



The Answer

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Q & A for Shinshu Buddhists



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This is the initial issue of *The Answer: Namo Amida Butsu, Q & A for Shinshu Buddhist*. In this format, all I am going to do is to try and answer any and all questions you may have about our religion in a simple and short format. Think of it as a large Dear Abby column for Jodo Shinshu Buddhists. I will ask the many ministers I know to help answer the more difficult questions and will periodically add articles by those ministers or of ministers and individuals whom I find interesting and relevant. To begin with I am enclosing this article I found in the Vista Buddhist Temple's web site, I believe it was originally published as the Hou-u: Dharma Rain/Vol. 1, No. 1. The article is over 10 years old, but I think it is still relevant today. Please read it and begin forming your questions.

The Point of Being Buddhist, Christian or Whatever in America
by Evelyn Yoshimura (Rafu Shimpo) Originally Published In: The Rafu Shimpo, Friday, May 12, 1995

Recently, my daughter's friend was telling us how it's getting hard to be a Buddhist at her high school. She goes to a school with a lot of Japanese-Americans (JA) and Asians. She and some of her friends go to the local Buddhist temple, but most of the kids go to the local JA Baptist church. Apparently, the Baptist church has a weekly get-together every Friday night for the youth. Usually one of the young adults who runs the get-togethers will give an inspirational talk, there's discussion and the bulk of the evening is socializing and fun. Sounds neat.

A few of the Buddhist kids have started to attend the Friday get-togethers and some are even converting to Christianity. But one night a friend of hers, who goes regularly and is pretty committed as a Christian, called her after one of the Friday night sessions. The girl's friend was feeling bad because the entire inspirational message that evening was spent dogging Buddhism as "the worship of suffering" and a quick ticket to hell. Although the girl's friend is strong in her Christian belief, she felt something wasn't right about the way Buddhism was put down. And it didn't stop that night at the church. This attitude began to appear at school and other social gatherings. And some of the Baptist kids got quite aggressive about trying to convert the non-religious and Buddhist kids. And at times, this religious zeal would blur with the pressure to "fit in" so strong among people this age.

My daughter's friend went on to tell us about a party where the girl hosting it, who's Buddhist, was cornered by a group of her friends who began talking to her about how she should accept Christianity as "the way" and how Buddhism is a "negative" religion. The girl got so angry she ended up leaving her own party for a while. But sometimes something good comes out of something not-so-good. The Buddhist kids began talking to each other and their parents and other temple adults about this pressure they were feeling. And during the course of these discussions, they realized that Buddhism is harder to explain than Christianity because there's a lot of ambiguity, and it's not based on "belief." Rather, it focuses on seeking the "truth" and trying to be honest with others and especially yourself. There's no supreme being. No soul. Only actions and what remains from them. Hard to explain in 25 words-or-less. So they have begun to study Buddhism and are struggling to understand it. And recently, they invited kids from Buddhist temples in the other areas in Southern California to a discussion group. About 30 young people came out on a Saturday night. More than planned. But this is not just about teenage peer pressure. At least some of this over-zealousness by the Christian kids is a reflection of the rise of the Reli-

gious Right in this country. With a political agenda that highlights putting prayer into the public schools and telling women when and if they can have children; and with groups like the Christian Coalition having direct impact on elections and their spokesmen like Newt Gingrich calling for a "return to a Christian nation"—it's not surprising for kids to adopt some of that intolerance and self-righteousness in dealing with people who have different beliefs than they do.

I was raised a Jodoshinshu Buddhist. After 40-something years, much of it still makes a lot of sense to me. I've also studied and tried to apply Marxist-Leninist methods and have found some of it helpful in understanding the way society works. And much of the Native American Indian and Native Hawaiian ways of viewing the inter-relationship of humans, other creatures and the earth also make a lot of sense. I suppose these are parts of what makes up my personal system of belief. And yet, I've known Buddhists and Marxist-Leninists who were hypocritical and foolish. And though Christianity has never attracted me, I know all Christians are not self-righteous zealots. In fact, I have been greatly moved and inspired by many Christians who really struggle to put into practice what they believe. To teach by example. But that's really the point, isn't it? Regardless of what name people give their particular system of belief, it's really what they do in practice that counts. If being a Christian, Buddhist, atheist, Marxist, Muslim or Jew gives people the inspiration to be better than they are—to make their community, the society, better than they found it; to see the inter-connectedness of all people; then more power to them, whatever they call themselves. But if people use religion, or any system of belief, to put other people down, to put themselves above others, for individual material gain or power or to create and increase divisions among people—then they don't deserve respect or consideration, whatever they call themselves.

Through this experience, my daughter's friend seems to have gotten stronger. It forced her and her friends to really think about what they believe and what is right. And, though it could've pushed them to become defensive and anti-Christian, instead, they have learned about respecting others, even if they think very differently. And that is definitely the point.

(This article appeared in the Rafu Shimpō's "Ochazuke" column. "Ochazuke is a staff written column. The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views of The Rafu Shimpō).

This article points out one of the things I would like to cover, that is the issue of engaging or sharing of one's religious belief. The strength that most Western belief systems have is a clarity of doctrine (right or wrong). How many times have we been asked "What is Buddhism?" Most of the answers typically given is that Buddhism is a "philosophy of life," or "way of life." But what do these words mean? Does philosophy qualify as a religion? Is the search for Truth and Enlightenment enough to qualify Buddhism as a religion? Is Salvation a necessary component of Religion? What is our Salvation, or do we have Salvation in our religion? What is Jodo Shinshu? What are our doctrinal beliefs? Do you have faith in our beliefs? What is the 18 Vow? What do the words "Tariki" and "Jiriki" mean? What is our practice in Jodo Shinshu? What is Shinjin? What does various sundry practices mean and why must we discard them? If you can answer all these questions, with clarity and convictions, you have no need for this. If you do not, please join our internet Sangha and ask questions. As a parting thought, I will give you the Answer, and that Answer is Namō Amida Butsu.

Please all send all replies to the sending email address or if you would prefer, you may also send your questions to: sensei@vhbt.org

This is dedicated to all my former and continuing Dharma School Student, if you would like, please share the information. I will also give definitions and ask questions that I hope you will think about. The future format will be more like a column with short and simple answers to questions. In the event that there are no questions, I will make some up and send it anyway.

In gassho,

Ray Fukumoto