

# 11 Shin Buddhism (Jōdo Shinshū) in Europe

Organizational Issues

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## Abstract

Jōdo Shinshū [Shin Buddhism] remains little known in Europe, despite the size and importance of this Buddhist sect in Japan. The European situation also presents a marked contrast with its significant presence in the United States, largely based in the Japanese American community. Jōdo Shinshū can thus be seen as a global religious organization that has a significantly different profile in different regional settings. This chapter focuses on the reasons behind this, and considers the history of Jōdo Shinshū in Europe, and the organizational challenges it has faced there: how has Jōdo Shinshū sought to adapt to the European setting, and in particular how has it situated itself in relation to other Buddhist organizations within Europe and Jōdo Shinshū elsewhere?

**Keywords:** Jōdo Shinshū, Buddhism in Europe, regional adaptation, religious organization, ordination, ritual language

## Introduction

This chapter presents a case study of the emergence in Europe of a network of local branches of one of Japan's major Buddhist sects, Jōdo Shinshū (also known as Shin Buddhism).<sup>1</sup> Jōdo Shinshū is one of the largest Buddhist sects

<sup>1</sup> The word *jōdo* (often written as *jodo*) literally means 'pure land', while *shin* means 'true'. So, Jōdo Shinshū means 'true pure land school'. It is a branch of Pure Land Buddhism. Shinran, the founder of Jōdo Shinshū, was a follower of Honen, who founded Pure Land Buddhism (Jōdo shū) in Japan.

in Japan, dating back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. There are nearly 20,000 temples in Japan affiliated to one of the two major branches of the sect: Hongwanji-ha and Ōtani-ha (also known as Nishi Hongwanji or Honpa Hongwanji, and Higashi Honganji),<sup>2</sup> both of which have their head temples in Kyoto, and are headed by descendants of Shinran, the founder of Jōdo Shinshū. There is no difference between the teachings of Nishi and Higashi Honganji – the split between the two derives from a succession dispute in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. Hongwanji-ha is the larger of the two, and the branch with which this chapter is primarily concerned.

A form of Pure Land Buddhism, Jōdo Shinshū can be more broadly situated within Mahayana Buddhism. Its central teaching is reliance on Amida Buddha. The movement teaches that we are all embraced by Amida's primal vow, which assures rebirth in Amida's Pure Land. Rather than advocating a particular practice therefore, Jōdo Shinshū teaches that we can simply rely on, or entrust ourselves to, Amida Buddha. The aim of Jōdo Shinshū could be summarized as awakening to the power of Amida's vow, and reaching a state of entrusting oneself to Amida, commonly referred to in Japanese as *shinjin*.<sup>3</sup>

Jōdo Shinshū has a large overseas membership in the USA (where the Shin Buddhist organization linked to Nishi Hongwanji is referred to as the Buddhist Churches of America) and also in Hawaii and parts of South America (especially Brazil). In 2009, the membership of the Hongwanji-ha branch in the USA was estimated by Hongwanji at around 145,000. The establishment of the American branches of Jōdo Shinshū dates back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and is closely linked to the history of Japanese migration to the Americas, as explored by Moriya in Chapter 12. Today, Jōdo Shinshū in the Americas has a membership extending beyond the ethnic Japanese community, but with strong roots in the Japanese diaspora. In the USA and Hawaii in particular, Jōdo Shinshū has a very well-established organization, including a network of temples and linked organizations (such as women's groups and youth groups), and a ministry training programme. These local organizations are in turn closely linked to their parent organizations in

2 The preferred forms of romanization for Japanese words differ between the two branches of Jōdo Shinshū, and are not applied consistently. Here, I use the romanization generally used by the English-speaking followers of each branch.

3 *Shinjin* is written with two Chinese characters: the first meaning 'entrust', and the second as 'heart' or 'mind'. The translation of *shinjin* has been hotly debated among Jōdo Shinshū followers for decades – early translations as 'faith' have been seen as problematic because of their Christian connotations. The preferred current translation in English texts produced by the movement is 'entrusting heart'.

Japan, and are for the most part affiliated to one of the two main branches of Shin Buddhism in Japan.

Jōdo Shinshū also exists in Europe, where its history dates back to the 1950s. In the period since then, while other forms of Buddhism have gained popularity and a sizeable following, Shin Buddhism has remained comparatively unknown, and at the time of writing, probably has no more than a couple of hundred members throughout Europe. European Jōdo Shinshū thus presents an interesting contrast both with other Buddhist groups in Europe, and with Jōdo Shinshū elsewhere. Based on research with European Shin Buddhist groups over a period of two decades beginning in the 1990s, this chapter presents first a brief history of this little-known branch of Jōdo Shinshū; followed by an analysis of the characteristics of European Shin Buddhist groups and the challenges they have faced in the European context; and the ways in which they have sought to adapt.

### Historical background

In Europe, the first Jōdo Shinshū group was established in 1956, by Harry Pieper, a German Buddhist living in Berlin, who had converted to Buddhism in the 1930s. Pieper met Kōshō Ōtani, then head abbot of Nishi Hongwanji, when Ōtani visited Berlin in 1954. Pieper received a form of ordination as a priest from Ōtani, despite not having completed the usual training for new priests in Japan. Pieper's active involvement in the Berlin group was short-lived, owing to the decline in his health from the 1960s onwards, but he had a larger impact elsewhere, as other Europeans interested in Shin Buddhism contacted him for information. Notable among these were Friedrich Fenzl, who established an Austrian branch of Jōdo Shinshū in the 1960s, and Jean Eracle, a former Roman Catholic priest from Switzerland, who set up the Buddhist Society of Jōdo Shinshū in Switzerland in 1970. Neither of them was ordained in Japan, but Fenzl studied at one of the Shin Buddhist universities in Japan, while Eracle received a form of ordination via Pieper, with Kōshō Ōtani's authorization. Other early converts to Jōdo Shinshū included Jack Austin in Britain, who met Pieper in the 1950s and received ordination in Japan in 1977, Adrian Peel, a friend of Jack Austin's who was ordained in Japan in 1979, and a follower of Jean Eracle, Jérôme Ducor, who was also ordained in Japan at the same time as Jack Austin.

Ordination in Europe became a controversial topic for a period. The general practice in Jōdo Shinshū is for a two-stage ordination: firstly *tokudō* [tonsure] followed by certification as *kyōshi* [teacher]. Both stages involve a

period of training, followed by an ordination ceremony. Currently, training is offered in Kyoto in Japan, and recently has also become available for Hongwanji Honpa followers in the USA, at the Institute of Buddhist Studies. For both *tokudō* and *kyōshi* certification, the training is followed by an ordination ceremony in Kyoto. In the case of ministers serving in the USA, a further qualification may also be obtained, that of *kaikyōshi* [overseas minister]. Ordination training in Japan is generally conducted in Japanese, but from 1989 periodic ordination training in English has also been offered in Japan. The ordination training in the USA is also in English.

The current *tokudō* ceremony was standardized in 1886, during a period of organizational re-structuring and centralization of Hongwanji in Japan. At the same time, it was made a requirement that the ceremony should be conducted by the head abbot [*monshu*] of the temple. Current explanations of this practice emphasize that the *monshu* of both main branches of Jōdo Shinshū must be a direct descendant of Shinran, the founder, since the headship has been hereditary since the time of Shinran (celibacy is not practised by Shin Buddhist priests). Compulsory ordination by the *monshu* was a departure from previous practice. In pre-modern times in Japan it had been possible for ordinands who lived far from the head temple, or who could not afford to be ordained at the head temple, to receive ordination at their own temples – a system called *jitokudō*, or self-ordination (Nasu 1998: 209). This practice was cited as a precedent in a short-lived attempt to establish a European ordination programme in Switzerland.

The structure of ordination training presents a problem for non-English speaking followers of Jōdo Shinshū, as there is no training available in languages other than English and Japanese. Further, the fact that training is not available at all in Europe presents a problem for those who – for various reasons – are not able to travel to Japan. These considerations underpinned the somewhat unusual route to ‘a form of ordination’ for both Pieper and Eracle. However, these ordinations were recognized by the head temple as they had been authorized (and in Pieper’s case performed) by the head abbot. It was in part owing to a recognition of these problems, and in part in an attempt to root Jōdo Shinshū more firmly in Europe that Eracle introduced a programme to train and ordain local priests himself in Switzerland in the 1990s. He aimed to open up ordination to members who spoke neither Japanese nor English. Although in this case the ordination ceremony was not performed by the head abbot, Eracle argued that there was a precedent in the pre-1886 system of self ordination. However, this programme was not recognized by the head temple in Japan, and those ordained by Eracle only achieved limited local recognition in Switzerland. Despite attempts

to revive a European based ordination following Eracle's death by one of his followers, it has now lapsed. Jōdo Shinshū in Switzerland is now headed by Jerome Ducor, a Swiss national who was ordained in Japan, and is fully recognized by Hongwanji. The general consensus among European members at present seems to be that Jōdo Shinshū is not well enough established in Europe to support a locally run ordination programme.

It is also worth noting that organization of the priesthood is somewhat different, and the significance of the first stage of ordination [*tokudō*] is interpreted distinctly in Japan, Europe, and the USA. In Japan, the position of temple priest is generally hereditary and members of temple families often receive *tokudō* while quite young, and it is not seen as sufficient in itself to become a temple priest – *kyōshi* certification is also required. In the USA, although some priests are sent from Japan, and may come from temple families, there are also a number of American-born priests, not all of whom are ethnic Japanese, and who do not necessarily come from temple families. Also, in the USA, while recipients of *tokudō* may perform certain roles in the temple, they cannot become the main priest of the temple until they receive at least the *kyōshi* certification, and preferably the *kaikyōshi* certification.

In Europe, on the other hand, only one of the non-Japanese priests has the *kyōshi* certification, Jérôme Ducor, who succeeded Eracle after his death. All the other non-Japanese priests have received *tokudō*, but not *kyōshi*. In the European context *tokudō* is considered sufficient in order to become a temple priest, and the vast majority of European Jōdo Shinshū temples are led by locally born priests who have only *tokudō*. This perhaps reflects the greater difficulty faced by Europeans, especially non-English speakers, in fulfilling the requirements to obtain both qualifications – even obtaining the first stage, the *tokudō*, involves a substantial commitment. Europeans now invariably take the training in Japan. Members must be recommended to take the training (generally, though not always, by their local priest) and must then wait for an English language *tokudō* training course to be scheduled in Japan (these are not held every year – rarely, special arrangements may be made for non-Japanese to receive *tokudō* in the interim). They must then attend a demanding ten-day residential training course, during which they study Jōdo Shinshū teachings and master the performance of key elements of ritual and liturgy, including chanting in Japanese and Sino-Japanese. It is perhaps not surprising then that undertaking *tokudō* is seen as a major life event in the European context, and tends to confer a measure of authority. It is also experienced by those Europeans who have completed it as both very challenging and personally transformative.

To return to the historical narrative: by the beginning of the 1980s, Shin Buddhism had established a number of centres in Europe, all affiliated with Nishi Hongwanji in Japan (a further centre was established in Poland during the 1980s), and also had several ordained priests (at *tokudō* level), although few lay members. In Germany, Switzerland, and Belgium, almost all those involved were Europeans, while in the UK, (where the group was run jointly by Jack Austin and a Japanese priest Hisao Inagaki, then lecturer at the School of Oriental Studies (SOAS) at the University of London) there was a more mixed membership, including some Japanese.

In the 1980s the European Shin Buddhist groups suffered some setbacks. In Britain, Jack Austin became ill, and Hisao Inagaki had to return to Japan, following the death of his father, and gave up his post at SOAS. A network of Pure Land Buddhists, the Pure Land Buddhist Fellowship, continued to exist in Britain, but it was to be some decades before another British-born priest was ordained in the Hongwanji tradition. Both in Britain and in Germany Shin Buddhists also experienced some difficulties in gaining acceptance by other Buddhists, who expressed doubts as to whether Jōdo Shinshū could be considered as 'real' Buddhism, for reasons that are considered in greater detail below.<sup>4</sup> In Britain, the Pure Land Buddhist Fellowship only gained permission to meet at the premises of the Buddhist Society in London in 1995, with Pure Land Buddhism placed on the Society's syllabus for the first time the following year. Similarly, in Germany, after a brief period of membership in the German Buddhist Union in the early 1980s (which then lapsed) local Jōdo Shinshū groups experienced difficulties re-joining. Many in the German Buddhist Union opposed Jōdo Shinshū's application to re-join again on the grounds that they were not real Buddhists. The Zen groups in particular argued that 'Amidism' was more based on Christianity than Buddhism (as discussed further below). These objections were eventually overcome in 1992. The German branch of Jōdo Shinshū, then under the leadership of another native German priest, Thomas Moser, was then allowed to re-join.

Overall, the 1990s were a period when Shin Buddhism in Europe gained greater acceptance from other European Buddhists and also expanded. Two new temples are particularly notable here. Ekō-ji, also known as Eko Haus, an impressive Japanese style Jōdo Shinshū temple, was built in 1992

4 One widely cited comment is that of Christmas Humphreys, founder of the Buddhist Society in London, who wrote of Shin: 'Here [...] is a form of Buddhism which on the face of it discards three-quarters of Buddhism. Compared with the teaching of the Pali Canon it is but Buddhism and water [...] This is easy, simple religion, for all the work is done for one [...] and it may be better than no religion at all. But is it Buddhism?' (1990: 164-165).

in Düsseldorf, a city that has a large number of Japanese expatriate residents. This was paralleled by the establishment in 1994 of the Three Wheels temple in west London, in an area with a high concentration of expatriate Japanese thanks to the nearby Japanese school. Both of these temples differ in important respects from the other Jōdo Shinshū European centres. Firstly, both have Japanese priests, and secondly both are organizationally and financially independent from Nishi Hongwanji. Eko Haus is formally affiliated to the Bukkyō Dendō Kyōkai (the Society for the Promotion of Buddhism, a Japan based organization linked to the Numata Foundation) and funded by the Mitsutoyō Foundation,<sup>5</sup> although their priests are drawn from Nishi Hongwanji. The Three Wheels Temple in London is a branch of Shōgyōji in Japan, a temple linked to Higashi Hongwanji. The head priest of Three Wheels, Kemmyō Taira Sato is a former University professor and also a former pupil of D.T. Suzuki, and is very active in organizing classes on aspects of Shin Buddhist teachings, and in translating key Shin Buddhist texts. Although not directly linked to Nishi Hongwanji, it maintains close ties with other Shin Buddhist groups in Europe, and organizes a range of activities, not necessarily aimed solely at Shin Buddhists. These include study classes, retreats, meditation classes, monthly meetings with dharma talks, and an annual reconciliation service for survivors of WWII.

Eko Haus plays a dual role as a centre for religion and culture, running courses introducing various aspects of Japanese culture such as calligraphy or flower arranging, which may be considered as Buddhist arts with a meditative component. It also houses a library, a guest house for visiting scholars, and a kindergarten open to Japanese and non-Japanese local residents, regardless of religious affiliation. Eko Haus also offers facilities for a range of Buddhist communities, and to that end has a special meeting room in the basement of the temple complex where the object of veneration is a changeable scroll that can be altered to show the images of founders of different traditions as the occasion demands. However, the main worship hall is constructed along Jōdo Shinshū lines, and the services follow the Nishi Hongwanji pattern. Eko Haus has become an important centre for periodic meetings and conferences for the whole Nishi Hongwanji European *sangha* [Buddhist community].

Other developments in the last two decades include a new Jōdo Shinshū group in Romania, headed by Adrian Cîrlea, who first encountered Jōdo Shinshū on the Internet. Cîrlea was ordained in Kyoto in 2003, and has

5 Mitsutoyo Corporation was founded by Yehan Numata (1897-1994), who also established the Bukkyō Dendō Kyōkai.



**Figure 11.1** Ekō-ji [Eko-Haus], Düsseldorf, Germany



since become very active in European Shin Buddhism, although his group remains small. Cîrlea contributes regularly to Internet-based debates on Shin Buddhism. In Germany, further ordinations of native German priests have taken place, and there are now Jōdo Shinshū centres in Berlin and Mönchengladbach (near Düsseldorf) as well as the temple in Düsseldorf. In the UK, after an interval of some decades with no British-born Hongwanji-ha priest, a British priest, Gary Robinson was ordained in Kyoto in 2012, and now leads a small Jōdo Shinshū group in Southampton. There has also been a generational shift in leadership, with the death of several members of the founding generation. Eracle in Switzerland has been replaced by Jerome Ducor, and Peel in Belgium by Fons Martens. And in all the European centres there has been a shift in modes of communication, with Internet-based communication taking on an ever more important role. The implications of this are considered further below.

### **Jōdo Shinshū in Europe: Organizational characteristics**

What are the key organizational characteristics of Jōdo Shinshū in Europe, and how does European Jōdo Shinshū differ from Jōdo Shinshū in Japan and the USA? The most apparent difference concerns the membership. There are now branches of Jōdo Shinshū (Hongwanji-ha) in seven European countries: Germany, Austria, Belgium, the UK, Switzerland, Poland, and Romania, as well as a small number of members in other European countries where



there is no formal Jōdo Shinshū centre. With the exceptions of Eko Haus in Düsseldorf, and the Three Wheels temple in London, the temples are run and attended by Europeans, all of whom are first generation converts. However, the total number of members remains very small, and there is little involvement of local expatriate Japanese in the European-run temples, even where many of these expatriates may be formally attached to a Jōdo Shinshū temple in Japan.

One can explain the lack of involvement of Japanese expatriates in Europe with local Buddhist organizations by considering the role that Buddhist temples take in most people's lives in Japan. Temples primarily offer funeral services and services for the ancestors, in a context where membership of a particular Buddhist sect is largely a matter of belonging at the level of a household, and is therefore conferred by birth or by marrying into a household, rather than by individual choice. The trend to 'funerary Buddhism' in Japan has been widely noted (see e.g. Reader 1991: 87-89), and there are efforts to combat this, and to carve out new roles for temples in Japan. Still, this remains the dominant perception of Buddhism for most people in Japan. When Japanese migrated to the Americas and to Hawaii, Jōdo Shinshū temples there catered for these same needs, while also providing an important source of cultural, social, and political support in the context of exploitation and discrimination, as noted by Moriya (Chapter 12). Hence, in the Americas, Jōdo Shinshū has a strong ethnic Japanese base, although it has also expanded beyond this in recent years.

In contrast, in contemporary Europe, Japanese expatriates are generally short-term migrants, who rarely need funeral services, and who rely on their home temples in Japan for the care of the ancestors. Discrimination, while sometimes present, is not on a scale comparable to that experienced by ethnic Japanese in the Americas before and during WWII, and social support for Japanese expatriates is provided by a range of other, mainly secular, Japanese-run organizations. From this perspective, a local European run Jōdo Shinshū temple has little appeal for most expatriate Japanese in Europe. Although the two Japanese-run European temples attract somewhat greater numbers of local expatriate Japanese, the numbers are still relatively small, and many of them attend only on special occasions – regular attendance at the temple is not a feature of Japanese Buddhism, and is not expected in Japan.

Secondly, the various European Shin Buddhist groups have developed largely independently from one another, although often linked by personal connections established through a wider European Buddhist network. The initiative for establishing most of these groups has come from local people,

not from missionaries sent from Japan. Communications among the various groups are necessarily limited by the range of languages spoken. English is most often used as the common language, despite the small number of native English-speaking members. However, there is no universally shared language, and there is a tendency for the groups to divide along linguistic lines. One result of all this has been that the individual groups have strong local identities, and may differ quite markedly from each other in various respects, including the form of services, use of local languages, and incorporation of practices such as meditation, as discussed further below.

Shin Buddhist groups in Europe have also enjoyed a great deal of autonomy in relation to the head temple in Japan. In formal organizational terms, Europe is listed as an overseas regional district in Hongwanji's organizational chart, alongside Australia, Mexico, Taiwan, and Nepal. Larger overseas branches are given the designation of district – a category that includes the Buddhist Churches of America, Canada, Hawaii, and South America. Links with Japan are mediated by the international office of Hongwanji, the International Association of Buddhist Culture (IABC), but in practice there are insufficient resources available to closely oversee the European groups, especially given their small size and the range of languages. The IABC does provide a degree of financial support for European Jōdo Shinshū though and is closely involved with the biennial Europe wide conferences which provide the main pan-European meeting point for European Shin Buddhists. Conferences may also be attended by members of Jōdo Shinshū from other countries, and the conference in 2014 included representatives from mainland USA, Hawaii, and Nepal.

These conferences are also the main occasion when representatives of Hongwanji in Japan visit Europe, and have been led on most occasions by either the retired Head Abbot [*zenmon-sama*], who is the head of the Hongwanji organization worldwide, or the designated successor to the headship [*shinmon-sama*]. As noted above, these positions are always occupied by direct descendants of the founder, Shinran, and partly for this reason, those occupying these positions are regarded with considerable reverence by the European followers, and their attendance is an important symbol of the recognition of the European branches by the head temple. However, this recognition does not extend to any systematic supervision or control of the local groups on an everyday basis. The running of local groups is generally left to the local priest, where there is one (not always the case). The control that the head temple exercises over the ordination process thus constitutes the main (indirect) form of control of the European network of branches by the centre in Japan.

Although the symbolic links between the European temples and Japan are seen as very important, and are emphasized on occasions such as the Europe-wide conferences, to date there has been no formal organizational structure to draw the various temples within Europe together – rather, they are all linked to the head temple in Japan, but only rather loosely to each other. Although there have been a number of attempts by the parent organization in Japan to introduce an overarching European structure, including the 2014 appointment of the Belgian priest, Fons Martens as the main liaison point between Europe and Japan, these have met with a cool response from many European members. The argument is often made, in discussions among members, that it is not realistic to try to create a single Europe-wide organization, given the cultural and linguistic differences between the various European countries.

One point that the various groups in Europe do have in common, though, is the issue of positioning themselves within the wider context of European Buddhism. As noted above, there have been repeated challenges to Jōdo Shinshū's authenticity as a form of Buddhism from other European Buddhists, generally on the grounds that with its emphasis on reliance on Amida Buddha (which in older English language publications is often phrased in terms of 'faith') it looks suspiciously like Christianity in disguise.<sup>6</sup> This suspicion is exacerbated by the absence of an easily identifiable form of practice, such as meditation, in Jōdo Shinshū. In the Japanese context, this is readily explicable in terms of the well-known opposition between self-power [*jiriki*] Buddhism, which relies on practices such as chanting or meditation, and other-power [*tariki*] Buddhism, or Pure Land Buddhism, which relies on the power of Amida Buddha's vow. However, in the European context, other-power Buddhism is an unfamiliar concept to many.

While in other Buddhist sects, practices such as chanting or seated meditation have a central role and are seen as transformative for the individual practitioner, in Jōdo Shinshū the central tenet is that of reliance on Amida Buddha, rather than on one's own efforts. This casts practices such as chanting and meditation in a very different light. While chanting is a part of Jōdo Shinshū services, and in particular the repetition of the *nenbutsu* – *Namu Amida Butsu* – is a well-known feature of Shin Buddhism, the chanting in services is a part of the liturgy rather than a practice of self-transformation, and saying the *nenbutsu* is understood as an expression of gratitude to

6 See Amstutz (1997: 55-65) for a detailed discussion of comparisons drawn by Western observers between Christianity and Shin Buddhism in the early modern period.

Amida Buddha<sup>7</sup>. This contrasts sharply with, for example, Sōka Gakkai, in which members and interested non-members alike are exhorted to chant *Namu Myōhō Renge Kyō* [devotion to the Lotus sutra] and invited to then observe the transformative effects this practice may create in their lives<sup>8</sup>.

Seated meditation, often viewed by Europeans and Americans as synonymous with Buddhism, may also be viewed as problematic in terms of the *jiriki-tariki* [self power/ other power] opposition. Insofar as meditation is practised by some schools of Buddhism as a means to enlightenment, it is viewed as a *jiriki* practice. The idea that meditation could be a means to enlightenment is firmly rejected by Jōdo Shinshū. For this reason, meditation is not generally part of Jōdo Shinshū services or meetings, nor is it systematically practised by either priests or other members (although some may practise on an individual basis). One Jōdo Shinshū European priest explained:

People in Europe expect that Buddhism equals meditation and vegetarianism. People may come to *dōjō* [the Jōdo Shinshū centre] once, ask about meditation, and when you say you don't meditate they say, 'Can you offer meditation classes?' Then I say, 'I could, but what's the point?' Then often they don't come back!

Although this priest decided not to offer meditation classes, other Jōdo Shinshū temples both in Europe and in the USA, do offer such classes partly in response to the widespread perception outside Asia that this is an integral part of Buddhism. However, these classes are not a core part of a Shin Buddhist temple's activities, and are presented more as an optional activity that may have some relaxation and general health benefits rather than a practice undertaken with spiritual benefits in mind.

Potential European converts may thus be deterred by the absence of an easily graspable practice, or of other features commonly associated with European perceptions of Buddhism. Shin Buddhists are not vegetarians, they are not celibate, and they are not barred from drinking alcohol. The questions, 'What do you do if you are a Shin Buddhist?' or 'What is your

7 The *nenbutsu* is not usually translated, but the meaning could be roughly summarized as an expression of reliance on and entrusting oneself to Amida Buddha (Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha 2002: 74-75)

8 This is a reference to the title of the Lotus Sutra, which is central to the Nichiren school of Japanese Buddhism, to which Sōka Gakkai belongs. It can be translated literally as "devotion to the Lotus sutra", but for a full discussion of its meaning from the movement's perspective see Sōka Gakkai 2015.

practice?’ are hard to answer. Europeans may see the act of entrusting oneself to Amida Buddha and his vow as too similar to Christianity (with which they are familiar) to be appealing.

Against this background, and in the context of their very small membership, it has been important for Jōdo Shinshū groups in Europe to position themselves clearly as part of the broader network of European Buddhist organizations. And they also need to comply with local legal requirements concerning the formation and organization of religious groups. Baumann (2002: 97) has pointed out that in some European countries, notably Germany and Austria, in order to obtain state recognition and hence legal rights, e.g. access to the media, financial support, legal standing and recognition equivalent to those of Christian churches, or the right to teach in schools, certain requirements have to be met. This usually involves setting up umbrella Buddhist organizations, and delineating and mutually agreeing upon specific Buddhist doctrines. To be recognised, it is essential to belong to an overarching Buddhist organization, and to conform with that organization’s requirements, which in turn are influenced by the requirements laid down by the state. This has caused problems for Jōdo Shinshū. For example, in Germany the German Buddhist Union established a Buddhist creed, but some local Jōdo Shinshū members did not feel they could accept all the elements, as the core of Jōdo Shinshū teachings is reliance on Amida, rather than accepting a body of specified rules or precepts. This resulted in some members leaving Jōdo Shinshū when it re-joined the German Buddhist Union in 1994, although currently Jōdo Shinshū groups in Germany enjoy good relations with the German Buddhist Union, as do other Jōdo Shinshū groups with the Buddhist networks in their respective countries.

Another aspect of this positioning of European Jōdo Shinshū groups within the wider frame of European Buddhism concerns the terminology and forms of service used in Europe. Strikingly, the ritual forms adopted in Europe are much more likely to resemble the forms generally used in Japan (such as music and chanting) than the forms used in the USA. While Jōdo Shinshū in pre-war USA adopted a service format that resembled Christian services in many ways, including hymns,<sup>9</sup> Jōdo Shinshū groups in Europe tend to be resistant to any format that appears Christian, preferring forms that align closely with European expectations of Buddhism. This includes chanting to Japanese style music, often in Sino-Japanese, and sometimes

9 Some of these apparently Western-style hymns were actually written in Japan. The late nineteenth century saw Western style musical settings widely adopted in Japan, including in some Buddhist contexts (Asuka 2008).

in Pali (e.g. when taking the three Buddhist refuges; in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha) and also sometimes in local European languages. An exception to this was Jōdo Shinshū in Switzerland during Eracle's lifetime. As noted above, Eracle was a former Roman Catholic priest, and also a passionate advocate of the localization of Jōdo Shinshū. As part of his attempts to localize Shin Buddhism, he set some Jōdo Shinshū services to a Benedictine chant, but this innovation appears to have lapsed with Eracle's death. The remaining Jōdo Shinshū members in Switzerland seem to prefer the Japanese style musical settings.

In any case, the hymnals used in American branches of Jōdo Shinshū are never used in Europe, and European groups have also avoided terms widely used in American Jōdo Shinshū such as 'church' or 'bishop' which are associated with Christianity. There is a clear contrast with strategies adopted by Jōdo Shinshū in the USA in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, which developed in a context in which discrimination against Japanese migrants was rife. There were therefore some benefits in adopting forms that echoed forms used in the local religion, Christianity. In Europe, on the other hand, the forms of service and language have developed in a context in which Jōdo Shinshū groups are trying to establish an identity that is clearly aligned with Buddhism, and correspondingly distanced from Christianity. While proselytization is not a major feature of Jōdo Shinshū, in conversations with European members of Jōdo Shinshū, many have suggested that European converts to Buddhism appear to be looking for something different from Christianity. Emphasizing the differences, rather than the similarities, between Jōdo Shinshū and Christianity may therefore be important in enhancing Jōdo Shinshū's appeal to potential local converts in the European context, particularly as there is no core of ethnic Japanese members to rely on.

Against this background of limited local knowledge of Jōdo Shinshū, and the widespread misunderstandings concerning this form of Buddhism in Europe, one of the priorities for European Jōdo Shinshū has been the dissemination of accurate information about Jōdo Shinshū, and the translation, or re-translation of key texts into local languages. This links with a somewhat academic bent that is noticeable across the various European Jōdo Shinshū groups, and which also finds expression in the modes of communication between the groups, and in the organization of Europe-wide events. Many of the early generation of European members were involved in academia or education, several as teachers at universities.

Publishing journals and organizing conferences to bring together the European members was an early feature which has continued to the present. In 1979 a new journal of European Shin Buddhism, *The Pure Land*, was

launched, while in 1980 the first European conference of Shin Buddhism was held, thenceforth to be a biennial event. In 1982 the International Association of Shin Buddhist Studies (IASBS) was launched at Ryūkoku University in Japan to promote the study of Shin Buddhism, following closely behind the establishment of another international body based in Japan, the International Association of Buddhist Culture (IABC). Founded in 1980, IABC aims 'to promote Buddhism throughout the world, especially the Other-Power teaching of Shinran Shōnin (1173-1262), popularly known as Shin Buddhism' (IABC N.d.).

In many respects, these conferences follow the standard format of academic conferences, and indeed the IASBS is an academic association. Name cards and welcome packs with copies of presentation papers are distributed on registration at the opening of the conference. Academic papers may be presented in the IASBS section of the conference by a range of speakers, including guest speakers from Japan. A further section offers a forum for members to give papers based on more personal experiences. In practice however, the distinction between the two sections in terms of the types of papers presented may become somewhat blurred. The most obvious difference between these events and other academic conferences is that short morning and evening services are held before and after the main session of the day. Furthermore, a highlight of these conferences is the ceremony for the confirmation of new Jōdo Shinshū members [*kikyōshiki*] conducted by either the retired abbot (currently) or, previously, the designated successor (who has now taken up the position of head abbot).

During the services, the atmosphere of the conference is transformed: ordained conference attendees don their robes, and members who have previously been confirmed put on a special Buddhist vestment [*shikishō*], and take out their prayer beads [*nenju*]. The services are usually very short, and consist largely of chanting, but the change in feel from academic to religious gathering is marked. On these occasions, the varying religious statuses of the conference participants is also made visible: from ordained priests in full robes, through to lay members with the *shikishō* with the Hongwanji crest (a mark of organizational membership) worn over their ordinary clothes, and observers or interested participants from other Buddhist organizations, or in some cases with no visible religious affiliation at all. The *kikyōshiki*, in particular, is a ritual moment of strong and visible emotion for some participants, in particular the new members who are receiving it, but also for others for whom it brings back memories of their own *kikyōshiki*.

These moments aside, some participants find the conference format, and the focus on giving formal papers, alienating. At conferences that I have attended some have commented that the content was too complex and



hard to follow, a problem which was exacerbated by language difficulties – conferences take place in English, which is a foreign language for most of the participants, as there are very few native English-speaking members in Europe. However, there is no alternative by which all European members and the visiting Japanese participants may communicate. It seems likely that this difficulty, together with the financial costs of attending conferences abroad without sponsorship, may prevent many European members from attending, and may exacerbate the tendency for the conferences to be dominated by the more academically inclined among the membership, and by those who are competent in English.

Despite these difficulties, there are also important organizational benefits from these conferences, which mirror to a great extent the experience of academic conferences. The conference dinner(s), coffee breaks, lunches, and informal conversations between organized sessions, offer opportunities to establish networks, and renew and reinforce interpersonal bonds between members who may otherwise have few opportunities to meet. Initiatives taken at conferences may also have long-term organizational implications. For example, at the 2014 conference an Internet-based group was formed for women members, who felt that there was a need for an international grouping to give a forum specifically for women and their experiences of Jōdo Shinshū. The conference format is also used in other Shin Buddhist organizations in Europe. The European Association of Shin Buddhism was created in 2000 in Baden-Baden, on an initiative by Ekō-ji, the Japanese run temple in Düsseldorf. Members meet twice a year in years when there is no IABC/ IASBS Shin Conference. At one meeting academic papers are presented, and at the other meeting European members give presentations.

Another increasingly important form of communication is the Internet, with various Internet forums existing in different languages, including French, German, and English, as well as less widely spoken languages such as Dutch and Romanian. Facebook groups, blogs, and websites are all used, and some groups also enable long distance participation via the Internet. Local temple events are often publicized via their websites, which also frequently offer newsletters and dharma talks. With the advent of a younger generation of priests in Europe, who are more at ease with the Internet, the potential for a de-territorialised European Internet-based Jōdo Shinshū community has grown, and affiliation with a particular group is no longer necessarily based on geography.<sup>10</sup> The Internet is now widely used in building

10 An extreme example of de-territorialization is that of the White Lotus Center in Alaska (closed when the priests of this temple left Alaska). This was a Shin temple which, for its twelve

Shin Buddhist networks across Europe, organizing meetings, and engaging in discussion and debate, Skype also provides a means for members to participate in services remotely. The Internet is an increasingly important means for groups to make their presence known. The Belgian temple Jikō-ji, for example, finds that most of the new contacts made with their group come from people who have discovered them via the Internet.

## Conclusion

What are the implications of the above discussion for the development of a 'European Jōdo Shinshū'? There are some distinctive aspects of Jōdo Shinshū in Europe which are shared across the region, notably, the predominance of locally born, non-ethnic Japanese members and the influence of more general European perceptions of Buddhism. Nevertheless, the individual European centres are divided by other factors such as language and geography. This has contributed to the development of a situation where the different centres are largely autonomous, and in many cases, have closer links with the Japanese centre (Hongwanji), from which they derive training and some financial support, than they do with each other.

Hongwanji retains clear overall authority in Europe, and other overseas branches, by virtue of the hereditary headship, which traces its descent back to the founder. In the European context, this is unchallengeable, nor do local European members wish to challenge it (although in Japan there have been a number of succession disputes among Shinran's descendants over the centuries). Another important aspect of Hongwanji's authority is its control over the ordination process. This was recognized by Eracle, and some of his followers, but their attempt to set up an independent European based ordination system in order to, as they saw it, allow a distinctively European Jōdo Shinshū to develop ended in failure. Although all the European branches recognize the authority of Hongwanji to train and ordain priests, Eracle's ordinations did not gain recognition. Eracle's authority to

years, was affiliated with the European Shin Buddhist community as a 'daughter temple' of Jikō-ji, rather than with the Buddhist Churches of America. The reasons for this were institutional and personal. Institutionally the centre priests had only received the first level of ordination, which is recognised as a qualification as temple priest in Europe, but not by the Buddhist Churches of America. Personally, one of the priests of this Alaskan temple had been an assistant priest in Jiko-ji in Belgium, and wanted to maintain this connection after moving. This possibility of affiliation with other temples (depending on personal connections and preferences) outside a member's country of residence, has been taken up by a number of members.

conduct ordinations was challenged in the light of the current practice which stipulates that valid ordinations can only be conducted by the head abbot, the direct descendent of Shinran.

European Jōdo Shinshū also operates within a sharply different context to that of Jōdo Shinshū in the USA, owing to the variation of language, legislative frameworks governing religious bodies, and cultural and religious background that exists within Europe. While in the USA it has been relatively straightforward to establish a nationwide organization (the Buddhist Churches of America), drawing together all the Jōdo Shinshū temples in mainland USA, the view of most followers in Europe is that they prefer to retain their independence from each other in order to adapt appropriately to particular local contexts. There is little appetite for a pan-European layer of organization, especially if it might be seen as giving one national branch pre-eminence over others.

In terms of the relationships among the various European Jōdo Shinshū branches, perhaps the closest organizational analogy is to an academic network comprising a number of distinct, but linked, organizations. Common activities are based around academic discussion, conferences, and the publication of journals<sup>11</sup> alongside the broader goal of disseminating information about Shin Buddhism in Europe, and various ongoing translation projects. This orientation is consistent with the perceived needs of the organization (in so far as Shin Buddhism remains little known within Europe), and the other-power orientation of Shin, in which practices such as meditation and chanting are de-emphasized, and reliance on Amida is stressed. An observable aspect of this throughout Jōdo Shinshū centres globally is an emphasis on hearing the dharma, and hearing Amida's call. Study, dharma-talks, and reading Shin Buddhist texts are all encouraged within this framework, and there is a continuity between these and the study-group/academic conference format for transnational communication that Jōdo Shinshū in Europe has tended to favour.

Another reason for the academic bias in European Jōdo Shinshū may be the presence of professional academics within European Shin, both past and present. Academic employment has some advantages for priests: it provides a source of income and greater flexibility than many other types of work (European Jōdo Shinshū priests derive little if any personal income

11 Significant Buddhist publications that I have drawn on are: *The Pure Land*, produced by the International Association of Shin Buddhist Studies; *Shin Buddhist*, produced by the International Association of Buddhist Culture; and *Pure Land Notes*, the journal of the Pure Land Buddhist Fellowship in the UK.

from the central organization). In Japan too, many Jōdo Shinshū priests are academics, as academic employment allows sufficient flexibility to officiate at temple services morning and evening. Also, academics may be particularly well placed to continue contributing to the dissemination of knowledge about Shin Buddhism through the translation of key texts and by writing books and articles. In any case, there is a very noticeable bias within Jōdo Shinshū in Europe towards disseminating information rather than actively pursuing conversion. Many, though not all, argue that an active programme of proselytization would be contrary to the principles of 'other power', and 'leaving it to Amida'.

However, the shape of European Jōdo Shinshū may now be changing. A significant development for Jōdo Shinshū in Europe in recent years has been the increasing use of the Internet, which has the potential to overcome geographical barriers, and also to re-configure existing groupings. While language barriers remain an issue, having distinct Internet forums in English, German, and French (the most commonly-used languages) as well as other local languages such as Dutch or Romanian, the widespread use of English as an international language has permitted the establishment of Internet groupings that span different European countries, and include participants from Japan, the USA, and elsewhere. This shift has several implications. Notably, it gives a more prominent voice to those who are adept at using the Internet, which may presage a shift away from the predominance of academics in the more formal conferences and journal publications. It also permits groupings based on factors other than geographical location – for example, gender (the recently formed women's forum), or positions regarding doctrine and the interpretation of texts. For instance, a particularly lively recent debate involving contributors from Europe, the USA, and Japan has centred around symbolic versus literal interpretations of key tenets of Shin Buddhist teachings.

Despite the potential of the Internet to transcend the local, some locally specific factors continue to be important. Particularly noteworthy is the relationship between Jōdo Shinshū in Europe and other European Buddhist organizations, and the difficulty the movement has experienced in convincing others that it is an authentic form of Buddhism. Many of these battles were fought, and apparently won (at least on an institutional level) in the 1990s, and for the most part the relationships between Jōdo Shinshū and other European Buddhist groups now appear to be good. However, the issue of how Jōdo Shinshū is perceived (although it is still one of the least known forms of Buddhism in Europe) as an inauthentic form of Buddhism has not disappeared. This may be one of the factors behind many Europeans

members prioritizing the importance of translation and teaching, and also on their autonomy in developing their own locally appropriate forms. In the shaping of Jōdo Shinshū in Europe, the positioning of European Shin Buddhism in relation to wider Buddhist networks, as well as in relation to the parent organization in Japan and broader international Shin Buddhist networks (including those facilitated by the Internet) have all played important roles.

### Acknowledgements

This paper is based on an extended period of research, including visits to most of the European Shin Buddhist groups, and interviews with many members, including some of the first generation of European Shin Buddhists, from the late 1990s up to the present. I would like to express my gratitude to all the members of various European Shin Buddhist groups, and also of both Nishi Hongwanji and Higashi Honganji in Japan, who gave so generously of their time during the research for this paper, and also in commenting on earlier drafts. I have done my best to ensure that all the information included in this article is accurate, however the responsibility for any errors that may remain, and for the interpretation offered here, is mine alone.

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