

The *Lotus Sutra*'s One Vehicle and
Rissho Kosei-kai's Understanding
of Interfaith Relations:
The Ambivalence of Religious Inclusivism and
Prospects for Embracing Religious Pluralism
for the 21st Century

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Abstract

This paper explores the *Lotus Sutra*-based understanding of the diversity of religions that underpins the Japanese Buddhist group Rissho Kosei-kai's approach to interfaith cooperation and dialogue. I examine how Rissho Kosei-kai creatively reinterpreted prewar Nichirenism's stance toward the diversity of religions to support a positively affirmative inclusivist embrace of other religions and enter dialogue with them. However, I determine that those innovations have an ambiguous contemporary legacy, as aspects of Rissho Kosei-kai's inclusivist notion of the oneness of religions cannot transcend reductive inclusivism and provide a coherent account of religious pluralism. I conclude by reflecting on the potential for establishing a practical framework for understanding religious pluralism for Rissho Kosei-kai and consider the prospects for embracing a thoroughgoing *Lotus Sutra* pluralism from the standpoint of the *Lotus Sutra* tradition.

Keywords: Rissho Kosei-kai, Niwano Nikkyō, *Lotus Sutra*, Nichirenism, religious inclusivism, religious pluralism

Introduction

In this paper, I will explore Rissho Kosei-kai's inclusivist interpretation of religious diversity, rooted in the *Lotus Sutra*, which serves as the cornerstone of its advocacy for interfaith cooperation and dialogue. I will delve into its historical development, the current challenges it faces from religious pluralism, and its potential trajectories for the future. Rev. Niwano Nikkyō, the founder of Rissho Kosei-kai, creatively reinterpreted the *Lotus Sutra*-based on inclusivist strategies employed by prewar Nichirenism, which aimed to assert Buddhist superiority, transforming them into a platform for embracing other religions affirmatively and fostering interfaith dialogue. While pioneering for his era, however, today Niwano's once groundbreaking innovations have been overtaken by the rise of religious pluralistic thought that began in the 1980s. From the standpoint of pluralistic thinkers, the very mechanism Rissho Kosei-kai uses to affirm other faiths-religious inclusivism-impedes a full embrace of comprehensive religious pluralism. Pluralistic perspectives pose an intriguing and potentially difficult dynamic for Rissho Kosei-kai, as interfaith fellowship and dialogue are central to its self-identity, its founder's hagiography, and its dissemination efforts.

Rissho Kosei-kai

History and Context

First, let me introduce Rissho Kosei-kai. Rissho Kosei-kai is one of several *Lotus Sutra*-based Buddhist lay organizations that saw explosive growth and significant social influence in Japan during the immediate postwar period. Founded in 1938 by Niwano Nikkyō (庭野日敬, 1906-99) and Naganuma Myōkō (長沼妙佼, 1889-1957), it emerged as one of many splinter groups of the older lay Buddhist organization Reiyū-kai. Rissho Kosei-kai would fall into the Ōtani Eiichi's category of the popular religions variants within the broader 20th-century religious movement known as "Nichirenism" or "Nichirenshugi" (日蓮主義) in Japanese, along with other groups such as Reiyū-kai and Sōka Gakkai.¹⁾ Nichirenism, often traced to its founding by Tanaka Chigaku (田中智学, 1861-1939) was a broad lay-focused religious socially and politically active movement within and loosely affiliated with Nichiren Buddhism, comprising lay associations, study groups. These entities, as well as some historically impactful individuals who emerged from them, sought to respond to Japanese modernity, aiming to reshape society through religious, social, and political reforms grounded in faith in the *Lotus Sutra*.²⁾ The renowned medieval monk Nichiren (日蓮, 1222-82) served as a human exemplar for this movement, embodying a radical social and religious critic striving for societal transformation. His Tiantai-influenced teachings, which emphasized the primacy of the *Lotus Sutra*, provided the doctrinal and ideological foundation for this multifaceted Nichirenism movement. Like many other groups within Nichirenism, Rissho Kosei-kai called for transforming Japanese society through faith in the *Lotus Sutra*, although the specifics of its prewar and wartime beliefs are not entirely clear due to the lack of available documentary

1) Ōtani 2019, 18; Shields 2017, 234.

2) Shields 2017, especially ch.6.

resources.

Although Rissho Kosei-kai had probably only about a thousand members at the conclusion of the Pacific War, during the years of the American occupation, it became one of the first of the so-called “new religions” to experience explosive growth, initially in Tokyo and surrounding areas, and eventually throughout the rest of the country, although the Kantō region and eastern Japan have always been its strongest base. By the early 1950s, Rissho Kosei-kai was large and wealthy enough to establish a publishing house and create social infrastructure such as a modern hospital. Within a few years, it expanded to include a nursing home and educational institutions such as private preschools, as well as both male and female junior and senior high schools.³⁾

Embrace of Interfaith Dialogue

Like some of the other *Lotus Sutra*-based groups that emerged from prewar Nichirenism, Rissho Kosei-kai embraced the peace movement and peace advocacy following Japan’s devastating defeat. However, Rissho Kosei-kai appears to have been the first to move toward interfaith dialogue, particularly in the 1960s. Rissho Kosei-kai’s interest in interfaith dialogue initially began with collaborations with other so-called “new religions,” which were increasingly scrutinized by the mainstream media in Japan during the 1950s. This focus on interfaith dialogue became more central to its identity after its founder, Niwano Nikkyō, was invited to attend a session of the Second Vatican Council in 1965, where he served as the sole Buddhist representative.⁴⁾ With the support of Rissho Kosei-kai’s organizational resources, Niwano played a pivotal role in establishing the international interfaith organization known as the World Conference of Religions for Peace (WCRP, now called Religions for Peace) in

3) Rissho Kosei-kai 1966; Niwano 1978.

4) Niwano 1978, 219.

1970.⁵⁾ His ongoing interfaith efforts culminated in him receiving the Templeton Foundation Prize for Progress in Religion in 1979.

Interfaith Dialogue and Doctrinal Innovation

Niwano and Rissho Kosei-kai's shift toward interfaith dialogue was accompanied by forging their own interpretation of the *Lotus Sutra* and the development of unique doctrines. This included new understandings of portions of the *Lotus Sutra* that have been central to the claims of *Lotus Sutra* Buddhism to unify Buddhism under the concept of the One Buddha Vehicle. Initially, there appeared to be minimal distinction between Rissho Kosei-kai's teachings and the doctrines of the Nichiren sect headquartered at Japan's Mt. Minobu, with early postwar Rissho Kosei-kai functioning somewhat as a lay organization for the sect. However, over the subsequent decade, it formulated its unique understanding of the *Lotus Sutra*, diverging notably from several core Nichiren sect doctrines. One change to note was that Niwano reshaped his interpretations of specific sections of the *Lotus Sutra* that had been pivotal for prewar Nichirenism's understanding religious diversity and the assertion of Buddhist superiority. One such section is found in chapter 16, which the commentarial tradition calls the "Six Ways in which the Tathāgata Manifests in the World" (六或示現). Another important section that Niwano reinterpreted concerns the transcendent powers the Buddha demonstrates in Chapter 21 of the *Lotus Sutra*.

The *Lotus Sutra*'s Synthesis

An Ecumenical or Exclusivist Text?

The *Lotus Sutra*'s openness to religious diversity has been a topic of heated

5) World Conference of Religions for Peace 2010.

debate for decades. Some proponents view the text as affirming religious diversity, while others perceive it as a hegemonic document, deeply sectarian and exclusivist. The diverse perspectives and sharp divisions regarding the *Lotus Sutra* sometimes give the impression that scholars are discussing entirely different texts. Prominent figures representing these contrasting views include Gene Reeves and Jamie Hubbard. Reeves emphasizes the sutra's ecumenical potential, whereas Hubbard interprets its approach to diversity as exclusivist.⁶⁾

However, I believe that if one is familiar with strategies of religious inclusivism, the ambiguity surrounding the *Lotus Sutra* becomes less perplexing. As I will elaborate on later in this paper, ambivalence lies at the core of inclusivist strategies. Such theologies encompass the religious other by integrating them within their own specific doctrines, which are asserted to be universal. Depending on the scope of its religious perspectives and the gradient of the hierarchies it establishes, religious inclusivist strategies can seem either relatively tolerant and accepting of the religious Other or, at the opposite end, function as a thinly veiled form of religious exclusivism.

Nichirenism and Religious Diversity

One of the intriguing aspects of early 20th-century Nichirenism is its proliferation of scriptural interpretation to navigate modernity and define Japan's position in the global community, especially after the country's mid-19th-century opening and the subsequent reforms of the Meiji government established in 1868. Nichirenism thinkers not only aimed to comprehend Japan's global role, some also endeavored to construct a coherent understanding of religious diversity and inter-religious relationships, drawing from the East Asian commentarial

6) Perhaps the most well-known critique of the narrowness of the *Lotus Sutra* has been made by Hubbard (1995); The late Gene Reeves emphasized the importance the hermeneutics of reading the text (2008, 4-5); One of the most recent arguments for the openness of the *Lotus Sutra* is made by Japanese scholar Ueki Masatoshi in chapter eight of his work (Ueki 2012).

tradition of the *Lotus Sutra*. In this pursuit, they gravitated towards passages of the *Lotus Sutra* historically central to its use as a means of intra-Buddhist inclusivism. Notably, a pivotal passage in Chapter 16 of the sutra discusses the “Six Ways in which the Tathāgata Manifests in the World” (六或示現). This passage aims to achieve a primary objective of the text: consolidating all buddhas as manifestations of Śakyamuni, who, as the sutra elucidates, “attained enlightenment in the distant past” (久遠実成). While the early chapters, particularly Chapter 2, strive to unify Buddhism’s teachings and practitioners under the *Lotus Sutra*’s “One Buddha Vehicle,” subsequent chapters, starting with Chapter 16, pursue this unity through an ontology of buddhas, portraying the *Lotus Sutra*’s eternal Buddha as the embodiment of the text’s foundational concept of a One Buddha Vehicle.

The *Lotus Sutra* as a Template for Reacting to Religious Diversity

Chapter Sixteen’s “Six Ways in which the Tathāgata Manifests in the World”

Let’s delve into the critical passage from Chapter 16. After disclosing that he did not achieve enlightenment at Bodhagaya some 40 years prior but had instead realized it in the unfathomable past, and emphasizing that his forthcoming entrance into *paranirvāṇa* will merely be an expression of skillful means, Śakyamuni Buddha informs the assembly that other buddhas he previously mentioned, such as Dipaṅkara (燃灯仏), before whom, in a past life, Śakyamuni vowed to become a buddha, were actually all manifestations of skillful means. Śakyamuni conveys to the assembly the notion that all these buddhas appearing throughout time were essentially skillful means extensions of himself. He then concludes by providing the listeners with a comprehensive sixfold explanation of how he manifests to sentient beings:

I may speak of myself. I may speak of someone else. I may appear as myself, I may appear as someone else. I may appear through my own deeds. I may appear through someone else's deeds. And whatever I teach and whatever I say is valid and never in vain.⁷⁾

In his commentary on this passage, Zhiyi (智顓, 538-597), whose interpretations laid the foundation for Chinese Tiantai, Japanese Tendai, and Nichiren Buddhism, writes in *Fahua wenju* 法華文句 [Words and Phrases of the *Lotus Sutra*] that “speaking” in this context refers to the voice and teachings the Buddha conveys, while “appear” pertains to the form in which the Buddha manifests. The phrase “appear as myself” (己身) signifies the Buddha's truth body. Conversely, “appear as someone else” (他身) denotes the response bodies the Buddha assumes.⁸⁾ In *Fahua xuanyi* 法華玄義 [The Profound Meaning of the *Lotus Sutra*], Zhiyi interprets “myself” in relation to the Buddha realm (仏界) of the Ten Realms of Existence (十界), while “someone else” signifies bodies that appear in the remaining nine realms existence.⁹⁾

In *Lotus Sutra* traditions, the Buddha who manifests in these six ways is referred to as the “Original Buddha” (本仏) or the Eternal Original Buddha (久遠本仏). This concept of the Original Buddha “appearing as someone else” facilitates the integration—or assimilation, depending on one's perspective—of all buddhas into the *Lotus Sutra*'s vision of an Original Buddha. Viewing the Original Buddha as encompassing other buddhas, this passage serves as a hierarchically inclusivist template for uniting the myriad buddhas, sutras, and teachings within Buddhism under the auspices of the *Lotus Sutra* and its universal buddha. It's worth noting that the formulation in the *Lotus Sutra* appears to predate the concept of the three buddha bodies. While commentarial tradition has imposed a three-body theory upon the text, the text itself primarily

7) Rissho Kosei-kai International 2019, 278; *Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮華經, fasc.5, 「如来寿量品」(T9, 42c10-12): 或説己身或説他身。或示己身或示他身。或示己事或示他事。諸所言説皆實不虛。

8) *Fahua wenju* 法華文句, fasc. 9 (T34, 131c15-18).

9) *Fahua xuanyi*, fasc. 2 (T33, 696a4-14).

presents a dual-body framework.

In Japan, the concept of the “Six Ways in which the Tathāgata Manifests in the World,” particularly the idea of the Original Buddha “appearing as someone else,” eventually expanded to encompass non-Buddhist Japanese divinities. This expansion aligns with the notion that “appearing as someone else” pertains to entities of the nine worlds. The juxtaposition of Japanese divinities with buddhas, labeling these Japanese gods as “traces” or *suijaku* (垂迹) of an “original ground” or *honji* (本地) buddha, employs terminology like “origin” and “trace” rooted in the *Lotus Sutra* commentarial tradition. However, in practice, this tradition often referenced the teachings and practices of esoteric Buddhism (密教). Given that the monk Nichiren and his followers dismissed esoteric Buddhism, chapter 16’s “Six Ways in which the Tathāgata Manifests in the World” served as the primary justification for integrating Japanese indigenous deities into Nichiren Buddhism practices.

Broadening of the concept of the Buddha “appearing as someone else” within Japanese Buddhism, extending it beyond intra-Buddhist inclusivism to encompass non-Buddhist indigenous Japanese deities, set an important precedent. Nichiren Buddhists of the early 20th century drew upon it to comprehend not only the range of religious practices within Japan, but also the worldwide diversity of religions.

Chapter Twenty-one and the “Future Oneness of Teachings”

The concept of the “future oneness of teachings,” significant in inclusivist strategies, also derives from Zhiyi’s Words and Phrases of the *Lotus Sutra*, specifically his interpretation of the Buddha’s displays of transcendent powers in Ch. 21, “The Transcendent Powers of the Tathāgata.” In this chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* Śākyamuni Buddha witnesses a vow from a large group of bodhisattvas who had arisen from the earth. The bodhisattvas pledge that following Śākyamuni’s parinirvāṇa, they will spread the sutra in whatever world there have been separated embodiments of the Buddha (分身). Accepting

their vow, Śakyamuni and his embodiments use their transcendent powers to manifest several mysterious displays and phenomena, showing their approval and celebrating the entrustment of the sutra. Zhiyi counts a total of ten displays, each of which hold symbolic significance. He understands the meaning of the first five displays to apply to the time when the Buddha Shakayamuni is still in the world but asserts that the latter five displays apply to the future ages after the Tathāgata's parinirvāṇa. Zhiyi takes the displays as indications of the *Lotus Sutra's* unification of Buddhist teachings, practitioners, and of truth itself, predictions of a future singularity. The five proceed dependently, step by step, with each level of unity founded upon the one before it. The demonstration of transcendent power that concerns us is the “voices singing forth from the skies” (空中唱聲) which Zhiyi interprets as a sign of the “future oneness of teachings” (in the Japanese doctrinal tradition, *mirai kyō itsu* 未来教一).¹⁰⁾ In Nichiren's writings, this oneness of teachings figures as a mass conversion of all the living beings in the universe to the *Lotus Sutra*, and in place of the phrase “*Namu Śakyamuni Buddha*” that rings sounds forth from the skies in the story of the sutra, Nichiren describes all the living beings intoning “*Namu Myōhō renge kyō*”—“I take refuge in the *Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wondrous Dharma*.”¹¹⁾

Stances Toward Other Religions: Tripartite Division of Strategies

At this juncture in my discussion, I'd like to outline the primary strategies religions have historically employed to address the existence and assess the validity of other religious beliefs and practices. The prevalent typology is the tripartite model of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, initially introduced by theologians Alan Race and Gavin D'Costa. While various scholars have

10) *Fahua wenju* 法華文句 fasc. 10 (T34, 142a16-17). The actual passage reads: 七, 空中唱聲者, 表於未來有教一也.

11) In Nichiren's text *Senjishō* 選時抄 (Nichiren Daishōnin gosho zenshū kankō iinkai 2021, 259).

expanded upon or critiqued this model, it remains a basic framework for comprehending attitudes and approaches to religious diversity. This significance was further emphasized by theologian Perry Schmidt-Leukel's influential affirmation of the tripartite framework in his research on religious pluralism.¹²⁾

Historically, exclusivism has been the prevalent response to the multiplicity of religions and faith practices. When referring to "exclusivism," we denote the belief that only one's own religion is true, while all others are deemed false. This perspective asserts that only one's own religion possesses salvific efficacy, grants access to ultimate reality, or serves as the sole path to achieve a paramount spiritual goal. Although exclusivism has frequently led to religious conflicts and repression, it does not necessarily imply a complete rejection of tolerance. Tolerance, in this context, is a begrudging acceptance of what one dislikes. Therefore, exclusivism inherently carries a negative view of religious diversity. As theologian John P. Keenan succinctly states, exclusivism is the claim to "possess the true picture."¹³⁾

Religious inclusivism is a response to religious diversity that acknowledges the validity of other religions to varying extents, even if not entirely embracing their entirety as truth. Inclusivism views other faiths as possessing partial truths or validity, albeit from the vantage point that one's own faith remains superior. Typically, other religions are seen as valid yet potentially less pristine or incomplete truths, or as sufficient but not optimal paths to the ultimate reality that one's own faith fully reveals. This perspective is termed "inclusive" because it recognizes the religious Other based on the premise that elements of one's own truth can be found, to a lesser extent, within that religious Other, fostering common ground or a foundation for unity and brotherhood. Historically, while inclusivism has been less prevalent than exclusivism, it is evident in traditions like Hinduism and Buddhism. Although exclusivism has dominated monotheistic traditions globally, arguments advocating for inclusivism have not been entirely absent.

12) Rose 2013, 8; Schmidt-Leukel 2005; Schmidt-Leukel 2017, ch.1; Knitter 2005, ch.2.

13) Keenan 2009, 21.

Religious pluralism acknowledges other religions as possessing equally valid truths and as effective pathways toward salvation, understanding of reality, or other ultimate objectives. Typically, pluralism entails recognizing and validating the religious Other based on that Other's specific terms and beliefs. Historically, pluralism has been the least common approach to religious diversity. However, it gained significant momentum, particularly in the 1980s, largely due to the thought and interfaith dialogue activity of theologian John Hick (1922-2012), and especially the impact of his groundbreaking 1989 volume *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*.

Some scholars who embrace this tripartite typology have further refined it, introducing various distinctions within its categories. Two subcategories of inclusivism relevant to our discussion today are the "fulfillment" model and the "replacement" model of religious inclusivism. The fulfillment model is the predominant approach to understanding the multiplicity of religions within Lutheran, Reformed, Methodist, Anglican, Greek Orthodox, and Roman Catholic churches.¹⁴⁾ As described by theologian Paul Knitter, this model asserts that God is actively present in other religions.¹⁵⁾ Therefore, these religions deserve respect, engagement in dialogue, and study because of the divine presence within them. A well-known representation of the fulfillment model is Catholic theologian Karl Rahner's (1904-84) concept of believers from other religions as "anonymous Christians." The fulfillment model aims to harmonize one's own religious tradition's priority, especially in Christianity, where Jesus Christ's unique role as the incarnation is central, with the validity and truth of other faiths.¹⁶⁾

The "replacement model," conversely, acknowledges the presence of God or truth within one's own tradition as manifest in other religions but views these religions as preliminary paths that ultimately guide individuals to embrace one's own faith. Paul Knitter refers to this perspective as "partial replacement,"

14) Knitter 2002, 63-64.

15) Knitter 2002, 63-64.

16) Knitter 2002, 71.

recognizing God's presence in other religions but with the intention of eventually leading adherents to one's own faith.¹⁷⁾ Therefore, while there's an initial provisional acknowledgment of other religions, in extreme cases, the replacement model essentially transforms into a form of exclusivism in its ultimate stance.

Varieties of these two approaches to inclusivism can be found in the writings of prewar Nichirenist thinkers who grappled with the issue of religious multiplicity.

Nichirenism's Sense Making of the Diversity of Religions: Inclusivist Replacement Model

Japan Discovers Religious Diversity

Japan had seen the coming of Catholic missionaries beginning with Francis Xavier's arrival in Kagoshima in 1549, but its "Christian century" ended with the suppression of the foreign faith and Japan severing most of its connections with the outside world. This isolation lasted until U.S. gunboat diplomacy forced the opening of diplomatic and commercial relations in 1854, and secured rights for foreign residents to establish churches and hold services within the boundaries of their concessions. Bowing to foreign pressure and realizing it had to align itself with international norms, Japan lifted restrictions on the practice of Christianity in 1871. With the opening of the country Japan rediscovered the world's religious diversity and was faced with the daunting task of placing its own traditions alongside those of the outside world. In doing so, it drew substantially on its own traditions, redefining terms used in Buddhist doctrinal hermeneutics to formulate a general concept of religion.¹⁸⁾ Nichiren Buddhists often reached for the "Six Manifestations" and "the future oneness of teachings"

17) Knitter 2002, 33.

18) Isomae 2003.

to provide frameworks to theorize an inclusivist relationship between Buddhism and non-Buddhist religions, developing those rubrics by applying them to faiths from outside Japan altogether. These questions were not unrelated to the problem of Japan's standing in the international order—attaining its proper place, not only at the table but according to some thinkers, a seat at the very center. Some of the Nichiren Buddhists I will discuss are self-identified “Nichirenists,” a Nichiren Buddhist evangelical movement, ironically populated by many who would now be considered ultra-nationalists, who saw in the spread of Nichiren Buddhism a path toward the spiritual rejuvenation of Japan.

The “Six Ways in which the Tathāgata Manifests in the World”

Nichirenist thinkers employed the concept of the Original Buddha appearing as “someone else” to interpret not only the deities of non-Buddhist religions but also their prophets as avatars or manifestations of the *Lotus Sutra*'s Original Buddha. In most instances, these authors advocated what can be termed as a replacement model of religious inclusivism. The actions of the Original Buddha within other religions serve as skillful means to bring peace and solace to diverse communities, with the ultimate aim of guiding them towards the *Lotus Sutra*, prompting them to eventually relinquish their prior religious beliefs. This 1921 passage by Shiozaki Ken'yō from *Sekai Daiheiva no jitsugen: Hokekyō to Nihon to sekai* 世界大平和の実現：法華経と日本と世界 [Realizing Great Peace for the World: the *Lotus Sutra*, Japan, and the World] exemplifies this perspective.

No matter the angle from which you look at it, it is an indisputable fact that the Original Buddha or the deities in the *Lotus Sutra* appear and manifest in all countries throughout this world ... And speaking from one point of view, the origin and basis for Jesus, which Christianity did not explain, is actually clarified in the *Lotus Sutra*; the god Jehovah and Christ knew but did not say it, but we could surmise they were secretly waiting for the right opportunity. But the time has come today, and we plainly know the origin and basis for the gods and buddhas of the

world. In every case, because it is clear that the divine spiritual principle of all the gods and buddhas in the world resides in this *Lotus Sutra*, it is best that humanity discover the *Lotus Sutra* as soon as possible and not rely upon other false gods that are provisional manifestations.¹⁹⁾

For Shiozaki and other thinkers, Japan's engagement and interaction with the global community mark a pivotal development, making the *Lotus Sutra* accessible to the entire world for the first time. This interaction propels the conversion of the world to Buddhism, particularly the Buddhism centered on the *Lotus Sutra*. It's noteworthy that even though Jesus and Jehovah are seen as manifestations of the Original Buddha, the revelation of their role as skillful means, and the exposure of their true identity as manifestations of the Original Buddha, renders them "false" gods.

Another thinker who uses the six manifestations as an inclusivist strategy is the prominent Nichirenist Kobayashi Ichirō (1876-1944), college professor and editor of the influential magazine *Hokke* 法華 [Lotus], published by the Lotus Association, based in Tokyo. In his 1918 work *Nichiren shugi gairon* 日蓮主義概論 [An Outline of Nichirenism], Kobayashi hints at the "Six Ways" when he formulates several understandings of the Original Buddha in modernist terms. Describing the Original Buddha as a "single absolute persona," Kobayashi insists Buddhists are not alone in recognizing such an absolute existence. Physicists would apprehend the Original Buddha as energy, philosophers would see noumenon.

It is permissible to affirmatively call it 'noumenon,' and 'being,' or even 'energy.' In Confucianism it is 'Heaven,' in Christianity and Mohammedism [sic] it is God. Moreover, these are not manufacture falsehoods, nor some illusion of misperception. Surely, they are looking up in reverence to a face of the Original Buddha.²⁰⁾

19) Shiozaki 1921, 71-72.

20) Kobayashi 1918, 557-558.

But, even though what Confucians, Christians and Muslims revere is the Original Buddha, unlike Buddhists of the *Lotus Sutra* faith, they only see a portion of its reality.

Compared to the single whole that is the Original Buddha, by calling it ‘noumenon’ it is an orphan, and by calling it ‘being’ it is also an orphan. By calling it ‘Heaven’ or ‘God’ it is again an orphan. None of these are its holistic totality. The holistic totality [of the Original Buddha] has been revealed to us through the World Honored-One Śakyamuni.²¹⁾

This is a common inclusivist strategy that reminds us of the old allegory of the blind men examining an elephant. As Perry Schmidt-Leukel reminds us, in Buddhism, the elephant allegory offers a hierarchical inclusivism, as the Buddha, unlike the non-Buddhist teachers, can see the entire elephant because he is the only one without a blindfold.²²⁾

In his *Hokekyō dai kōza* 法華經大講座 [Major Course on the *Lotus Sutra*], a 13-volume commentary published in 1936, Kobayashi writes that the Original Buddha appears at times in forms other than that of a buddha—“someone else”—in instances when such are the most appropriate forms to removing that person’s delusion and awakening them. All teachings are the teachings of the Buddha. The Original Buddha’s teaching is absolute, but because of his compassion at times he appears in these various forms.

Sometimes he appears, calling himself a Buddha—this is the activity of the one fundamental Buddha. There is only one fundamental Buddha, and at times he comes as a buddha called Śakyamuni, and other times he comes as in ways other than buddhas, leading us by expounding various teachings. If we go on to well savor the meaning of this, someone like Confucius becomes a manifestation of the Original Buddha. Laozi is also one, and so is Jesus, as well as Mohammed [sic].

21) Kobayashi 1918, 558.

22) Perry 2017, ch.6.

When we think about all the ancient sages and wise men, great kings and other various people who have accomplished magnificent works, the appearance of such people are all spontaneous manifestations of the compassion of this fundamental Buddha. A certain time he appears as a great hero. Another time he appears as a great king. Another time as a sage, another time as a wise man. He appears like this in order to teach we human beings all manner of things, and to integrate these teachings he appears as Śakyamuni, calling himself the Buddha, and all heretofore teachings are unified by the teachings of Śakyamuni. Because of this, when we think deeply about the teachings of the *Lotus Sutra*, it is highly comprehensive and broad.²³⁾

Here Kobayashi affirms other religions through the inclusive strategy of the six manifestations, which benefits humankind, because all teachings arise from the compassion of the Tathāgata. Kobayashi also includes within the workings of the Original Buddha the accomplishments and activities beneficial to humankind, such as those of kings and culture heroes. But, just as the *Lotus Sutra* was the necessary key to affirming lower teachings within Buddhism in teaching hierarchies (判教), here, it is the teachings of the Buddha in the *Lotus Sutra* that are capable of integrating all other religious teachings. This leads to a significant caveat:

However, there is something that we should not misunderstand. If we talk like this, we may carelessly think, “Then isn’t it fine if we don’t bother to learn the *Lotus Sutra*—isn’t it permissible if those who prefer Christianity practice Christianity, those who prefer Mohamedism [sic] practice Mohamedism?” But it is hardly like this. The teachings that have appeared in these varieties are ultimately unified by the Buddha, and we must see those teachings as fragmentary. If we misunderstand this we will be in trouble. Holding that any is as good as another—“Since they are ultimately manifestations of the one Buddha, any teaching is permissible—Ōmoto is

23) Kobayashi 1936, 166.

just as good as Tenrikyō, which is just as good as Christianity!”—is shallow thinking. They are all variously useful, but ultimately the issue is more than that. They are all variously manifested partial teachings, and ultimately, they must be unified. We must not forget that all of them will be unified by Buddhism. This is why Buddhism is extraordinarily grand, totally beyond the others.²⁴⁾

For Kobayashi, it is not necessary to label as spurious another teaching which is incomplete or partial. Doing so is narrow minded and humiliating to those of other religions. But, he cautions, one can only have a single focus of devotion in their hearts. Once the *Lotus Sutra* occupies this place, like the trunk of a tree, it is permissible to make use of other advantageous teachings or philosophies as branches, since in the end they derive from the Buddha. Additionally, the other teachings are taught to prepare the way for Buddhism. Kobayashi quotes the sixth Tiantai patriarch Zhanran: “First decorum and music became prominent, and later the path of truth was opened.”²⁵⁾ In other words, Confucian decorum and music were first widely popularized in China, edifying the people and teaching them to appreciate the Way, and this made it easier for Buddhism to be disseminated later. As a fragment of Buddhism, Confucianism and Mohism prepared the way for the teachings of Śakyamuni to take hold. In this sense, other religions are useful and far from worthless, as the Buddha says, “valid and never in vain,” but valid as means to preparing for their ultimate supersession by Buddhism.

Chapter Twenty-one’s “Future Oneness of Teachings”

The Nichiren Buddhist priest Shimizu Ryōzan (1864-1928) is perhaps one of the earliest to expand the “future oneness of teachings” to include non-Japanese non-Buddhist religions. In his *Kokutai gokō* 国体五講 [Five Lectures on the National Essence] (1924) Shimizu writes that in order to achieve peace in the

24) Kobayashi 1936, 169.

25) Kobayashi 1936, 169.

world, all countries have to be broadly in accord on their basic objectives, and if various countries are moving toward different goals, the world cannot attain unity. Drawing on the interpretation of Ch. 21's ten displays of transcendent power derived from Zhiyi and inherited by Nichiren, Nozaki proposes that there are four ways in which the *Lotus Sutra* can unite the world—the oneness of teaching, oneness of people, and oneness of principle. For brevity's sake, he folds them all into the “future oneness of teachings.”²⁶⁾ Shimizu takes an extremely liberal inclusivist reading of the oneness of religions in the present age, and never mentions any necessity for all religions to disappear through integration into *Lotus Sutra* Buddhism. “In the Nichiren sect, no matter the teaching or the religion, all are considered the *Lotus Sutra*. If I explain this point using an extreme example, what we think in our hearts to be outside teachings are not outside teachings, that [for example,] Christianity is not to be seen as Christianity. It is not an outside teaching, but a part of Japanese Buddhism.”²⁷⁾ Shimizu suspects he is shocking some readers, and he retorts anticipated opposition, writing: “It may be said that Shimizu has uttered something horrendous, which could destroy the sect. But if it is a sect that can be destroyed in such a way, someone should destroy it. I think there is no need for such a pathetic sect.”²⁸⁾ Shimizu muses that because of this oneness of teaching, Christian ministers should attend the celebrations for the birthday of Śakyamuni Buddha that are held in April in Japan, and likewise Buddhist monks should attend Christian services.

Writing about a decade after Shimizu, Kobayashi Ichirō goes into further detail than Shimizu with regard to the “future oneness of teachings,” but does indeed see a conversion of sorts of other religions in the future. In his 1936 thirteen volume commentary Kobayahsi treats it as an extension of Ch. 16's “Six Ways in which the Tathāgata Manifests in the World” and devotes several pages to it in his commentary on the 21st chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*. Kobayashi

26) Shimizu 1924, 107-108.

27) Shimizu 1924, 109.

28) Shimizu 1924, 111.

begins:

This passage, “the future oneness of teachings” gives expression to the certain return of all teachings to one. This is an extremely weighty issue for people who have faith in Buddhism. The teachings in the world are variously divided, and the purpose of all of those teachings is making people and the world better, and without doubt this is the purpose that all of these teachings are expounded. However, the fact that teachings expounded for the same purpose are variously divided is, in short, because the teaching is incomplete, or it is not fully believed [by its followers].²⁹⁾

Kobayashi alludes to the import of the six manifestations and its recognition and affirmation of other religions as part of Buddhism, which he will review in detail below. He stresses from the very beginning the hierarchical aspect of his inclusivism: unlike Buddhism, other religions are partial revelations of truth.

Therefore, these religions will naturally draw closer together and must ultimately return to one. Because their goal of improving human beings is one, they must not be divided forever. Whether it be Christianity, Buddhism, Mohammedism [sic], Tenrikyō, they are expounded for the one purpose of improving human beings. The fact that their teachings are not in accord is that the teaching is incomplete, or that the way of spreading it through teaching it is at fault, or for some or another cause distance has opened up between them, and they fail to accord. In the end, those teachings are progressively refined, gradually progress, and when truth comes to be understood, all ultimately must become one. This kind of integration is certainly conceivable, which was already discussed previously in the “The Lifespan” chapter—the Buddha appears in the world in forms other than a buddha to expound teachings...” The Lifespan” chapter clearly tells us that they are all a part of Buddhism. Therefore, in the future all teachings will all go on to become

29) Kobayashi 1936, 203-204.

one, and the time must come when all will recognize that humanity has only one teaching. If we do not believe this, then we will not be able to have absolute faith in and devotion to Buddhism.³⁰⁾

Kobayashi reveals his inclusivism to be as provisional as are the other religious teachings. Their single purpose ensures their eventual sublation into Buddhism, and for Buddhists, or at least the faithful of the *Lotus Sutra*, he insists this is a necessary article of faith. Kobayashi explains that this belief is indispensable because it strengthens the conviction of one's refuge in the Buddha—that in the end one's focus of devotion will be what all humanity eventually takes refuge in. What is the timeframe for the integration of all religions into Buddhism? Kobayashi is unclear: “The time will come when all upon the earth, as well as all in the heavenly realms, and whoever or whatever, will all take refuge in the Buddha.”³¹⁾

Niwano Nikkyō's Reformulation

Niwano's Starting Point

In his early writings on the *Lotus Sutra*, particularly focusing on chapter 16 and dating to 1953, Niwano Nikkyō taught that figures like Jesus, Confucius, and the deities of other faiths were indeed manifestations of the Original Buddha. Perhaps foreshadowing his later doctrinal innovations, he emphasized the validity of other religions. He referenced Śakyamuni's declaration in chapter 16 of the *Lotus Sutra*, stating that whatever the manifestations of the Original Buddha teach is “valid and never in vain” (皆實不虛). However, in his interpretation of chapter 21, traditionally understood as a prophecy about the future conversion of all Buddhists to the *Lotus Sutra's* One Buddha Vehicle,

30) Kobayashi 1936, 204.

31) Kobayashi 1936, 206.

Niwano cautioned Rissho Kosei-kai members. He declares emphatically that when considering the attainment of buddhahood, other buddhas, gods, and their teachings were “completely ineffective.”³²⁾ While Niwano might have initially embraced a more open and less rigidly graded inclusivist stance than some Nichirenists, he undeniably prioritized the *Lotus Sutra*. This is further reinforced by his interpretation of the next demonstration of transcendent powers, the eighth of ten, which following Zhiyi the tradition considers a prediction of “the future oneness of humanity.” Niwano writes:

Today, there are hundreds and thousands of religions and sects in the world, and it is truly contradictory that people worship various miscellaneous gods and Buddhas as their main deities. The teachings should be unified, and all Buddhists must return to the Buddha Śākyamuni.³³⁾

Niwano’s wording here suggests that he doesn’t mean just intra-Buddhist unification, but that all religions, which he holds are appearances of the Original Buddha, must be consolidated through taking the Śākyamuni, i. e., here meaning the Original Buddha, as their focus of devotion. Niwano’s interpretation of chapter twenty-one clarifies that his approach to religious diversity early in his career is fundamentally in line with that of Nichirenism in general—a replacement model of religious inclusivism.

Niwano’s Transformation and Doctrinal Innovation:

“The Six Ways in which the Tathāgata Manifests in the World”

Niwano Nikkyō’s third and final commentary on the *Lotus Sutra* was *Hokekyō no atarashii kaishaku* 法華經の新しい解釈, literally “A New Interpretation of the *Lotus Sutra*.” It has most recently been published in English under the title *Buddhism for Today: The Essential Wisdom of the Threefold Lotus Sutra*.

32) Niwano 1954, 21.

33) Niwano 1954, 21.

This is the most important of Niwano's works to consider in depth because it represents something of the culmination of his understanding of the *Lotus Sutra*. Moreover, in addition to being widely read by Rissho Kosei-kai members, it is also marketed to the wider public, and has been translated into several foreign languages.

In *Hokekyō no atarashii kaishaku*, Niwano writes at length about the "Six Manifestations," underscoring his affirmation of other religions by clearly admonishing readers, many of whom are Rissho Kosei-kai members, against hostility toward other religions and to refrain from criticizing them.

The vast breadth of the Buddha Dharma lies within this teaching of the Six Ways in which the Original Buddha Manifests in the World. The implication of these six ways is that Buddhism does not stand in opposition to Christianity, Judaism, or Islam or to the teachings of other great sages, such as Confucius, Mencius, and Laozi. The Buddha's words here in chapter 16 clearly show that great saints and sages such as these are ultimately appearances of the Eternal Original Buddha as "someone else," and their revered teachings are the manifestations of the Buddha Dharma in other forms. I do not say this because I am a Buddhist but because, since the Buddha is the grand truth of the cosmos, the great life of the universe, there can be no truth that is not encompassed by the Buddha and no beneficial teaching that is not Buddha Dharma. Accordingly, a narrow-minded person who utters biased comments about other religions on the grounds that Buddhism is the true religion while Christianity, for example, is not, cannot be considered a Buddhist in the most profound sense.

A right teaching—one in accord with universal truth—is right regardless of who teaches it. Truth is truth no matter whose teachings convey it. Buddhists revere as a buddha any person who is the source of right teachings that lead all living beings toward truth. So it naturally follows that Buddhists do not place themselves in opposition to other religions.³⁴⁾

Niwano takes a clear stance: other religions are indeed "truth," and individuals

displaying biases against other faiths are not only narrow-minded but also demonstrate an attitude inconsistent with Buddhist principles. A genuine Buddhist is characterized by magnanimity toward other faiths.

Something that is perhaps not as striking but of significance is how Niwano grasps the Buddha. Compared to his discussion of the six manifestations a decade earlier, here Niwano paints the Original Buddha in depersonalized, generalized terms—the abstract “grand truth” of the universe. He appears to be saying that “Buddha” is the totality of truth, a synonym for the phenomenon of truth itself. Niwano next gives an example to illustrate how this grand truth is present, not as something separate and only within Buddhism, but in solution, in various religions.

To illustrate this with a simple example, nutrition is not something that exists separately from foods such as rice, bread, beans, vegetables, milk, fish and salt. Rice is nourishing for our bodies, as are milk and vegetables. The fundamental quality of the ingredients in all of these foods, which makes them good for our health, is what constitutes “nutrition.” If someone says, “I don’t need any ‘nutrition’ because I eat bread, milk and vegetables,” it would be ridiculous in the extreme.

The truth of the Buddha is like “nutrition” in this example; the teachings of the various saints and sages correspond to the assorted foods like rice, vegetables, milk, and so on. The basis of all of them—the “nutritiousness” that makes them beneficial to us—is the Dharma of the Buddha. Accordingly, they all constitute the Buddha’s teaching, and make for a well-balanced “meal” that nurtures our character, and thus we can partake of this feast without worrying about our spiritual health, and so there is no need to debate the relative merits of individual dishes like “rice” or “bread,” for example.³⁵⁾

Readers familiar with Chinese Tiantai and Japanese Tendai or Nichiren Buddhism will recognize that Niwano is updating the allegory of the “five

34) Niwano 2012, 387-388.

35) Niwano 2012, 338-389.

flavors” of milk, in which the essence—ghee—is present in all the other forms of milk. The original allegory is inclusive but hierarchical—in the *Lotus Sutra* tradition, the *Lotus Sutra* is the clarified form of pure ghee. Niwano certainly knows this, which is probably why he seems to mitigate the sense of hierarchy by emphasizing the need for a spiritually “well-balanced” meal, and accepting rice and bread—representative foods of “east” and “west”—as being equally nutritious. By likening our access to truth as a feast, he conjures a smorgasbord of religions or teachings.

Is then any religion just as good as any other? This is the issue where Kobayashi Ichirō found the boundary of the *Lotus Sutra*’s openness to other religions, and took pains to point out that any religion is not just as good as another. Rev. Niwano continues his discussion of the Six Ways, dealing directly with the issue of conversion by referring to an anecdote about the historical Buddha Śakyamuni.

Once, a powerful general in Vaishali who had been a follower of Jainism, another Indian religion, was deeply impressed by the Buddha’s teaching of the Dharma and promptly became his disciple. The general wanted to proclaim his conversion to Buddhism throughout the land, but the Buddha dissuaded him, saying that it was not necessary. Śakyamuni even went so far as to tell the general, “You should continue to revere the Jain saints and teachings as you have always done.”³⁶⁾

The passage is admittedly ambivalent. Clearly, in the sense that the general has become a disciple of the Buddha, he has converted in one sense, but his new practices and beliefs do not conflict with his Jain practices. Niwano appears to be rejecting the need for exclusivist conversion and sanctioning multiple religious belonging, but the possibility of a hierarchical ordering of traditions is not explicitly foreclosed.

36) Niwano 2012, 389.

Niwano's Doctrinal Innovation: the "Future Oneness of Teachings"

As we have seen above, the problem of conversion is usually front and center in "the future oneness of teachings," and we will next consider Niwano's later interpretation. Whereas Niwano's understanding of the "Six Ways" is a further development of his earlier position, his conception of the future oneness of teachings undergoes a near total transformation.

At present, our *sahā* world is a realm of suffering, but these living beings in the sutra realize that in a future time when all of humankind's teaching and learning converge with those of the Buddha, *sahā* will become the most magnificent world in the universe. Today, teaching and learning, which should elevate humankind, tend to set us on the path to disorder, and because of this, teaching and learning pit us against one another, leading instead to unhappiness. There are examples of this in the arenas of religion and politics, and within the fields of science, rather than improving our lives nuclear physics is leading us toward the greatest abys of misfortune humankind could ever know.

If the various fields of learning and thought were to progress by following the principle of respect for human life and universal harmony, the ideal world—the land of Eternally Tranquil Light described in the *Lotus Sutra*—could be realized on the face of this earth, and combined with our civilization's advanced material culture, the *sahā* world would become the focal point of the cosmos. By making the buddhas on Divine Eagle Peak visible to the entire universe and bringing about this epiphany in the hearts of all living beings in the *sahā* world, Śakyamuni Buddha reveals the "future oneness of teachings," meaning that all of the teaching and learning of humanity will definitely converge with the Buddha's teaching of respect for human life and universal harmony.³⁷⁾

This passage brings to mind Kobayashi's discussion of the aims of all religions being the same. For Kobayashi, however, the unity in aims is both a reason

and harbinger for the eventual integration of all teachings into the Buddhist teaching of the *Lotus Sutra*. For Niwano, all types of learning, including religious teachings, do not, at the present time, all have the same objective, but in the future will coalesce around the single goal of “respect for human life and universal harmony.” Niwano distills Buddhism down to this general humanistic principle, not entirely dissimilar from his notion of nutrition introduced above, upon which religions and those who pursue various types of learning can agree. By doing so, he deftly sidesteps the absolutism that usually characterizes traditionalist understandings of “the future oneness of teachings.”

The Ambivalence of Inclusivism

Niwano’s “Gentle Inclusivism”

Niwano’s doctrinal innovations coincided with his increasing involvement in interfaith dialogue and cooperation, and given his important role in establishing the WCRP, continue to impact the world today. Religious studies scholar Mutō Akihiro has gone as far to characterize Niwano’s shift as a “Copernican revolution.”³⁸⁾ Niwano’s enthusiastic participation in interfaith dialogue was inherited by Rissho Kosei-kai and remains an important focus of the organization. Additionally, Niwano’s openness to the religious Other is not merely something carried on by elite strata of the organization, but also seems to characterize the attitudes of many rank-and-file members.

Using the analytical framework for approaches to religious diversity that I presented above, we can interpret Niwano’s approach as transitioning from the replacement model of inclusivism, often observed in prewar Nichirenism, to a fulfillment model of religious inclusivism. While perhaps groundbreaking and innovative in the 1960s and 1970s, however, more recent scholarship and theory

37) Niwano 2012, 564.

38) Mutō 2018, 36.

of religious diversity has proposed that as a stance toward religious diversity, inclusivism is a double-edged sword. While it can provide grounds for a greater embrace and approval of the religious Other, by its very nature inclusivism cannot escape hierarchical chauvinism and forestalls recognizing the equality of religions. As John P. Keenan describes, Niwano's perspective is a "gentle inclusivism," which is "nuanced and less dismissive, exhibiting greater embrace and theological sensitivity." But nevertheless,

[The] inclusivist attitude entails deep and, I would maintain, insoluble problems. By adjudicating other traditions, indeed even by embracing them, it also embraces a cultural and theological arrogance that assumes one's own history, one's own religion and its scriptures, or one's own mystic philosophy, as the norm by which all others are to be measured."³⁹⁾

To understand Keenan's critical evaluation of Niwano's thought, we have to take the religious "pluralistic revolution" into account.

The Pluralist Revolution

While Niwano's innovations in the 1960s and 1970s were undoubtedly groundbreaking when compared to prewar Nichirenism and aligned with the leading interfaith innovators of his era, religious inclusivism was soon overshadowed by the pluralistic movement of the 1980s and 1990s. This shift was notably influenced by John Hick's seminal ideas, presented in Hick's Gifford Lectures (1986-87) and subsequently published as *An Interpretation of Religion* in 1989. Hick emerged as a central figure among a swiftly expanding community of theologians and religious thinkers across various traditions, all striving to articulate pluralistic perspectives rooted in their respective religious contexts.

³⁹⁾ Keenan 2009, 13.

Admittedly, the “pluralist revolution” has faced resistance and pushback from conservative theologians and religious leaders in the late 1990s and the 2000s. In spite of this, pluralistic perspectives have found acceptance among many liberal Christian denominations. These groups are particularly inclined towards promoting interfaith dialogue. The increasing trend of individuals identifying with and participating in multiple religious traditions, both among religious leaders and the general public, further bolsters support for pluralistic viewpoints.

Rita Gross highlights the dilemma that inclusivism can present for the religious Other. “Such inclusivism is really irritating to those who are ‘included’ but also erased in that process,” she observes.⁴⁰⁾ Even if interactions are friendly and the reception is warm, the essence of inclusivism involves incorporating, or as I would articulate, subsuming the religious Other. Ultimately, the Other isn’t truly accepted in their distinctiveness. From a pluralist perspective, inclusivism is rooted in a theological presumption that one’s own religious tenets represent the standard. For the inclusivist, while truths may exist across all faiths, one believes they exclusively hold the universal truth.

The Pluralist Revolution and Rissho Kosei-kai

The commitment of Rissho Kosei-kai to interfaith dialogue is integral to its identity and is prominently featured in the hagiography of its founder, Rev. Niwano Nikkyō. This emphasis is also evident in its outreach efforts. However, there are instances where its inclusivist stance presents challenges. While Rissho Kosei-kai’s inclusivism aligns well with the Catholic Church’s views, which can also be characterized as inclusivist, it differs from Unitarians, another of its historical partners in interfaith dialogue, who tend to adopt pluralistic perspectives. Moreover, Rissho Kosei-kai’s proactive highlighting of interfaith dialogue in its international dissemination efforts resonates strongly with individuals who lean towards pluralism or practice multiple religious

⁴⁰⁾ Gross 2014, 68.

belonging, most prominently the Unitarian minister and process theologian Gene Reeves (1933-2019), who served as Rissho Kosei-kai's international advisor and consultant. When individuals holding pluralistic views encounter the elements of inclusivism that Keenan and Gross discuss, they are likely to be confused and disappointed.

One example of this is the struggle over choosing between the definite and indefinite article in translations into English. No equivalent grammatical particles exist in Japanese, but they become necessary upon translation. Opponents of using the definite article protest the sense of exclusivism that the use of it creates. One example of this can be found in the English translation of Rissho Kosei-kai's Members' Vow, a case where the supporters of the indefinite article prevailed. The Japanese sentence *Bukkyō no honshitsu-tekina sukuware-kata o nishiki shi* 仏教の本質的な救われ方を認識し was translated as “And recognize in Buddhism a true way of liberation.”⁴¹⁾ Had the definite article “the” been used in this sentence, its meaning would have become blatantly exclusivist.

It could be argued that this kind of phenomenon is an example of the hegemonic imposition of a western liberal pluralism on a non-western tradition. This is actually one of the very criticisms that opponents of pluralistic theologies raise—pluralistic views are liberal hegemonic claims projected upon religious traditions.⁴²⁾ However, it is Rissho Kosei-kai that has chosen to engage in international dissemination and position its tradition as universalist religion that transcends national and cultural boundaries, willingly entering the realm of what Roger Haight describes as the “inculturation” of a tradition, and exposing itself to pressures of what Kenneth Rose calls “departicularization.” “Inculturation,” as Haight describes it, is when a tradition is allowed to take on the form of a local culture, developing a theology that does not ignore the “vista of modern critical questions.” Haight draws parallels to how the early Christian movement proclaimed its faith to Hellenistic culture and was in turn shaped by

41) Rissho Kosei-kai International 2019b, 120-121; Rissho Kosei-kai 1992, 95.

42) Rose 2013, 25.

that culture.⁴³⁾ By “departicularization” Rose means “the process whereby every religious tradition slowly unravels itself as it adapts to cultural change.”⁴⁴⁾ Given the sharp decline in religious participation in Japan and poor prospects for growth, the growing popularity of Buddhism internationally, and Rissho Kosei-kai’s focus on foreign dissemination, Rissho Kosei-kai is likely to increasingly encounter the trends that Haight and Rose identify.

Rose, in particular, points to this historical process of departicularization that religions undergo, as well as other factors such the inability of verbal formulas to be definitively final or normative, the inability to objectively judicate religious truth claims, our interconnected global society that demonstrates the pluralistic character of religion, the phenomenon of religious hybridity or multiple religious belonging, among other factors, to assert the following conclusion.

Taken together, these lines of argument converge upon the conclusion that no inclusivist theology of religions can finally evade its unraveling as inadequate as an account of the religious life of humanity. Inclusivisms are doomed from the start by their reliance upon historically contingent, ad hoc, and finally implausible doctrinal devices designed to help the original theology remain relevant in a changed context, one that either no longer senses a need for the original theology or that finds it irrelevant and alien because it is a product of a different time and place. If this failure is acknowledged (as it inevitably will be through the sheer passage of time and cultural change) without bitterness or rejection of religion altogether, then it will open the door to an apophatic and pluralist theology of religions that is better able to account for the whole of humanity’s religious and spiritual experience than any particularist approach.⁴⁵⁾

Rose’s conclusion is no doubt controversial to many theologians and religious leaders, and perhaps seems implausible given the theological attacks on

43) Haight 1999, preface.

44) Rose 2013, 9.

45) Rose 2013, 56.

pluralistic theologies since the 1990s. Nevertheless, there has been a steady, if not subtle trend in the direction of pluralism. Rose observes that “In the wider stream of liberal Christian theologies, pluralism has become the uncontroversial default theology-of-religions position, thus rendering obsolete the question of the validity of religions other than the home tradition.”⁴⁶⁾

Prospects for the Development of a Pluralistic View

I am keen to observe how Rissho Kosei-kai navigates the challenge presented by the ambiguity of *Lotus Sutra*-based religious inclusivism. While some individual staff members do recognize this issue, the extent to which the organization as a whole acknowledges it remains to be seen, and it is unclear what responses, if any, we can expect to see in the future. Is there room for a pluralistic theology within *Lotus Sutra* Buddhism, and particularly within the teachings and writings of its founder Niwano Nikkyō? Unlike Niwano, who in his time needed a fresh interpretation of the *Lotus Sutra* to support his religious inclusivism, Rissho Kosei-kai today would need both a renewed understanding of both several portions of the *Lotus Sutra* and the teachings of its founder.

Hints of Religious Pluralism?

Can we find a basis for a move toward pluralism in the thought of Niwano Nikkyō? Although a fulfillment model of inclusivism is firmly established within Niwano’s interpretations of the *Lotus Sutra*, as we have seen, there were some hints of a move toward a more pluralistic stance later in his career. Mutō Akihiro presents evidence suggesting that Niwano was conscious of the ambivalence inherent in inclusivism and the potential to offend other religions. Mutō observes that in interfaith dialogue, Niwano appeared to gradually reduce

⁴⁶⁾ Rose 2013, 35.

his use of the phrase “All religions have the same root,” a phrase which he often used in his Dharma talks and remains known to Rissho Kosei-kai members today.⁴⁷⁾ Most importantly, however, there is a little noticed shift in Niwano’s understanding of the Original Buddha and its relationship with the divinities of other religions in *A Buddhist Path to Peace*, originally published in Japanese in 1972, that signals a move in the direction of religious pluralism.

Please reflect deeply on the meaning behind such truths as God Almighty, creator of the universe; the Sovereign Ancestral Kami who divinely remain in the high Heavenly Plain; the root of the universe is the Eternal, Original Buddha; the three-thousand-great-thousandfold world is the body of the Tathāgata Mahāvairocana; and Amitābha, Amitāyus. It may be understood that all these truths are rooted in the same Truth.

Although ways of expression and nuances in the way of thinking differ according to the land, time, and race into which a religion was born, the fundamental teaching is, in its essence, the same. If we were to dispute over details, we could find minor differences between the agape of Christianity, the compassion of Buddhism, and the makoto [sincere heart] of Shinto. But when we examine their roots, all are human sentiments that are, simply and purely, the great life of the universe.⁴⁸⁾

While Niwano’s formulation that all religions have the same root is present here, in this context, the *Lotus Sutra*’s Original Buddha is not the singular root from which all other religions emerge. Instead, it represents one of the various names or identities through which human beings perceive what he terms the “great life of the universe.” In his commentaries on the *Lotus Sutra*, he employs the phrase “great life of the universe” to depict the *Lotus Sutra*’s Original Buddha. However, in this instance, it appears that the “Original Buddha” is just one of many equivalent or equally valid perspectives for understanding the “great life of the universe.” This passage reads as what is called “identist pluralism,” which

47) Mutō 2018, 37.

48) Niwano 1975, 78-9.

the notion that all religions are oriented toward the same ultimate reality.⁴⁹⁾

However, such indications of pluralism were seemingly never fully elaborated upon. It remains uncertain how Niwano might have approached pluralism or reinterpreted passages of the *Lotus Sutra* that form the basis of his religious inclusivism. This challenge falls upon his successors and heirs. For those interested in the fate of Asian Buddhism in postmodern society, Rissho Koseikai is a Buddhist group to watch.

49) Griffin 2005, 24.

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