

## Nichiren's View of Nation and Religion

SATŌ Hiroo

佐藤弘夫

*A concern with "peace of the nation" was an integral part of Nichiren's religious vision. This paper examines Nichiren's understanding of the term "nation" (kokka), which for him pertained not so much to the political power structure, as much as to the land and the people who lived therein. His view of the Tennō and of earthly political power can then be seen in this light, as instruments toward establishing peace in the land and among the people. For Nichiren the highest value is the Transcendent Power who is none other than Śākyamuni Buddha, before whom all human beings stand on an equal plane. Failure on the part of political rulers to achieve the goal for which they are in power, that is, "peace of the nation," results in their fall from power, and even death, or punishment in hell. This paper also surveys how this revolutionary message of Nichiren was modified by his followers in the course of Japanese history.*

**Keywords:** Nichiren — Nichirenism — nation — *kokka* — Tennō — emperor — *buppō-ōbō*

IN CONSIDERING THE VARIOUS philosophical and sociopolitical movements in modern Japanese history (from 1868 onwards), we cannot ignore the influence of the thirteenth-century Buddhist figure Nichiren. Prominent among the currents that determined the course of modern Japan is Nichirenism (*Nichiren-shugi* 日蓮主義), an ideological movement linked to the rise of militarism during the period preceding the Second World War.<sup>1</sup> The image of Nichiren as a fiery nationalist that is still touted even today is due to the portrayals by the proponents of this movement.

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<sup>1</sup> Some scholars use this term "Nichirenism" (*Nichiren-shugi*) in a broad sense to include different philosophical and religious standpoints that derive in some way from the teaching of Nichiren (see, for example, TOKORO 1972 and TAMURA 1972). The term itself was coined by Tanaka Chigaku and used in a way that was identified with nationalistic ideals. I follow Tanaka's usage in this article.

Proponents of Nichirenism often cited the treatise *Risshō ankoku ron* 立正安国論 (On the establishment of right doctrine and peace of the nation) to emphasize Nichiren's nationalistic bent. In contrast with Shinran, another major Buddhist figure of the Kamakura period, who set aside all issues of state and politics and sought salvation within the domain of the individual's inner life, Nichiren was persistent in his involvement in political issues and state affairs. Insisting on his own religious teaching as the only one that could bring about peace in the nation, he repeatedly made admonitions to the rulers of the land, aiming at their conversion to his teaching. This feature of Nichiren's character was played up by Nichirenists of the modern period to project and establish his image as an ardent nationalist.

However, after Japan's defeat in the Second World War, the intellectual climate took an about-face, and the nationalistic facet of Nichiren's religious thought became a stumbling block for appreciating his ideas. Ienaga Saburō, a representative postwar scholar of the history of Japanese thought, took the view that the aspect of Nichiren's Buddhism concerned with the political arena and matters of state, so accentuated by the prewar nationalists, was a vestige of the State Buddhism of Japan's ancient period that held sway up to Nichiren's time. Contrasting Nichiren with Shinran, who had removed all concern with political matters from his own religious horizon, Ienaga questioned the categorization of Nichiren as belonging to the "New Buddhism," because Nichiren manifested remnants of the "old Buddhism" in his religious thought (IENAGA 1947). Studies on Nichiren after Ienaga thus came to focus on the question of how Nichiren's teaching could be categorized as New Buddhism, with scholars seeking to determine features in his thought that would support such categorization.

The notion of the "primacy of imperial law" (*ōbō i-hon* 王法為本) vs. the "primacy of Buddhist law" (*buppō i-hon* 佛法為本) was introduced as one way of trying to resolve this issue (TOKORO 1965). The term "primacy of imperial law" refers to the state Buddhism of the ancient period of Japanese history, wherein Buddhism was subordinate to political authority and placed at the service of the ruling regime. In contrast, Nichiren reversed the order of priority. Manifesting interest in national issues from a religious standpoint, he regarded the establishment of true Buddhism as a precondition for "peace of the nation" (*ankoku* 安国). Taking Buddhism as having supremacy over political authority, He thus assumed a position referred to as the "primacy of Buddhist law." In contrast to the position of traditional Buddhism, which was subservient to state authority and put to use for the protection of the nation (*gokoku* 護国), the position of the New Buddhism of the Kama-

kura period, as it was envisaged by its proponents, including Nichiren, was one of primacy. This is the view commonly held among scholars today (TAKAGI 1979, KAWAZOE 1971, SASAKI 1979).

But is this a correct and adequate interpretation of Nichiren's position? There are grounds for doubt. Taking our cue from a key passage in the *Risshō ankoku ron*, let us reexamine the framework provided by the notion "primacy of Buddhist law" vs. "primacy of imperial law" to check its applicability and adequacy in this case.

*What is "Establishing Right Doctrine and Peace of the Nation"?*

There is a passage in the *Risshō ankoku ron* often cited as a reference for Nichiren's view of the relationship between state and religion, which goes as follows: "First and foremost, pray for the nation. Then endeavor to establish Buddhist law."

This passage was indeed most convenient for prewar nationalists who wanted to demonstrate how Nichiren was himself a nationalist first and foremost. They reiterated, citing this passage, how Nichiren thought of his country above all else (KOBAYASHI 1942).

In the postwar era, however, it became a disadvantage to regard Nichiren in such terms. The image of the "nationalist" became a stumbling block toward a positive evaluation of Nichiren's thought. Thus, scholars were confronted with the task of trying to understand this passage and coming to terms with it.

In this context, a rather convenient fact was pointed out. *Risshō ankoku ron* is a treatise that uses the device of question-and-answer, written in the form of a dialogue between "host" (*shujin* 主人) and "visitor" (*kyaku* 客). The host can be taken as representing Nichiren's standpoint, and the visitor can be taken as an adversary whom Nichiren attempts to win over to his own side in the course of the conversation. The passage that goes "First and foremost, pray for the nation. Then endeavor to establish Buddhist law" comes from the mouth of the visitor, and hence is to be read as a statement contrary to Nichiren's actual stand.

Thus, in the postwar era, these words were taken as not expressive of Nichiren's position, but its opposite. In the framework of the "primacy of imperial law vs. primacy of Buddhist law" issue, this passage is read as expressing the adversarial position, giving primacy to imperial law, and not Nichiren's position giving primacy to Buddhist law. Today this view has become the established one among scholars (TAMURA 1965, p. 325; TOKORO 1965, pp. 8–9; TAKAGI 1970, p. 65; KAWAZOE 1971, pp. 41–42; SASAKI 1979, p. 85).

However, I myself cannot go along with this way of thinking. I have previously addressed this issue in another article, and here I will only offer an outline of what I have already treated elsewhere in greater detail (SATŌ 1987).

To summarize my own arguments, the above passage is indeed a statement made by the “visitor,” but the first point I emphasize in my conclusions is that this passage is a straightforward statement of Nichiren’s own true intent. As I read it, this passage, appearing in the later portion of the *Risshō ankoku ron*, reflects the visitor’s position not as adversarial to that of the host, but simply as one that acknowledges a point of agreement with the latter. The second point of emphasis I would like to make is that this passage does indeed reflect Nichiren’s own position, but not in the way that prewar nationalists and proponents of the “primacy of imperial law” position had taken it to mean.

If we are to read this passage as expressive of Nichiren’s own thought, how is it to be interpreted? Traditionally, this had been interpreted in the light of the concepts of “imperial law” (political authority) and “Buddhist law” (religious authority) set in opposition, as giving primacy to the former. However, a passage immediately preceding this one in the *Risshō ankoku ron* cannot be overlooked in the attempt to render a more adequate reading: “The country prospers because of the Dharma, the Dharma is holy because of people.” This declares that the (establishment of right) Dharma (Buddhism) is the basis for the country’s prosperity. And if we take this to heart, it would be inconsistent to read the other passage treated above, immediately following this one, as reversing position and proclaiming the primacy of national interest over Buddhist law. A better reading would take these two passages not in opposition, but in tandem. We can thus venture to say that, as a precondition for the assertion “first and foremost, pray for the country, then endeavor to establish Buddhist law,” there is the corollary assertion that “the prosperity of the nation depends upon no other than the establishment of right Buddhist law.”

If the original passage cited is not to be taken as giving primacy to imperial law above Buddhist law, how is it to be understood? I read this as Nichiren proclaiming that, precisely to ensure the establishment of Buddhist law, first and foremost one must pray for the peace and prosperity of the nation. In other words, with the establishment of Buddhist law as one’s goal, one may be tempted to put one’s own worldly benefit or one’s rebirth in the Pure Land as one’s first matter of concern. But instead of considering such individual matters, it is important first and foremost, according to Nichiren, to pray for the peace and prosperity of the nation.

I thus argue that the noted passage from the *Risshō ankoku ron* is not to be read as teaching the primacy of imperial law over Buddhist law, as hitherto taken by many scholars and interpreters, but as encouraging readers to pray, first and foremost, for the peace and prosperity of the nation, as part of the very process of establishing and enhancing Buddhism. Read in this way, that is, as teaching that the establishment of Buddhist law is invariably connected with the peace and prosperity of the nation, we can ask: how does this position differ from the traditional understanding of Buddhism as protector of the nation in the ancient (Heian) period?

To answer this question, in the next section I examine Nichiren's understanding of the concept of "nation," comparing it with Buddhist views before his time.

#### *Rulers' Peace and People's Peace*

In the ancient period of Japan, the term "nation" (*kokka* 国家) primarily referred to the supreme ruler of the land, the Tennō (天皇 = Heavenly Sovereign). In fact, the term "kokka" written in Chinese ideograms was in many instances read in Japanese as "Mikado" (=imperial ruler). For example, in the *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀, there is the following passage to that effect: "Our Nation (=mikado) is Sovereign throughout the land" (vol. 2, p. 50).

If the term "nation" in fact refers to the Tennō as Highest Ruler and Sovereign throughout the land, it would follow that the term "protection of the nation" (*gokoku* 護国) would mean the protection of the person of the reigning Tennō.

In the *Keiran shūyō shū* 溪嵐拾葉集 (a voluminous Tendai treatise from the medieval period), the following passage is noted: "On the Matter of Prayers and Invocations for the Protection of the Nation. Our temple, Sō-ji-in 總持院, shall be the designated place of prayer for the good fortune and longevity of the imperial ruler" (T. 76.863). Here "the protection of the nation" is synonymous with "the good fortune and longevity of the imperial ruler." This is evidently a carryover from the usage of the ancient period.

In the *ritsuryō* system of government in ancient Japan, the Tennō was considered as the sole constituent and subject of the legal order. Thus, in the Buddhism of ancient Japan, the terms "protection of the nation" and "peace of the nation" invariably meant "the protection of the person of the Tennō," or the peace and stability of his reign.

Against this background let us see what Nichiren meant in his use of the term "nation" in the context of the expression "peace of the

nation.” To go right to the point, Nichiren was not referring to the Tennō nor to the highest ruler of the political structure of the state, but to the land and the people who live therein. Thus, when Nichiren writes of “peace of the nation,” he was referring to something that went beyond the traditional sense of the stability of the Tennō’s reign or the security of the preestablished power structure (SATŌ 1978). Rather, his use of the term evoked mainly the image of peace and secure livelihood of the masses of people that lived in the land.

In the *Risshō ankoku ron* Nichiren writes: “The nation prospers because of the Dharma. The Dharma is holy because of the people. If the nation goes to ruin and people perish, who will venerate the Buddha, who will believe in the Dharma?” (*STN* 2: 220). This passage comes right before the one cited above, “First and foremost, pray for the nation.” Here it is clear that “nation” does not mean the person of the ruler, but refers to the land and the people, as the basis for the preservation of the Buddha and the Dharma.

Also in the *Risshō ankoku ron* is the following: “If one’s nation is lost and one’s house is destroyed, where can one go and flee from this world? If you seek your own peace and stability, first and foremost pray for the peace of the entire world” (*STN* 1: 225). These words are those of the host in the *Risshō ankoku ron*. Again it goes without saying that “nation” in this context does not refer to the persons in power nor the ruling authority.

The *Risshō ankoku ron* itself was written as Nichiren was confronted with the intermittent disaster and misfortune that continued to plague the people of the land, and as he sought ways of saving them from such a predicament. His mind’s eye was focused on the masses of people who were the direct victims of the disasters, and not on the personal fate or fortune of the political rulers.

In Buddhist doctrine there is a notion of “realm of country and land” (*kokudo seken* 国土世間) referring to the environment in which sentient beings live. In Nichiren’s use of the terms “peace of the nation” (*ankoku* 安国) or simply “nation” (*kokka* 国家 = “state”), what he was referring to primarily was not the ruling authority at the summit of the political and social structure, but that realm of land and country where people lived. His usage thus echoed this traditional Buddhist notion of *kokudo seken*.

The distinctiveness of Nichiren’s concept of “peace of the nation” lay in this shift in reference and emphasis, from the sense of the safety of the person of the Tennō or the stability of the existing political power structure (which we may also refer to as “nation” in the narrow sense), to the peace in the land and secure livelihood of the people

(which we may then refer to as “nation” in the broad sense of the term).

With the above in mind we can reexamine the passage in the *Risshō ankoku ron* previously cited. “First and foremost, pray for the nation. Then work to establish Buddhist law.” We can paraphrase this as follows: “Rather than praying for your individual salvation in the next life or your own enlightenment in this one, first and foremost, consider and pray for peace and harmony in the land and among the people who live therein. In so doing you will be setting the conditions for the establishment of the Buddhist law in the nation.” Here we can easily infer that at the back of Nichiren's mind is the sentiment expressed in an earlier passage of the *Risshō ankoku ron*: “If the nation goes to ruin and the people perish, who will venerate the Buddha, who will believe in the Dharma?” Thus, precisely for the goal of establishing Buddhist law, Nichiren emphasizes, it is imperative to “first and foremost, pray for the nation.”

A surface glance would take the use of the same words to be “old” Buddhism, such as “peace of the nation” and “protection of the nation.” But whereas for “old” Buddhism these referred to the stability of the existing power structure and the safety of the person of the Tennō, for Nichiren the emphasis and the reference of these terms radically shifted, embracing the land and the people therein. There is thus a tremendous difference, in this point, between Nichiren and “old” Buddhism.

### *Imperial Law as Means toward Peace of the Nation*

What, then, is the role of the political power structure or of the reigning ruler (“nation” in the narrow sense) toward the establishment of peace in the land and among the people (“nation” in the broader sense), in Nichiren's schema presented in the *Risshō ankoku ron*?

From the above we can see that “nation” in the former (narrow) sense is synonymous with the term “imperial law.” And in Nichiren's schema, imperial law is no other than a means toward the establishment of peace of the nation. On this basis, the legitimacy of a particular regime or power structure depends solely on whether it can realize this goal for which it is intended, namely, the establishment of the peace of the nation.

Here an important issue comes to the fore. If a particular regime is not able to fulfill the mandate for which it has been placed in power, namely to establish and ensure the peace of the nation, what will happen? Nichiren did not hesitate to heap criticism upon such a regime.

In his treatise entitled *Shugo kokka ron* 守護国家論 (On the protection of the nation), we find the following passage: “Those who depart from this earthly life and fall into hell do so not for a single cause... (these include,) for example, a nation’s ruler who does not heed the cries of the people” (*STN* 1: 89).

*Shugo kokka ron* was written around the same period as the *Risshō ankoku ron* and is one of the earliest treatises of Nichiren. In it he describes how a good number of rulers have fallen into hell, and one of the reasons he gives is precisely that they did not heed the voices of the suffering people in their domain. In short, he proclaims that rulers who cannot bring about peace in the nation will inevitably fall into hell as punishment.

This kind of political criticism was not possible within the framework of the Buddhism of the ancient period, wherein “peace of the nation” was equated with the stability of the ruling regime. Making a clear-cut distinction between the narrow and broad sense of “nation” as described above, and understanding the former as the means toward the establishment of peace in the latter sense, made it possible for Nichiren to launch such criticisms.

Let us elucidate this point from another angle. In Japanese Buddhism prior to Nichiren, we can say that the interrelation between imperial law and Buddhist law was one of mutual interdependency. The so-called theory of mutual interdependency of Buddhist law and imperial law (*buppō-ōbō sōi ron* 仏法王法相依論) gave expression to this kind of interrelationship (SATŌ 1998a).

In this kind of context, the nation, or imperial law, that was to be protected by Buddhist law was no other than the person of the Tennō, as well as the existing power structure. As such, “peace of the nation” meant nothing other than the prolongation of the existing regime: preservation of the existing power structure was understood as the goal of establishing peace of the nation. Within this framework there was no room for considering the peace and livelihood of the masses of people. Also, within this framework there would be no place for criticism or rejection of existing political authority.

In contrast to this standpoint, distinguishing the narrow sense of “nation” from the broader sense as described above enabled Nichiren to set up a tripolar framework for considering the relationship between imperial law and Buddhist law. In this case the concept of “nation” (in the broader sense, meaning the land and the people) served as the third pole in the framework. Imperial law is thus understood as that which is entrusted with the mandate of protecting (and enhancing) Buddhist law, as well as establishing peace of the nation,



that is, security and harmony in the land and among the people.

Nichiren's criticism of ruling authority, based as it was on this distinctive concept of "nation," escalated toward the later years of his life. In a letter to Shijō Kingo 四条金吾, one of his devoted followers, he writes: "Śākyamuni Buddha doles out reward and metes punishment justly. The three Tennō named above, and three ministers of state, are regarded as enemies of Śākyamuni Tathāgata. Their life on this earth was to no avail, and they fell into hell in their next rebirth. This should be no different as far as the present ruler is concerned" (*STN* 2: 1381). In a letter to the wife of another follower, he writes that the prevalence of evil during their respective reigns became the cause of the five Tennō, from the eighty-first (Antoku) to the eighty-fifth (Chūkyō), turning into demons or falling into hell in their next rebirth (*STN* 2: 1790).

This kind of criticism leveled against previous Tennō, incidentally, was not allowed in print at the height of militaristic nationalism in the period preceding and during the Second World War.

#### *Tennō Who Fell into Hell*

I have so far described how, on the basis of his distinctive concept of "peace of the nation," Nichiren understood the ruling political authority as the means toward realizing that peace, and how this understanding made it possible to level criticisms against rulers who were not able to accomplish that goal. This concept, though distinctive vis-à-vis the framework inherited from the Buddhism of the ancient period, was, however, not a monopoly of Nichiren, seen within the wider context of the medieval period of Japanese history (SATŌ 1998b).

As we have seen, in the Buddhism of the ancient period, "nation" was nothing other than the person of the Tennō, and "peace of the nation" meant the stability of the existing regime. However, toward the medieval period there are instances of the use of the term "peace of the nation" that indicated an inclusion of the land and the people, though in these instances the central meaning still focused on the ruling authority.

Further, in the medieval period the notion of the existence of a universal authority transcending earthly political authority was widely held. In this context, it was understood that anyone, inclusive of the Tennō, who acted at odds with this universal authority would receive punishment and/or die.

In the *Heike monogatari*, for example, the young Tennō Antoku is told by the Second Ranking Nun (*ni-i no ama* 二位の尼), as the Heike

forces are defeated in battle and drown in the waters of Dan-no-Ura: “You have been born into this earthly life to become the nation’s ruler, but dragged down by evil karma, your good fortune has run out. This is why you are now about to fall into the bottom of the sea” (vol. 2, p. 336). These words in effect testify to the belief in the existence of a universal principle or authority that even the Tennō, at the pinnacle of earthly power, cannot escape or turn against.

There are other instances that can be cited, such as the illness of the Tennō Go-Suzaku, or the death of the Tennō Nijō, or the defeat of the retired Tennō Go-Shirakawa in the Jōkyū Uprising, which are regarded as punishments due to their having gone counter to Buddhist law.

The universal authority, or Transcendent Power, that brought about the destruction and defeat or death of these Tennō or retired Tennō, was variously identified with the Buddhist Dharma as handed down in particular temples, or with a particular Buddha or kami, or else with an impersonal and abstract principle such as the law of cause and effect. It was thus described and expressed in different ways. But the common factor in all these different expressions was the belief in a tremendous, Transcendent Power that was in the background of this phenomenal world. Even the highest earthly authority, such as the Tennō, considered as a descendant of the kami, cannot evade such a universal authority, and going against it would result in loss of power or even death. It is against the backdrop of this belief in a universal authority or Transcendent Power that Nichiren’s concept of peace of the nation and his view of the role of the Tennō came to be formed.

However, a decisive difference can be pointed out between Nichiren and other thinkers of the medieval period who shared this belief in some form of transcendent, universal authority. Though there are common themes in describing the fate of individual Tennō as dying or falling into hell, etc., as the result of their having collided with this universal authority, none of the writers or thinkers of the medieval period, save Nichiren, considered anyone other than the Tennō as the nation’s legitimate sovereign. In this sense, Nichiren stood out as an exception.

It was taken for granted throughout Japanese history that no one other than the Tennō, regarded as a direct descendant of the kami who founded the Japanese islands, was the ruler of the Japanese nation. But this was not so for Nichiren. For him, political authority (imperial law) was in effect nothing more than the means toward the realization of the peaceful life of the people. As long as this mandate was fulfilled, it did not matter who the political ruler was.

In two writings of Nichiren's later years we read the account of five Tennō, from Antoku to Chūkyō, who are named in the same lineup as Minamoto Yoritomo and Hōjō Yoshitoki, Bakufu (military) rulers of the same period (*STN* 2: 1824; 1847–48). As the series of Tennō are not able to bring about justice in their mode of government, Yoritomo and others come to be regarded as the nation's legitimate rulers who receive protection from the kami. Here Nichiren states that just as in the past, when Tennō did fall from the seat of power as rulers of the nation, so in these days it could happen again.

In other words, during the medieval period Nichiren was the only one who openly put into question the absolute authority of the divinely descended Tennō, and affirmed the possibility of transfer (through revolution) of legitimate authority as ruler of the nation to other individuals.

Incidentally, there is a well-known treatise among the Confucian writings, the *Meng Zi*, one of the four classics that deals with political revolution. Yet even during the Edo period of Japanese history, where the influence of Confucianism was most pronounced, the philosophy of revolution as expounded in this treatise received scant acceptance. In Japan, where the belief in the unbroken lineage of Tennō as lasting for ages eternal was deeply rooted and commonly held, the *Meng Zi* did not find a hearing. There was even a story that spread among the people of how the ships that happened to carry copies of this treatise from China sank into the sea on the way to Japan. In this kind of milieu, Nichiren's thought, radical as it was with its affirmation of the possibility of revolution, stood out as unique and without par not only in the medieval period, but even up to the premodern era.

Here I would like to bring up a related issue. This concerns the currently widely-accepted view that Nichiren did not consider the Tennō of his day as the nation's sovereign, but Hōjō Yoshitoki, the highest political authority at the time. A good number of scholars of the present day hold the view that for Nichiren, one result of the Jōkyū Uprising was that the center of political authority shifted from the imperial house to the Hōjō family (TAKAGI 1965; TAMAKAKE 1998, p. 38). I do not agree with this view. In my understanding, for Nichiren the Tennō of his time continued to hold the seat of power as the nation's sovereign.

What, then, actually changed in the Jōkyū Uprising? In my view, for Nichiren the Tennō continued to be regarded as the nation's sovereign, but the actual seat of power was transferred from the retired Tennō, who happened to be the reigning Tennō's father, to Hōjō Tokimune (see SATŌ 1998c). Thus, Nichiren distinguished between the nation's sovereign (*koku-ō* 國王) as the summit of earthly authority,

and the nation's *de facto* ruler (*koku-shu* 国主) who wielded the actual power. In other words, the Tennō continued to be the sovereign, but the actual ruler who wielded power changed from Go-Toba, the retired Tennō, to Hōjō Yoshitoki. This, in my view, is how Nichiren understood what happened as a result of the Jōkyū Uprising.

In his later years, however, Nichiren gave indications in his writings that in place of the eighty-first to the eighty-fifth Tennō, he regarded Minamoto Yoritomo, and later Hōjō Yoshitoki, as the nation's sovereigns. If this is the case, it would appear that Nichiren's view of the significance of the Jōkyū Uprising changed in the later years of his life from that of his earlier years. From the view of a case of seizure of actual power that had continuing effect in successive regimes, Nichiren later came to view this incident as a one-time seizure of the seat of the nation's sovereign that lasted only during Yoshitoki's reign.

In either case, independently of the fact of whether the Tennō was in reality Japan's national sovereign or not, for Nichiren the position of Tennō was seen on the basis of its fundamental relationship with Buddhist law, that is, as a means towards that law's enhancement and propagation. In this regard, he saw the military rulers (the Bakufu) on the same plane. "Old" Buddhism affirmed the authority of the Tennō as a descendant of the kami, but for Nichiren there was no regard at all for any special authority of the Tennō in these terms. In contrast with the "old" Buddhism that regarded the Tennō as the nation's sovereign from his very status as descendant of the kami, Nichiren, grounded in a distinctive worldview that saw imperial law as inseparable from Buddhist law, did not accept such an assumption in his own understanding of the status of the Tennō.

Going back to our earlier point, in the background of the formation of Nichiren's thinking on this subject we can note his firm belief in the existence of an ultimate value that transcended all earthly authority. Nichiren frequently referred to Śākyamuni Buddha as the Transcendent Being that ruled over this world. Everyone stands on an equal plane vis-à-vis this Buddha, be it Tennō or be it ordinary person. In this framework, it is underscored that even the Tennō, upon becoming an enemy of Śākyamuni, will fall into hell, and any person, even one of low social status, having faith, will attain enlightenment.

### *The Significance of Nichiren's Thought in History*

Let us set Nichiren's thought in historical perspective, from the vantage point of the question of the relationship between state (nation)

and religion. The first point to note is his teaching of the equality of all human beings, from the nation's sovereign to the masses of people, as they stand before this ultimate power that transcends all earthly authority.

In ancient Japan it was the common assumption that the Tennō, as a descendant of the kami, held supreme authority over all. There was no room for the development of any notion of a universal existent or universal value that went beyond this authority. In the medieval period, however, the notion of the existence of an ultimate authority that transcended that of the Tennō, which even had power over the life and death and the very fate of the Tennō, came to be widely accepted. Nichiren, drawing on this current, strongly emphasized the role of this transcendent power, which he equated with Śākyamuni Buddha, in the events and affairs of this world.

In his treatise *Senji shō* 選時抄 (On the determination of time), Nichiren writes that a person stricken with leprosy who recites the title of the *Lotus Sūtra* (Namu-myōhō-rence-kyō) is on this count holier than the Abbot of the Tendai school, regarded as the pinnacle of religious authority, on this count (*STN* 2: 1009). *Vis-à-vis* the Buddha and the Dharma as transcendent authority, the Tennō, the Abbot of the Tendai school, and a person stricken with leprosy all stand on the same level. If a Tennō goes against this transcendent authority, the consequence is to fall into hell. Even one stricken with leprosy, having faith in this transcendent authority, is regarded as a noble person. With this logical framework—that is, in the context of the direct relationship with Śākyamuni Buddha as transcendent authority—Nichiren sought to legitimate his own place and that of his followers within the scheme of things, and therein drew strength to withstand persecutions.

The second point to note in understanding the historical significance of Nichiren's thought is that he taught salvation as something not to be confined to the individual's inner life or to the subjective realm, but as something that called for actualization in endeavors toward the transformation of the land, toward the realization of an ideal society.

Looking at the major Buddhist figures whose life and career spanned around the same period as Nichiren's, we can compare him on this count with Hōnen, Shinran, Dōgen, and others. Hōnen and Shinran, for example, abandoned any hope of salvation in this world, teaching that this earthly realm is a world thoroughly replete with evil. One born in this earthly realm can only look squarely at the evil karma that has led to one's birth in this world, and entrust oneself to Amida Buddha, the sole power that can save one from this evil realm. Thus for

Hōnen and Shinran, this phenomenal world is not something to be transformed, but something to be shunned in the search for salvation in a different realm.

Dōgen, on the other hand, placed importance on the experience of enlightenment in this life. However, his view confined salvation to the individual realm. There is no trace of a positive stance toward transforming society in Dōgen's thought.

In contrast with the above figures, Nichiren, not satisfied with relegating salvation to the inner life of the individual, taught that it was imperative to engage oneself in active efforts to objectively transform the land, toward the realization of an ideal society wherein people would be able to attain happiness. He emphasized the task of constructing the Buddha land in this world in his teaching. Nichiren's active interest in and frequent reference to "nation" in his writings derives not so much from a desire for recognition by the Tennō or by ruling political authorities, as from his conviction that it was imperative first to realize peace in this worldly existence before all else.

Above I have described a distinctive feature of Nichiren's thought, in that he sought to establish the ideal Buddha land, setting himself toward the task of objectively transforming this country of Japan in the period of the Latter Age of Dharma. Nichiren shines light on the identity of the agent who will bring about this transformation of the phenomenal world. This is the third notable feature of his thought.

In the chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* entitled "Springing Up out of the Earth," there is a scene where numerous bodhisattvas appear and receive the mission to propagate the Dharma in this evil world in the time after the Buddha's entry into nirvāṇa. Nichiren presents the religious dimension of his own actions and those of his followers with this scene from the *Lotus Sūtra* in mind, identifying himself and his followers with the bodhisattvas described therein. If he and his followers are in effect these bodhisattvas depicted in the *Lotus Sūtra*, it would follow that their actions related to the propagation of the *Lotus Sūtra*, toward the realization of the Buddha land in this earthly realm, are no less than sacred acts that bring to fulfillment the Buddha's own predictions (as given in the *Lotus Sūtra*). For Nichiren and his followers, theirs was a sacred mission for which they were called to dedicate and offer their lives.

Thus, with the agent of transformation of this earthly realm into the Buddha land identified, and the actions toward such transformation endowed with religious significance, Nichiren's religious teaching comes to incorporate into its inner structure a distinctively practical thrust, calling followers to an active engagement in the trans-

formation of the world as a component of their religious identity and mission.<sup>2</sup>

*Between Nichiren and Nichirenism*

In concluding this paper, I would like to reflect briefly on the shift in the understanding of Nichiren's teaching, from what I described above, to the interpretation proffered by the Nichirenists of the modern period.

Nichiren's religious vision was of such radical nature that his followers continued to be subjected to persecution throughout history. Faced with such a prospect, many of Nichiren's heirs sought ways to reconcile themselves and be able to coexist with earthly authority, toning down or outrightly abandoning such radical aspects of Nichiren's thought. These aspects included the logic of affirmation of revolution, or descriptions of Tennō or political rulers as falling into hell, etc. As this process of accommodation took place in history, the religious perspective that Nichiren opened up for his followers, emphasizing belief in a transcendent power above all earthly authority, on the basis of which one could level criticism against political rulers, was inherited, and maintained, not by the religious professionals, the Buddhist priests ensconced in their established temples, but rather by communities of lay devotees. The religious movement known as "Hokke Ikki" 法華一揆, for example, arose out of this heritage of religious faith handed down among Nichiren's lay followers. Unfortunately, in the shift to the premodern society that occurred from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century, this popular movement that was closely linked with the religious vision as described above lost its battle against the consolidated religiopolitical power structure of the time. In the Edo period, this notion in Nichiren's thought that upheld the existence of a religious authority transcending the earthly was regarded as heretical, and along with Christianity and a few bore the brunt of severe persecution. Among the groups of Nichiren followers, the Fujufuse-ha 不受不施派 in particular, which continued to place emphasis on Śākyamuni Buddha as absolute being, was proscribed, and only those groups that went along with and affirmed the reigning political authority were allowed to continue as religious bodies under the supervision of the political establishment (SATŌ 1998d).

Tanaka Chigaku, the principal proponent of Nichirenism in the

<sup>2</sup> Nichiren's thought identifying the grass-root masses, understood as the "bodhisattvas springing up from the earth," as agents of transformation, has been given renewed attention in the modern period because of the logic of social revolution it offers (see SATŌ 1998e).

modern period, repeatedly wrote to this effect: “The Most Holy Tennō, descendant of the kami, is the embodiment of the right path, and is the very truth of the *Lotus Sūtra* itself” (TANAKA 1936). For Tanaka, the Tennō is the holy and inviolable Being itself. Thus for Tanaka, to protect this divine Tennō was a most important duty. For Nichiren, the Tennō is no more than the means to realize “peace of the nation.” The Tennō is an entity that is at the service of a higher and more sublime religious ideal (the Buddha Dharma) and, as such, comes to be affirmed and recognized as the nation’s sovereign. But in Tanaka’s schema, the person or being of the Tennō had come to be regarded as an ultimate end in itself.

This standpoint of modern-day Nichirenism can perhaps be better understood by recalling two historical currents of the premodern period. One is the defeat of popular religious movements (such as the Fujufuse movement), and the other is the subservient stance taken by religious leaders vis-à-vis political authority. Thus, the extremely important horizon opened up by Nichiren, namely the understanding of political authority as merely a means toward the realization of a much more sublime goal, is no longer seen.

In projecting the image of Nichiren as an ideologue that supported the view of “Japan as a nation under the Tennō system,” the Nichirenist propagandists covered up or expurgated those passages in Nichiren’s writings that went counter to their cause, and manipulated Nichiren’s teaching to their own advantage.

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