama Buddha, Shinran maintained that only Amida Buddha should be revered. Despite his commitment to exclusive nembutsu (専修念仏 senju nembutsu), recitation of Amida Buddha’s name, Hōnen still made room for the possibility of meritorious works affecting a person’s liberation from samsāra, while Shinran absolutely denied them. And while Hōnen argued that calling on the name of Amida had saving efficacy, Shinran argued that calling Amida’s name was simply an expression of gratitude for a salvific event that had already occurred.68 Shinran maintained that the cause for birth in Amida’s Pure Land was simply the possession of an entrusting position (信心 shinjin) — or I as prefer to call it, an entrusting heart — in Amida’s salvific power.

However, even these departures from Hōnen’s more conventional Pure Land beliefs pale in comparison to Shinran’s most significant and arguably radical position, namely his idealization of the evil person as the prime candidate for salvation in Amida’s Pure Land. This stance was especially subject to misunderstanding and misrepresentation from outsiders, which often led to harsh critiques from non-Shin Buddhist practitioners and additional pressure and tension within the Shin community. In particular more established sectarian expressions of Japanese Buddhism, such as the Tendai and Shingon sects, employed the time-honored conceptual framework of debates regarding orthodoxy and heresy to attack Shinran’s ideas and claim that his teachings were outside the sphere of classically accepted Buddhist teachings.69

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As previously discussed in this chapter, “In Shinran’s concept of karma, all that we do, think, or feel is instigated by past action; in other words, all that we are in the present has been determined by the past... Whatever we may seek to do in the present, our future is determined, and there is no room whatever for any change or improvement through our present activity.” When compared with the more traditional Buddhist view of karma, Shinran had a unique understanding and interpretation. Throughout his writings and teachings he staunchly maintained that the all-pervasive and binding quality of karma rendered transcendence or enlightenment (understood within a Pure Land context to mean birth in the Pure Land of Amida Buddha) to be impossible if one simply relied upon one’s own efforts. Examples of this position can be found in the *Mattōshō* (*末照抄 Lamp for the Later Ages*) when Shinran writes, “In no way is birth accomplished through the calculating of foolish beings; neither can it be the object of the calculating of the eminently wise,” as well as in Shinran’s *Jōdo wasan* 99 (*浄土和讚 Hymns of the Pure Land*),

> When we say “Namu-amida-butsu,”  
> The benefits we gain in the present are boundless;  
> The karmic evil of our transmigration in birth-and-death disappears,  
> And determinate karma and untimely death are eliminated.

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69 A useful description of Buddhism’s historical growth, as understood through the lens of the orthodoxy/heterodoxy paradigm, can be found in Bernard Faure, *The Rhetoric of Immediacy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 7-17.  
70 Ueda, “Freedom and Necessity,” 106.  
As Ueda Yoshifumi described the matter, “While in Mahāyāna thought in general the concept of karma is taken up from the stance of the transcendent, as an aspect of existence in the world of the enlightened being, in Shinran’s thought – in his concepts of karmic evil (zaigō, tsumi) and past karma (shukugō) – it expresses rather the stance of the person, through insight into the fundamental nature of human existence, to the impossibility of transcendence.” Shinran understood that all humans are “originally and profoundly possessed of evil nature. [This is because] Fundamentally, human beings are self-centered and harm other living beings.” Examples of Shinran’s thinking on this matter can be found in the Kyōgyōshinshō (Collection of Passages Revealing the True Teaching, Practice, and Realization of the Pure Land Way).

I find that all beings, an ocean of multitudes, have since the beginningless past down to his day, this very moment, been evil and defiled, completely lacking the mind of purity.

For Shinran a good person is anyone who does good deeds, or who attempts to accumulate positive karmic merit, through their own efforts or self-power (自力 jiriki).
This ‘good’ person trusts in himself and his own power rather than trusting in the Dharma or the power of a Buddha to liberate him. For Shinran an evil person is anyone who realizes the depth of her delusions and thus places her complete trust in the Other Power (他力 tariki), the workings of the Primal Vow of Amida Buddha. In other words, according to Shinran’s thinking as expressed in Chapter Three of the Tannishō, the

73 Ueda, “Freedom and Necessity,” 103.
75 Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha, Kyōgyōshinshō, in The Collected Works of Shinran (Kyoto: Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha, 1997), 95.
human condition is by definition evil, and evil people are “ordinary beings who entrust in the power of Amida Buddha’s Primal Vow without doubt.” Recall that for Shinran ‘evil’ persons are variously those who are possessed of blind passions, the three poisons (greed, anger, ignorance), and evil offenses; and those who entrust in Amida’s Primal Vow—in other words, everyone. As the “sign and symbol of his [own] involvement with the [evil] passions, Shinran adopted the term Gutoku as his surname. This term has the meaning of ‘foolish, bald-headed old man,’ and it signified the debased condition of Shinran’s life.” Thus Shinran also regarded himself as both a karmically defiled individual and a recipient of Amida’s unrestricted gift of shinjin.

Finally, it is important to note that given Shinran’s view of the human condition as unavoidably defiled and depraved, as well as his radically non-dualistic conception of all actions as being evil, Shinran deemed any human efforts to positively affect the sentient condition as hopeless and futile. “According to Shinran, in the world there is karma (cause and effect) and nothing else prevails. Man [sic] in the age of mappō is totally subject to the workings of karma, and because man in this age can only live by passions and neurotic desires over which he has no control, Shinran did not regard man as ultimately responsible for his moral and spiritual depravity.” By Shinran’s thinking humanity was living in the last days of the dharma (末法 mappō), a period in which the teachings of the buddhas were so faintly heard and so easily misinterpreted that sentient

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78 Ingram, “Shinran Shōnin and Martin Luther,” 441.
beings were especially prey to the Three Poisons and the delusional thought that they could affect their own ontological transformation by self-effort (*jiriki*).

Contextual Rationale for Development of Doctrine

As indicated earlier, the *Tannishō* was written in response to what appeared to be a “deteriorating situation among nembutsu practitioners in the Kanto area in the years following Shinran’s death.”

This deteriorating situation included the introduction of divergent beliefs and practices among the early nembutsu, or Shin, community. The author of the *Tannishō* gives the following explanation in his prologue when he writes:

> As I humbly reflect on the past [when the late Master was alive] and the present in my foolish mind, I cannot but lament the divergences from the heart of true entrusting that he conveyed by speaking to us directly, and I fear there are doubts and confusions in the way followers receive and transmit the teaching… Let there be not the slightest distortion of the teachings of Other Power with words of an understanding based only on personal views. Here, then, I set down in small part the words spoken by the late Shinran Shōnin that remain deep in my mind, solely to disperse the doubts of fellow practitioners.80

As Inagaki notes, “Several nembutsu groups had been formed around Shinran in the Kanto area where he nurtured a close circle of disciples for about twenty years from his early forties. Some of them continued to keep in contact with him even after he moved to Kyoto. In the years immediately after his passing, the disciples might have been able to keep the communities in line with Shinran’s teachings. But as these direct disciples grew fewer and strange ideas began to crop up among the nembutsu groups, the people had no one to turn to for guidance to resolve their doubts. In order to ensure the correct

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80 Ibid., 3.
transmission of the nembutsu teaching, the aged compiler Yuien made the decision to
take up his brush and set down what he could recall of what Shinran had so carefully
taught everyone.”81 In other words, in order to keep the young Shin sōgya (sangha)
intact, while remaining faithful to the original, orthodox, teachings of Shinran, a central
statement of belief was written.

The Tannishō was written “in an attempt to preserve Shinran’s ideas from
distortion and to rectify a number of misconceptions circulating among his followers.”82
Specifically, according to the Tannishō, these misconceptions (i.e. deviations from or
distortions of Shinran’s teachings) were:

(1) Some believers are confusing people’s minds by dividing Amida’s wonder
into two categories (the wondrous vow, 誓願不思議 seigan fushigi; and the
wondrous name, 名号不思議 myōgō fushigi) without giving any good reason to
do so.

(2) Those who do not read or study the sutras are not assured birth in the Pure
Land.

(3) A person will not achieve birth in the Pure Land if she flaunts the principal
vow (本願ぼこり hongan bokori) thinking there is no reason to fear evil because
of the wonder of Amida’s principal vow.

(4) A person should have complete faith that profound karmic evil leading to
eight billion kalpas of rebirth is eliminated with a single nembutsu.

81 Ibid., viii-ix.
82 Dobbins, Jōdo Shinshū, 69.
(5) With this body overwhelmed by evil inclinations (煩惱具足 bonnō gusoku) a person already achieves enlightenment.

(6) When believers with faith spontaneously (自然に jinen ni) fall into anger, or commit and evil deed, or become argumentative with companions and fellow believers, they must without fail undergo conversion again (廻心 eshin).

(7) Those who only achieve rebirth on the edges of the Pure Land will eventually fall back into the hell realms.

(8) A person will ultimately become a greater or lesser Buddha based upon the size of one’s donation to the Sangha.

All told there are three primary reasons for there having been wrong views (邪見 jaken) or heretical views (異安心 ianjin) of Shinran’s teachings. These reasons are (1) the elusiveness of Shinran’s teachings; (2) the illiteracy of the population that embraced Shinran’s teachings; and (3) the influx of adherents to the Shinshū from other religious traditions. First, Shinran thought his teachings were simple enough for the ordinary individual to follow yet they were subtly profound enough that people were confused easily. His teachings varied just enough from more mainstream Buddhist teachings that “deviations arose because some diluted his provocative message and others exaggerated it.” As alluded to earlier, examples of his more challenging teachings included positing the impossibility of attaining awakening by one’s own efforts; the utter conviction that

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83 While it is accurate to describe heretical views of Shinran’s teachings as ianjin, it should be noted that this term only came into existence around 1802.

84 Dobbins, Jōdo Shinshū, 8-9.

human nature is by definition evil; and the attendant belief that everyone, even the
outcaste, the poor, the lost and the confused are the intended objects of Amida Buddha’s
infinite compassion.

Second, Shinran’s teachings were especially attractive to the lower classes of
society. While generally not being educated enough to grasp the nuances of Shinran’s
thought, lower class individuals such as farmers and craftsmen were initially drawn to the
ease of *nembutsu* practice as a means for addressing their this-worldly affairs.

“Aristocrats in Kyoto generally followed the traditional interpretations of the orthodox
Buddhist schools, treating the *nembutsu* as an ancillary practice to other religious
observances… [Whereas] Lowborn townsmen and peasants in the countryside often
turned to it as a deterrent against misfortune or as a deliverance from the religious
consequences of evil deeds.”86 This development is best understood as a perfect example
of what Buddhist scholar Melford E. Spiro calls *apotropaic* Buddhism—that aspect of
Buddhism most concerned with humanity’s “worldly welfare: the curing of illness,
protection from demons, the prevention of droughts, and so on.”87

Third, it was greatly feared that any “emulation of mainstream Buddhism” on the
part of the nascent Pure Land community would have a “corrosive effect.”88 It was
thought that if the influences from other Buddhist sects were too great the heart of
Shinran’s message would be watered-down or lost. An important example of this is the
centrality of Shinran’s vision regarding the transformative Other-Power of Amida and his

86 Ibid., 19.
Vow. Thus, the Tannishō was written in such a way that the confusion from within and the corrosiveness from without would not distort what was otherwise a radical way of conceiving of the human experience and the means for escaping it.

The Tannishō is a tightly structured document that is organized systematically in order to respond to misunderstandings and questions. Specifically the first half of the Tannishō is a collection of ten of Shinran’s most important teachings. The second half is then a critique of eight misinterpretations of Shinran’s lessons. “The eight items listed in the Tannishō’s second half provide a graphic image of early religious trends in the Shinshū, especially as it evolved around the dōjō.”89 In this way, the Tannishō not only gives us a clear sense of the earliest doctrinal-like debates occurring in the Shin sōgya, but it also provides us with a snap-shot of the religious landscape from the document arose.

Akunin Shōki Setsu According to the Tannishō

The section that follows is a first of its kind when it comes to detailed examinations of the Tannishō, as no scholar to date has critically interpreted the text through the following six lens: (1) the nature of the human condition or predicament; (2) the past conditioning action that leads to this human condition; (3) the futility of any human efforts to affectively change this human condition; (4) the ontologically transformative response to the human condition that originates from “outside” of any human efforts; 5) the transactional quality of this process of ontological transformation;

89 Ibid., 77.
and (6) the scope of the transformative response. An analysis of what the Tannishō posits with regard to each of these thematic categories will provide a uniquely nuanced interpretation of the text, as well as enable the reader to better grasp the comparative analysis that occurs in Chapter Five.

Throughout this dissertation I have defined akunin shōki as “all ordinary beings, filled with residual karma, are by definition evil people and as such are the objects of Amida’s saving power.” This saving power is the compassion of Amida Buddha “who embraces and never abandons those who become aware of their own evil and suffer from it.” What follows is a brief look at what this doctrine of akunin shōki ultimately means according to the Tannishō.

Nature of the Human Predicament

Pure Land traditions have been especially interested in the question of the nature of the human condition. In fact, “questions such as ‘What is a ‘human being’? and ‘How is the definition of ‘human being’ related to the Pure Land teaching?’ have been central to the tradition’s historical development.”


Asai, “Exclusion and Salvation in Honen’s Thought,” 125.
often point to the inherent Buddha-nature (仏性 busshō) of all sentient beings. This implies that the self-nature of all sentient beings is a nondual reality, akin to that of an awakened being (i.e., a buddha). Put another way, according to Mahāyāna thought all beings inherently possess the potential to become a buddha and the task is for one to uncover or realize this reality. However, despite the assertion of a person’s inherent Buddha-nature, Shin thought maintains that the human condition is filled with defilements (bonnō), which impede awakening. On the surface this may appear to be a paradox, as logic would dictate that the state of “awakenness” or satori (悟), that state of “intuitive apprehension of the [true] nature of reality that transcends conceptual thought,” is not commensurate with defilement.93 However, here is where Shinran’s thinking is so unique. Shinran argued that the human condition is best characterized as being karmically bound due to the generation of karmic merit during previous rebirths. This past karma (shukugō) blinds humanity to its true nature consequently binding humanity to the cycle of transmigration. These defilements fill us with attachments and delusion. Thus, it can be said, “if this delusion is something we all have, then perhaps in the truest sense of the word, bonno or delusion is what our ‘human nature’ is.”94

Shinran further defined bonnō as evil passions or blind passions. In section three of the Tannishō Yuein-bō recounts the words of his late master when he writes:

It is impossible for us, who are possessed of blind passions to free ourselves from birth-and-death through any practice whatsoever. Grieving over this, Amida made the Vow, the essential intent of which is the evil person’s attainment of Buddhahood. Hence, evil persons who entrust

93 Keown, *Dictionary of Buddhism*, 256.

themselves to Other Power are precisely the ones who possess the true cause of birth.\textsuperscript{95}

In section nine Yuein-bō elaborates on this matter when he writes:

What suppresses the heart that should rejoice and keeps one from rejoicing is the action of blind passions. Nevertheless, the Buddha, knowing this beforehand, called us ‘foolish beings possessed of blind passions’… Further having no thought of wanting to go to the Pure Land quickly, we think forlornly that we may die even when we become slightly ill; this also is the action of blind passions. It is hard for us to abandon this home of pain, where we have been transmigrating for innumerable kalpas down to the present, and we feel no longing for the Pure Land of Peace, where we have yet to be born. Truly, how powerful our blind passions are!\textsuperscript{96}

The key to understanding the view of the human condition, as represented in \textit{Tannishō}, is to remember the description of Shinran’s view of karma. Shinran had elaborated on the general Buddhist notion that says anything going against the Buddha-Dharma is an ego-based, attachment-driven action, and thus not of ultimate reality, by calling these things evil. Given that every non-enlightened human action is at some level ego-based and attachment-driven (i.e. the result of blind passions) then according to Shinran every human action is evil and the human condition itself is evil. All of this culminates, of course, in the most significant and well-known phrase of the \textit{Tannishō}, which seemingly sums up Shinran’s and the \textit{Tannishō}’s view of the human condition, “Even the good person is born in the Pure Land, so without question is the person who is evil.”\textsuperscript{97}

\textit{Past Conditioning Actions that Lead to the Human Predicament}

\textsuperscript{95} Inagaki, ed., \textit{A Record in Lament of Divergences}, 7. Italics are mine.

\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 12-13. Italics are mine.

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 7.
In section thirteen of the *Tannishō*, Yuein-bō responds to the third major misconception regarding Shinran’s teachings. The misconception states, “People who are unafraid of committing evil because of the inconceivable working of the Primal Vow are in fact impudently presuming upon the Vow and therefore will not attain birth.”\(^98\) In other words, the misconception was that a person would not achieve birth in the Pure Land if she flaunted the principal vow due to her misunderstanding of evil acts and evil karma. While this statement is patently not the case, given the clarification of all human activity as being evil and all evil people being the object of Amida’s salvific compassion shown in the most recent section of this dissertation, the important point to understand now is how the defiled human condition is entirely due to past conditioning actions (i.e. past karma, *shukugō*). Yuein-bō writes:

This statement is of one who doubts the Primal Vow and fails to understand the influence of good and evil karma of past lives. Good thoughts arise in us through the prompting of good karma from the past, and evil acts are conceived and committed through the working of evil karma. The late Master said, ‘Know that every evil act done – even as slight as a particle on the tip of a strand of rabbit’s fur or sheep’s wool – has its cause in past karma.’\(^99\)

At first glance the emphasis in this statement seems to clearly show that any evil act in the present life is entirely due to the influence of past karma. “The *Tannishō* argues that much of the evil in people’s lives is the karmic fruition of past acts (*shukugō*).”\(^100\) However, we would be wise to remember that Shinran has argued that the duality of good and evil is simply a relative concept. In the ocean of the Vow good and evil are equal.

\(^98\) Ibid., 22.

\(^99\) Ibid. Italics are mine.

\(^100\) Dobbins, *Jōdo Shinshū*, 74.
Good acts, as seen from the relative human perspective, are never really good when seen from the perspective of the Buddha. As Shinran writes in the *Shoshinge*:

The great dharma teachers of ancient India, China and Japan
Make clear Sakyamuni’s emphasis
That when compared with Amida Buddha’s pure activity,
All we sentient beings are calculating and defiled.
Sakyamuni’s teachings disclose to us
The universal enlightenment made possible
Through Amida’s Vow.¹⁰¹

Put differently, and as alluded to in the previous section regarding the human condition, any action by a sentient being is by definition ego-based, calculating, attachment-based, and defiled. In other words, *all* actions are due to *shukugō* and are evil. The “karma from our past that rules our lives is always evil.”¹⁰² Shinran confirms this when he states in Article Thirteen, “we sentient beings cannot arbitrarily do evil, or perform good deeds. He says that even the evil or bad that we do is due to our karma.”¹⁰³ But what exactly is “evil?”

According to Shinran, evil are actions that disrupt harmonious order—actions based on ego-attachments are evil. The earliest forms of mainstream Buddhism posited specifically “the ten evil acts.” These are: (1) killing living beings; (2) stealing; (3) committing adultery; (4) telling lies; (5) uttering harsh words; (6) uttering words that cause enmity between two or more persons; (7) engaging in idle talk; (8) greed; (9) anger; and (10) ignorance. To this list Pure Land Buddhist thought adds which it

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¹⁰² Ueda, “Freedom and Necessity,” 79.

considers to be “the five grave offenses,”—some of the most evil acts one could commit. These are: (1) killing one’s father; (2) killing one’s mother; (3) killing an arhat, or disciple of the Buddha); (4) causing the Buddha’s body to bleed; and (5) causing disunity in the Buddhist order.

Furthermore “Shinran recognized evil as a prevalent phenomenon in the age of mappō, and he acknowledged its presence in his own life. Much of this he saw as the eruption of evil inclinations (bonnō) or as the karmic fruition of acts perpetuated in past lives (shukugō). Hence, [according to Shinran’s thought] when a person commits a wrongdoing, it is often a manifestation of karmic proclivities built up over many lifetimes.” All told, Shinran maintained that all human activity is thoroughly evil because of the negative karmic influence and past actions.

_Futility of the Human Effort to Change the Human Predicament_

Shinran taught that “only when people realize that they are unable to free themselves of the woes of this world through their own efforts do they come to rely on Amida’s power totally.” Shinran maintained fervently that the only way to attain birth in Amida’s Pure Land was for a person to let go of the delusional belief that his actions had any impact on this process. By Shinran’s calculation, karmic evil and blind delusions are so overwhelming that every action we commit is by definition evil in nature. An example of this complete denial of the freedom of human will can be found in section

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104 Dobbins, _Jōdo Shinshū_, 55.

105 Ibid., 71.
thirteen of the Tannishō, as Shinran “attributes absolute control over the conduct of our lives to karmic causation.”

Good thoughts arise in us through the prompting of good karma from the past, and evil acts are conceived and committed through the working of evil karma. The late Master said, “Know that every evil act done – even as slight as a particle on the tip of a strand of rabbit’s fur or sheep’s wool – has its cause in past karma.”

Even those acts we might otherwise consider to be good, such as making offerings to the sōgya or engaging in strenuous acts of piety or meditation, are useless. “Morality was of limited effect, as were ritual actions; nothing, it seemed, could eradicate the deep-seated imperfection of being human.”

Furthermore, “Shinran’s model of time [also] denies any sort of free will, since everything we do and have done is swamped in an abyss of unfathomable evil karma.”

According to Shinran’s concept of karma, “we lack the potential to do anything that is not evil. [Consequently] if whatever we do – even acts we consider to be good and virtuous – is in fact evil, then whatever our subjective thoughts, in reality we have no moral freedom of choice.”

Our only “freedom” as a human is intimately connected to our past karma. The key is for a person to realize completely and clearly that he is a karmically bound person (i.e., an evil person), and to then to live his life entirely in the awareness that he cannot live any way other than as an evil person. “In short, teachers of

107 Inagaki, ed., A Record in Lament of Divergences, 22
110 Ibid., 105.
lay Pure Land piety saw the human condition as virtually hopeless without intervention by the Buddha, while those of monastic orientation insisted on strenuous self-effort even in the final stages of dharma.”

According to the Tannishō it is futile to think that any human action could affect the state of the human condition.

**Ontologically Transformative Response that Originates Outside Any Human Effort**

According to Shinran’s teachings, birth in the Pure Land, or —using the bridge concept from this study—ontological transformation, is the result of actions and efforts of a source that stands outside the human condition entirely. In Shin thought this source of ontologically transformative power is known as “other-power” (他力 tariki), or Amida Buddha and his Primal Vow. As examined previously in this chapter, birth in Amida’s Pure Land is the direct result of Amida’s Primal Vow. The Vow states, “If, when I attain Buddhahood, sentient beings in the land of the ten quarters who sincerely and joyfully entrust themselves to me, desire to be born in my land, and call my Name even ten times, should not be born there, may I not attain perfect Enlightenment.”

Taking a hermeneutical step that was distinct from his teacher Hōnen, Shinran regarded even the ability to recite the Nembutsu as an expression of Other-Power. Whereas other Buddhist sects of his time regarded the recitation of the Nembutsu as yet another “good” act conducted through self-effort, Shinran saw the nembutsu as an act of gratitude arising from the Other–Power of Amida and his Vow. Shinran maintained that “faith, like

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Nembutsu, is not a product of human exertion but rather the creation of Amida unilaterally bestowed on sentient beings.”

Transactional Quality of the Process of Ontological Transformation

Building upon the work of his teacher, Hōnen, Shinran maintained that Amida’s articulation of the Primal Vow generated an unlimited storehouse of karmic merit, which he in turn transfers to all sentient beings in two phases. The two phases—first expressed by Chinese monk Donran (476-542), considered by Shin practitioners as the Third Patriarch of the tradition—are “going forth” (ōsō-ekō) and “returning” (gensō-ekō). As Hisao Inagaki explains in The Three Pure Land Sutras: A Study and Translation (2000), the phrase “going forth” is in reference to Amida’s transfer of merit from his great karmic storehouse in order for people to “attain birth in the Pure Land together with all sentient beings by endowing them with one’s merits. The phrase of ‘returning’ is to re-enter the worlds of Samsāra to lead sentient beings to the Buddhist Path.” Thus, Shinran has interpreted Amida’s merit-transference as a transactional-like process of ontological transformation. Amida gives humanity shinjin for the purpose of facilitating our birth in the Pure Land and in return humanity perpetuates the process of liberating all sentient beings by returning to the realms of samsāra to assist with the liberation of others. As Yuein-bō recounts Shinran’s teachings in the fifth section of the Tannishō:

As for me, Shinran, I have never said the Nembutsu even once for the repose of my departed father and mother, For all sentient beings, without exception, have been our parents and brothers and sisters in the course of

113 Dobbins, Jōdo Shinshū, 6.

countless lives in many states of existence. On attaining Buddhahood after this present life, we can save every one of them. Were saying the Nembutsu indeed a good act in which I strove through my own powers, then I might direct the merit thus gained toward saving my mother and father. But that is not the case. If, however, simply abandoning self-power, we quickly attain enlightenment in the Pure Land, we will be able to save, by means of supernatural powers, first those with whom we have close karmic relations, whatever karmic suffering they may have sunk to in the six realms through the four modes of birth.115

Mainstream Mahāyāna thought (and some Theravāda traditions as well), on the other hand, maintains that it is possible to direct or transfer merit through self-power (jiriki). This merit is accrued through the performance of good acts. In the fifth section of the Tannishō Shinran has instead positioned merit transference as a transactional activity in which Amida directs virtue and merit towards us. Humanity plays no role in the transaction, as long ago Amida Buddha acquired the karmic merit necessary to “solve” the dilemma of human existence. As human calculations are always evil and thus lacking, it is only Amida’s merit transference that can affect the ontological transformation necessary for birth in the Pure Land. Even the central human act of reciting the nembutsu should be understood as simply a response of gratitude for Amida’s soteriological action. As Shinran explains in section fourteen of the Tannishō, “Thus the nembutsu that we say throughout a lifetime . . . should be recognized as entirely the expression of our gratitude for the benevolence and our thankfulness for the virtuous working of the Tathagata’s great compassion.”116


116 Ibid., 28.
Scope of Transformative Response

Consistent with the pan-Mahāyāna position on the matter, Shin thought maintains that liberation from the cycles of rebirth involves transcending the duality of good and evil, thereby enabling liberation from the binding passions, delusions, and judgments of samsāric existence. Shin thought, as influenced by Shinran’s teaching, distinguishes itself from other Mahāyāna teachings, however, in that it is predicated on a radical non-dualistic conception of karma. In other words, all karma is evil and by extension all sentient beings are evil. This results in the knowledge that “the Primal Vow of Amida makes no distinction between people young and old, good and evil; only the entrusting heart, shinjin, is essential.”117 Put differently, there is no discrimination with regard to whom Amida extends loving-compassion and similarly there is no discrimination with regard to who shall be born in the Pure Land. In Shin thought it is accepted that there is an ontological equality among all sentient beings due to their shukugō, and consequently ontological transformation, or birth in the Pure Land, is meant universally. As presented in section three of the Tannishō:

> It is impossible for us, who are possessed of blind passions, to free ourselves from birth-and-death through any practice whatever. Grieving over this, Amida made the Vow, the essential intent of which is the evil person’s attainment of Buddhahood. Hence, evil persons who entrust themselves to Other Power are precisely the ones who possess the true cause of birth. Accordingly [Shinran] said, ‘Even the good person is born in the Pure Land, so without question is the person who is evil.’118

117 Ibid., 4.

118 Ibid., 7.
As the evil person is the true object of Amida’s Primal Vow (akunin shōki setsu), and all people are deemed evil persons, ontological transformation is for everyone. James Dobbins interprets the Tannishō to be asserting that there is nothing, either good or evil that can impede the work of Amida’s liberating Vow. “The 18th Vow of Nien-fo-Faith is the most concrete expression of Amitābha’s [i.e., Amida’s] wish to save all beings in delusion and suffering. The Vow of universal salvation, as the 18th Vow may be called, having been fulfilled, the most effective way of salvation has become available to us.”¹¹⁹ In other words, ontological transformation in Shin Buddhism is a universal experience.

The analytical categories employed in this chapter will also serve as the scaffolding for the thick description of Reformed Christianity and the Doctrine of Limited Atonement that follows.

¹¹⁹ Inagaki, The Three Pure Land Sutras, 76.
Chapter Four: The Doctrine of Limited Atonement

Few Christian doctrines have seen such a breadth of interpretation as the doctrine of atonement. In particular, some of the greatest doctrinal debates have focused on the exact extent of the atonement.¹ In the early seventeenth century, the early Dutch Reformed Christian church attempted to respond to what it perceived as the propagation of false or erroneous teachings by a small but growing number of university professors and Reformed church pastors in and around Amsterdam. This ecclesial response established more fixed and orthodox positions on several contested theological matters within the young Dutch Reformed Church. The formal repudiation of this perceived heresy and the subsequent effort to establish orthodoxy took place at the Synod of Dort (also known as Dordrecht or Dordt) in South Holland between November 1618 and May 1619. The synod’s conclusions appear in a document formally ratified on May 6, 1619, by Calvinist representatives of Great Britain, Switzerland, and the United Provinces of Holland who were present. This document, referred to as the Canons of Dort, has become one of the central doctrinal standards for the Christian Reformed Church and the Reformed Church of America. Today, countless Christians regard it as a virtual summary of the major tenets of Calvinism.²

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Through an exploration of the Canons’ five heads of doctrine, I explain the Canons’ position on six matters discussed in the comparative analysis in Chapter Five.\(^3\)

The six matters are (1) the nature of the human condition or predicament,\(^4\) (2) the “original” conditioning action that leads to this human condition, (3) the futility of any human efforts to change this human condition, (4) the ontologically transformative response to the human condition that originates from “outside” of any human efforts, (5) the transactional quality of this process of ontological transformation, and (6) the scope of the transformative response. The Canons reaffirm what has become known as the Calvinist Doctrine of Limited Atonement. Although I examine and explicate this doctrine in greater detail throughout the chapter, it can be summarized as follows: While Christ’s death and atonement on the cross were sufficient to redeem the sin of all humanity, in accordance with God’s will, Christ’s atonement was only efficacious in the salvation of some individuals. In other words, “Christ’s coming was not to provide salvation for all mankind [*sic*], but to render certain the salvation of the elect.”\(^5\)

The Canons’ statement of this absolute decree of election for some but not all individuals (i.e., God’s predeterminative selection of a limited number of people for eternal life) serves as a key point in the forthcoming comparative analysis in Chapter Five, as it demonstrates an orthodox declaration of the limited extent or scope of transformative response to the human condition.

\(^3\) A “head of doctrine” should be understood as a separate part or aspect of a doctrine. Thus the five heads of doctrine described in the Canons of Dort are five separate parts of one doctrinal statement.

\(^4\) The state of the human condition, often thought of as the “human predicament,” has been variously understood within the Christian tradition, but it has nearly always centered upon the nature or quality of humanity’s relationship with God.

Numerous theological influences shaped the unique articulation of the Doctrine of Limited Atonement found in the Canons of Dort. In order to establish a foundation for understanding the doctrine’s construction, this chapter briefly examines the theological developments that preceded the Synod of Dort and inestimably shaped the nature of the Canons, including the early Christian church’s multivalent conception of salvation, redemption, and atonement; Augustine of Hippo’s doctrine of original sin; Augustine’s view on the efficacy and particularism of God’s grace; Anselm of Canterbury’s commercial or “merit” theory of atonement; Peter Lombard’s distinction between the sufficiency of Christ’s death and the efficacy of Christ’s death; John Calvin’s conceptions of the particularism of the working of grace and the transactionally substitutionary character of Christ’s death and atonement; and Theodore Beza’s writings on predestination, election, and specific atonement.

It also is useful to recall that the term “Reformed” will be interpreted throughout this work as Calvinist as opposed to Lutheran (with the differentiation being marked not by the traditional division according to understandings of sacramental presence during the Eucharist but rather according to divergent views regarding predestination), and continental (as in Dutch, German, French, and Swiss) as opposed to English or Scottish Presbyterian in origin. The word “Reformed” also suggests Protestant churches whose designation is based upon doctrine as opposed to Protestant churches based more upon polity (as in Presbyterianism).  

In the traditional Protestant denominational division surrounding sacramental presence, there are two views concerning the presence of Christ within the Eucharistic

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meal. Luther maintained that while the elements bread and wine do not literally change into the presence of Christ, Christ is actually present within the Eucharist, but it is only faith that can make the sacrament of benefit to the Christian. Luther’s position is one of the consubstantiation of the Lord’s Supper, as opposed to the Roman Catholic view of transubstantiation, in which the bread and wine literally change into Christ’s body and blood through the act of priestly consecration. In this way, “Christ is truly and substantially present in the elements themselves.” On the other hand, Calvin maintained that Christ is not literally present within the elements but rather is present spiritually when the elements are consumed. In this way, Calvinists believe that the Eucharistic meal provides “spiritual nourishment and brings one closer to the presence of Christ.”

It is vital to understand the basis for the divergent views regarding predestination, which is the most important distinction in this chapter’s account of the Dutch Reformed Church. Lutheran orthodoxy defines “predestination” as God’s choice, prior to any foreknowledge of what a person will or will not do during his or her lifetime, of who among humanity will enjoy eternal beatitude and salvation. The early Lutheran position further understood predestination as a conditioned decree of God (decretum conditionatum) that God ordained in light of human faith. However, lest it be thought that faith impelled God’s decree, Luther sought to preserve the Gospels’ sense of God’s expansive grace (gratia universalis) as the key to salvation. He did so by maintaining

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9 Ibid.
that faith and belief are provided as gifts by God, in such a way that faith and
predestination are coordinated, thereby ensuring that all who have faith are among the
predestined elect. Ultimately more relevant to the view expressed in the Canons of Dort,
the Calvinist position maintains that predestination is an absolute decree of God
(*decretum absolutum*) whereby “all rational creatures, angels and men, have been
appointed to their ends, either to eternal life or to eternal death [and that it is solely up to
God] to manifest his mercy and justice in the salvation of some and the damnation of
other of his creatures.”

The consummate difference between the early Lutheran and
Calvinist positions is that Calvin saw that the ends (*finis*) were fixed (i.e., salvation or
damnation), as well as the means (*via*) to these ends. Put another way, election should be
considered *completely apart* from the faith or efforts of humanity. As Calvin writes:

> In conformity, therefore, to the clear doctrine of the Scripture, we assert,
that by an eternal and immutable counsel, God has once for all
determined, both whom he would admit to salvation, and whom he would
condemn to destruction. We affirm that this counsel, as far as concerns the
elect, is founded on his gratuitous mercy, totally irrespective of human
merit; but that to those whom he devotes to condemnation, the gate of life
is closed by a just and irreprehensible, but incomprehensible judgment.

This chapter explains which theological influences most significantly contributed
to the creation of the Doctrine of Limited Atonement, why this doctrinal statement was
articulated in this manner within the Canons of Dort, and what limited atonement means

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10 Luther’s position on predestination can especially be seen in his *De servo arbitrio* (1525), a reply to
Erasmus’s *De libero arbitrio*. *Gratia universalis* posits that God intends for all people to benefit from
God’s grace.

11 *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic

according to the Canons. An understanding of these three questions, as well as of the six positions found within the Canons’ heads of doctrine (ranging from the nature of the human condition to the scope of transformative response to said human condition), is a necessary foundation for following the comparative analysis in Chapter Five.

Theological Influences on the Doctrine of Limited Atonement

*Early Theological Developments*

Notions such as salvation, redemption, atonement, and sin all ultimately inform the articulation of the Doctrine of Limited Atonement in the Canons of Dort. To understand the Canon’s position on the extent of the atonement, it is necessary to consider briefly the winding history of the early Christian church’s view on a variety of theological matters.

For centuries Christian theologians have suggested, based on 2 Corinthians 5.19, that the heart of the Christian message is the proclamation of God reconciling humanity back unto Godself through the mediation of Jesus Christ.\(^{13}\) This promise and hope of reconciliation or “at-one-ment” with God is often understood by Christians as being the very meaning of salvation itself. While the church has never produced a unified doctrine of salvation, it has certainly been consistent in arguing that the cornerstone of salvation is

\(^{13}\) Since at least the early 1990s, feminist theologians have argued that the use of standard male-centric pronouns when referring to God in writing need to be reconsidered. They argue that changing this practice will enable a renewed perception of God, devoid of unnecessary gender biases. A specific example of this sort of revised language is seen in the use of the word “Godself” instead of “Himself.” For a good example of the argument for this sort of expository use of pronouns, see Gail Ramshaw-Schmidt, “The Gender of God,” in *Feminist Theology: A Reader*, ed. Ann Loades (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), 168-80.
the saving work of Jesus Christ. The position that salvation is in some manner mediated through the work and death of a particular first-century Galilean man, considered by his contemporaneous followers as well as later Christians to be the Christ (from the Greek word Christos, meaning “anointed one” or “Messiah,” which is a translation of the Hebrew Mashiakh), is the key element that most distinguishes the Christian tradition from other religions. “The most important notion, common to preaching piety, and dogmatics, is that ‘Christ died for us.’ This is the sine qua non of every doctrine of atonement.” The interpretation of this mediated saving work is known as soteriology, derived from the Greek word soter (σωτήρ), meaning “savior” or “deliverer,” whereas the work itself has become known as atonement. As this chapter is most concerned with a unique historical articulation of the extent of the impact of this work (i.e., atonement), it is useful to first describe exactly what theologians and scholars within the broader historical Christian tradition have meant by the terms salvation and atonement.

Salvation and redemption. Many scholars have argued that the highest goal or ideal of any religion is ontological transformation, often conceived in terms of salvation or liberation. However, across religious traditions this ideal and the methods for its

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fulfillment have been understood in quite diverse and often conflicting manners.

Salvation may be variously understood as being

this-worldly or other-worldly; it may be individual or social; it may be attained once and for all, or it may be conceived of as a process of growth; it may be dominantly an escape, salvation from something, sin, fear, danger, death, or it may be conceived of as chiefly positive, saved to or for something; it may be conditioned or it may be absolute and eternal.

Salvation may be won by self-effort or by the aid of a savior. It may be attained through works, something one does, asceticism, performance of ceremonies, moral effort, self surrender; it may be won through faith in a savior, sometimes vicariously, or it may be won through some kind of saving knowledge. ¹⁷

In the most basic Christian sense of salvation, this highest goal or ideal has focused upon repairing or redeeming what is perceived to be a broken relationship between God and humanity. This broken relationship can be thought of as “a basic split in the structure of human existence. The self reflects a division within the self, between the side that exists here and now with all its needs and lacks and the other side that will and should exist in a state of fullness and satisfaction, [in other words in full relationship with God].”¹⁸ A brief look at the meanings of the words “redemption” and “salvation” will help elaborate on this Christian sense of salvation as a reparation.

Redemption, derived from the Latin word redimere, means to buy back, to repurchase, to free from what distresses or harms, or to free from captivity by payment of


ransom. There is a transactional quality to this word. Salvation, derived from the Latin 
_salvatio_ means “deliverance,” specifically, deliverance from the powers and effects of 
sin. Furthermore, it implies making one safe, which comes from the Latin word _salvus_, 
which is akin to healthy, solid, whole, entire, and free from harm or threat. In other 
words, there is a healing and protecting quality to salvation. These metaphors for 
redemption, which arise from Paul’s language, especially as found in Romans 3.21-25, 
allowed many Christians to understand salvation as an act of repairing or redeeming, and, 
therefore, salvation serves as a transactional process of deliverance from harm and a 
restoration of wholeness. As indicated earlier, the actual mediated work that leads to 
salvation has become known as “atonement.”

_Atonement._ Within the broad Christian tradition, there has existed for centuries a 
belief that, in the days following creation, relations between God and humanity were 
right, proper, or harmonious but that at some point this relationship fell out of alignment. 
From this impression there developed an ongoing perception of a disorder, dis-harmony, 
or dis-ease about the state of the human condition. This disordered condition or 
predicament requires repair or redemption—in other words, a realignment or “re-at-one-
ment.” This message of redeeming the relationship between God and humanity has stood 
at the center of the biblical message.

This nearly universal Christian understanding of the nature of the human 
condition (i.e., disordered and out of right relationship with God, or existentially 
estranged) is addressed in Chapter Five’s comparative analysis. In particular, the

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comparative analysis focuses on how the Canons of Dort employed this interpretation of the human condition.

The word “atonement” literally means setting at one; bringing into accord or harmony; reconciling or restoring relations. In other words, this at-one-ment has the power to reconcile the disordered human condition. Put another way, atonement “is concerned with the issue of how in general, despite fault on one side, reconciliation is achievable between the two or more parties involved.” In this case, the two parties involved are, of course, humanity and God. Whereas salvation can be broadly conceived as the effort to restore wholeness to what is broken, the idea of atonement “has a narrower focus. It insists that salvation depends upon the restoring of a relationship between human beings and God, who are estranged from one another.” So, how and when was the relationship between God and humanity disrupted or broken, and what is the fault or threat that requires amelioration? The Western Christian position, drawing from the Hebrew Bible for scriptural authority, maintains that soon after God created humanity, their ordered and harmonious relationship was broken because humanity decided to reject God. Any understanding of salvation is thus intimately linked to an understanding of the story of creation and the state of God’s earliest relationship with that creation.


22 See Genesis 3:1-7 NRSV in the Hebrew Bible for the description of this rejection event and Genesis 3:8-24 for the description of the subsequent disjuncture of the prior harmonious relationship between humanity and God.
Sin. From the earliest days of Christian thought, Christian theologians have maintained that humanity is out of this “right relationship with God” due to sin—specifically, the sin of the first human, Adam, commonly referred to as “original sin.” Over time, sin has become commonly understood as “an act or attitude by which the reality of God is denied or violated.”\(^{23}\) In other words, sin has often been understood as an offense against God, a prideful choice of self over God. “Sin alienates from God, divides the sinner from God’s community, disorders the life of the sinner, and in that measure disorders creation itself.”\(^{24}\) Thus, sin is the harm or threat that prohibits a right ordering of relations between God and humanity, which in turn results in the corruption or defilement of the human condition.

This alienation from God through sin and the subsequent corruption of the human condition is not simply confined to Adam. Many believe that within the human condition there exists a proclivity to or tendency to sin, sometimes thought of as an inherited hereditary depravity. Where does this proclivity to stand against God in a corrupted state originate, though? This tendency toward moral corruption or depravity is most often credited to Adam’s sin, his subsequent fall from God’s grace, his expulsion from the Garden of Eden, and, most significantly, the transmission of this depraved and defiled condition to all of his descendents.\(^{25}\) This concept, known today as the Christian Doctrine


of Imputation, implies that sin, guilt before God, and a corrupted state or human condition are imputed or transmitted from generation to generation.

Specifically, a view of imputation sometimes referred to as the “Solidarity View” argues that a unique relationship exists between Adam and his descendants. One way of interpreting the effects of this relationship is called “Seminalism,” a position that maintains that the “union between Adam and his posterity is biological and genetic such that Adam embodied all human beings in a single collective entity and thus all people are co-sinners with Adam.” All people are thought to have inherited from Adam guilt, natural corruption, and a total inability to change their standing or status with God (a concept explored later in this chapter).

A second way of interpreting the effects of the relationship between Adam and his descendants, under the Solidarity View of imputation, is called Federalism. This position maintains that the “union between Adam and his posterity is due to the fact that God appointed him as the representative head of the human race. What Adam did is charged to

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25 The passage from Christian epistles most often referenced as demonstrating this transmission of hereditary depravity is Romans 5:12-21 NRSV. The key phrase most often cited is Romans 5:12 NRSV, which states, “Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned.” Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy, ed., The New Oxford Annotated Bible (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 214 NT.

26 The Solidarity View of imputation can be juxtaposed with one other commonly known position called the “Example View,” which argues that Adam’s sin was his alone and that the sins committed by later individuals are simply following Adam’s example. In other words, personal guilt before God is due to one’s own sin, not due to Adam’s. While the Example View has certainly been maintained within the Christian tradition as a viable perspective on both Adam’s sin and the sins of subsequent generations, its influence pales in comparison to the Solidarity View, which, largely because of Augustine’s writings on the matter, ultimately functions as a theological underpinning for the Doctrine of Limited Atonement. House, Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine, 87.

27 Ibid.
his posterity. [Thus] Adam’s first sin was imputed to every person. All people were tried in Adam our representative and declared guilty.”

Augustine of Hippo perpetuated Seminalism in *The Enchiridion*. Within this work is one of the first unique theological developments that would eventually shape the Canons of Dort’s articulation of the *extent* of the atonement, namely, Augustine’s views on the inherited depraved state of the human condition, which have become known as Augustine’s Doctrine of Original Sin. Before examining Augustine’s writings on this matter, it is important to address the church’s earliest efforts to expound upon the process of restoring the human predicament to one of right relations.

*Views of atonement during the patristic age.* Within the broad Christian tradition, what distinguishes the particularity of atonement from the generality of salvation is the mediating role of Jesus Christ. During the first five centuries of the Christian era (i.e., the Patristic age), the various Christian thinkers and theologians referred to as the apostolic fathers worked diligently to describe this mediating role of Jesus Christ, and several themes emerged. For example, the apostolic fathers “in general affirmed the centrality of Christ in the salvation process, [and] regarded the cross as pivotal and its message as essential,” but none of their theories were ever formally or fully developed. In fact, “[f]inding a theory to explain how Christ’s life, death, and resurrection can bring about

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human redemption has long been one of the more intractable tasks faced by the theologian.”

For the first couple of centuries following the death of Jesus of Nazareth, many people wrestled with the question of his work and death. Some, like the Gnostics, saw Jesus primarily as a teacher who worked to save humankind by reminding people of things they had forgotten, illuminating their true nature, and teaching them how to live. They thought that salvation flowed “from the knowledge (gnosis) of God that brings eternal life.” But for many Christians, this position did not explain why Jesus was forced to suffer and die on a cross. Irenaeus, an early Christian thinker and bishop of Lyons in southern France during the late second century, “sought the basis for a fuller account of Christ’s saving work in Paul’s references to Christ as the second Adam. [Irenaeus concluded that] when Adam, out of pride and disobedience, sinned, something went wrong with humanity. Christ [then] put things right. He undid what Adam had done by living a human life of humility and obedience, even to death.” In other words, Christ’s humility and obedience to God reversed the hubris and disobedience of Adam. According to Irenaeus, “while Christ was manifested as human he summed up in himself the totality of human history, rectifying the damage caused through the Fall, infused grace into the human race, replacing the sin of Adam with the gift of God . . . [Thus the] incarnation has the purpose of undoing the consequences of the Fall [i.e., the disruption


of the harmonious relationship between God and humanity].” Implicit within these statements is an early Christian assumption about the unity of humanity, which suggests that Adam’s actions affected all of his descendents. These assumptions would eventually coalesce in Augustine’s aforementioned Solidarity View of imputation, later known as Seminalism.

Thoughts like those of Irenaeus, as well as of early theologians such as Origen (185-254?), provided the dominant imagery for the Christian church for nearly nine hundred years to follow. During the church’s earliest years, this first real theory of atonement became known as the Theory of Recapitulation, suggesting that Christ repeated all the life stages of Adam in reverse, thereby turning humanity’s path from disobedience back to obedience. “It is the whole life of Christ, the incarnation itself, that brings salvation as the restoration of what humanity was originally intended to be.”

Thus, it was thought that the prior “right relationship” with God was reestablished. Of course, the need to right the relationship begs questions about what exactly went wrong with humanity in the first place and how Christ was able to make things right.

In response to these questions, the patristic position emphasized the powers of evil. The thinkers of the time believed that the human spiritual condition could best be understood as one of enslavement to the powers of evil (as personified in Satan or the devil). As a result, the Christ’s work and death were understood in a more nuanced manner than simply as undoing or rectifying a damaged relationship. Specifically, his work and death, which ultimately freed humanity from enslavement, were understood

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34 McKim, Theological Turning Points, 81.
either as the triumph over the powers of evil or the payment of a ransom to Satan in order release of humanity from bondage. This bondage was largely conceived of as captivity to Satan’s temptations and the inevitability of future sin.

According to the first view, Adam “yielded to Satan’s trickery and obeyed him rather than God [when Adam ate the forbidden fruit from the prohibited tree in the middle of the garden], thereby putting humanity under Satan’s lordship.” In accordance with legalistic terms of the day, Satan had a just and legitimate claim to humanity because of Adam’s action. However, “Christ then freed us by defeating Satan. According to some accounts he even used trickery to defeat trickery.”35 It was thought that Christ defeated evil and freed humanity from bondage by tricking Satan into thinking that when pursuing Christ he was pursuing a sinful human. “Origen speaks of Jesus handing over his soul to Satan in exchange for the souls of humanity, which the devil claimed to own because humans are sinful. When Satan accepted this exchange, he found that the soul of Jesus could not be held because Jesus was sinless, and the sinless soul of Christ caused Satan agonizing torture.”36 Satan had thereby overreached in his attempt to claim Jesus, and Satan’s claim was nullified.

According to the second view, Adam’s disobedience to God damaged humanity’s relationship with God. Once again, Adam’s disobedience occurred when he ate fruit from a prohibited tree in the Garden of Eden, but this time the disobedience came with a price tag.37 This “disobedience has distorted our relationship with God and left us owing God a

35 Placher, A History of Christian Theology, 70.
36 McKim, Theological Turning Points, 83.
37 Gen 3:3 NRSV.
penalty for the injury we have done his honor [as well as leaving humanity enslaved to Satan]. Christ’s suffering and death represent a sacrifice on our behalf, a payment for our sin.”38 Once again the legalistic sensibilities of the day shaped this notion of a debt being owed and compensation being required. This position on atonement was largely championed by Origen and in time became known as the Ransom Theory of Atonement. According to this view, Christ’s death was a sacrifice or ransom paid to the devil in order to purchase the claim upon humanity, thereby ensuring God’s victory over evil. The view posits that Christ’s life was equal to or greater in value than all of humanity, so by freely offering himself up to death through the crucifixion, all debts were paid and God’s honor was restored. This theory carries within it “the assertion of the belief in the victory of life over death and good over evil, accomplished in the death and resurrection of Christ.”39

Ultimately, when examining the early church’s theories of Christ’s mediating role in salvation we find that Irenaeus’s Theory of Recapitulation and Origen’s Ransom Theory had the deepest and longest-lasting influence upon the Western Church, and the Reformed Church in particular. Certainly, we ought not discount the importance of Western Christian apologist Tertullian’s (160-220) concept of salvation as satisfaction, in which penitent sinners offer tears, self-punishment, fasting, almsgiving, and so on, in an effort to further secure God’s forgiveness, nor Eastern theologian Athanasius of Alexandria’s (296?–373) description of salvation as deification, in which believers seek union with Christ’s divine nature through baptism and a life of obedience to God. However, for the purposes of this dissertation, Irenaeus and Origen’s theories, which

38 Placher, A History of Christian Theology, 71.
represent the early church’s dominant positions on salvation and atonement, suffice in our exploration of the influence of early theological positions on the Doctrine of Limited Atonement as found in the Canons of Dort. Understanding how the Canons came to interpret the “original” conditioning action that led to a sense of the human condition as being defiled, as well as the futility of the human effort to change the depraved condition, requires a brief examination of Augustine of Hippo’s Doctrine of Original Sin.

*Augustine’s Doctrine of Original Sin*

Augustine of Hippo’s (354-430) views on countless matters (including creation, free will, original sin, and predestination) significantly influenced theologians of the Protestant Reformation, such as John Calvin and Theodore Beza, who in turn helped shaped the Canons of Dort. Augustine is credited with establishing what is commonly referred to as the Doctrine of Original Sin, derived from the Latin term *peccatum originis*, meaning “sin of the origin,” and his writings on sin and grace have immeasurably shaped the Christian church’s perception of these matters. However, it is useful to acknowledge that several theologians paved the way for Augustine to fully develop an early theory into broadly accepted doctrine. It was the apostle Paul, in his letter to the Romans, who originally introduced the notion that Adam’s sin had ramifications for all of humanity. “When he taught that as in Adam all men have sinned, so in Christ they are saved, he not only suggested an interpretation of the Genesis story of the fall of the first parents which no Jewish exegete had made before (as far as we know),
but he also furnished Christian theology a major theme of thought.\textsuperscript{40} This theme was adopted and expanded upon by early theologians. For example, Tertullian, the aforementioned North African Christian, first coined the term “original sin” around the year 200 CE when he proposed that sin was passed into the soul of each person through human procreation.\textsuperscript{41} Cyprian (200-258), bishop of Carthage in North Africa, furthered this thinking when he wrote that even infants who have not actually committed sins require baptism, as they have inherited the guilt of Adam.\textsuperscript{42} In several of his commentaries, Ambrose (340-397), the bishop of Milan, concurred when he taught that “through the sin of the first man, Adam, all Adam’s descendents come into the world tainted with sin.”\textsuperscript{43} Influenced by Ambrose, Augustine took these ideas regarding the inherited depraved state of the human condition and coupled them with his Neoplatonic conception of the presence of evil in the world to formulate his foundational Doctrine of Original Sin.\textsuperscript{44}

For Augustine, any understanding of salvation and atonement had to begin with an understanding of original sin and its dramatic effects upon the human condition. By

\textsuperscript{40} Encyclopedia of Religion, 1945 ed., s.v. “original sin,” by Wilhelm Pauck.


\textsuperscript{43} Latourette, A History of Christianity, 177.

\textsuperscript{44} Neoplatonism maintains that there exists an ultimate and indivisible being (God), which is entirely characterized by good. This indivisible and harmonious source of all good in turn does not cause or create evil. Evil has no ontological existence. Rather, evil is due to the absence or privation of good. This is a refutation of the Manichean sense of dualism, in which good and evil are coequal constituent parts of nature.
Augustine’s reckoning, the first human, Adam, was created with freedom of will and the power to choose between doing good and forsaking good. In other words, Adam was given the power to choose not to sin (posse non peccare). This gift was in many ways humanity’s “highest quality, a gift from God intended for [humanity’s] own good, and [its] chief peril.”\(^{45}\) Adam used his “divinely given capacity for rational free choice” when he made the conscious decision to put his will before the will of God, resulting in the first sin.\(^{46}\) For Augustine, this rejection of God implied a denial of Adam’s absolute dependence upon God, resulting in a change in Adam’s proper ontological condition (posse peccare) and a decline in his standing with God (i.e., a degradation of the prior good and harmonious relationship between God and humanity). This original sin introduced evil, and Adam was fallen into a condition or state of sin. In his 1983 book, *A History of Christian Theology*, William C. Placher delineates the adoption of Augustinian ideas. “Western theologians [in general] thought in terms of states. With Adam’s initial sin, humanity had fallen into a state of sin. Christ redeems us, bringing us into a state of grace.”\(^{47}\) In other words, Adam’s choice of self over God resulted in the defilement or depravity of Adam’s ontological standing, and the mediated saving work of Christ was thought to affect an ontological transformation (i.e., salvation) of the defiled sinner.

It has been suggested that for Augustine “the fall of man [*sic*] was one of the most important events in all of world history. Why? Because, when Adam chose to sin against God of his own free will, he experienced the just condemnation of God. He experienced


\(^{46}\) Ibid., 178.

this condemnation not only on himself but also on his offspring. Adam’s actions created a chasm between God and man that could only be bridged by the grace of God; no action of man could bridge that chasm.\footnote{J. V. Fesko, \textit{Diversity Within the Reformed Tradition: Supra- and Inferalapsarianism in Calvin, Dort, and Westminster} (Greenville, SC: Reformed Academic Press, 2001).7.} Augustine maintained that Adam’s fall into sin was monumental, because \textit{all} of humanity was now inevitably bound to “choose self instead of God,” assuring that humanity would repeatedly sin like Adam for all of eternity, and to similarly exist in a defiled state.\footnote{McGiffert, \textit{A History of Christian Thought}, 2:36.} Humanity was effectively a heap of damnation, loss, and utter destruction, a \textit{massa damnata}. As Augustine put it, “that one sin, admitted into a place where such perfect happiness reigned, was of so heinous a character, that in one man the whole human race was originally, and as one may say, radically, condemned.”\footnote{Augustine, \textit{The Enchiridion}, trans. J. F. Shaw, in \textit{Basic Writings of Saint Augustine}, vol. 1, ed. Whitney J. Oates (New York: Random House, 1948), 686.} This corporate condemnation of humanity to the boundedness of sin was linked to the imputation of Adam’s sin to all of his descendents through the act of procreation, a theory that found its expression in Augustine’s aforementioned Seminalism position. In \textit{The Enchiridion} Augustine writes:

\begin{quote}
After his [Adam’s] sin he became an exile from this place and bound also his progeny, which by his sin he had damaged within himself as though at its root, by the penalty of death and condemnation. As a result, any offspring born of him and the wife through whom he had sinned, who had been condemned together with him, born through the concupiscence of the flesh which was their punishment, carrying within it a disobedience similar to that which they had showed, would contract original sin.\footnote{Augustine, \textit{The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Charity}, trans. Bruce Harbert, in \textit{The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21\textsuperscript{st} Century}, pt. 1, vol. 8, ed. Boniface Ramsey (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 2005), 289.} 
\end{quote}
As Augustine further reflected upon this imputed sinfulness and depravity, and the breadth of the chasm which exists between God and humanity, he realized that there was little that a person could do to close the gap and reconcile the fractured relationship. The ultimate ramification of the fall of Adam was that the degradation and depravity caused by that first sin was so complete that, whereas humanity was initially able to not sin (*posse non peccare*), humanity was now unable to refrain from sinning (*non posse non peccare*). According to theologian Bruce Demarest, “Sinners can neither will the good nor perform any meritorious work to earn God’s favor.”

Free will certainly continued to exist, but humanity had now lost the desire to choose God and to do good. The stain of sin was such that humanity was essentially only free to continue sinning by choosing self-centered concerns over the concerns of God. “This falling away from man’s [sic] God-given status into a lower level of being, so Augustine believed, is not one from which man can recover by his own effort . . . Man cannot raise himself by his own boot-straps.” Self-effort and good works would not affect one’s salvation. Determination and human will could not reestablish a state of righteousness. Even heart-felt contrition and obedience unto God would not result in ontological transformation.

“No one could achieve perfection through obedience to the Law of God by means of free will alone.” As Augustine stated in *The Enchiridion*, “What good can one who is ruined do, except insofar as he is set free from his ruin? Can he perhaps do good by the free

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choice of his own will? This too must not be thought, for it was by evil use of his power
of free choice that man ruined both that power and himself."^55

Grace. Given Augustine’s view of humanity’s complete powerlessness to affect
its own ontological transformation, it makes sense that he proclaimed that freedom from
sin, and subsequent salvation, was only possible with some help from an outside source.
Augustine thought that God alone had the exclusive power to cause salvation or,
conversely, to ensure destruction. If relying only upon its own abilities and powers,
humanity would never seek God, since original sin had erased this desire. Augustine
maintained that instead of allowing this reality to continue unabated, God offered a
transformative response to the human predicament in the form of divine help. This
“divine help without which man cannot choose God and live for him [sic] Augustine
called grace.”^56 In its most basic sense, grace implies divine favor or assistance.
However, in early Christian theological circles, “divine grace had been understood not
simply as the kindness and favor of God, shown especially in salvation, but also in an
objective sense as something bestowed upon men [sic].”^57 The gift of grace was revealed.
Irrespective of human merit or deservedness, God freely provided humanity with a way
to overcome its inability to save itself. In the face of humanity’s complete powerlessness
and inevitable damnation, God provided the gift of the means for salvation.

^55 Augustine, The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Charity, 292.
^57 Ibid., 93.
Augustine, and many Protestant Reformers who followed his thinking, including those who directly influenced the language found in the Canons of Dort, largely differentiated between what he and they perceived to be two forms of grace—common grace and special grace. Common grace suggests “God’s undeserved goodness to every person in the form of his [sic] general care. It includes the provision of basic human needs, the restraint of evil, the delay of judgment, and the maintenance of the civil order.”\textsuperscript{58} This description is simply an elaboration of the basic sense of grace described earlier. It essentially denotes God’s favorable and agreeable disposition toward all of humanity, whereby God facilitates and ensures the possibility of a full and ordered human life for all people. “Special grace, on the other hand represents the exercise of God’s saving power toward sinners.”\textsuperscript{59} Special grace involves God actively changing the desire and willingness of individuals to move from self-centeredness to God-centeredness. It is a changing of the individual’s heart, and a strengthening and renewal where only weakness and depravity previously existed. Grace repairs the will and restores it to a state of health. This “effectual grace” thereby enables the process of ontological transformation to begin. Whereas common grace is largely a \textit{disposition} on the part of God, special grace is a particular form of \textit{action} on the part of God to compensate for humanity’s inability to act on its own behalf. Special grace is the power of God at work where the power of humanity has failed. For Augustine, then, grace is “God the heavenly Physician curing the maladies of sin and restoring sinners to spiritual

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{59} Demarest, \textit{The Cross and Salvation}, 64.
health.” Grace is the healing, redemptive power of God in action or “needed remedy for something in the human situation, . . . the agent of a restored relation.”

The manner of God’s grace. Before moving to a more in-depth exploration of Augustine’s view on the particularity of God’s grace, it is useful to underscore the manner by which God’s divine help (grace) was extended. As stated earlier, Augustine saw God’s help (i.e., God’s grace) as being made available through the mediated saving work of Jesus the Christ. While Augustine viewed God as the heavenly physician, he understood Jesus the Christ to be the tool or the cause affecting the cure. Augustine believed that salvation from sin required a mediator and that there was only one mediator capable of affecting salvation, Jesus the Christ. Because Augustine understood Jesus to be the Word of God become incarnate, that universally condemning first sin could not “be undone and washed away except by the one mediator between God and humanity, the man Christ Jesus.” In other words, it took God in the flesh to affect humanity’s salvation.

Building positively upon the earlier theological themes of sacrifice and ransom, Augustine addressed the matter as to how salvation was actually accomplished through two narratives, which he derived from Romans 3. First, because of sin God required a

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60 Ibid., 65.


62 In the Hebrew Bible, the phrase “Word of God” implies both the spoken word of God (such as heard and interpreted by a prophet) and the expression of God’s power. The early Christian tradition focused on the latter part of this definition and conceived of the Word of God as God’s saving actions, specifically through the message and actions of Christ, which in turn created faith in the hearts of believers.

63 Augustine, The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Charity, 302.
sacrifice in order to heal the corrupted nature that humanity had inherited from Adam. The death of Jesus, as God incarnate, was the only sacrifice that would suffice. Thus, as an act of grace from God, Jesus functioned as a transactional substitution for the massa damnata, by intentionally obeying the will of God, standing in for humanity through his death, and desiring the reconciliation of humanity back unto God.

Begotten and conceived, then, without any indulgence of carnal lust, and therefore bringing with Him no original sin, and by the grace of God joined and united in a wonderful and unspeakable way in one person with the Word, the Only-begotten of the Father, a son by nature, not by grace, and therefore having no sin of His own; nevertheless, on account of the likeness of sinful flesh in which He came, He was called sin, that He might be sacrificed to wash away sin. For under the Old Covenant, sacrifices for sins were called sins.64

The second theme is largely an embellishment of Origen’s earlier Ransom Theory of Atonement, whereby humans are redeemed from the power of Satan by the ransom of the blood of Jesus. It was thought that Jesus’ blood was transactionally offered for humanity’s sins. In Book 13 of De Trinitate, Augustine writes,

In this redemption the blood of Christ was as it were the price given for us (but the devil upon receiving it was not enriched but bound), in order that we might be loosed from his chains, and that he might not involve in the nets of sin and so draw with himself to the ruin of the second and eternal death, anyone of those whom Christ, free from debt, had redeemed by pouring out His own blood without being obliged to do so . . . 65

The consequence of God’s twofold saving actions through Christ was that humanity was irresistibly drawn to Christ, and through Christ to God, and that faith was created in the hearts of believers. While the notion of faith is examined later in more detail, for now

64 Augustine, The Enchiridion, 683.

faith in Christ should be understood as the giving of oneself over to the saving power of God. It is heartfelt trusting in the ontologically transformative power of God that can and will restore humanity’s standing before God back to its pre-fall status, a state of righteous alignment and harmony with God.

_Efficacy and Particularism of God’s Grace._ Augustine was so thoroughly convinced that the universal implications of original sin condemned all of humanity to damnation justly that he would have seen no fault or injustice had God gone through with punishing every individual, confining them to eternal perdition. In his work *On the Predestination of the Saints,* when addressing why the gift of faith is not given to all, Augustine writes, “from one all have gone into a condemnation, which undoubtedly is most righteous; so that even if none were delivered therefrom, there would be no just cause for finding fault with God.”\(^{66}\) Despite this perspective, or perhaps in light of it, Augustine maintained that out of infinite love and compassion for humanity, God had predetermined a certain number of people out of the mass of perdition (*massa perditionis*) to receive God’s grace. God reserved salvation for only a certain number of sinners, which is what is meant by the _particularism_ of God’s grace. To understand this theological position, it is useful to recall Augustine’s differentiation between common grace and special grace. Whereas common grace is generally oriented toward _all people_, special grace is meant for a _select number_ of people.

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Augustine believed that God, as a response to the inevitable fall of Adam, predetermined who would receive grace and the attendant salvation, and who would not. “God predestined those he [sic] foreknew would exercise faith in Christ,” and this faith was entirely the result of God’s enabling efforts. Augustine’s view was a response to the Pelagians, who argued that humanity was completely free and self-sufficient, free to accept the gift of Christ or reject it, and able to attain eternal salvation without the divine grace of God (i.e., through personal effort). Augustine maintained that the predestining act of granting grace was not simply a matter of foreknowledge of who would respond to Christ but that in fact grace was the very ground or cause for responding to Christ, and thus the foundation of salvation. Prior to Augustine, most Christian theologians aligned with the former position, but Augustine found this notion untenable, as it implied that grace could be merited or earned, thereby deemphasizing God’s sovereignty. Augustine instead argued, “predestination is infallibly effective of itself, anterior to and unconditioned by any foreknowledge of man’s [sic] actions. The plan to save some men is based on an utterly benevolent or gratuitous divine choice.”

He based much of his thinking on predestination on his readings of Romans 8:29-30, which states “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be confirmed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a larger family. And those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified,” and

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67 During the Patristic period, one of the common explanations for the fall of humanity was that God created Adam, knowing he would rebel and sin, thereby demonstrating humanity’s weakness without God and thus allowing God to show God’s mercy.


Romans 9:11-12 (the apostle Paul’s interpretation of the Jacob and Esau story), which reads “Even before they had been born or had done anything good or bad [so that God’s purpose of election might continue, not by works but by his call] she was told, ‘The elder shall serve the younger.’”

For Augustine, to be predeterminatively selected to be among God’s chosen ones, the elect, relied completely on God’s pleasure and was the greatest gift possible, as it ensured eternal salvation. Those not among the elect are simply passed over and left in their ontological condition of depravity and defilement. This position makes it clear that Augustine was a single-predestinarian, and that he “understood predestination in an infralapsarian sense.” While God may have foreordained a select number of people to salvation, God did not similarly foreordain others to damnation. Rather, God passively left those not chosen in their preexistent state of sin. According to Augustine’s understanding, God would never actively condemn someone to damnation but simply does not count all individuals among the elect. When attempting to answer why Augustine took this position, some scholars have interpreted his writings in Predestination of the Saints as suggesting that “the bishop speculated that God predestined to salvation persons equal in number to the fallen angels, thus ensuring that the inhabitants of the heavenly city would be at least as great as in the beginning.”

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70 Rom 8:29-30, 9:11-12 NRSV.

71 Demarest, The Cross and Salvation, 115.

72 The view that God actively foreordains not only who will be saved but also who will be damned is known as supralapsarianism. This double-predestination or positive divine action regarding salvation and reprobation especially appeared in the writings of Theodore Beza (1519-1605). This dissertation ultimately shows that when considering the matter as to who salvation is meant for, the infralapsarianism of Augustine was the dominant position represented at the Synod of Dort.
Through his arguments with the Pelagians, Augustine became “the first great defender of the efficacy and particularism of God’s grace.” While he did not discuss the extent or scope of atonement at great length in his writings, he nearly formulated a doctrine of limited atonement some twelve hundred years before the Synod of Dort’s doctrinal statements on the matter. An example of Augustine’s thoughts regarding what he perceived to be the limited nature of God’s grace can be found in Chapter XI of On the Predestination of the Saints where he writes:

‘Many hear the word of truth; but some believe, while others contradict. Therefore, the former will to believe; the latter do not will.’ Who does not know this? Who can deny this? But since in some the will is prepared by the Lord, in others it is not prepared, we must assuredly be able to distinguish what comes from God’s mercy, and what from His judgment. . . Here is mercy and judgment—mercy towards the election which has obtained the righteousness of God, but judgment to the rest which have been blinded. And yet the former, because they willed, believed; the latter, because they did not will believed not. Therefore mercy and judgment were manifested in the very wills themselves. Certainly such an election is of grace, not at all of merits.

Another example can found in Chapter XVI of On the Predestination of the Saints where Augustine writes, “Faith, then, as well in its beginning as in its completion, is God’s gift; and let no one have any doubt whatever, unless he desires to resist the plainest sacred writings, that this gift is given to some, while to some it is not given.” In other words, while God is generously predisposed towards all people, an efficient form of grace (i.e.,

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76 Ibid., 792.
one that enables people to adhere to God’s desires) is only given to those whom God has predeterminately selected. This is what is meant by the efficacy of God’s grace.

*Anselm’s Commercial or “Merit” Theory of Atonement*

Despite the great variety of Christian positions on the matter, there existed no systematic account of atonement, limited or unlimited, until Anselm of Canterbury (1034-1109) wrote *Cur Deus Homo* (1097-98). Anselm based his thinking in *Cur Deus Homo* (*Why God-Man*) upon a commonly accepted medieval system of penance in which sin is equated with a debt and recompense is required. He postulated that through the disobedience of Adam, God’s honor was offended. “Through disobedience persons rob God of his [*sic*] honor and violate the integrity of his kingdom.”77 In particular, Anselm argued that Adam sinned by failing to render unto God complete obedience. This offense required that some sort of satisfaction be given, but, as the offense was considered infinite in nature, no human being could provide adequate reparation. Thus God provided Jesus Christ, considered by the Christian church to be both divine and human (i.e., the God-man), whose death on the cross thereby effectively redeemed God’s honor. “By the incarnation, Jesus Christ, fully God and fully man, and only he, could make the needed satisfaction and enable God to forgive man without doing violence to the moral balance of the universe.”78 This work by Anselm was the first systematic effort to delineate the necessity of both the incarnation and Christ’s crucifixion, and its central theory became

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known as the Satisfaction Theory of Atonement, one of the most commonly referenced ways of understanding the mediated saving work of Christ.

However, in recent years some scholars have begun to suggest that within *Cur Deus Homo* there are two ways of interpreting the mediated saving work of Christ. Theologian Richard Cross posits that Anselm “develops a two-pronged approach to his analysis of the redemptive value of Christ’s death [i.e., atonement].” Cross acknowledges that the first half of Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo* clearly explicates the dominant and more famous side of the theory, the Satisfaction Theory. But he goes on to argue that the second half of Anselm’s work develops a lesser, yet independent side of the theory, which he labels the *merit* theory of atonement.

According to the merit theory, Christ’s death *merits* certain rewards for human beings. “On this scheme, Christ’s death is a supererogatorily good act [i.e., exceeding what is needed] that merits a reward from God. The reward is whatever Christ asks for . . . [and] Christ asks that God forgive the sins of those who repent and apologize to God.” According to this theory, this is, in effect, a transference of Christ’s merits, or meritorious reward, from Christ to the lot of depraved sinners. Richard Swinburne also comments on this theory when he suggests that “works of supererogation give to the agent [in this case Jesus the Christ] ‘merit.’ In other words, the supererogatory agent stacks us merit for himself.”

Christ’s supererogatory good act accrued ample merit to compensate for humanity’s debt, which was then credited to humanity’s bill.

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80 Ibid., 408.

Both Swinburne and Cross suggest that God indirectly places Godself under an obligation to reward highly meritorious actions. “According to Swinburne, supererogatory actions place their recipient under an obligation to gratitude; and supererogatory actions of sufficient magnitude place their recipient under an obligation to more than merely gratitude (64-66). Both of these sorts of supererogatory action are labeled by Swinburne ‘meritorious’ (70). Christ’s death thus seems to place God under an obligation to reward it in some way. Of course, the nature of this reward is appropriately determined by God.”

Ultimately this dynamic is, according to Anselm, exactly what happens in the case of Christ’s sacrificial death. “It is necessary that the Father should compensate the Son . . . On whom is it more appropriate for [Christ] to bestow the reward and recompense for his death than those who salvation . . . he has made himself a man, and for whom, as we have said, he set an example, by his death, of dying for the sake of righteousness?”

**Lombard’s Distinction**

Peter Lombard’s (1095-1160) influence upon the articulation of a doctrine of limited atonement in the Canons of Dort, while small when compared with that of Augustine, is vital nonetheless. Unfortunately, Western scholars often miss Lombard’s important role because few of his writings have been translated into English. This oversight is especially disappointing given that Lombard “had a major intellectual

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84 As of 2011, no complete English translation of Lombard’s most famous work, *Libri Quattuor Sententiarum*, exists.
influence from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century.” His best-known work *Libri Quattuor Sententiarum* (more commonly known as the *Sentences* or the *Book of Sentences*) became the standard compendium of theology for students and teachers until Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae* supplanted it during the Reformation. While Lombard’s *Sentences* was not an especially original work, it was the most systematic and complete summary of Catholic theology in its day. In fact, except for the Bible itself, more commentaries have been written on the *Sentences* than on any other Christian religious text. The list of theological luminaries who read and wrote about the *Sentences* includes Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, William of Ockham, and Martin Luther.

Lombard’s effect on the Canons’ declaration of the atonement’s limitation in scope is important to recount, as he was the first theologian to draw a stark distinction between the sufficiency and efficacy of Christ’s death. The common understanding today is that while Christ’s death and atonement on the cross were sufficient to redeem effectively the sin of all humanity, in accordance with God’s will, Christ’s atonement was only efficacious in the salvation of some individuals. In many ways the articulation of this distinction laid the foundation for a more concrete doctrine of limited atonement, which states that salvation is only for a limited number of people. Augustine, from whom Lombard drew deeply for the *Sentences*, never quite arrived at a fully articulated doctrine on limited atonement, as seen when he writes:

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85 A surprising example of this Western scholastic oversight can be found in the otherwise highly detailed and immensely useful examination of the theological influences upon Calvin, the Synod of Dort, and the Westminster Assembly conducted by J. V. Fesko in *Diversity Within The Reformed Tradition*. The only reference to Peter Lombard’s *Sentences* is found in a brief description of Gregory of Rimini (c.1330-1358) and the influence of the first two books of the *Sentences* upon Rimini’s supralapsarian position. Brian Davies, foreword to *Peter Lombard*, by Philipp W. Rosemann, Great Medieval Thinkers, ed. Brian Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), ix.
Listen: “Jesus answered them, I tell you, and ye believe not: the works that
I do in my Father’s name, they bear witness of me: but ye believe not;
because ye are not of my sheep.” Ye have already learned above who the
sheep are: be ye sheep. They are sheep through believing, sheep in
following the Shepherd, sheep in not despising their Redeemer, sheep in
entering by the door, sheep in the enjoyment of eternal life. What did He
mean, then, in saying to them, “Ye are not of my sheep?” That he saw
them predestined to everlasting destruction, not won to eternal life by the
price of His own blood.\textsuperscript{86}

According to Augustine, only some people are to be considered the followers of Christ.
The atoning actions of his sacrifice were meant specifically for them, and these chosen
individuals will receive eternal salvation. But other individuals are not to be considered
Christ’s followers, and because of God’s predeterminative limited election, they remain
confined to perdition.

Lombard was the first theologian to put the matter so clearly and bluntly. In the
Sentences, Lombard proclaims:

Christus ergo est sacerdos, idemque et hostia pretium nostrae
reconciliationis; qui se in ara curcis non diablo, sed Trinitati obtulit pro
 omnibus, quantum ad pretii sufficientiam; sed pro electis tantum quantum
ad efficaciam, quia praedestinatis tantum salutem effecit.\textsuperscript{87}

This observation “remained the fundamental distinction on the question of the death of
Christ throughout the Middle Ages and into the Reformation period . . . and this
distinction made between the sufficiency of the sacrifice made for all and the efficacy of


\textsuperscript{87} Peter Lombard, Libri Quattuor Sententiarum, Liber Tertius: De Incarnatione Verbi, Distinctio XX, 3, in
Turnholti, Belgium: Typograph Brepols Editores Pontifich, 1981), column 799 (column citation is to the
reprint edition).
the sacrifice made for the elect remained a touchstone for the Reformed debate on this question and took on great significance at the Synod of Dort.” While the matter is discussed in greater detail later in this chapter, an example of the influence of Lombard’s distinction can be seen in the second article of the Remonstrantia, the controversial statement in 1610 that precipitated the convening of the Synod of Dort. The second article seems to be a direct, contradictory reply to Lombard’s position regarding efficacy and sufficiency: “The redemptive price paid by Christ is not only sufficient to redeem all of mankind, but is also by the decree and will of God paid for all, so that God can and will enter into a new covenant with sinners.” The Canons’ statement on limited atonement serves as a response to this declaration.

Theodore Beza’s Writings on Predestination, Election, and Specific Atonement

Theodore Beza (1519-1605) “occupied a critical position among those who formulated the theory of the atonement before the Synod of Dort.” When it comes to evaluating the breadth and depth of his influence, however, scholars disagree. Some have pointed to Beza as the primary source for the development of a doctrine of limited

90 Few if any prior scholastic interpretations of the Remonstrantia have explicitly posited this idea that its second article is a direct refutation of Lombard’s distinction between the sufficiency and the efficacy of Christ’s death. This omission could be due to the aforementioned dearth of Western scholarship on Peter Lombard. Marcia Colish’s 1994 work Peter Lombard is the one exception. Furthermore, scholarly attempts to trace the causal trajectory of thought related to the extent of the scope of atonement has proved futile: that trajectory is John 10:25-28, Augustine’s “Homilies on the Gospel of John,” Lombard’s Libri Quattuor Sententiarum, the second article of the Remonstrantia, the First Head of Doctrine in the Canons of Dort.
91 Godfrey, “Reformed Thought on the Extent of the Atonement to 1618,” 139.
atatement in Reformed theology. 92 Others, including myself, think that this statement goes too far. 93 “Stated simply, a definite [i.e., limited] atonement is not strictly related to supralapsarianism, nor was it introduced to Reformed theology by Theodore Beza. A definite atonement was intertwined with predestination for over seven hundred years prior to Westminster or the existence of Theodore Beza. To argue that Beza’s supralapsarianism introduced the ‘post-Reformation doctrine of limited atonement’ ignores the historical facts to the contrary.” 94 Early evidence demonstrates that it was not Beza alone who definitively shaped the Reformed or post-Reformed position on limited atonement. The seventeenth-century writings of William Twisse argue that “the doctrine of absolute reprobation did not find its origin in Beza; rather it had roots in medieval theology.” 95 Although Beza did not introduce the doctrine of limited atonement found in the Canons, it is useful to examine the important role his thoughts and writings did play in the Canons’ formation of such a doctrine. His writings on predestination, election, and specific or limited atonement, along with John Calvin’s, were regularly consulted and referenced by many key figures at Dort.


94 Fesko, Diversity Within the Reformed Tradition, 285.

95 William Twisse, The Riches of God’s Love unto the Vessells of Mercy Consistent with His Absolute Hatred or Reprobation of the Vessells of Wrath or An Answer unto a book entitled God’s Love unto Mankind, Manifested by Disproving His Absolute Decree for their Damnation (Oxford: L. L. and H. H. Printers to the University, 1653); Fesko, Diversity Within the Reformed Tradition, 295.
As early as 1575, Beza had clearly expressed a strong belief in the limited extent of the atonement. In his work *A Briefe Declaration of the Chiefe Poyntes of Christian Religion Set Forth in a Table*, he wrote:

Forasmuch therefore as he is merciful, and yet could not forget his justice, before all other things it was necessarie [sic] that a mediator should be appointed: by whom man might be perfectly restored and that this should be done by ye free mercy of grace which doth appear in ye free salvation of his elect… and finally with one only offering and sacrifice of himself should sanctifie [sic] all the elect . . . \(^\text{96}\)

Beza expanded on the notion that only the elect benefited by the atonement in his work *Ad Acta Colloquii Montisbelgardensis Tubingae Edita, Theodori Bezae Repsonsio*, in which he wrote “propitiationis beneficium necessario ad solos electos, et, quia electi sunt, credentes pertinere. [The benefit of the atonement properly belongs to the elect alone.]”\(^\text{97}\)

One of Beza’s clearest expressions supporting his belief that limited atonement is limited in scope appears in what is arguably his most famous work, *Quastionum et responsionum Christianarum libellus* (more commonly known as *Questions and Responses*). Here, in response to a request to describe predestination, Beza writes:

Common belief is that predestination is seen chiefly in the governing of human kind. Therefore, we will describe it this way: we say that it is the eternal and immutable decree of God, going in order before all the causes of salvation and damnation, whereby God has determined to be glorified in some by saving them in Christ by mere grace, but in others by damning them by His rightful judgement [sic] in Adam and in themselves. From the use of Scripture we call the former vessels of glory, and elect, that is predestined to salvation from eternity through mercy; the latter are called reprobates and vessels of wrath, that is, those who are predestined likewise


to rightful damnation from eternity (both of which God knew individually from eternity).  

In response to the following question, Beza continued his explanation of God having set forth two very different ends for humankind, by writing:

Then I say, that as often as the Scriptures make mention of the predestination of the elect—so often is the predestination of the reprobate confirmed, when the matter itself requires that, whereas some are elected to life, the rest must be understood to be predestined to death. Furthermore, if the vessels of glory are said to be predestined to glory, the opposition of contradictions wholly requires, that we should consider the vessels of wrath as predestined to death.  

Beza went so far as to suggest that Peter Lombard’s distinction between the sufficiency of Christ’s death and the efficacy of Christ’s death only confused the matter when it came to understanding exactly for whom the atonement was meant. Beza argued that it was important to establish that Christ’s death was in no way intended for the salvation of all of humanity but rather affected only the salvation of those already elected by God. It should be noted, however, that “Beza’s strict formulation, rejecting the traditional distinction between sufficiency and efficacy, was not accepted by the majority of the Reformed theologians.” Even so, Beza’s influence on the spirit of early seventeenth-century Reformed thought and the discussions held at the Synod of Dort, is undeniable.

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100 Godfrey, “Reformed Thought on the Extent of the Atonement to 1618,” 144.
Jacob Arminius (1560-1609), the father of the controversial Remonstrant position, often mistakenly grouped together Calvin and Beza’s positions on predestination. In a debate on predestination with his colleague from the University of Leiden, Franciscus Gomarus (1563-1641), Arminius rejected the thinking of Reformed theologians such as Calvin, Beza, and William Perkins, because Arminius believed their position on predestination made God the architect of the fall. While it was well known at the time that supralapsarians did not regard God as the author of sin, Arminius nevertheless wrote, “according to the opinion of Calvin and Beza God is made to be necessarily the author of sin.”

When Arminius started preaching in Amsterdam in 1588, he took explicit exception to Beza’s characterizations of God as predestining some to salvation and reprobating some to damnation prior to creation. Instead, Arminius was eager to maintain that salvation and damnation occur after the mediation of Christ (i.e., the atonement), as the inevitable consequences of faith in or rejection of God.

In summary, this much can definitively be said about Theodore Beza’s opinion as to the extent of the atonement: Beza maintained throughout his writings that “God predetermines all events and all human destines by his eternal will, his decree” and as such God has decreed that the “benefit of the atonement properly belongs to the elect alone.”

**Contextual Rationale for the Development of the Doctrine of Limited Atonement**


103 Godfrey, “Reformed Thought on the Extent of the Atonement to 1618,” 141.
Leiden, the second largest city in the province of Holland as of the mid-1500s, largely adopted Protestantism in 1572, when the city’s residents joined the Revolt against Habsburg Spain. The Dutch Reformation was not a national event during which the entire republic formally converted from Roman Catholicism to Reformed Protestantism. Rather, it was a highly local affair in which religious reform was introduced into Dutch towns one at a time. “Local circumstances were in fact of paramount importance to the success or failure of the establishment of a Calvinist Reformation in the Dutch provinces freed from Spanish rule. Precisely because power was so decentralized in Holland, Calvinist leaders were confronted in each locality by entrenched political structures and cultures that did not automatically accommodate themselves to this new and unfamiliar organization, the Reformed Church.”¹⁰⁴ Logically, then, as Reformed influence spread, it did not become a mandated confessional position. In fact, it functioned much more as one among many confession statements.¹⁰⁵

As the young Dutch Reformed Church struggled to define itself in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, it faced a climate in which many theological viewpoints were being taught and preached. This diversity of positions contributed to growing discord within the Dutch Reformed Church and even fueled the increasing possibility of civil war within the Unified Dutch Provinces. After the political fighting had ended in the Protestant North now known as the United Netherlands, “a momentous struggle over doctrine broke out within the Dutch Reformed Church.”¹⁰⁶


¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 7.
The initial theological disagreement between supralapsarians and infralapsarians focused on predestination, with the central question of whether God’s determination of who would be saved and who would be damned was a reaction to the fall or a precedent to the fall. However, some people protested against both of these views. Those protestors, who would be known as both the Remonstrants (i.e., those who vigorously object or oppose a position) and the Arminians, took the lead of Jacob Arminius, who had been a student of Theodore Beza and later became a pastor of a Reformed church and a professor of theology at the University of Leiden.

Before examining Arminius’s theological positions in greater detail, it is helpful to understand why the existence of diverse doctrinal views in the United Netherlands was such a concern. The early Reformed church viewed itself as a confessional church, and it was precisely during Arminius’s lifetime that “the doctrinal statements of the Reformation were being codified and systematized. This systematization left increasingly less space for divergent doctrinal positions. Moreover, during this time in Holland both the Belgic Confession [1561] and the Heidelberg Confession [1563] had been adopted as the doctrinal guidelines for the churches in Holland, which left less room for doctrinal diversity.”107 It should be noted that while the writings of Luther were initially well received in the Netherlands, by the end of the sixteenth century Calvinism was quickly replacing Lutheran views. In particular, the Calvinists worked for “the maintenance of particular confessional standards. Following in the tradition of Erasmus of Rotterdam, however, Arminius championed the idea of the liberty of individual conscience relative to

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107 Fesko, *Diversity Within the Reformed Tradition*, 165.
doctrinal standards.”108 This entire matter of the doctrinal and confessional authority of the Reformed church substantially animated the ensuing struggle between the Remonstrants and the Calvinists to the degree that the “more liberal Arminians [the Remonstrants] were regarded as of dubious loyalty to both Church and State.”109 In part, this skepticism was due to political reasons, as the Dutch Calvinist Reformers were nationalists attempting to use doctrinal hegemony to further unify the United Netherlands.

_Jacob Arminius._ During the 1590s, Arminius’s sermons and teachings raised the ire of the strict Calvinists in the Leiden area when he began expressing rather unorthodox opinions regarding the _extent_ of God’s grace. Contrary to the generally accepted orthodoxy of the day, Arminius placed much greater emphasis upon the role and place of human freedom in the acquisition of faith than did Calvinists. He began to teach a doctrine of salvation predicated upon cooperation between the human will and God, rather than one exclusively due to the sovereignty of God. Furthermore, Arminius did not agree with the typical Reformed interpretation of Romans Chapter 9, which suggests that God elected and reprobated individual people. Arminius taught that the passage suggests that types of people, instead of specific individuals, would or would not achieve salvation. Ultimately, he believed that the atonement of Christ was _universal_ and occurred prior to election and reprobation. Arminius maintained that God _desires_ to save all people and does in fact offer salvation to all people. However, human free will often


gets in the way of God’s desire and thus God does not always achieve God’s purpose. Because of human free will, some people are saved while others are not. Of course, this stance directly contradicts the Augustinian/Calvinist position that God does not actually intend to save all people.

In summary, Arminius reversed the traditional ordering of the decrees of election and atonement, saying that Christ’s atonement, preceding election, was sufficient for the salvation of all people and that the subsequent decree of election was intended for those people who repented and believed. Thus, the Remonstrant position has become known as Arminianism. To elaborate further, the Arminian position can be understood as follows: Election is the conditional choice of God based upon foreknowledge of who will believe. Thus, election is the result of humanity’s faith rather than its cause. While acknowledging the depravity of the human condition, this position assumes a view that is contrary to traditional Calvinist thought in its emphasis on the free will and responsibility of humanity to choose between good and evil. This view deemphasizes the sovereignty of God by making God’s choice of the elect contingent upon their faith alone. Additionally, this position allows humanity the ability to resist God’s grace. In light of these theological positions, Franciscus Gomarus accused Arminius of “deviation from the confessional standards of the Reformed church—the Belgic Confession (1561) and the Heidelberg Catechism (1563).”

As a memorial to Arminius’s work, one year after his death, court preacher Janus Utyenbogaert directed forty-six Arminian ministers to sign the Remonstrantia:

“remonstrating five offensive doctrinal points of the Calvinistic opposition and framing

This memorial or statement of opposition was sent to John van Olden Barneveldt, the advocate-general of Holland and Friesland, in the hopes that the group’s divergent opinions would be tolerated if not accepted by the leaders of the Dutch Reformed Church in Holland. However, those hopes were quickly dashed.

Before examining the reaction of the more orthodox members of the Dutch Reformed Church, it would be useful to consider the five positive doctrinal statements put forth by the Remonstrants. In 1610, the Arminians presented to the Church of Holland for acceptance these articles:

Article 1. Conditional Election: This article affirms election but considers this election to be conditional upon the faith of the believer. The election of certain believers to salvation before creation was based on God’s foreknowledge of who would freely choose to have faith. In other words, faith is not something given by God but rather results from humanity’s free will working in cooperation with the Spirit. “That God, by an eternal, unchangeable purpose in Jesus Christ his Son, before the foundation of the world, hath determined, out of the fallen, sinful race of men, to save in Christ, those who, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, shall believe on this his Son Jesus, and shall persevere in this faith, through this grace, even to the end.” In other words, the decree of salvation is meant for all who believe, have faith in Christ, and persevere in faith.

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fifty positive doctrinal points of their own.”111 This memorial or statement of opposition was more than likely inspired by the five points which Hincmar, the leader of the Synod of Chiercy (853), framed in a letter to Amolo, wherein was condemned Gottschalk’s doctrine of double predestination, eternal security, total depravity, and his limited view of God’s saving will and Christ’s atoning work” (2).
Article 2. Universal Redemption or General Atonement: This article affirms that Christ’s death made it possible for all people to be saved, not just particular people. However, not all people are actually saved. The acceptance of Christ’s redemption is what makes it efficacious. In other words, Christ’s death enabled God to enter into a new covenant with anyone who would believe. “That, agreeably, thereto, Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world, died for all men and for every man, so that he has obtained for them all, by his death on the cross, redemption and the forgiveness of sins; yet that no one actually enjoys this forgiveness of sins except the believer.”\(^\text{113}\) This statement implies a universal redemption or a general atonement.

Article 3. Total Depravity / Prevenient Grace: This article affirms that humanity has been affected by the fall from God’s grace but that it has not become entirely enslaved to a corrupt nature. The article intimates that God graciously allows and enables each person to employ his or her own free will, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, to choose good over evil in spiritual matters. Thus faith is humanity’s contribution or act toward salvation. It is “needful that he be born again of God in Christ, through his Holy Spirit, and renewed in understanding, inclination, or will, and all his powers, in order that he may rightly understand, think, will, and effect what is truly good.”\(^\text{114}\)

Article 4. Resistible Grace: This article makes it clear that God’s grace is not irresistible. Free will allows humanity to choose to accept or reject the call of the gospel. The article takes the position that God does everything possible to bring a person to salvation but


\(^{113}\) Ibid., 546.

\(^{114}\) Ibid., 547.
that the Holy Spirit cannot renew or regenerate a person’s corrupted nature until that person chooses to believe. A person’s faith therefore makes the application of Christ’s saving work possible (i.e., the efficacy of Christ’s atonement is contingent upon human choice). Of course, this view also implies that a person can choose not to respond to God’s offer of grace, thereby inhibiting salvation. “But as respects the mode of the operation of this grace, it is not irresistible, inasmuch as it is written concerning many, that they have resisted the Holy Ghost.”

Article 5. Conditional Perseverance: This article leaves open the possibility that although a person may believe and have faith, thus achieving salvation, it is still possible for the believer to fail in maintaining faith and ultimately lose his or her salvation. Like election, perseverance in faith is conditional upon the efforts of believers. Whether “they are capable, through negligence, of forsaking again the first beginnings of their life in Christ, of again returning to this present evil world, or turning away from the holy doctrine which was delivered them, of losing good conscience, of becoming devoid of grace, that must be more particularly determined out of the Holy Scripture, before we can teach it with the full permission of our minds.”

The Reaction. In March of 1611, “a group of Calvinistic ministers, led by Festus Hommiesz, followed suit by preparing their own memorial, the so-called Contra-Remonstrance, and submitted it to the States of Holland.”

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115 Ibid.

116 Ibid., 548-49.

refuted each of the five positions outlined by the Remonstrants, but of most interest to this study was their statement regarding the extent of the atonement. They held that God delivered Christ to the cross “in order to save his elect, so that although the suffering of Christ . . . is sufficient unto the atonement of the sins of all men, nevertheless the same, according to the counsel and decree of God, has its efficacy unto reconciliation and forgiveness of sins only in the elect and true believer.”

In other words, the suffering and death of Christ is sufficient for the atonement of all but is only efficacious unto God’s elect. This outlook echoed dramatically Peter Lombard’s seminal distinction.

Initially, the States of Holland declared that the Remonstrants “should not be subject to censure because of their opinions.” Tensions between the Contra-Remonstrants and the Remonstrants continued, however, and Prince Maurice, the military leader of the young republic who sought to gain absolute monarchial control over the Netherlands, fueled the tension between the two camps to further his cause. He became a strong ally of the Contra-Remonstrants and ordered the imprisonment and beheading of Barneveldt, the principal lay leader of the Remonstrants, who favored a republican confederacy. According to Stephen Strehle, “Maurice’s rationalization was that the Remonstrants presented a threat of civil war and a synod was needed to preserve unity.” These actions prepared “the way for the formulation of the States-General, who should answer to his bidding, and by which this famous synod was convoked and all its

118 Peter Y. De Jong, Crisis in the Reformed Church (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, 1968), 211-12, quoted in Strehle, “The Extent of the Atonement and the Synod of Dort,” 3.


120 Ibid., 4.
proceedings ratified.” In other words, the Synod of Dort was convened in an effort to prevent civil war by ending the discord in the Reformed Church caused by the conflict among the Contra-Remonstrants, the Remonstrants, and other outlier groups.

The particular teaching that most disturbed the conveners of the synod was the notion that humanity was *not* completely spiritually helpless. The Remonstrant position implied that each person possesses free will that he or she can then use to positively or negatively affect his or her eternal destiny by choosing either good or evil in spiritual matters. According to the Remonstrants, humanity is *not* enslaved by a sinful nature, and people can affect their own salvation. Contra-Remonstrants believed that this teaching failed to recognize the full sovereignty of God, especially when it came to the matter of salvation from sin. For many, it also echoed of Pelagianism, which had previously threatened the church’s unity. They feared, pragmatically, that if Remonstrant teachings were widely adopted, the young Dutch church would fracture and become isolated from the rest of the Reformed Church.

In reaction to the Arminian articles of 1610, and in an effort to retain the unity of the young Dutch Reformed Church, eighty-six delegates from Reformed churches from across Europe met from November 13, 1618, until May 29, 1619, to respond formally to the Arminian Remonstrance. That the Synod of Dort eventually condemned Arminianism was no surprise. In fact, the “outcome of the Synod was never really in doubt; it affirmed the Calvinist character and doctrine of the Dutch Reformed Church and rejected Arminian beliefs on predestination and salvation as heretical.” The Synod of Dort “was not a

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121 Ibid.
doctrinal conference in which equals could air their theological views, but rather an ecclesiastical decision-making assembly, and the judicial and doctrinal machinery of the synod were controlled by the Calvinists.”

Limited Atonement According to the Canons of Dort

The Canons of Dort offered an ecclesiastical declaration on the workings of salvation, specifically the limited extent or scope of God’s ontologically transformative response to the human condition. In time, this declaration assumed the form of orthodox doctrine. The “main focus of the Canons of Dort is the affirmation that salvation is wholly by divine grace rather than by human merit.” The relationship between God and humanity can be restored, but it is God who makes it happen. Humanity is certainly responsible but is meant to receive salvation, not affect it. The Canons make it clear that the process of reconciliation is solely the purview and work of God and that it is accomplished through the mediator Jesus the Christ.

The Canons of Dort systematically articulated the five basic principles of Calvinist orthodoxy, and these principles “were reaffirmed by the Synod of Dort in 1619 as the doctrine of salvation contained in the Holy Scriptures.” These five points, formulated as responses to the five controversial heads of doctrine submitted by the Arminians, address the matters of Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited

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122 Kooi, Liberty and Religion, 155.

123 Williams, “The Five Points of Arminianism,” 35.


125 House, Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine, 100.
Atonement, Irresistible Grace, and Perseverance of the Saints. Each position will be explored in greater detail, but it is helpful to begin with basic definitions:

1. *Total Depravity* means that humans are entirely corrupted by sin and are thought to exist in a state of complete defilement or depravity, such that salvation from this state is possible only through a gift of God’s grace.

2. *Unconditional Election* is the idea that the determination of who will be saved rests entirely with the sovereign will of God, such that election is not determined or conditioned by any quality or act on the part of humanity.

3. *Limited Atonement* states that Christ’s atoning work, while sufficient to cause the salvation of all humans, was predeterminatively meant for only a limited number of people and that only the elect actually secure eternal salvation.

4. *Irresistible Grace* is the internal call of the Holy Spirit to God’s chosen people that cannot be rejected; therefore, the elect are irresistibly drawn to Christ.

5. *Perseverance of the Saints* means that individuals chosen by God for salvation are granted the power to maintain their faith until final ontological transformation occurs.

As indicated throughout this chapter, I am most interested in the third matter of Limited Atonement. To provide necessary context, I have described each of the six significant matters upon which the canons commented, since these will be used during the comparative analysis in Chapter Five. While the Canons are structured in a systematic manner, the central ideas discussed in the comparative analysis are somewhat scattered throughout the text of the Canons. Thus the descriptions of the six principal points of comparison highlight key passages found throughout the Canons. The aforementioned
theological and political influences are often overtly present in the language of the Canons, but they are just as frequently implicit in the thoughts behind the text. It is safe to say that the Canons, in their final form, would not have been possible without all of the previously mentioned historical developments.

*The Human Condition (Total Depravity)*

The Canons clearly state the Dutch Reformed Church’s ultimate view of the nature of the human condition. This view can especially be found in the Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine. Before outlining what these heads of doctrine posit regarding the nature of the human condition, an important first step is to explain why the Third and Fourth heads of doctrine were combined within the Canons. “It will be recalled that the Synod was called together to answer the Remonstrants, particularly to draw up a reply to the so-called Five Arminian Articles of 1610 . . . When the Synod studied the Third Arminian Article, however, it could not find anything wrong with it as such. The Synod therefore decided not to write a separate chapter against the Third Article, but to look at the Third Article in the light of what the Remonstrants said in their Fourth Article.”126 Specifically, the Synod could find no fault with the position in Article Three of the Remonstrance that humanity does not have within itself either the necessary saving grace or the necessary energy to think or to act in ways that are truly good. Thus, the Canons maintained the five-point structure of the Remonstrant position, and today people still speak of the five articles of Dort.

Article One of the Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine begins by stating that humanity was created in the image of God and that all of humanity’s dispositions, attributes, propensities, and aspects upon creation (i.e., every aspect of its being) were entirely holy and filled with purity.

In the beginning man was created in the image of God, adorned in his mind with true and wholesome knowledge of his Creator and of spiritual things, in his will and heart with righteousness, and in his affections with purity, so that he was completely holy.\(^{127}\)

This statement reflects an Augustinian understanding of the original righteousness of God’s creation of humanity. As discussed earlier, Augustine maintained that righteousness was a part of the original nature of humanity and that holiness, purity, and righteousness were intrinsic qualities of the original human condition. Thus humanity’s disposition was first oriented toward the fulfillment of a good and pure life. However, in Article One, the Canons describe how humanity’s relationship with God becomes broken, so that all of humanity’s dispositions, attributes, propensities, and aspects (i.e., affections) become filled with impurity.

But, revolting from God through the instigation of the devil and through his own free will, he deprived himself of these excellent gifts, and instead brought upon himself blindness, horrible darkness, vanity, and perverseness of judgment in his mind; malice, rebelliousness, and stubbornness in his will and heart; and impurity in all his affections.\(^{128}\)

\(^{127}\) Hoekema, “A New English Translation of the Canons of Dort,” 147. An older translation reads: “Man was originally formed after the image of God. His understanding was adorned with a true and saving knowledge of his Creator, and of spiritual things; his heart and will were upright, all his affections pure, and the whole Man was holy” (The Canons of the Synod of Dort, in The Creeds of Christendom, vol. 3, ed. Philip Schaff, 4th ed. [New York: Harper and Brothers, 1919], 587).

This sense of the human condition as being impure continues throughout Article Two of the Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine, where humanity is described as being corrupt and as having a depraved nature. “Since he was corrupt, he brought forth corrupt children. This corruption, therefore, has been derived from Adam by all his descendants.”\(^{129}\) The description of corruption being passed along to all descendants of Adam is closely aligned to the aforementioned trajectory of Augustinian thought regarding human nature and sin.

Finally, Article Three expresses that all people are “conceived in sin,” “born as children of wrath,” “inclined to evil,” and possessing a “depraved nature.”\(^{130}\) Article Sixteen confirms this view by stating that sin, “which has pervaded the whole human race, did not deprive man of his human nature, but corrupted it and brought into it spiritual death.”\(^{131}\) Humanity is totally and entirely depraved because sin has filled every corner of its being. In other words, “the effect of the fall upon man \(\text{sic}\) is that sin has extended to every part of his personality—his thinking, his emotions, and his will.”\(^{132}\)

*Depravity is Due to an “Original” Conditioning Action (Original Sin)*

The Canons make a point of relating how this human state of defilement and depravity is due to an “original” conditioning action. In other words, the entire human predicament is conditioned or shaped by the event of Adam’s sin and fall from God’s

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\(^{129}\) Ibid., 148.

\(^{130}\) Ibid.

\(^{131}\) Ibid., 154.

grace, or the “original sin.” Article One of the Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine within the Canons describes how Adam’s revolt against God (through the instigation of the devil) of his own free will deprives him of God’s pure and holy affections. Adam’s rejection of God caused his human nature to be corrupted, thereby bringing forth Adam’s spiritual death. Article Two of the Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine relates how Adam came to pass his depraved nature along to his descendents.

Such was man after the fall, such children he also brought forth. Since he was corrupt, he brought forth corrupt children. This corruption, therefore has been derived from Adam by all his descendents, Christ alone excepted, not by imitation, as the Pelagians formerly maintained, but by the propagation of a depraved nature, according to God’s righteous judgment.\textsuperscript{133}

This statement reaffirms clearly the Calvinist position on original sin. Calvin maintained that every human is related to the fallen Adam and that a biological solidarity exists between Adam and all of his descendents. Calvin built upon Augustine’s teachings that one receives one’s physical nature and soul from one’s parents in a germinal sense, so it stands to reason that Adam’s corrupt and depraved nature could not help but be passed along from generation to generation. The Canons’ First Head of Doctrine opens with language reflecting this belief: “Since all men have sinned in Adam and deserve the curse and eternal death . . . ”\textsuperscript{134} In other words, hereditary depravity is imputed to \textit{all of} humanity.

\begin{center}
\textbf{The Futility of Human Effort to Change the Human Condition}
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\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., 134.
The Second Article of the Second Head of Doctrine provides the first indication in the Canons of the futility of any human effort to affect the redemption of humanity and its subsequent salvation. While the First Article underscores the notion that because God is just, sin requires either punishment or satisfaction, Article Two states that since “we ourselves cannot make this satisfaction and cannot deliver ourselves from the wrath of God,” then God must make the necessary satisfaction on our behalf. God sacrificing Jesus to crucifixion accomplishes this satisfaction.

Article Three of the Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine also addresses humanity’s complete inability to change or transform its defiled condition back into one of righteousness before God. Humanity is unwilling and unable to transform its corrupt nature as a result of sin, and that it is held completely in the bondage of evil. Rather than having the free will to choose good over evil, the sinner has a total inability to affect his or her own salvation. Thus, humans are left in a state of total corruption, depravity, and helplessness.

All men therefore are conceived in sin and born as children of wrath, incapable of any saving good, inclined to evil, dead in sins, and slaves of sins. Apart from the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit; moreover, they are neither willing nor able to return to God, to reform their depraved nature, or to prepare themselves for its reformation.\textsuperscript{136}

Article Five of the Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine elaborates on this complete inability of humanity to affect its own ontological transformation by exploring the Synod’s sense of the failings of the Law of Moses.

\textsuperscript{135} Ibid., 143.

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., 148. Italics mine.
What has been said about the light of nature must also be said about the
decalogue, given by God through Moses particularly to the Jews. For
though it reveals the greatness of sin, and more and more convinces man
of his guilt, yet it neither points out a remedy nor gives him power to free
himself from this misery. Rather, having weakened through the flesh, it
leaves the transgressor under the curse. *Man cannot, therefore, through
the law obtain saving grace.*

Humanity’s weakness is not simply confined to the moments before saving grace is
obtained. The authors of the Canons did not assume that salvation is a one-time
occurrence; they took a theological stance that salvation is a process rather than an event.
They believed that when grace is granted, sinners are initially freed from sin but that
perseverance is required for the sinner to reach the ultimate goal of perfection in
salvation. Once again, humanity is described as too weak to accomplish this on its own,
requiring God’s continual graceful presence in the human life.

Furthering this notion about the helplessness of man, Article Three of the Fifth
Head of Doctrine states, “Because of these remains of indwelling sin and also because of
the temptations of the world and of Satan, those who have been converted would not be
able to remain stedfast [*sic*] in that race if they were left to their own resources.” Self-
directed human efforts to obtain salvation and self-directed attempts to remain in God’s
grace are doomed to fail.

_Transformative Response Originating “Outside” (Predetermined Election and Grace)_

Consistent with prior Calvinist positions regarding God’s grace, the Canons
articulate that despite the depravity of the human condition, and humanity’s inability to

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137 Ibid., 149. Italics mine.
change this predicament from sinfulness to righteousness, God can and does affect the necessary transformation or regeneration in order to rescue humanity from darkness (i.e., salvation). No human action or effort of any sort is involved. The saving grace of God is obtained by the efforts of God alone. Transformative response comes from “outside” or beyond human efforts.

This thinking is first expressed in the Second Article of the First Head of Doctrine when the Canons allude to passages from the Christian New Testament relating to God’s gift of Jesus. “But in this the love of God was revealed, that He sent His only Son into the world, so that everyone who believes in Him should not be lost but have eternal life (I John 4:9, John 3:16).”\(^{138}\) Note that it is God’s action that results in the attainment of eternal life (i.e., ontological transformation). The manner of God’s actions from beyond human efforts is described in more detail in Article Seven of the First Head of Doctrine.

From eternity He has also appointed Christ to be the Mediator and Head of all the elect and the foundation of their salvation. Therefore He decreed to give to Christ those who were to be saved, and effectually to call and draw them into His fellowship through His Word and Spirit. That is, He decreed to give them true faith in him, to justify them, to sanctify them, and, after having powerfully kept them in the fellowship of His Son, finally to glorify them, for the demonstration of his mercy and the praise of the riches of His glorious grace.\(^{139}\)

The transformative response to the human condition is further described in Article Eleven of the Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine, which relates how God “penetrates into the innermost recesses of man, opens the closed and softens the hard heart, circumcises that which was uncircumcised, and pours new qualities into the will. He

\(^{138}\) Ibid., 135.

\(^{139}\) Ibid., 137.
makes the will which was dead alive, which was bad good, which was unwilling willing, which was stubborn obedient, and moves and strengthens it so that, like a good tree, it may be able to produce the fruits of good works.” Article Twelve describes this regenerative act as being “clearly a supernatural, most powerful and at the same time most delightful, marvelous, secret, and inexpressible work,” which is not unlike the power expressed in the creation itself. In other words, the transformative and regenerative act is entirely divine in nature. Almost by way of summary, Article Sixteen describes this transformative response to the human condition as “the divine grace of regeneration.” Divine grace is bestowed, faith is implanted or infused into the human heart, and the individual who is called by God is said to repent and believe. One’s previously corrupted and spiritually dead human condition and will is now healed, corrected, and brought back to spiritual life. Reparation has occurred. Finally, Articles Fourteen and Fifteen go on to describe this transformative act by God as being a completely free yet undeserved gift due to the sinful state of humanity.

The Transactional Quality of the Process of Ontological Transformation

The common understanding of the atonement, seen through the lens of Anselm’s Satisfaction Theory, can be easily gleaned from Articles One and Two of the Second Head of Doctrine. Article One states that, because God is supremely just, satisfaction is required for the sins of humanity. Article Two goes on to describe how “we ourselves

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141 Ibid., 152.
142 Ibid., 154.
cannot make this satisfaction and cannot deliver ourselves from the wrath of God . . . [so instead God] has given His only Son as our Surety, who so that He might make satisfaction for us.”\textsuperscript{143}

Within Article Eight of the Second Head of Doctrine lies a sense of a transference to the elect of that which is acquired from Christ—faith. “God further willed that Christ should give to those so chosen faith (which, together with other saving gifts of the Holy Spirit, He acquired for them by His death).”\textsuperscript{144} The Canons take the position that Christ actually acquired faith and other saving gifts of the Holy Spirit. In turn, God wills Christ to give these acquired things to the chosen few (i.e., the elect). This understanding of the transactional quality of ontological transformation, though easily overlooked when examining how atonement was thought to occur, is important in Chapter Five’s comparative analysis.

\textit{The Scope of Response to the Human Condition (Limited atonement)}

Given that the limited scope of the mediated saving work of Christ is a focal point of the Canons, they contain plenty of statements regarding the limitedness of the objects of atonement (i.e., the elect). For the purposes of this study, I describe only a few.

The First Head of Doctrine deals with predestination and the scope of redemption. Article Seven states that God has, “according to the most free good pleasure of His will, out of mere grace, chosen in Christ to salvation a certain number of specific men.”\textsuperscript{145}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 143.}  
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 145.}  
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., 136-37.}
his “New English Translation of the Canons of Dort,” Anthony Hoekema makes a point of noting that this is “a literal rendering of *certam quorundam hominum multitudinem* [and] apparently the Synod wished to take pains to indicate that God did not simply determine to save a certain number of men, but that He chose specific individuals.”¹⁴⁶ On the whole, Article Seven (“Election Defined”) of the First Head of Doctrine is the most complete articulation of the limited scope of atonement that can be found in the Canons. In its entirety, it states:

> Election is the unchangeable purpose of God whereby, before the foundation of the world, out of the whole human race, which had fallen by its own fault out of its original integrity into sin and ruin, He has, according to the most free good pleasure of His will, out of mere grace, *chosen in Christ to salvation a certain number of specific men*, neither better nor more worthy than others, but with them involved in a common misery.¹⁴⁷

This thinking is elaborated upon in Article Eight (“The Efficacy of the Death of Christ”) of the Second Head of Doctrine:

> God willed that Christ through the blood of the cross (by which He confirmed the new covenant) should effectually redeem out of every people, tribe, nation, and tongue all those and *only those who were from eternity chosen to salvation* . . . ¹⁴⁸

This language of Christ’s blood is consistent with Augustine’s transactional ransom of Christ’s blood being paid to Satan.

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¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 137f.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 136-37. Italics are mine.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 145. Italics are mine.
The Second Head of Doctrine also deals with the efficacy and scope of the death
definition. In particular, Article Eight teaches that the “saving efficacy of the death of
Christ extends only to the elect.”

For this was the most free counsel and most gracious will and intent of
God the Father, that the life-giving and saving efficacy of the most
precious death of His Son should extend to all the elect, to give to them
alone justifying faith and through this faith to bring them unfailingly to
salvation. That is, God willed that Christ through the blood of the cross
(by which He confirmed the new covenant) should effectually redeem out
of every people, tribe, nation, and tongue all those and only those who
were from eternity chosen to salvation and were given to Him by the
Father.

Finally, in Article Fifteen of the First Head of Doctrine we find language entirely
consistent with Augustine’s infralapsarianism, as it describes the ultimate “destiny” of
humanity.

This eternal and undeserved grace of our election is especially illustrated
and indicated for us by Holy Scripture when it declares that not all men
are elect but that certain ones have not been elected, or have been passed
by in the eternal election of God. These God out of His most free, most
just, blameless, and unchangeable good pleasure has decreed to leave in
the common misery into which they have by their own fault plunged
themselves, and not to give them saving faith and the grace of
conversion . . . God has decreed finally to condemn and punish eternally,
not only on account of their unbelief but also on account of all their other
sins, as a declaration of His justice.

This understanding of the limited scope of response to the human condition, along with
the other theological positions described in this chapter, provide a necessary foundation
for Chapter Five’s comparative analysis, to which we now turn.

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151 Ibid., 140-41. Italics mine.
Chapter Five: Critical Cross-Cultural Comparison

When the lights are out, it’s less dangerous. Here we are now, entertain us. I feel stupid and contagious. Here we are now, entertain us. – Kurt Cobain of Nirvana (1991)

La nuit tous les chats sont gris. – French proverb

Smells Like Christianity

In his seminal 1990 clarion call for the development and application of a new comparative methodology, Jonathan Z. Smith reminded scholars of the vital “third term” of the comparative endeavor. Evoking J. G. Frazer’s and Otto Pfleiderer’s respective comparisons of Christ (as represented by Paul in Romans 6) and the “dying and rising gods” of the Mediterranean in The Golden Bough and Das Urchristenthum, seine Schriften und Lehren respectively, Smith concluded that “comparison is never dyadic,” in the sense of simply comparing phenomena $x$ with phenomena $y$ based upon the apprehension of surface resemblance. He recognized as well that the insistence upon dyadic comparison has been a central culprit in the failure of many past comparisons. Recall, Catholic missionaries Xavier, Cabral, and Valignano’s narrow observations of Japanese Shin Buddhism and their insistence upon positing the existence of similarities due to Lutheran influence.

1 “Smells Like Teen Spirit” (a song by Nirvana)


Building upon Frazer and Pfleiderer’s work, Smith concluded instead that comparison is always triadic, in the sense of comparing phenomenon \( x \) with phenomenon \( y \) “with respect to” \( z \). This third element, or third term — \( z \) — is arguably the most significant constituent of any comparative enterprise as it is the key to avoiding the pitfalls of Eliadian comparativism and a demonstration of the utility of comparison itself. “In the case of an academic comparison, the ‘with respect to’ is most frequently the scholar’s interest, be this expressed in a question, a theory, or a model.”\(^4\) In other words, critical cross-cultural comparison always involves not two, but three elements—phenomenon \( x \), phenomenon \( y \), and most importantly, the scholar’s academic concern.

Just as magic is no longer regarded as a dark art, for when it is performed in a dimly lit auditorium the audience is able to suspend belief safely and temporarily for the purpose of entertainment, in a similar sense cross-cultural comparison is a “magical” form of intellectual play between otherwise incongruent occurrences for the purpose of providing “an occasion for thought.”\(^5\) Certainly, it is true that rigorous comparison makes it possible to see cultural phenomena in a new light and that useful interreligious learning transpires, but Smith is correct in that similarity and difference are never given. Rather, they are invented or determined by the comparativist’s interpretive – or magical efforts. The comparativist is like a collagist, combining \textit{objets trouvés} for aesthetic interest.\(^6\) As Smith notes, a comparison is “the result of mental operations . . . It is the scholar who


makes [the comparands’] cohabitation — their ‘sameness’ — possible, not ‘natural’ affinities or processes of history.”

Why? The scholar finds the act of comparing the two phenomena to be compelling. Too many sloppy, universalizing comparativists have made the mistake of suggesting otherwise, by arguing for the existence of objective universal “sacred” realities that simply exist “out there,” transcending cultural specificity while “awaiting the organizing ministrations of the contemporary interpreter.”

The real determinants of the comparative endeavor are a scholar’s concepts, structures and purposes – in other words, what is most interesting about comparison is the result of the scholar’s analogical imagination.

Comparison does not necessarily tell us how things ‘are’… [rather] comparison tells us how things might be conceived… A comparison is a disciplined exaggeration in the service of knowledge. It lifts out and strongly marks certain features within difference as being of possible intellectual significance, expressed in the rhetoric of their being ‘like’ in some stipulated fashion. Comparison provides the means by which we ‘re- version’ phenomena as our data in order to solve our theoretical problems.

Whereas Smith regarded the magic of prior comparative enterprises in a negative light, I align my view of comparativism with the Smithian New Comparativists who are taking up his challenge by cultivating the re-envisioned potential for the discipline. Like them, I see “comparison as an indeterminate scholarly procedure that is best undertaken as an intellectually creative enterprise, not as a science but as an art – an imaginative and

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7 Smith, Drudgery Divine, 51.


9 Smith, Drudgery Divine, 52. Italics found in the original.
critical act of meditation and re-description in the service of knowledge.”¹⁰ The comparative analysis of religious developments is a particular sort of intellectual bricolage in which the scholar creatively uses cross-cultural constructions for the purposes of furthering a unique discourse. Just as the late French-philosopher Jacques Derrida argued that, “Every discourse is bricoleur,” Smithian New Comparativists are well positioned as the tinkerers with the methodological tools to craft a healthy and rigorous comparative discourse.¹¹

The first step the Smithian New Comparativist must take to avoid the Eliadian pitfalls of the past is to acknowledge, self-consciously, that the scholar always brings a particular agenda and point of view to the table of comparison. Historically the dominant paradigms employed in the comparative discourse have arisen from a Protestant Christian context. Significant examples include the privileging of terms such as “salvation,” “faith,” and “God” in the discourse of religious studies. As I discussed in Chapter One of this work, this privileging has been apparent especially in past comparisons of Reformed Christianity and Shin Buddhism, but it is also true of more general efforts in the Western academic study of religion. As Daniel Dubuisson notes, the search for a definition of the term “religion” itself has met with “powerful intellectual prejudices stemming from the Christian tradition” and the failure to counter this has “resulted from several factors, foremost among them… the absence of any systematic thought aimed at determining


satisfactory analytical criteria capable of winning unanimity among scholars.”¹² Given the postmodern penchant for scrutinous deconstruction, though, one is left to wonder how unanimity regarding analytical criteria will ever be reached.

Terms are simply linguistically embedded conventional designations for cultural phenomena and the classificatory category “religion” is as large and problematic a construct as one might find in comparative discourse. Evidence of this is the fact that many cultures and languages did not even have a word like “religion” in their lexicons until the late nineteenth century. By way of example, there is no equivalent for the term “religion” in the earliest languages of the Dharmic traditions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism). Dharmic religious traditions are Indian traditions predicated on ways of cultivating dharma, which can be understood generally as an underlying ordering principle that upholds both social and personal life. The Dharmic traditions tend to share notions of karma, samsāra, and liberation, as well the core value of nonviolence (ahimsā), but should they be referred to as “religions?” Within their respective contexts, instead of being considered a member of a given “religion,” one might speak of following the sanatanadharma (“the timeless Truth”) or the buddhadharma (“the teachings of the Buddha”). “But instead of this, what have we seen and do we still observe today? In a general way, that people have casually chosen the Western Christian model as a reference, reduced to what is considered its central framework in order to make of it a kind of ideal, intangible form.”¹³ In other words, Christian categories and terms have

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¹³ Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion*, 64.
become the implicit standard in the Western study of religion, and the comparative enterprise in particular.

The danger in this imposition of Christian terms for non-Christian ones lies in the inevitable shifts in meaning that occur. As Buddhist philosopher Jay L. Garfield notes:

When we translate we transform in all of the following ways: we replace terms and phrases with particular sets of resonances in their source language with terms and phrases with very different resonances in their target language; we disambiguate ambiguous terms and introduce new ambiguities; we interpret, or fix particular interpretations of texts in virtue of the use of theoretically loaded expressions in our target language; we take a text that is to some extent esoteric and render it exoteric simply by freeing the target language reader to approach the text without a teacher; we shift the context in which a text is read and used. No text survives this transformation unscathed.\(^{14}\)

I further argue that this impulse to define the terms of comparison based on Christian concepts is resultant from the fact that a majority of cross-cultural comparisons have originated in the West. As Dubuisson notes, “No important concept was borrowed by the history of religions from any foreign cultural sphere at all! – as if it were self-evident that the Western, Christian, Platonic terminology (‘god,’ ‘soul,’ ‘faith,’ ‘belief,’ ‘rite,’ ‘church,’ ‘priest,’ ‘providence,’ etc.), specific as it is, held the power to describe everything and understand everything, starting with mankind.”\(^{15}\) This hubristic thinking is precisely the sort that has undergirded essentializing Eliadian comparisons of the past. Consequently, it is incumbent upon Smithian New Comparativists to reframe the discourse as much as possible, by identifying and employing comparative categories that

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“characterize certain ranges of cultural data, and still not fall into [a] characterization of ‘essentialism.’”

A means for accomplishing this is to admit that terms such as “religion” are merely theoretical interlocutors that temporarily stand in as a bridge to overcome cultural disjunction for the purpose of addressing scholars’ questions and concerns. Of course, any terms that arise from within the Western academic study of non-Western cultures are loaded with Western, Christian, and Platonic baggage, but it should be remembered that “all human knowledge comes in the form of cultural posits.” However, because “the subject matter of religion is as intricate and vari-colored as a Persian tapestry, the need to develop a foundation for coherent generalizations [remains] pressing.” In response, this taxonomic “universal” that we call religion should be understood as a construct that temporarily allows us to engage in discussion around some human activities. If not for the invention of a category like religion, while fully acknowledging the debate that surrounds its definition, it would be impossible for people to discuss what they believe, or think, or do with one another, with respect to certain human behaviors. This holds true for any category at which we might choose to look. Someone might say “I went to work yesterday and did x.” It could easily be asked, “What really constitutes work?” That which is “work” for you may be “play” for me. What is work anyway? Should the term be understood in the ontological or metaphorical sense? Over time, if a construct called

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“work” is not temporarily accepted at some level, human dialogue and interrelationality become impossible. Of course, at the level of the historical or cultural particular there may be significant differences in terms of meaning and content, but the category or universal “work” at least allows a starting point for responsible yet creative consideration of any similarities and differences. In other words, a temporary theoretical interlocutor allows discourse to begin. So too does this logic apply for cross-cultural comparison.

Cross-cultural comparison helps us to conceive of all that transpires in human activity in something more than a case-by-case manner. When surface similarities are perceived there must be a means for responsibly and critically evaluating interrelationality. Critical cross-cultural comparison enables us to make some sense of why, for example, “do Quaker meetinghouses, Hopi kivas, and Gothic cathedrals use space differently” or, more to the point of this project, why did some late thirteenth-century Japanese Buddhists and some early seventeenth-century Dutch Christians, who shared analogous conceptions of the human condition as well as a sense of the futility of human effort to change this condition, respond to a common ontological presupposition in such doctrinally divergent ways. Differences can “reveal not just an absence of approximation to the template, but rather a revelation of the factors which make versions of the theme (or prototype) different from each other.” This contributes to an even greater appreciation of historically situated, contextualized, culturally specific expressions of religious phenomena. As Barbara Holdrege notes, “One of the important


tasks of comparative study… is thus to challenge scholars of religion to become more critically self-conscious of the Protestant legacy that lingers in our categories and taxonomies and to reconfigure our scholarly discourse to include alternative paradigms.”

Thus, in this comparative project, I have consciously chosen to avoid the overtly Christian terms that have so regularly defined past comparisons—scripture, divinity, savior, salvation, deity, etc.—in lieu of what the late neopragmatic philosopher Richard Rorty called “alternative vocabularies.” Rorty’s premise was that “vocabularies are tools . . . for helping people to ‘cope’ with reality, and should not be seen as more or less transparent mediums for ‘representing’ reality.” Consequently, recognizing that the privileging of certain categories and terms runs the risk of reifying the hegemony of Protestant paradigms, suppressing cultural significance, and disfiguring unique religious phenomena, I have chosen two temporary interlocutors or “bridge concepts” in order to frame and initiate a Smithian occasion of comparative thought. These bridge concepts, designed to serve as provisional, linguistic rope-bridges, are meant to enable a thoughtful, yet respectful critical crossing of an otherwise incommensurate cultural chasm.

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23 Aaron Stalnaker, Overcoming Our Evil, 8.

Bridge Concepts – Human Condition and Ontological Transformation

As Aaron Stalnaker correctly observes in *Overcoming Our Evil: Human Nature and Spiritual Exercises in Xunzi and Augustine* (2006), any comparative enterprise faces two fundamental challenges. It must bring distant cultural phenomena “into interrelation and conversation, and it must simultaneously preserve their distinctiveness within the interrelation.” In the present study, careful analysis of the dharmalogical and theological influences on the doctrines of *akunin shōki* and limited atonement, and the historical-contextual rationale for their development, meets the second goal of preserving distinctiveness. The first goal of bringing these traditions and particular teachings into analogical relations is accomplished through the use of “bridge concepts.”

The use of bridge concepts should be regarded as an efficacious response to the relative absence of any systematic thought when it comes to Eliadian comparisons. “Bridge concepts are general ideas, such as ‘virtue’ and ‘human nature,’ which can be given enough content to be meaningful and guide comparative inquiry yet are still open to greater specification in particular cases… they are chosen specifically to facilitate a particular comparison of a delimited number of objects, and so are chosen with those objects in mind. The process of selection and refinement is thus in an important sense inductive, and any broader applicability any given set might possess is essentially hypothetical and subject to further testing and revision in wider inquiries.” Note that Stalnaker’s understanding of bridge concepts is consistent with Smith’s “third term,” as

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25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.
well as Fitz John Porter Poole’s insistence upon examining only “aspectual characteristics of a given tradition . . . rather than entire religions.”

The two key bridge concepts I am employing in the present comparative analysis are “human condition” and “ontological transformation.” These bridge concepts are formulated in such a way that they are intended to be “projected” into the religious traditions and texts being compared (Shin Buddhism and the Reformed Christian tradition, and the Tannishō and the Doctrine of Limited Atonement) “as a way to thematize their disparate elements and order their details around these anchoring terms.” As I indicated at the onset of this project, the terms “human condition” and “ontological transformation” are admittedly problematic terms. Robert Cummings Neville notes in *The Human Condition: A Volume in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project* (2000), that the very notion of “human condition” is a twentieth-century idea, which has “European origin and global dissemination through the effects of modernity.” As such, neither the author of the Tannishō nor the framers of the Canons of Dort would recognize this terminology. However, I have selected this idiom as a bridge concept for the express purpose of facilitating a particular comparison of the efforts of two traditions to understand humanity’s place in existence.

While the historical pan-Buddhist tradition does not invoke the phrase “human condition” specifically, the first teaching of the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, is a comment upon existence itself. This first “Noble Truth” in Buddhist thought posits

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28 Aaron Stalnaker, *Overcoming Our Evil*, 17.

that all existence, and in particular human existence, is best characterized as a condition of dis-ease, discontent, or suffering. As contemporary Buddhist scholar Rupert Gethin explains, “Buddhist thought starts from the premise that life presents us with the problem of suffering. The schema of the four truths analyses the nature of the problem, its cause, its solution and the way to effect that solution.” Donald W. Mitchell explains similarly that the Buddha was “concerned with helping humanity understand the nature and causes of its dissatisfactory condition and the path that leads to liberation from this condition.” Gethin and Mitchell’s comments are applicable to the understanding of human existence found throughout Buddhist thought, and Shin Buddhist thought in particular.

Early seventeenth-century Dutch Christians would also not have invoked the phrase “human condition” when reflecting upon the circumstances of existence in which they found themselves. However, the delegates at the Synod of Dort were the inheritors of centuries of Christian reflection upon precisely this matter. As professor of New Testament and Early Christian Studies, Paula Fredriksen, explains, “humanity finds itself, in [the apostle] Paul’s view, in a terrible, all-but-overwhelming plight so severe that nothing less than direct divine intervention—God sending his Son—could turn things around.” This outlook can be found in Paul’s letter to the churches in Corinth and Galatia (e.g. 1 Cor. 2:8; 2 Cor. 4:4; Gal 4:8). Christian theologians during the Patristic

period, such as Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and Irenaeus also emphasized aspects of Paul’s letters as they reflected upon the redemption necessary to transform the ignorance, evil, and suffering that marked the human plight. Origen of Alexandria provided a diagnosis and description of the human predicament in his *Peri Archôn* ("On First Principles") when he considered the way a fleshly human life is a burden and a punishment, and that this world is not the true home of the soul.33 Of course, as discussed previously it would not be possible to conceive of the authors’ of the Canons conception of the human predicament without mentioning Augustine of Hippo. Building upon Paul’s imagery found in Romans 9:19-23, Augustine described humanity as a massa damnata ("a lump of perdition") that is “oriented toward ignorance and death.”34

Implicit within these Buddhist and Christian statements regarding the plight of humanity is also a concern for a “solution” to what we might call the “problem of human existence.” The Primal Vow of Amida Buddha and the salvific act of Christ are each intended as means for changing, rectifying, mitigating or solving the dissatisfactory, disordered, depraved state of the human condition. In other words, at the heart of these two traditions is a belief that through contextually specific acts the essence or nature of being (ontology) can be transformed. Once again, while the term “ontological transformation” is entirely a Western academic construct and a “speculative intellectual aspect” that I am privileging; it, like the phrase “human condition,” can easily stand-in as a provisional, linguistic rope-bridge in the service of a comparative analysis.35


34 Ibid., 144.

of scholars who have also previously employed the bridge concept “ontological transformation” include comparative theologian John B. Cobb Jr., Buddhist scholar Frederick Streng—who writes of the ultimate transformation of religious persons ontologically—and Randall L. Nadeau, who notes that the “intent of all religious belief and practice is… a solution to the problem of suffering or sin, an ontological transformation of the individual expressed in symbolic terms as movement from death to life, from bondage to freedom, from ignorance to enlightenment.”

An Occasion for Comparative Thought

As all comparisons are triadic in that they involve a comparison of phenomenon \( x \) with phenomenon \( y \), “with regard to” \( z \) (with \( z \) being the scholar’s academic concern), it is important that I clearly establish the occasion upon which this study’s comparison is built. Much of the present comparative endeavor is predicated upon Doniger’s assertion that it is possible to bring into a single, harmonious comparative conversation the uniquely different approaches that two cultures have made to a similar human problem. Thus, my theoretical concern, my “with respect to,” is an ontological presupposition shared by two diverse religious traditions. This critical comparative analysis, or my comparative question, involves an examination of how culturally disparate religious teachings illuminate two respective traditions’ doctrinally divergent responses to a conceptually analogous understanding of the human predicament. Building upon the bridge concepts of “human condition” and “ontological transformation,” the six central

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points of my comparison are: (1) the nature of the human predicament, (2) the past conditioning action(s) that led to this human condition, (3) the futility of any human effort to change the human predicament, (4) the ontologically transformative response that originates “outside” any human efforts, (5) the transactional quality of this process of ontological transformation, and (6) the scope of transformative response.

Nature of the Human Predicament

As indicated in Chapter Three of this dissertation, Pure Land Buddhist traditions have always been especially interested in the nature of the human condition. As Pure Land scholar Jōkai Asai once noted, “questions such as ‘What is a ‘human being’? and ‘How is the definition of ‘human being’ related to the Pure Land teaching?’ have been central to the tradition’s historical development.”37 Recall earlier in this project that Shin thought has answered the first of these questions by positing that the human condition is filled with defilements (bonnō), best understood as blind passions, and is consequently karmically bound to the cycles of rebirth. For example, Shinran maintained in his teachings that defilements such as greed, hatred, and delusion fully characterize and inform the human condition. As contemporary Shin scholar Sachiya Hiro summarized the matter, “if this delusion is something we all have, then perhaps in the truest sense of the word, bonnō or delusion is what our ‘human nature’ is.”38

Recall also that the articulation of the nature of the human predicament found in the Tannishō is the result of Shinran’s unique conception of the human condition. Shinran


maintained that all human actions are ego-based and attachment-driven. Thus, all human actions should be regarded as evil in nature, and since human existence is the direct result of action (karma), the human condition itself is evil or depraved in nature.

This view of the human condition is clearly articulated in section nine of the Tannishō, when Yuein-bō recounts Shinran’s teachings. “What suppresses the heart that should rejoice and keeps one from rejoicing is the action of blind passions. Nevertheless, the Buddha, knowing this beforehand, called us ‘foolish beings possessed of blind passions.’”39 In other words, humanity is bound inextricably by evil desires and ignorance. Even before Shinran uttered these words the tradition had regarded the human predicament or condition as fundamentally dissatisfactory and depraved. Example can be seen in the Kyōgyōshinshō as Shinran quotes a famous passage from one of the early patriarchs of the tradition, Zendō when he writes:

The Deep Mind is the mind of Deep Faith. It has, again, two aspects. The first is that which believes deeply and determinedly that we are really sinful, ordinary beings, fettered to Birth-and-Death, continuously drowning and transmigrating since innumerable kalpas ago, and have no means of emancipation. The Second is that which believes deeply and determinedly that the Forty-eight Vows of Amida Buddha embrace the sentient beings, enabling those who trust His Vow-Power without doubt and apprehension to attain Birth assuredly.40

All of this thinking culminates in the most significant and well-known phrase of the Tannishō, which neatly sums up the view of the human condition expressed by Shinran, “Even the good person is born in the Pure Land, so without question is the person who is


evil.” In other words, birth in Amida’s Pure Land is meant for all people, as all people are evil by nature.

The Canons of Dort, and by extension the early Dutch Reformed Christian tradition, struck an even clearer position with regard to the state of the human predicament. As I noted in the last chapter, while Article One of the Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine begin by positing that humanity was created in the image of God and that humanity’s general disposition was initially oriented towards the fulfillment of a good and pure life, lived in right alignment with God’s will, this orientation quickly changed. Through a rejection of God, Adam brought upon himself “blindness, horrible darkness, vanity, and perverseness of judgment in his mind; malice, rebelliousness, and stubbornness in his will and heart, and impurity in all his affections.” In other words, as elaborated upon in Article Two of the Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine, due to Adam’s resultant impurity and the corruption of his nature an inclination towards evil and a general condition of depravity was passed along to all of Adam’s descendents. The Canons clearly posit that humanity is utterly depraved because sin has filled the entirety of its being. In summary, the Canons are predicated on the contention that the human condition is completely defiled and depraved.

Shin Buddhism and the Reformed Christian tradition articulate a conceptually analogous understanding of the human predicament — as depraved, disordered, defiled, and filled with impurities. Specifically, Shin thought conceives of the human condition as being oriented towards an illusory ego, which only serves to enmesh humanity further in

41 Ibid., 7.

delusion, ignorance and blind passions. This is not unlike mainstream Mahāyāna conceptions of the problematic nature of ego-consciousness, in which the degree of conviction that there exists a separate “I” or “self” is directly related to the relative strength of the three poisons of existence—greed, anger, and delusion. The more “I” focus upon “myself,” and the more attached “I” become to “my” activities and thoughts, the more entangled in blind passions I become. Depravity and defilement are thus reified as the very nature of the human condition. Hence the need for a dramatic solution that will allow sentient beings to transcend their limited understanding of existence, such that ignorance might be replaced with awakened comprehension.

In a similar manner Reformed Christian thought conceives of the depravity of the human condition as being due to, and a form of, ego-orientation. Recall that Adam was created with an initial orientation towards the good and pure life, in right alignment with God’s will. However, Adam was also given the capacity for freedom of choice, and he used this trust and freedom to put “his” will before the will of God. Adam’s “original sin” was a decision to be self-oriented rather than God-oriented. As Emil Brunner explains, “sin, in relation to the good, is the ‘arrestation of our God-consciousness.’”43 God-consciousness involves a primary concern for, and absolute dependence upon, God. In placing his own will and desires before the desires of God, Adam rejected the right relationality that God first established between Godself and humanity. This resulted in Adam’s fall from God’s grace and an attendant degradation of the human condition.

Therefore, Shin Buddhist and Reformed Christian thought share a similar sense of the depraved human condition as being, in part, due to ego-centeredness.

However, within this analogous understanding also lies a difference with regard to the temporal framework under which it is possible to speak of the human condition as depraved, disordered, and defiled. According to pan-Buddhist thought, humanity has always been subject to blind passions (*bonnō*) and has always existed in a state of delusion. This contention is based on the understanding that the samsāric cycle of transmigration has always been turning. Like a circular river that has no beginning or end, beings have been flowing perpetually through the six realms of existence, and as such have always been subject to delusion. Shin thought affirms this way of thinking, as can be seen in Chapter 31 of the Larger Sūtra on Amitāyus [i.e., Amida Buddha]:

Because they are stupid and callous, such people do not accept the teachings of the Buddha; they lack forethought, and only wish to satisfy their own desires. They are deluded by their passionate attachments, unaware of the Way, misguided and trapped by anger and enmity, and intent on gaining wealth and gratifying their carnal desires like wolves. And so, unable to follow the Way, they are again subject to suffering in evil realms in an endless cycle of birth-and-death. How miserable and pitiable this is!\(^4^4\)

Humanity has always been trapped by blind passions. There was no “first” cause for this condition.

Within Reformed Christian thought though it is understood that the depraved human condition is a change from the original state of humanity. When humanity was first created its ontological condition was one of purity and righteousness. This condition

only changed after Adam’s hubristic action. Unlike the Buddhist sense of defilement and impurity existing throughout time, the Reformed Christian position is predicated on an introductory moment when the human condition changed states.

By taking a Smithian bilateral approach to the comparative analysis of the respective traditions’ conceptions of the human predicament it is possible to examine both their similarities and their differences. This demonstrates two levels of comparative contrast. First, it allows for the establishment of a starting point for comparing these traditions a bit more broadly, without relying upon the typical points of comparison found in past case studies of this sort. In other words, while the cultural specifics that produced these common formulations are vastly different, and the complex specifics of the actual concepts are distinct, the temporary bridge concept “human condition” allows us to recognize that these traditions do share a common ontological presupposition.

Second, it shows that even within apparent “sameness” resides important difference. Recall, that any real progress in the use of the comparative tool in the field of religious studies, requires attending as much or more to what makes religious phenomena different than to what makes them alike. By holding the traditions’ differences in creative comparative tension we are able to see variations on a theme (i.e., nuanced understandings of the plight of humanity), as well as examine this otherwise calcified concept with the light emanating from a cross-cultural source. We realize that any ontological statement is uniquely wedded to the cosmology from which it emanates. In other words, to speak of humanity as being depraved or fallen, in a Western Christian sense, assumes a fall “from” a prior point of stability. Whereas, to speak of humanity as
being depraved or defiled, in a Japanese Buddhist sense, assumes a beginningless constant state.

This sort of reciprocal illumination also enables us to pay closer attention to the terms we use in any comparative endeavor. As Neville explains, “comparison is required both to detect the need for better terminology, and to generate and test proposed terminology . . . [Fortunately,] as the terminology improves, comparison gets more nuanced; and as comparison is more adequate, the terminology gets more accurate.”

The earliest comparisons of Shin Buddhism and Christian thought, conducted by Catholic missionaries in Japan, were clumsy conflations of terms and ideas. Mid-to-late twentieth-century Eliadian comparativists were no more accurate than their predecessors as they employed uncritically imposed Christian terminology in the pursuit of pan-human universals. As this study has used the critical tools and self-awareness of Smithian Comparativism the comparison of these traditions grows more nuanced, subtle, and precise.

Past Conditioning Actions that Lead to the Human Predicament

Buddhist thought has largely maintained that existence in any of the samsāric realms of rebirth is the direct result of residual karma (shukugō) and this past karma should be understood as being due to blind passions and ignorance. Therefore, a central premise of general Buddhist thought is that past actions condition or shape future rebirths. Shin Buddhist thought is not unique in this manner.

45 Neville, The Human Condition, 10.
In section thirteen of the *Tannishō*, the author, Yuein-bō, responds to a misconception of the time, which posited that people who pridefully have no fear of committing evil acts because of the “inconceivable working of the Primal Vow” run the risk of not attaining birth in Amida’s Pure Land. Yuein-bō attempts to correct this misunderstanding when he writes:

This statement is of one who doubts the Primal Vow and fails to understand the influence of good and evil karma of past lives. Good thoughts arise in us through the prompting of good karma from the past, and evil acts are conceived and committed through the working of evil karma. The late Master said. “Know that *every evil act done – even as slight as a particle on the tip of a strand of rabbit’s fur or sheep’s wool – has its cause in past karma.*”

When recalling Shinran’s rejection of the duality of good and evil as simply a relative concept and his insistence that all human actions are best understood as delusional and depraved, it is easy to see that for Shinran, and by extension the teachings articulated in the *Tannishō*, all actions are due to shukugō and are thus evil. As contemporary Shin scholar Yoshifumi Ueda summarized the matter, the “karma from our past that rules our lives is always evil.” This position is reaffirmed in section nine of the *Tannishō* when Yuein-bō recounts Shinran as having said:

Further, having no thought of wanting to go to the Pure Land quickly, we think forlornly that we may die even when we become slightly ill; this also is the action of blind passions. It is hard for us to abandon this old home of pain, where we have been transmigrating for innumerable kalpas down to the present, and we

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47 Ibid., Italics are mine for emphasis.

feel no longing for the Pure Land of Peace, where we have yet to be born. Truly, how powerful our blind passions are!49

Put differently, if the residual karma from our past lives and the blind passions that contribute to this were not so powerful we might more readily wish for birth in the Pure Land and rejoice in the conviction that we would soon be there.

As alluded to in the previous section about the human condition, according to the Canons of Dort the human state of defilement and depravity is also causally due to a past conditioning action. That action was thought to be Adam’s sinful rejection of God, and his subsequent fall from God’s grace, otherwise known as the original sin. “The word sin denotes a transgression or attitude which, in the final analysis, is always directed against God . . . Sin, therefore, is the responsible guilt of man [sic] before God, the breach of the personal relationship, a turning away from God and one’s fellow-men.”50 Article One of the Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine describes Adam’s free will-based decision to rebel against God, thereby resulting in a corruption of Adam’s human nature. Article Two of the Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine goes on to explain how Adam came to pass along his fallen and depraved nature hereditarily to all of his descendents. Building upon Calvin’s sense of the biological solidarity between Adam and his descendents, the Canons state, “Since he was corrupt, he brought forth corrupt children. This corruption, therefore has been derived from Adam by all his descendents, Christ alone excepted.”51 Thus the Canons maintained that not only was the human predicament one of complete

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and total defilement, but this condition was due to the conditioning action of Adam’s
original sin, in which hereditary depravity was imputed to all of humanity. You will
recall, as Augustine explained, because of Adam’s sin humanity cannot help but continue
to sin.

With respect to the Shin Buddhist and Reformed Christian conceptions of the
human predicament, it can be said safely that these traditions do share a common sense of
there being a past conditioning action or actions that led to the human plight. However, as
in the case of the previous section “different religions [can] share a common idea vaguely
but specify it differently.” The difference in perspective between Shin Buddhism and
Reformed Christianity, with regard to the past conditioning action(s) that lead to the state
of the human predicament, has to do with breadth of causal influence. Not withstanding
mainstream Mahāyāna thought, which suggests all karmic activity is linked together
collectively, as in Indra’s web—in other words, all past karma (shukugō) shapes all
present and future karmic trajectories, which we conventionally refer to as individual
persons—Shin thought demonstrates that each person’s past actions have been
accumulating as negative karma, born out of ignorance, from the depths of a
beginningless past. This karmic wave then collapses and manifests in the present moment
as a karmically bound evil being. Put differently, “It is the past, not the present, that
forms the center of causality [and] . . . the concept of past karma points directly to the
individual himself.”

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52 Neville, The Human Condition, 264.

53 Ueda Yoshifumi, “Freedom and Necessity in Shinran’s Concept of Karma,” trans. Dennis Hirota, in
Living in Amida’s Universal Vow: Essays in Shin Buddhism ed. Alfred Bloom (Bloomington, IN: World
Wisdom, 2004), 110.
This stands in stark contrast to the corporate sense of imputed depravity found in Reformed Christianity, and which is articulated concretely in the Doctrine of Limited Atonement. Here “original sin is founded on a common ancestor of all individuals.”\(^{54}\) Despite having done nothing to warrant existence in a state of impure separation for God themselves, humans that are alive today are deemed by the Canons to be just as “guilty” before God as Adam was for his act of denial. The past act of one individual cast a shadow over all people. Conversely, in Shin thought the past actions of all sentient beings contributed to the present state of general depravity.

Once again, while the cultural particularities or cargo of this comparison are distinct—I would never suggest that *shukugō* and sin are identical representations of reality—their structural similarities certainly advance our Smithian occasion for comparative thought. The benefit of a Smithian approach to the comparison of these themes is that it is possible to hold the apprehension of surface resemblance simultaneously, with regard to causal influence on a common ontological presupposition, in creative tension with the distinctive cultural and linguistic forms found in each tradition. In other words, *shukugō* and sin are similar enough conceptually that they warrant being marked and lifted up because of their intellectual significance to our larger theoretical question—How do two traditions with common understandings of the human condition respond doctrinally? As we do though, we will note that the differences in cultural understanding are distinct enough that it is possible to beginning considering whether, despite surface resemblances, these traditions are, in fact, pointing to different religious ends. In addition to an over-emphasis upon similarity, a pervading problem of

\(^{54}\) Ibid.
past Eliadian comparisons has been their assumption that regardless of the unique details of each tradition, when it comes to providing a solution to the human dilemma all religious paths culminate eventually at the same point—an “unequivocal, single reality.”

This pluralistic approach is described by theologian S. Mark Heim when he writes of the manner in which, “the most prominent contemporary pluralists relegate specific individual elements in a tradition and its concrete historical texture to secondary status; these are the culturally variable forms in which we encounter what is truly ultimate for religion.”

In order to counter-act this subtle, yet insidious “many paths, one summit” conception of soteriology we must steadfastly adhere to some of the strengths of Smithian New Comparativism: reframing the discourse with regard to analytical categories of cross-cultural comparison, grounding the comparison of ideas in the “events” of texts, and seeking difference alongside all similarities. Nevertheless, we will revisit Heim’s concerns later in this chapter.

Futility of Human Effort to Change the Human Predicament

In section thirteen of the Tannishō, Yuein-bō recounts Shinran’s belief that the influence of residual or past karma is so significant that humanity has no control over the quality of its actions. As Yuein-bō explained, “We sentient beings cannot arbitrarily do evil, or perform good deeds. [Shinran] says that even the evil or bad that we do is due to

56 Ibid., 5-6.
our karma.”\textsuperscript{57} According to Yoshifumi Ueda, “Shinran’s model of time denies any sort of free will, since everything we do and have done is swamped in an abyss of unfathomable evil karma . . . [According to Shinran’s concept of karma,] we lack the potential to do anything that is not evil. [Consequently] if whatever we do – even acts we consider to be good and virtuous – is in fact evil, then whatever our subjective thoughts, in reality we have no moral freedom of choice.”\textsuperscript{58} Shinran’s rejection of the traditional threefold path of self-effort (\textit{jiriki}) was complete. He deemed any efforts to constructively affect the human predicament as doomed from the outset. In this way, Shin Buddhism is distinct from other forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism in that it is predicated on the contention that human effort and intentionality play no role with regard to a person’s ultimate liberation. As meditation and moral activity arise from within the karmically bound human condition they are not efficacious when it comes to release from samsāra, let alone birth in Amida’s Pure Land. Only Amida’s Vow has the power do these things. As Shinran states in section fourteen of the \textit{Tannishō}:

\begin{quote}
I have no idea whether the Nembutsu is truly the seed for my being born in the Pure Land or whether it is the karmic act for which I must fall into hell. Should I have been deceived by Master Hönen and, saying the Nembutsu, fall into hell, even then I would have no regrets. The reason is, if I could attain Buddhahood by endeavoring in other practices, but said the Nembutsu and so fell into hell, then I would feel regret at having been deceived. But I am incapable of any other practice, so hell is decidedly my abode whatever I do.\textsuperscript{59}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{57} Sachiya, \textit{On Being Evil: An Introduction to the Tannisho}, 86.

\textsuperscript{58} Yoshifumi, “Freedom and Necessity in Shinran’s Concept of Karma,” 105.

\textsuperscript{59} Inagaki, ed., \textit{A Record in Lament of Divergences}, 5-6.
Put another way, Shinran would be sadly mistaken if he believed that his own efforts would ensure his birth in the Pure Land. From the Shin perspective human effort to change the human predicament is futile.

Early in Article Two of the Canons of Dort, the thought that humanity is incapable of rectifying the fallen or deprived nature of the human condition is delineated in a similar manner. Whereas Article One of the Canons posits that Adam’s sin requires a form of satisfaction or punishment, Article Two goes on to state, “we ourselves cannot make this satisfaction and cannot deliver ourselves from the wrath of God.” The original sin of Adam is so significant, and the subsequent depravity of humanity so complete, that only God can make the necessary satisfaction on our behalf. God’s sacrifice of Jesus through crucifixion accomplishes this satisfaction.

Article Three of the Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine also addresses humanity’s complete inability to affect this disordered and defiled condition constructively, when, evoking Augustine’s thoughts on the matter, it suggests that humanity’s sinfulness is so complete that humanity could not cease from sinning if it wanted to. Whereas Adam was created with free will, his descendents are held completely in the bondage of evil. As the Canons put it:

All men [sic] therefore are conceived in sin and born as children of wrath, incapable of any saving good, inclined to evil, dead in sins, and slaves of sins. Apart from the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit; moreover, they are neither willing nor able to return to God, to reform their depraved nature, or to prepare themselves for its reformation.  

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61 Ibid., 148. Italics mine for emphasis.
In other words, any and all self-directed efforts to return to a state of alignment with God are useless. According to the Canons, because of the deep indwelling of depraved sinfulness, it is simply beyond humanity’s ability to return to God’s grace on its own. The Tannishō and the Canons thus strike an analogous position with regard to the futility of any human efforts to affect ontological transformation constructively. The Tannishō conveys that self-power (jiriki) is useless due to the overwhelming nature of past karmic evil, while the Canons convey similarly that self-effort is useless due to the overwhelming nature of sin.

**Ontologically Transformative Response that Originates Outside Any Human Effort**

According to Shin thought, any change in the human predicament, or ontological transformation, rests entirely on a source outside of any human effort. For Pure Land practitioners the symbolic representation of this “other-power” (他力 tariki) is said to be Amida Buddha and his Primal Vow. As examined in the previous chapter, liberation, characterized as rebirth in the Amida’s Pure Land, is the direct result of Amida’s Primal Vow. As Yuein-bō recounts Shinran’s teachings in section eleven of the Tannishō, Amida Buddha promised through the unimaginable workings of the Vow to bring all who call his name into his Pure Land:

To begin with, then, it is through Amida’s design that we come to say the Nembutsu with the belief that, saved by the inconceivable workings of Tathagata’s great Vow of great compassion, we will part from birth-and-death. This being realized, our calculation is not the least involved, and so, in accord with the Primal Vow, we will be born in the true fulfilled land.⁶²

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⁶² Inagaki, ed., *A Record in Lament of Divergences*, 16.
As Alfred Bloom interprets this, Amida’s compassion for humanity is in no way dependent upon our efforts. “Shinran makes it clear that the completion of the Vow requires nothing from the side of man [sic] . . . as the causal basis for birth in the Pure Land.”\(^{63}\) Even the recitation of the nembutsu is the result of Amida’s decision to bestow entrusting hearts and minds upon humanity. This can be seen in Shinran’s thoughts regarding the nembutsu in section eight of the *Tannishō* when he notes:

> The Nembutsu, for its practicers, is ‘non-practice’ and ‘non-good.’ Since it is not a practice performed out of one’s own designs, it is called ‘non-practice.’ Since it is not a good act done through one’s own calculation, it is called ‘non-good.’ Because it arises wholly from Other Power and is free of self-power, for the practicers, it is ‘non-practice’ and ‘non-good.’\(^{64}\)

Taking a hermeneutical step that was distinct from his teacher Hōnen, Shinran regarded even the ability to recite the Nembutsu as an expression of Other-Power. Whereas other Buddhist sects of his time regarded the recitation of the Nembutsu as yet another “good” act conducted through self-effort, Shinran saw the nembutsu as an act of gratitude arising from the Other–Power of Amida and his Vow.

As I have suggested in the previous two sections, despite the state of the human condition and the past conditioning action that led to this predicament, and despite humanity’s inability to affect its own salvation, all is not lost according to the theological position articulated in the Canons of Dort. A solution to the plight of humanity has arisen from the compassion and love of God. According to Reformed Christian thought an ontologically transformative response to humanity’s depraved condition arises from


\(^{64}\) Inagaki, ed., *A Record in Lament of Divergences*, 11.
beyond all human efforts. The Canons maintain that God’s love for humanity is so great that God acts in such a manner as to provide the necessary satisfaction and regeneration of the broken relationality, which results in eternal life for those who believe. This thinking is expressed in the Second Article of the First Head of Doctrine when the Canons refer to passages from the Christian New Testament relating to God’s gift of Jesus. “But in this the love of God was revealed, that He sent His only Son into the world, so that everyone who believes in Him should not be lost but have eternal life (I John 4:9, John 3:16).”

Subsequent Articles of the Canons go on to describe this ontologically transformative act by God in greater detail. Article Eleven relates how God imputes new dispositions, attributes, and propensities upon humanity as God “makes the will which was dead alive, which was bad good, which was unwilling willing, which was stubborn obedient, and moves and strengthens it so that, like a good tree, it may be able to produce the fruits of good works.”

In an effort to clarify further that this transformative and regenerative act is entirely divine in nature, and not the result of any human effort, the Canons posit in Article Twelve that salvation is “clearly a supernatural, most powerful and . . . inexpressible work,” which is akin to the power expressed in the creation itself. Finally, Articles Fourteen and Fifteen note that the sinful state of humanity was so complete that this transformative act by God is a completely free, yet undeserved gift. In other words,

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66 Ibid., 151.
67 Ibid., 152.
the Canons take the position that soteriology rests entirely on the divine assistance and favor of God. Ontological transformation is solely due to God’s grace.

Transactional Quality of the Process of Ontological Transformation

Building upon the work of his teacher, Hōnen, Shinran maintained that Amida’s articulation of the Primal Vow generated an unlimited storehouse of karmic merit, which he in turn transfers to all sentient beings in two phases. The two phases—first expressed by Chinese monk Donran (476-542), considered by Shin practitioners as the Third Patriarch of the tradition—are “going forth” (ōsō-ekō) and “returning” (gensō-ekō). As Hisao Inagaki explains in The Three Pure Land Sutras: A Study and Translation (2000), the phrase “going forth” is in reference to Amida’s transfer of merit from his great karmic storehouse in order for people to “attain birth in the Pure Land together with all sentient beings by endowing them with one’s merits. The phrase of ‘returning’ is to re-enter the worlds of Samsāra to lead sentient beings to the Buddhist Path.”68 Thus, Shinran has interpreted Amida’s merit-transference as a transactional-like process of ontological transformation. Amida gives humanity shinjin for the purpose of facilitating our birth in the Pure Land and in return humanity perpetuates the process of liberating all sentient beings by returning to the realms of samsāra to assist with the liberation of others. As Yuein-bō recounts Shinran’s teachings in the fifth section of the Tannishō:

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

Nembutsu indeed a good act in which I strove through my own powers, then I might direct the merit thus gained toward saving my mother and father. But that is not the case. If, however, simply abandoning self-power, we quickly attain enlightenment in the Pure Land, we will be able to save, by means of supernatural powers, first those with whom we have close karmic relations, whatever karmic suffering they may have sunk to in the six realms through the four modes of birth.69

Mainstream Mahāyāna thought (and some Theravāda traditions as well), on the other hand, maintains that it is possible to direct or transfer merit through self-power (jiriki). This merit is accrued through the performance of good acts. In the fifth section of the Tannishō Shinran has instead positioned merit transference as a transactional activity in which Amida directs virtue and merit towards us. Humanity plays no role in the transaction, as long ago Amida Buddha acquired the karmic merit necessary to “solve” the dilemma of human existence. As human calculations are always evil and thus lacking, it is only Amida’s merit transference that can affect the ontological transformation necessary for birth in the Pure Land. Even the central human act of reciting the nembutsu should be understood as simply a response of gratitude for Amida’s soteriological action. As Shinran explains in section fourteen of the Tannishō, “Thus the nembutsu that we say throughout a lifetime . . . should be recognized as entirely the expression of our gratitude for the benevolence and our thankfulness for the virtuous working of the Tathagata’s great compassion.”70

Looking across the cultural chasm between Shin thought and the Reformation, it is easy to see evidence of the common understanding of God’s ontologically


70 Ibid., 28.
transformative activity, or reconciling atonement, within Articles One and Two of the Second Head of Doctrine of the Canons of Dort. Article One of the Canons states that because God is supremely just, satisfaction is required for the sins of humanity. Article Two goes on to describe how “we ourselves cannot make this satisfaction and cannot deliver ourselves from the wrath of God… [so instead God] has given His only Son as our Surety, who so that He might make satisfaction for us…” This way of thinking is consistent with common interpretations of Anselm’s Satisfaction Theory.

Within the Eighth Article of the Second Head of Doctrine, though, lies a subtle sense of a transactional quality to the process of ontological transformation. This position can be easily overlooked when examining the process of reconciliation and atonement, but when recognized it provides a unique opportunity for considering the Christian doctrine of atonement in a new light, as well as a compelling opportunity for comparative analysis. The key is the statement, “God further willed that Christ should give to those so chosen faith (which, together with other saving gifts of the Holy Spirit, He acquired for them by His death) . . . ” If we bear in mind the Canons’ dependence upon Anselm’s Theory of Atonement, we see that the Canons take the position that Christ acquired faith and other saving gifts of the Holy Spirit through his crucifixion. In turn, God willed Christ to give these acquired things to those few individuals whom God has elected to be recipients. As Richard Swinburne explains, works of supererogation, such as Christ’s death and resurrection, create a certain moral standing for the acting agent. One of the two central acts of supererogation takes the form of favors that benefit others directly.


72 Ibid., 145. Italics mine for emphasis.
Through this, the supererogatory agent “stacks up merit for himself.”

73 According to Richard Cross, this merit accords Christ a reward from God. “The reward is to be whatever Christ asks for [and] . . . Christ asks that God forgive the sins of those who repent and apologize to God. . . So the redemptive result of Christ’s sacrifice is God’s being obliged to forgive those who repent and apologize to God.”

74 In other words, there is to a transactional-like transference of that which is acquired, from Christ to the elect.

Once again, the cultural specifics implicit in Shinran’s interpretation of Amida’s directing of merit towards humanity and Anselm’s interpretation of Christ’s supererogatory good act, which accrued ample merit to compensate humanity’s debt, remain distinct—as they are. As Dubuisson reminds us, “If we do not respect the structural uniqueness of each cultural continuum, all cultures in effect become comparable, but at the price precisely of that which made them unique.”

75 I am reminded of Wendy Doniger’s cautionary note that an interpretive imbalance is “demeaning to the individualism of each, [and] a reflection of the old racist, colonialist attitude that ‘all wogs look alike.’”

76 Eliadian comparisons tend to do precisely what Dubuisson and Doniger caution us against, resulting in a blurring of cultural distinctiveness, the ignoring of context in favor of generalizations, and the academically destructive privileging of Protestant


Christian essentialist categories of comparison. However, when temporarily using the bridge concept “ontological transformation,” it becomes possible to place these otherwise culturally incongruous theoretical premises onto a common table of comparative analysis, in the service of exploring the third term — the scholar’s intellectual interest. Recount that for this project the primary interest is how two religious traditions that share a conceptually analogous understanding of the human predicament conceive of a solution to humanity’s plight. Each tradition has a long dharmalogical and theological history, respectively, of maintaining that the human predicament can be remedied or overcome. Both Shin Buddhism and Reformed Christianity are predicated on the contention that this solution, or ontological transformation, has a transactional-like quality about it.

While this dissertation is unique in its consideration of the structurally similar transactional-quality to the theories of ontological transformation found in these respective traditions, we are again reminded of the cultural distinctiveness of the traditions’ use and interpretation of the term “merit.” Just as the terms shukugō and sin are not identical representations of reality, when Shinran and Anselm discussed “merit” they had quite different notions in mind. Whereas Shinran was teaching in a culture informed by the mainstream Mahāyāna notion of conducting religious practices for the benefit of others, Anselm was writing and living in a culture informed by monetary efforts to resolve the debts of indentured servants. When Shinran wrote of Amida’s transference of merit from his limitless storehouse he was describing the incalculable religious benefit accrued by the act of Amida invoking the Primal Vow and establishing his Pure Land. When Anselm wrote of Christ’s ample merit to compensate humanity’s debt he was playing with the status of currency and its ability to render a debt paid in full.
The pay-off of this fifth element in my systematically organized comparison is two-fold. First, we are able to revision Anselm’s merit theory of atonement based on our reading of Amida’s merit transference. Recall that the common interpretation of Anselm’s Theory of Atonement focuses on the satisfaction required by God for the sins of humanity. This traditional and calcified interpretation makes little or no mention of the transactional-like nature that is also present in Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo*, and which runs through the Canons. With the tools of Smithian Comparativism I have accomplished Bernard Faure’s goal of cutting across Buddhist and Western discourses for the purpose of reviewing certain Western notions in light of Buddhist theories. Like Faure, I have attempted to see “whether certain Buddhist notions, through the slight shift that they may prompt in our habitual ways of thinking, might not lead us to reformulate a number of classical problems of Western thought.”77

Second, we are able to see further evidence that these traditions are engaged in divergent soteriological endeavors. At night all cats may look grey, but in the clear light of a Smithian Comparative day we see that temporary interlocutors for comparison, such as “merit” and “transactional quality,” are as tenuous as the bridge concepts “human condition” and “ontological transformation. The term “merit” can stand in long enough to help us question deeply-rooted assumptions regarding what is normative, but quickly enough the rope-bridge of comparison begins to unravel and we see that it is only Smith’s third term at work. The perception of similarity may help set the table for academic inquiry, but the deeper we go into the comparative discourse the broader the cross-

cultural chasm becomes. Why should we conceive of the religious aim of each tradition as being commensurate ultimately, if we have learned that:

(1) the respective traditions’ understandings of the human condition are intimately tied to the dominant cosmologies of the given culture;

(2) the past conditioning actions that have most influenced the human condition are different with regard to meaning of terms and breadth of causality;

(3) the source of the ontological transformation that originates outside the human predicament is distinct;

(4) the interpretation of the transactional quality of the process of ontological transformation is embedded deeply in the cultural milieu of the time and place.

An examination of the final element of comparative analysis will answer the question.

Scope of Transformative Response

Consistent with the pan-Mahāyāna position on the matter, Shin thought maintains that liberation from the cycles of rebirth involves transcending the duality of good and evil, thereby enabling liberation from the binding passions, delusions, and judgments of samsāric existence. Shin thought, as influenced by Shinran’s teaching, distinguishes itself from other Mahāyāna teachings, however, in that it is predicated on a radical non-dualistic conception of karma. In other words, all karma is evil and by extension all sentient beings are evil. This results in the knowledge that “the Primal Vow of Amida makes no distinction between people young and old, good and evil; only the entrusting
heart, shinjin, is essential.”

Put differently, there is no discrimination with regard to whom Amida extends loving-compassion and similarly there is no discrimination with regard to who shall be born in the Pure Land. In Shin thought it is accepted that there is an ontological equality among all sentient beings due to their shukugō, and consequently ontological transformation, or birth in the Pure Land, is meant universally. As presented in section three of the Tannishō:

> It is impossible for us, who are possessed of blind passions, to free ourselves from birth-and-death through any practice whatever. Grieving over this, Amida made the Vow, the essential intent of which is the evil person’s attainment of Buddhahood. Hence, evil persons who entrust themselves to Other Power are precisely the ones who possess the true cause of birth. Accordingly [Shinran] said, ‘Even the good person is born in the Pure Land, so without question is the person who is evil.’

As the evil person is the true object of Amida’s Primal Vow (akunin shōki setsu), and all people are deemed evil persons, ontological transformation is for everyone. James Dobbins interprets the Tannishō to be asserting that there is nothing, either good or evil that can impede the work of Amida’s liberating Vow. “In short, Amida’s saving power extends to all situations and circumstances, and it reaches out to people whatever their failings may be.”

The scope of ontological transformation according to Shin Buddhist thought knows no bounds and in this way should be understood as a universal experience. As Inagaki explains, “the Power [of the Vow] fills us completely and changes our karmic course toward the Land of Bliss. Birth in the Pure Land and subsequent attainment of

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79 Ibid., 7.

Enlightenment are, therefore, the natural result of the working of this Power. Amitabha’s [i.e., Amida’s] saving power is available here and now, and no one is excluded from his salvation.81

On the other side of this occasion for comparative thought stands the Reformed Christian tradition’s conception of the scope of ontological transformation. As noted in Chapter Three of this dissertation, one of the central focal points of the Canons of Dort was the limited mediated saving work of Christ. Recall that one of the more pressing impetuses for convening the Synod of Dort involved the Remonstrant question as to the extent of God’s grace. Contrary to the generally accepted orthodoxy of the day, Jacob Arminius believed and taught that the atonement of Christ was in fact a universal event, meant for all people. In direct response the Canons clearly posited in Article Seven that:

Election is the unchangeable purpose of God whereby, before the foundation of the world, out of the whole human race, which had fallen by its own fault out of its original integrity into sin and ruin, He has, according to the most free good pleasure of His will, out of mere grace, chosen in Christ to salvation a certain number of specific men, neither better nor more worthy than others, but with them involved in a common misery.82

According to the calculation of the authors of the Canons, neither God’s grace nor the atoning power of Christ’s death is universal. God has intentionally rendered the scope of ontological transformation to be limited. Lest there was any confusion on the matter, the authors of the Canons went on to note in Article Eight that Christ’s atoning death “should effectually redeem out of every people, tribe, nation, and tongue all those and only those

81 Inagaki, The Three Pure Land Sutras, 37.
who were from eternity chosen to salvation . . . \textsuperscript{83} This language regarding “the elect,” in other words a limited number of individuals for whom salvation was possible, was continued in Article Fifteen of the First Head of Doctrine, as the authors write:

This eternal and undeserved grace of our election is especially illustrated and indicated for us by Holy Scripture when it declares that not all men are elect but that certain ones have not been elected, or have been passed by in the eternal election of God. These God out of His most free, most just, blameless, and unchangeable good pleasure has decreed to leave in the common misery into which they have by their own fault plunged themselves, and not to give them saving faith and the grace of conversion… God has decreed finally to condemn and punish eternally, not only on account of their unbelief but also on account of all their unbelief but also on account of all their other sins, as a declaration of His justice. \textsuperscript{84}

While Christ’s death and resurrection constituted a powerfully atoning act that more than ameliorated humanity’s broken relationship with God, salvation, according to the Canons is and was a limited event, meant for only those whom God has previously elected.

The comparison of these scopes of transformative response clearly shows that whereas Shin Buddhism conceives of birth in the Pure Land as meant for all people— in other words, liberation or ontological transformation is a universal experience— the Reformed Christian tradition conceives of salvation as an event meant only for those whom God has elected, in other words ontological transformation is a limited experience. The “events” of the Tannishō and the Canons of Dort may have begun with a conceptually analogous understanding of the plight of humanity, but their respective statements of religious orthodoxy could not be more divergent. Previous comparative scholarship has focused primarily on perceived similarities between the two traditions,

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 145. Italics mine for emphasis.

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 140-41. Italics mine for emphasis.
and through a bilateral methodological approach I have also examined points of surface resemblance. However, I have argued throughout this comparative analysis that despite a common understanding of the human condition as being defiled and depraved, the traditions’ divergent doctrinal responses to this condition imply different salvations ultimately. Like Heim, I disagree fundamentally with the essentializing proposals of Eliadian universalists and contemporary religious pluralists in that I argue “there is real diversity of actual religious ends.”85 When Shin Buddhists are born in Amida’s Pure Land they are not standing elbow-to-elbow with the God’s chosen ones, as their differing paths lead to different summits.86 Religious traditions can be understood as responses to human quandaries, and Doniger remains correct that it is possible to examine divergent responses to common dilemmas cross-culturally, but the examination may unearth widely disparate paths. Furthermore, some chasms truly are incommensurate.

Disciplined Exaggeration in the Service of Knowledge

Whereas past Eliadian comparisons have been content to note surface resemblance between two phenomena, confuse perceived similarity with identity, and then posit the existence of certain pan-human and transcultural realities, which are imminently comparable by virtue of their “sameness,” I have chosen instead to engage in a disciplined Smithian exaggeration in the service of knowledge. Smithian New Comparativism is rigorous and responsible in that it marks certain features within similarity and difference as being of use to the scholar’s theoretical concerns. This is

85 Heim, Salvations, 6.

accomplished by the self-conscious acknowledgment of the limitedness and cultural embeddedness of all terms used in comparative analysis. Once granting that, though, it still remains possible to employ temporary theoretical interlocutors as bridge concepts for beginning a discourse of cross-cultural analysis around a common question. In the service of establishing a healthy case study that demonstrates the best methodological tools of Smithian Comparativism I have limited my theoretical interests to a comparative examination of how two culturally distinct religious traditions, which share a conceptually analogous ontological presupposition, have responded to the human dilemma in doctrinally divergent ways. As bridge terms I chosen to employ the alternative vocabularies of “human condition” and “ontological transformation.”

The result of these efforts has been a temporary designation of “like” or “similar” on five of the six central points of comparison that have served as the scaffolding for my comparative endeavor. This is stated with the full recognition, however, that as quickly as similarity is perceived it dissolves into cultural uniqueness, as the languages in which the central documents under review are different, the dharmalogical and theological influences that shaped the doctrines in questions are different, and the meaning of the vital terms for comparison are generally incommensurate. Nevertheless, as Smith intimates, the comparison of two phenomena that are identical brings nothing of originality to the academic table. Indeed, even if we think we are comparing what might seem to be identical phenomena, this is impossible; as Wittgenstein famously quipped, if two things are the same, how can they be two things? Instead comparison requires the creative use of analogical imagination for the purpose of examining something the scholar finds compelling.
In this Smithian comparison I have chosen to consider six positions that I maintain are present to some degree in both Shin Buddhism and Reformed Christianity. They are as follows: (1) the nature of the human predicament, (2) the past conditioning action(s) that led to this human condition, (3) the futility of any human effort to change the human predicament, (4) the ontologically transformative response that originates “outside” any human efforts, (5) the transactional quality of this process of ontological transformation, and (6) the scope of transformative response. From my comparison I have concluded that Shin Buddhism and Reformed Christian thought, as found in the *Tannishō* and the Canons of Dort respectively, share thematically parallel expressions of:

(1) the human condition as being unavoidably depraved and defiled;

(2) the human predicament being best characterized as inherently impure due to “original” conditioning actions, namely, past karma (*shukugō*) and original sin;

(3) the futility of the human effort to effectively change one’s own corrupted existence;

(4) transformative responses to the human condition that originate outside the capacity of the individual, namely the “Other Power” (*tariki*) of and entrusting (*shinjin*) in Amida Buddha, on the one hand, and the predetermined election and grace of God on the other; and

(5) the transactional quality of the processes of ontological transformation in response to each tradition’s understanding of the human condition, namely, Amida Buddha’s transference of merit (*shishin ekō*) to all sentient beings for their rebirth in the Pure Land, and the application of merit as seen in Anselm of Canterbury’s substitution or commercial theory of atonement.
The traditions in question though reach dramatically divergent responses with regard to the scope of ontological transformation. It is here that the temporary designation of “likeness” and “similarity” ends. I maintain that the doctrines of akunin shōki and limited atonement provide different interpretations as to the scope of transformative response to the human condition. Specifically, I have argued that the Reformed Christian doctrine posits a limited response, whereby only the predetermined elect are granted salvific redemption, and that the Shin Buddhist doctrine posits a universal response whereby all sentient beings, and most especially evil persons, are assured rebirth in Amida Buddha’s Pure Land. These transformative events can then be understood finally as divergent religious ends.
Chapter Six: Conclusion and Comparative Implications

The “end” of comparison cannot be the act of comparison itself.—Jonathan Z. Smith, “The ‘End’ of Comparison: Redescription and Rectification (2000)¹

Contemporary cultural theorist Russell McCutcheon argues there are four interrelated tasks found in the academic study of religion—definition, description, comparison, and redemptive analysis.² He further argues that the first three tasks are all conducted in the service of the fourth ultimately. According to McCutcheon, we define, describe, and compare in order to begin asking the important questions—What new information has been gleaned through this study? How are we to interpret all that we have discovered? Have our theories and tools been useful relative to our academic concerns? Can the lessons learned from this study be applied more broadly? In other words, once a comparison has ended the real work begins. It has been my aim, through this comparative analysis of Shin Buddhist and Reformed Christian perspectives on, and responses to, the nature of the human predicament, to accomplish all four of these interrelated tasks.

In order to begin a critical examination of religious phenomena it is vital that we first define clearly the concepts, terms, texts, and theories under review. By doing so


scholars of religion are able to be more forthcoming with regard to their theoretical concerns, as well as the structures of analysis that they employ. As McCutcheon notes, it is important that we (teachers and scholars) help students especially to see that “there is something at stake in the way in which we go about defining and classifying objects in the world.”

As has been noted throughout this project, too many Eliadian comparativists of the past have assumed that phenomena \( x \) and phenomena \( y \) just exist “out there” in the world, and it falls to the comparativist to simply place these two givens side-by-side in order to reveal their relative “uniqueness,” value, dependence, or location on some mythic developmental ladder. Sixteenth-century Catholic missionaries in Japan, Karl Barth, and countless modern scholars of comparison who have been drawn to the apparent resemblances between Shin Buddhism and Reformed Christianity all fit this Eliadian bill. Recall Gregory Alles’s caution though that multicultural studies will continue to devolve into random juxtapositions of cultural datum unless the comparative endeavor is conducted in a manner that is more rigorous and healthy.

In order to accomplish the task of academically self-aware definition when analyzing cross-cultural phenomena comparatively I have made use of the first significant tool of Smithian New Comparativism—ask non-Eliadian questions. Heeding Wendy Doniger’s suggestion, I have “slice[d] the matter sideways.”

Rather than continue following the well-paved course of comparing these traditions based on privileged Protestant Christian concepts such as “faith,” “salvation,” or “grace” I have instead examined the differentials by which two religious texts articulate divergent

\[ \text{Ibid., 219.} \]

\[ \text{Wendy Doniger, } \textit{The Implied Spider: Politics & Theology in Myth} \text{ (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 47.} \]
responses of scope to a conceptually analogous ontological presupposition. In other words, by using the methodology of Alles’s “analogical cart” I have identified two paradigmatic cultural instances by which a common human quandary is approached in a divergent fashion. In this way I have also made use of the second tool of Smithian New Comparativism—reframe the discourse. By rejecting common, universalizing categories of comparison in favor of temporary bridge concepts—“human condition” and “ontological transformation”—and an alternative macromyth, I have heeded Smith’s overarching concern for establishing a “discourse of difference.” Finally, like Smith, I have argued that all comparative studies are triadic, in this sense of comparing two phenomena with respect to the scholar’s creatively invented academic concern.

The second task in the academic study of religion involves description. In order to compare two phenomena it is necessary to engage in thick description of the context, particularity, and individuality of the respective comparands. In the case of this project’s comparative efforts I have used the third, fourth and fifth tools of Smithian Comparativism—ground ideas in the “events” of texts, demonstrate concern for the contextual influences that have shaped a given religious position, and examine phenomena in situ. Whereas many past Eliadian comparisons have placed religious phenomena upon the table of comparison in an ahistorical and non-textual manner I have instead chosen to analyze Shin Buddhist and Reformed Christian positions with regard to ontological transformation as found in two historical documents that have dramatically influenced the developmental trajectories of these traditions—the Tannishō and the

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Canons of Dort. Like Alles, I prefer to “replace ‘meaning’ with ‘event’ as the central category for the history of religions.” In this way, I avoid the tendency to make the sweeping generalizations and universalizing statements found so commonly in Eliadian hermeneutical enterprises. Thus, the specific details and statements used in a comparison of Shin Buddhist and Reformed Christian responses to a conceptually analogous understanding of the human condition are drawn from significant religious works rather than from disembodied religious ideas. This mode of investigation also allows for the examination of the dharmalogical and theological influences that led to the construction of *akunin shōki setsu* (the theory that the evil person is the object of Amida Buddha’s liberating power) and the Doctrine of Limited Atonement (the position that God intends the salvation of only those who among the elect). Finally, examining these doctrinal expressions of orthodoxy in their full cultural embeddedness further defamiliarizes otherwise normative positions and ensures the establishment of a comparative analytical equilibrium between generalizing explanation and concern for particularity. The articulation of contextual influence provides the nuance and rigor necessary for any comparative effort to be useful.

According to McCutcheon the third task in the academic study of religion is, of course, comparison. In order to proceed with rigorous comparison though it is necessary to first delimit the scope of intellectual concern. In other words, it is important to employ analytical control when selectively choosing particular elements to compare. McCutcheon agrees with Smith and William Paden’s concern for controlling aspectual

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focus when he notes, “The scholar’s role is to make explicit and then defend the criteria by which she decides to ignore this or that aspect of a datum in an effort to compare some other aspect.”  

I have sought to accomplish this sixth tool of Smithian Comparativism by choosing to focus on six analogical matters within the Tannishō and the Canons. Recall that this comparative project has revolved around six positions that I maintain are present to some degree in both Shin Buddhism and Reformed Christianity. They are as follows: (1) the nature of the human predicament, (2) the past conditioning action(s) that led to this human condition, (3) the futility of any human effort to change the human predicament, (4) the ontologically transformative response that originates “outside” any human efforts, (5) the transactional quality of this process of ontological transformation, and (6) the scope of transformative response. Concentrating upon only these matters, rather than the totality of the religious traditions, has resulted in “reciprocal illumination” and meaningful interreligious learning. In other words, it has allowed us, like Bernard Faure, to see if viewing otherwise calcified Western ideas through the lens of Buddhist theories might reveal new insights. At this point it should go without saying that any academically useful insights garnered through this comparison are also the result of the seventh tool of Smithian Comparativism—systematically organizing an investigation. Too many academic inquiries are haphazard juxtapositions rather than critical comparisons. Through a bilateral examination of both similarities and differences, conducted in a methodical fashion, it is possible to consider the final task of the academic study of religion—redescriptive analysis.

7 McCutcheon, Critics Not Caretakers, 229.

The meaning and value of redescriptive analysis is not unlike the Zen saying, which suggests that when a person first begins the way of Zen a cup of tea is just a cup of tea. But in time, after some discipline and effort, the practitioner realizes through the Doctrine of Dependent Co-Arising that the humble cup of tea is as expansive as the sky, as high as the mountains, and as deep in meaning as the seas. However, after even greater discipline and rigorous effort the practitioner comes once again to appreciate the cup of tea just as it is—as a humble cup of tea. This awareness though is a much richer one than with which the practitioner began. It is the result of deep analysis and introspection. As Paden puts it, “In music, the trained ear hears more structure but also more difference, more detail, and it inevitably hears every new instance of music within the overall context of the history of musical expression. It is the same with religion. Comparative perspective is educated perspective.” In light of training, practice in the art of disciplined inquiry, and critical perspective “The task of the history of religions is [thus] not to compile exhaustive collections of methodically sifted data but to formulate insights into the unity and diversity of religious realities.” In other words, in light of a Smithian comparison of Shin Buddhist and Reformed Christian responses to a common understanding of the human condition, which has been conducted with a methodological toolset capable of reclaiming the promise of the comparative endeavor, what can we now say?


First, when presented with Shin Buddhist teachings, missionaries Francis Xavier and Alessandro Valignano were not wrong to think that they were considering something they had seen before. The effort to make meaning out of perceived “sameness” is a natural human process. The problem however lies in the fact that these initial perceptions with reified by later scholars. Content to conflate similarity with identity, Eliadian comparativists impeded the progress of the academic study of religion. Conducting arbitrary, unanchored comparisons that were largely devoid of meaningful analysis, past comparativists created an environment in which comparison was deemed a useless tool in the study of religion and culture. The history of twentieth-century comparisons of Shin Buddhism and Christianity demonstrates this clearly. Using the tools of Smithian New Comparativism though I have argued that it is possible to revisit this case study, thereby unearthing previously unseen similarities and differences between these traditions. The most dramatic example of this, of course, is the suggestion that despite numerous structural and conceptual parallels the Shin Buddhist and Reformed Christian traditions not only have widely divergent conceptions of the scope of “salvation” and liberation, but that their respective religious paths also lead to divergent religious ends. This is a suggestion that warrants further exploration in future studies. Additionally, I maintain that the methodological approach to comparison demonstrated throughout this project is a serviceable step toward reclaiming the promise of the discipline. As Paden notes, “Comparative perspective is built up over time.”\textsuperscript{11} The time for Smithian Comparativism has begun.

\textsuperscript{11}Paden, \textit{Religious Worlds}, 162.
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Appendix

Glossary of Important Japanese Terms and Names

aku (悪) = evil
akunin (悪人) = evil doer; evil person
akunin shōki (悪人正機) = evil persons are the object of Amida’s Primal Vow
Amidabutsu (阿弥陀仏) = Buddha of the Western Pure Land
Amidakyō (阿弥陀経) = Smaller Pure Land Sutra
Ashuku (阿闍) = Akṣobhya Buddha
bodai (菩提) = enlightenment, awakening
bonbu (凡夫) = foolish being
bonnō (煩悩) = defilements; afflictions; evil, polluting passions
bonnō gusoku (煩悩具足) = evil inclinations -
busshō (仏性) = buddha-nature
chikushōdō (畜生道) = the realm of animals
denki (伝記) = biography or biographical record
Daigobon (醍醐本) = short title for the manuscript called *A Biography of Honen Shōnin*, found at Daigo-ji temple in Kyoto in 1917
Donran (曇鸞) = Tan-luan; (476-542); third patriarch of Pure Land Buddhism
eshin (廼心) = turning of the mind; change of heart
Eshinni (惠信尼) = wife of Shinran Shōnin
futaten (不退) = the stage of nonretrogression
gedatsu (解脱) = liberation; coming undone from the cycles of rebirth
gōhō (業報) = karmic consequence
gokuraku (極楽) = sukhavatī; the “Land of Bliss”
Gutoku (愚禿) = foolish, bald-headed old man; Shinran’s adopted personal name
gyō (行) = practice
hisō hizoku (非僧非俗) = neither monk nor layman
Hōnen (法然) = Shinran’s teacher; sixth patriarch of Pure Land Buddhism; (1133-1212)
hongan (本願) = the Primal Vow
Hongwanji-ha (本願寺派) = sectarian branch of Shin Buddhism
Hōzō-biku (法蔵比丘) = Dharmakāra Bhiksu; the legendary ahistorical figure who eventually becomes revered as Amida Buddha
ianjin (異安心) = heretical views; aberrant faith
ichinen (一念) = one moment; akin to “one thought-moment”
igyō (易行) = easy practice
jaken (邪見) = wrong views
jinen ni (自然に) = spontaneously; naturally
jiriki (自力) = self power
jōbutsu (成仏) = buddhahood
jōdomon (浄土門) = the Pure Land Path
Jōdo (浄土) = Pure Land
Jōdo ronchū (浄土論註) = Commentary on Vasubandhu’s Treatise on the Pure Land
Jōdo Shinshū (浄土真宗) = True Pure Land Sect
Jōdo wasan (浄土和讃) = Hymns of the Pure Land
kai (戒) = precepts
Kanmuryōjukyō (観無量寿経) = Sūtra on Contemplation of the Buddha of Infinite Life
kū (空) = emptiness; śūnyatā
kyō (経) = “sutra;” scripture
Kyōgyōshinshō (教行信証 Collection of Passages Revealing the True Teaching, Practice, and Realization of the Pure Land Way)
makoto no kokoro (まことの心) = true, real, and sincere heart and mind
mappō (末法) = later days of the Dharma; the last Dharma
Mattōshō (末灯 erro) = Lamp for the Later Ages
metsudo (滅度) = nirvāṇa
Miroku (弥勒) = Maitreya Buddha
myōgō fushigi (名号不思議) = wondrous name
Muryōjukyō (無量寿経) = Larger Pure Land Sutra
“Namu-Amida-Butsu” (南無阿弥陀仏) = “Homage to Amida Buddha;” “Honor to Amida Buddha”
nangyō (難行) = difficult practice
nehan (涅槃) = nirvāṇa
nembutsu (念仏) = recitation of Amida’s name; meditation on the buddha
ōjō (往生) = birth; birth in Amida’s Pure Land
rokudō (六道) = samsāra; the six realms of existence
Ryūju (龍樹) = Nāgārjuna; first patriarch of Pure Land Buddhism
sangaku (三學) = the three learnings; the threefold practice of precepts, meditation, and wisdom
sanmai (三味) = samādhi; a mental state of concentration
sanshin (三心) = doctrine of the threefold mind
satori (悟) = awakening
seigan fushigi (誓願不思議) = the wonderous vow
senju nembutsu (専修念佛) = exclusive nembutsu
sesshu fusha (誓取不捨) = never to be forsaken
setsu (説) = doctrine; exposition
shabado (娑婆道) = The Realm of Shaba; the world of endurance; sahā
shingyo (信行) = true entrusting
shinjin (信心) = entrusting heart; faith
shinryo (真如) = “thusness”; tathatā; “things as they are”
Shinran (親鸞) = founder of the True Pure Land sect; (1173-1262)
Shinran Shōnin (親鸞上人) = Master Shinran
shishin (至心) = sincere mind
shōdōmon (聖道門) = the path of sanctification
Shōnin (上人) = holy master; Master; “saint”
Shōshinge (正信偈) = Hymn of True Shinjin and the Nembutsu
shukugō (宿業) = past karma
sōgya (僧伽) = sangha; the Buddhist order
Tannishō (歎異抄) = A Record in Lament of Divergences
tariki (他力) = Other Power
tenjin (天神) = devas, gods of heaven
tsumi (罪) = evil; offence; to doubt
yokushō (欲生) = aspiration for rebirth in the Pure Land
Yuien-bō (唯円房) = probable author and compiler of the Tannishō
zaigō (罪業) = karmic evil; defiled karma