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From prominence to obscurity : a study of the Darumashū : Japan's first Zen school

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Citation

Breugem, V. M. N. (2012, May 30). *From prominence to obscurity : a study of the Darumashū : Japan's first Zen school*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/19051>

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Issue Date: 2012-05-30

IN CONCLUSION

Who was Nōnin? And what was the nature of the pioneering Zen school that he established, known as the Darumashū? For a long time most of what was known to us about this group and about its various followers came from suspicious sources: its critics. Eisai accused the adherents of the Darumashū of rejecting Buddhist works and of engaging in evil behaviour. Dōgen called them idle and simple fools, entangled in misguided, heterodox ideas. Students of the Pure Land teacher Shōkō praised their own teacher for putting Darumashū founder Nōnin to shame in debate. Nichiren denounced Nōnin for infesting the country with the evils of Bodhidharma's Zen. In the 14th century, the Buddhist historian Kōkan Shiren described Nōnin as an untrustworthy, marginal figure and thereby consigned him to obscurity. There was now little need to know who Nōnin was, and what the teachings of the Darumashū actually said. Intriguing questions, such as how Nōnin, the vilified founder of a marginalized tradition, came to view himself as a Zen adept without actually having traveled to China, could no longer be asked, let alone answered.

Despite a thorough examination of the historical sources, it cannot be denied that Nōnin remains an elusive figure. What became clear is that he was a highly noticed figure. The negative tone of most of the reports about him must be understood against the background of rivalries between competing Buddhist groups that were trying to establish their own orthodoxy, or whose established position in the Japanese Buddhist world was now under threat by charismatic newcomers with alternative narratives and competing interpretations. The assertion and preservation of orthodoxy played an important role in the eventual excision of the Darumashū from the historical record.

Orthodoxy, historian John Henderson explains in one of the few comparative studies on the subject, requires heterodoxy – or the notion of heterodoxy – to establish and preserve its self-definition as orthodox; the orthodox “positions and defines itself by reference to [the heretical], even arises and develops historically by constructing an inversion of the heretical other.”⁶⁶⁸ The negative evaluations of Nōnin and the Darumashū that are evident in the writings of Eisai (who competed with Nōnin for the mantle of Zen orthodoxy) and Dōgen (who needed to convince Darumashū monks in his community of his Zen orthodoxy) are obviously acts of constructing the “heretical other.” Henderson's analyses offers promising prospects for further comparative research. One of the common patterns that Henderson identifies in the construction of orthodoxy and heterodoxy in Neo-Confucian, Islam, Judaism and Early Christianity is the attribution of an alleged heretical idea to a “grand heresiarch” who serves as the personified source of the accursed heretical notion.⁶⁶⁹ A similar strategy is employed by both Eisai and Dōgen. Both monks delineate their own orthodox positions by negatively portraying the adherents of the Darumashū as contemporary followers of archetypical “heretics” in the Buddhist tradition. Eisai conjures up Pūraṇa Kassapa, the model evildoer who taught that slicing up people to heaps of flesh incurs no karmic retribution. Dōgen associates the Darumashū with another heretical figure, the brahmacārin Śreṇika, who committed the error of affirming an eternal mind essence. In some

⁶⁶⁸ John B. Henderson, *The Construction of Orthodoxy and Heresy: Neo-Confucian, Islamic, Jewish, and Early Christian Patterns* (State University of New York Press, 1998), p. 2.

⁶⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 134-151

aspects at least, the process of marginalization of the Darumashū, then, appears consistent with a general pattern in world intellectual history.

One of the main objectives of this thesis was to investigate how the picture that emerges from the writings of Darumashū critics fits in with what was actually taught and practiced in Darumashū communities. The key to unlock this question, or at least make a beginning with it, lies in an examination of the primary Darumashū texts that have surfaced in recent times but remained, with notable exception, largely unstudied. My translation and analyses of these works is a beginning. But we can already with certainty conclude that the material reveals a far richer and far more complex and hybrid constellation of practices and ideas than the partial writings of the critics have led us to believe. The antinomianism at the center of most of the charges against the Darumashū, is certainly present in these materials. *Jōtōshōgakuron*, for instance, downplays the value of moral precepts, saying that if one just stops discriminative thinking, all moral precepts become redundant. *Kenshōjōbutsugi* asserts the absolute identity of ordinary beings and buddhas, and on that basis declares: “we do not observe the practice of meditation.” According to this text, meditative practice does not lead to buddhahood; the recipe buddhahood is a good teacher who reveals the truth of inherent buddhahood and a listener who has accepts this truth with joyous faith. *Hōmon taikō*, on the other hand, contains a detailed manual for the practice of seated meditation. The same text also contains strong endorsements of Pure Land *nenbutsu* practice: “The decisive activity for attaining birth in the Pure Land is to be intently mindful of the Buddha and to recite his name on the basis of the three right attitudes and a mind set upon awakening. Do not doubt this!”

This thesis represents a beginning of a more comprehensive understanding of the Darumashū, its history, notions and practices. The detailed analysis of the three seminal Darumashū texts presented here is, to quote a well-known historian, “not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.” Much work remains to be done. Other investigations that will place the Darumashū in broader and more theoretical contexts must follow. It needs no argument that any such investigation would benefit from the stepping stone provided here.