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*Zen at War*. By Brian (Daizen) A. Victoria. New York & Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1997. Pp. xii+228. ISBN: 0-8348-0405-0, US \$19.95.

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Over the past few years several fine pieces of scholarship have been published dealing with the place of Buddhism in the process of modernization of Japan. However, the lack of studies on the role played by Buddhist institutions in the age of Japanese authoritarianism and colonialism is still surprising. In this case, as in many others, many scholars tend to reproduce the basic attitudes of the Buddhist institutions they study. The almost complete misremembering, if not erasure, of the events which took place in Japan after the end of the war also affects the way in which we look at Buddhism. In addition, the fact that studies have been based on sectarian distinctions has made it difficult to reconstruct the general context (social, political, ideological) in which Buddhist institutions operated until 1945. This attitude still continues, as is clear from the fact that most studies on contemporary Japanese religion deal with so-called “new religions” and not with institutional Buddhism.

Brian Victoria’s book, *Zen at War*, begins to redress the situation. It is a forceful exposé of the disturbing political and ideological position of Buddhist institutions and their leaders in the years between 1868 (the Meiji Restoration, which began the modernization of Japan) and 1945 (with the end of the Pacific War), followed by an account of postwar responses and contemporary attitudes. The book presents a chronological account of modern Japanese Buddhism’s attitudes toward the state and colonial war in particular, with a special focus on the Zen sects. Whereas the treatment of influential Zen authors provide interesting and detailed case studies, the description of the general framework also given by Victoria shows that Zen’s attitudes were not unique or peculiar. In Victoria’s words, institutional Buddhism chose a “total and unequivocal subjugation . . . to the State and its policies” (p. 79). In spite of the subject, Victoria’s treatment is sober and well-balanced. He does not look for apologies or excuses or indulge in gratuitous sensationalism.

The book begins with an outline of the early Meiji period, with the state’s attempt to eliminate Buddhism and Buddhism’s responses to the new political situation which resulted from modernization. These are the subjects of Part One: “The Meiji Restoration of 1868 and Buddhism.” Victoria then follows leading Buddhist individuals and institutions along the path of militarism and right wing authoritarianism down to the bitter end, described in detail in Part Two: “Japanese Militarism and Buddhism.” The final section of the book, Part Three: “Postwar Trends,” presents some of the postwar Zen responses to previous attitudes and ideological positions. In this context, Victoria describes the role of Zen in corporate training programs and sees disquieting signs of continuity.

One of the many merits of the book consists in making available in translation, often for the first time, numerous examples of ideological interventions by leading Buddhist figures who, although largely ignored today by non-specialists, nevertheless played an important role in shaping the Buddhist field in Japan until 1945. Victoria uses a vast array of sources, ranging from sectarian documents directed to the clergy, to more popular publications, thus giving a good representation of the nature and propagation of Buddhist ideology.

However, the chronological structure of the book at times tends to fragment the argument. Many citations are actually quite repetitive, as there are almost no signs of intellectual developments within the Buddhist field from late Meiji until 1945. My impression is that, when Buddhist institutions reconstituted after the persecution towards the end of the nineteenth century, they had already developed a simplified but powerful politico-theological discourse. Their role was to proliferate statements of support to national policies and to control the production of alternate ideas.

The Buddhist discourse of the time seems to have been animated by two major features, mentioned only in passing by the author despite their importance. These were, respectively, the decision to promote loyalty to the throne, patriotism, and national unity (pp. 12-13), and the sense of a “Japanese spiritual burden,” according to the expression of Anesaki Masaharu (p. 15). Such a “burden”, which was unquestionably based on a feeling of spiritual and moral superiority, referred to the project to unify Eastern and Western thought and the advancement of the East. Loyalty to the throne and patriotism were expressed by a rhetoric of filial piety and self-sacrifice, whereas Japan’s “spiritual burden” was clearly connected to militarism and colonialism. As the book explains, Buddhist institutions were directly engaged in various activities for the support of state military and colonial policies: the establishment of missions as part of the Japanese colonial administration, the performance of rituals for the protection of the state and the defeat of its enemies, fund raising, and training of soldiers (pp. 139-144).

Japanese Buddhist institutions and leading intellectuals produced a theology/ideology for the whole spectrum of right-wing Japanese politics. However, there were several attempts to develop alternate discourses, of a democratic and socialist nature, through an original and creative reinterpretation of Buddhist doctrines. One of the merits of the book is to give voice to these minority positions. The Zen priest Uchiyama Gudō (1874-1911), executed by the government for his supposed involvement in a plot to kill the emperor, was an active member of the anarcho-socialist movement (pp. 38-48).

The Youth League for the Revitalization of Buddhism (Shinkō Bukkyō

Seinen Dōmei) was another democratic movement that challenged the authoritarian tendencies of the Buddhist world (pp. 66-73). It was inexorably isolated by institutional Buddhism and repressed and disbanded by the police. The book also suggests that there was individual, non-organized resistance to Japan's wartime policies, even though it is obviously difficult to trace it. Victoria mentions a few notable examples (pp. 73-78).

The numerous examples and quotations in the book are quite effective in showing the overall intellectual bankruptcy of Buddhism at the time. What is particularly interesting, and is unfortunately lacking in the book, is an analysis of the discursive strategies employed by the intellectuals of the Buddhist establishment. Buddhist attitudes toward the war were mainly shaped by unquestioned adherence to state ideology and policies. It seems to me that most of the Buddhist world in Japan from 1868 to 1945 was engaged in a rhetorical exercise to adjust traditional Buddhist concepts and doctrines to dominant political ideas. Almost never was Buddhism capable of an original, innovative contribution to politics; all it did was to follow supinely the lead of the regime and give the dominant ideology the support of Buddhist exegesis. Paramount was the justification of war, perhaps because it was the least justifiable action in Buddhist terms. We find statements like the following: “[Buddhism] vigorously supports such wars [fought for good purposes] to the point of being a war enthusiast,” wrote Hayashiya Tomojirō and Shimakage Chikai (p. 88); “without plunging into the war arena, it is totally impossible to know the Buddha Dharma,” wrote the well-known Zen master Harada Daiun Sōgaku (p.137).

Traditional notions were deployed for the politico-theological purpose of justifying state policies in Buddhist terms. Particularly important in this respect were Buddhism's historical role as a protector of the country (*chingo kokka* or *gokoku bukkyō*), the Zen connections to the samurai ideals (and here the newly invented notion of *bushidō* played an important role) and its related spirit of self-sacrifice, in turn glossed as a result of the traditional Buddhist idea of selflessness (*muga*). Even the notion of compassion was mobilized. Lieutenant colonel Sugimoto Gorō, a famous Zen follower, wrote: “The wars of the empire . . . are the [Buddhist] practice (*gyō*) of great compassion (*daijihishin*)” (quoted on p. 119). Even the style at times resembled that typical of a Zen *kōan* (perhaps mediated by fascist Futurism): “[If ordered to] march: tramp, tramp, or shoot: bang, bang. This is the manifestation of the highest Wisdom [of Enlightenment],” wrote again Daiun (quoted on p. 137). It is interesting to notice how the apparent variety of the Buddhist ideological discourse (in which each sect mobilized its own vocabulary to reaffirm the same dominant positions), actually hid its stunning simplicity, as

a mere commentary to a few sonorous state slogans.

Particularly relevant, and deserving of an in-depth study in itself, is the role of notions such as nondualism and the twofold truth, as they were subjected to aberrant readings that yielded stunning authoritarian and militaristic interpretations. It is the twofold truth, in particular, that grounded the reversal of common-sense knowledge about Buddhist doctrines. In other words, what appeared as an obvious violation of Buddhist tenets against killing, for example, was described as a superficial interpretation based on limited understanding. Only the wisdom of enlightenment could give one access to the real significance of war and other apparent immoral acts. The book relates several cases, such as that of Kurebayashi Kōdō: “Wherever the imperial military advances there is only charity and love. They could never act in the barbarous and cruel way in which the Chinese soldiers act” (p. 133); D.T. Suzuki: “it is really not he [the soldier] but the sword itself that does the killing. He had no desire to do harm to anybody, but the enemy appears and makes himself a victim” (p. 110), which is in turn connected to the popular theme of the “sword that gives life” by killing; Sawaki Kōdō: “Whether one kills or does not kill, the precept forbidding killing [is preserved]. It is the precept forbidding killing that wields the sword. It is this precept that throws the bomb” (p. 36).

Also the principles of non-dualism (*funi*) and no-self (*muga*) were used, mostly in order to emphasize the citizen’s subjection to the totalitarian state represented by the emperor and to authority in general. The famed scholar Shimaji Mokurai, for example, “maintained that distinction in social standing and wealth were as permanent as differences in age, sex, and language. Socialism, in his view, was flawed because it emphasized only social and economic equality. That is to say, socialists failed to understand the basic Buddhist teaching that ‘differentiation is identical with equality’ (*sabetsu soku byōdō*)” (p. 41-42). At the same time, individual citizens are “of one body and mind with the state,” therefore “they cannot exist without the state” (Hayashiya and Shimakage, quoted on p. 89). Again, it is interesting to notice how the entire Buddhist conceptual apparatus was simplified and reduced to a discourse that was most of the time symbiotic with official propaganda. Also, epistemological notions were used to support right-wing ideology.

The book does not limit itself to presenting the ideology of the leading Buddhists until 1945. It also addresses the reactions of the Buddhist establishment in the post-war period. Despite Buddhism’s active and massive engagement in war-time ideology, it is surprising that declarations of war responsibility by Japanese Buddhist sects were issued more than forty years

after the end of World War II, and only by branches of the Shin, Sōtō, and Tendai sects (pp. 152-157). Yet, as Victoria writes, such statements “almost totally ignore . . . the question of the doctrinal and historical relationship between Buddhism and the state” (pp. 156-157). D.T. Suzuki, for example, chose to blame Shintō for the war crimes (p. 150) and, like many other Buddhist writers, kept trying to find positive aspects in the Japanese war.

A notable exception is Ichikawa Hakugen, whose work is presented at length in one of the final chapters of the book (pp. 166-174). Hakugen identifies twelve historical characteristics that affected the way Buddhism reacted to the establishment of an authoritarian, militaristic modern Japanese state. In this context, the book’s reference to the so-called “critical Buddhism” (*hihan bukkyō*) movement is particularly relevant. If treated as a mere Buddhological trend, as it usually is, it makes little sense. However, when placed in its proper historical and ideological context, as Brian Victoria does in this book, “Critical Buddhism” acquires a quite different value as an attempt to criticize the conceptual and doctrinal tools used in modern Japan to justify authoritarian and right-wing policies. The real target of Hakamaya Noriaki or Matsumoto Shirō, the main proponents of Critical Buddhism, is not the doctrine of original enlightenment (*hongaku shisō*) per se, but rather the ideological use to which it was subjected between 1868 and 1945, a usage which has never been directly criticized by the Buddhist establishment. In this respect, it is interesting to see how war-time rhetoric of “discipline, obedience, conformity, and physical and mental endurance,” as well as the notion of no-self, reemerge in the discourse of “corporate Zen” in contemporary Japan (pp. 182-187).

Again, it is important to understand the original background of these metaphors in order to deconstruct their reactionary ideology.

This book is an important and valuable contribution to the study of modern Japan and Japanese Buddhism. It is also relevant for those who are interested in the role played by Buddhism in modernization, in the relations between religion and politics and religion and ethics.