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Yukio Matsudo. *Nichiren, der Ausübende des Lotos-Sūtra*. Norderstedt: Books on Demand, 2004. 591 pp. EUR 50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-8334-0767-3.

Reviewed by Ruben L. F. Habito (Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University)
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This volume, written in German, is based on Yukio Matsudo's Habilitation thesis submitted to the University of Heidelberg and approved in 2001. It is a crystallization of Matsudo's years of work on Nichiren, calling the attention not only of scholars and adherents of Nichiren Buddhism as such, but also of students of Japanese religion and philosophy, and of comparative thought in general.

The first part, consisting of two long chapters, is a detailed description and analysis of Nichiren's religious career (chapter 1) and teaching on ultimate reality (chapter 2). This part takes up the bulk of the volume, with more than four out of five hundred and some pages of Matsudo's text. The second part, in two much shorter chapters, focuses on doctrinal disputations with clerics of the Nichiren Shōshū, (chapter 3), and on themes related to Nichiren's reception in the West (chapter 4). In these two parts, originally prepared as two autonomous tracts but put together in this single volume, Matsudo presents his own interpretation of Nichiren's religious thought, underscoring the historical significance of Nichiren as a reformer of Japanese Buddhism, and calling for a fresh look at the implications of his religious message for the contemporary world.

The disputation with the Nichiren Shōshū gives Matsudo a convenient venue for unpacking concrete implications of his position on Nichiren's religious thought, which he had systematically laid out in the first part of the book. Set in this contrast with the doctrinal positions of the Nichiren Shōshū, Matsudo's reading of the texts attributed to Nichiren stands out in fresh relief, presenting Nichiren as conveying a "humanistic-centered" religious message, as opposed to the "authoritarian and institution-centered" religious orthodoxy espoused by the Nichiren Shōshū organization. The latter has come to deify Nichiren into an absolutized being that

is now regarded as an "Other Power" that endows unenlightened beings who seek assistance through faith in the *Lotus Sutra* with assistance "from above."

Chapter 4 lists the stereotypical and distorted images of Nichiren that have appeared in general works in Western languages up to recent times. These often depict Nichiren as "un-Buddhist," "patriotic and nationalistic," "militant," or even as "psychologically imbalanced," with caricatures that sorely miss the point and ignore Nichiren's religious message. This characterization is what Matsudo intends to rectify. Matsudo's work not only throws fresh light on this oft-misunderstood figure, but also opens new avenues in comparative thought, as Nichiren's religious teaching is situated within the arena of world philosophical and religious currents. Critical and evaluative comments

In his introductory chapter, Matsudo describes the nature of the sources available to us in approaching the historical figure of Nichiren. This classification of textual sources can be seen against the backdrop of an ongoing debate among scholars regarding the status of certain writings attributed to Nichiren. A landmark work in this regard is Asai Yōrin's *Nichiren Shōnin Kyōgaku no Kenkyū* (*A Study of the Doctrine of Nichiren Shōnin*), published posthumously in 1945, which questioned the authenticity of those texts that contained elements of the Tendai doctrine of original enlightenment, asserting that this doctrine was not in consonance with Nichiren's own teaching. Asai's study sparked lively discussions among scholars, and Jacqueline Stone has carefully documented and evaluated the various issues in this debate that has involved many prominent scholars over the years, and herself sets the discourse in new light. (cf. her doctoral dissertation, *Some Disputed Writings in the Nichiren Corpus: Textual, Hermeneutical and Historical Problems*.)

Ann Arbor, 1991, and her award-winning *Original Enlightenment and the Transformation of Medieval Japanese Buddhism*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999). Sueki Fumihiko has also offered some fresh angles on this discussion in his *Nichiren Ny? mon (Introduction to Nichiren)* published in 2000. There are many aspects in the debate too intricate to lay out in this review, but the main point that calls for comment here is Matsudo's use of sources in his endeavor to lay out various facets of Nichiren's religious thought.

In his exposition of "Nichiren's doctrine," Matsudo cites many passages from those works he himself has listed and acknowledged as "questionable writings," as well as from the category of "lecture notes," which scholars have also come to question in terms of authenticity. He takes a hint from Sueki (2000, cited above), who offered a norm for adjudicating on those writings, based on whether they are seen as "consistent or not with Nichiren's thought." Matsudo, however, begs the question, in simply assuming that the citations from this category of writings disperse throughout this volume are in themselves expressions of Nichiren's own thought, to be regarded as "consistent" with it. To this reviewer, this is the most unsatisfactory feature, if not the major flaw, of the entire volume.

The same can be said in critique of Anesaki Masaharu's 1916 work, *Nichiren, the Buddhist Prophet* (cited above), which portrayed Nichiren in glorious terms as embodying features of both mystic and prophet (two typologies often set in contrast in religious studies), but which based these portrayals largely on texts that later scholars (beginning with Asai Y? rin) earmarked as "questionable." Matsudo does not address Asai's and others scholars' concerns about the reliability of certain texts handed down in Nichiren's name that contain elements of Tendai original enlightenment doctrine (texts which Matsudo amply uses in his citations), but simply skirts the issue. The fact that, aside from a single mention of Asai's name without footnoted documentation (p. 374), the latter's landmark work is not even listed in the bibliography is a telling feature on this point.

Matsudo could have taken a hint from Jacqueline Stone (1991, 1999, cited above) who examined such writings, not so much interested in determining whether they were in fact Nichiren's own or not, but with a view to understanding them better and appreciating them as developments in Nichiren's thought that, putatively, his later followers had amplified and elaborated upon as part of the Nichiren legacy. If Matsudo had followed this

line of argumentation, this volume would have had a greater cogency and convincingness in its presentation of "Nichiren's thought," seen from the wider angle of its history of effects.

Matsudo could re-frame his task, not as one of expounding on the thought and teaching of the historical Nichiren (using, as he does, sources that can be questioned for "authenticity," thereby rendering a flaw in his presentation), but rather as one of laying out the religious message of Nichiren as received and elaborated upon by followers in successive generations. This may be a point easily glossed over by adherents themselves, but is not one to be overlooked by historians and scholars of religion. Matsudo's expressed intent to cast Nichiren as a reformer of Japanese Buddhism may be behind this implicit insistence on the his authorship of those questionable writings, giving the historical Nichiren the honor for many of those aspects Matsudo extols in his religious teaching, rather than acknowledging credit also to the later followers putatively responsible for some of those writings.

Also, one may concur with Matsudo's thesis that Nichiren can be regarded as a reformer of Japanese Buddhism based on the reasons Matsudo lays out in this book, but this need not be taken in an exclusive sense that would ignore or play down the significance of other figures like H? nen, Shinran, D? gen, and others who also can be regarded as "reformers" of Japanese Buddhism in their own different ways.

There are other items in this volume that historians of religion and scholars of Buddhism may quibble about. A comment (on p. 366) that the *Mah? y? na Treatise on The Awakening of Faith* was "composed by A? vagho? a in the second century and translated into Chinese by Param? rtha (499-569) in 557" ignores the debates among scholars over the last decades concerning the authorship and origins of this well-known work.

The last chapter on "Nichiren's Reception in the West" accentuates the negative images of Nichiren in the West, as well as distortions from the standpoint of other religious traditions, that stand to be corrected with Matsudo's re-portrayal of Nichiren's personality and teaching in this volume. In making his case, Matsudo has apparently chosen not to mention some recent works that also cast Nichiren's thought in new light, such as the special edition of the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* (Vol.26, 3/4, Fall 1999), entitled "Revisiting Nichiren," edited by Jacqueline Stone, et. al. This is a collection of articles and reviews highlighting key aspects of

Nichiren's thought and its contemporary significance, with a six-page bibliography of Western language works on Nichiren, most of which Matsudo has either been oblivious of or has chosen to ignore.

On a positive note, in contrasting Nichiren's thought with the doctrinal positions of the Nichiren Shōshū (chapter 3), Matsudo is able to highlight appealing features in the religious message of Nichiren (and followers). Here he makes comparative remarks on the religious message of Jesus set against what is generally taken as the "orthodox position" of Roman Catholicism, bringing his point home effectively. Matsudo's aim is to contrast these standpoints of institutional orthodoxy with the religious teaching of Jesus, who proclaimed sinful human beings to be nevertheless children of God in whom God's love and grace reside, seen in parallel with the religious message of Nichiren, who affirmed ordinary beings to be the bearers of the infinite Wisdom and Compassion of the Buddha. The observations Matsudo makes comparing two religious orthodoxies set against the message of their respective founders can serve as useful pointers for further reflection and study on interreligious themes.

Yukio Matsudo's *Nichiren, der Ausuehende des Lotos-Sūtra* makes contributions in three of the four areas of Nichiren studies that have traditionally occupied scholars in Japan, and carries this discourse in a Western language. First, it puts together findings from recent studies that recast the figure of Nichiren in the context of his

time, that is, the Kamakura period of Japanese history. Second, it makes a distinctive contribution in the area of doctrinal studies that address theoretical and practical aspects of Nichiren's teaching from the point of view of adherents. Third, it provides descriptive accounts of developments among Nichiren's followers, notably the Nichiren Shōshū, though seen in an adversarial light.

In sum, the technical issues cited above notwithstanding, Matsudo's work is a noteworthy contribution in what can be called Nichiren Buddhist "systematic theology." This latter phrase is used following John Makransky and Roger Jackson (*Buddhist Theology*. Richmond: Surrey, 2000), referring to critical and constructive tasks of intellectuals who study and reflect on Buddhist traditions. Matsudo takes on his task with a passion, and with a deep familiarity with the textual sources (in the five categories listed above). He offers creative and refreshing insights into an important religious figure who remains influential in our day, not only in Japan but in different parts of the world where followers of Nichiren's Lotus teaching have established communities of practice. Scholars in various related disciplines (Japanese studies, Buddhist studies, comparative religious studies, religious philosophy) able to traverse the contours of the German language may also find in this study on Nichiren's life and thought relevant hints for their own fields of interest, such that plowing through this hefty tome can become a worthwhile undertaking.

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