

# **Abolish Buddhism and Destroy Shakyamuni!**

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## **Preface**

This is the second part of an article concerning the ethical and doctrinal changes to Japanese Buddhism that occurred as a result of its centuries-long, syncretistic connection to the indigenous religion of Shintō. The first part of this article, entitled “Counting the Cost of Buddhist Syncretism”, may be read here: <http://www.jocbs.org/index.php/jocbs/article/view/186>. While reading the first article is not required, its contents will nevertheless provide a helpful context for the events described in this article.

## **Introduction**

The greatest danger Buddhism, regardless of sect, ever faced in its 1,500 year old history in Japan occurred in the beginning years of the Meiji period (1868-1912). It was then that outside forces attempted to destroy Buddhism, both ideologically and physically, in a movement known as “abolish Buddhism and destroy Shakyamuni” (J. *haibutsu kishaku*). This movement resulted in the destruction of tens of thousands of Buddhist temples throughout the country together with their statuary, the forced laicization of large numbers of Buddhist priests and widespread attacks on Buddhist doctrine and praxis, among other repressive measures. In short, Buddhism was attacked as a superstitious, *foreign* religion that had no place in a Japan modernizing at breakneck speed.



*Image 1: Headless stone Buddha Statues in Kawasaki city,  
Kanagawa Prefecture*



*Image 2: Broken Buddha Statue*

At the same time, in order to unite what had previously been a loose federation of autonomous units (*J. kuni*), suspicious of central authority, into a modern, centralized state, Meiji political leaders strongly supported a Shintō revival, for they felt Shintō could be used as the spiritual axis around which to build a modern, united nation. They sought to turn the throne into a sacred object based on the emperor's divinity, a divinity acquired by his mythological descent from the Sun Goddess Amaterasu. The government also took control of shrine finances and the training of Shintō priests in order to promote this indigenous, animistic faith. This control was exercised through a newly created entity called "State Shintō" (*J. kokka Shintō*), which became the vehicle used to promote national unity and absolute obedience to the emperor's dictates. As an essentially political, not religious, construct, State Shintō was never designated as a "state religion" (as is widely but mistakenly assumed), though its emperor-centric rituals certainly had religious overtones. It would remain in place until Japan's defeat in August 1945.

Unsurprisingly, at the time of the Meiji Restoration, Shintōists enthusiastically welcomed the opportunity the new central government provided to free themselves from over a thousand years of Buddhist control. No longer was Shintō placed in a subservient position, one in which Shintōists were relegated to the role of protecting the Buddhist faith, all the while remaining under the control of various Buddhist sects. At long last, Shintō could be independent, though the cost of this independence was the requirement that Shintō leaders conform to government dictates. For example, Shintō priests were henceforth appointed by the state as government officials rather than acquiring their status through hereditary succession.

As Japan expanded and became an empire in the 1900s, Shintō also became an important ideological support mechanism used to justify Japanese expansion. This may be considered the Achilles heel of not just Shintō but all animistic faiths, for they are easily captured by the tribal or ethnic *Zeitgeist* of a nation, especially in wartime. Thus, Shintō leaders readily supported the policies of their ethnic political leaders, no matter how aggressive those policies were. With Shintō's support, the Japanese people were taught to regard Japan as a divine land, protected by divinities (*kami*) and ruled over by a divine emperor, himself the alleged descendant of the Sun goddess.

Buddhism's reaction to the attacks against it was both dramatic and far-reaching. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that in the long run Buddhism was substantially weakened, an effect lasting even to the present day. This is the story of what happened and why.

## The Background

Buddhism was formally introduced to Japan from Korea in the middle of the sixth century. By the Tokugawa era (1600-1867) Buddhism had, outwardly at least, reached the pinnacle of power, functioning as a *de facto* state religion. This meant that each and every household in the country was *forced* to affiliate itself with one or another nearby Buddhist temple. The result was an explosive growth in the number of Buddhist temples, from only 13,037 temples during the Kamakura period (1185-1333) to 469,934 during the Tokugawa, each entitled to a government stipend.<sup>1</sup> Outwardly, Buddhism appeared to be flourishing as never before.

There were, however, a number of hidden costs associated with Buddhism's effective establishment as a state religion. First, mandatory temple affiliation turned a large part of the Buddhist clergy into little more than government functionaries at the village level. Concurrently, membership in a particular sect often became less a matter of religious conviction than political expediency or, simply, geographic location.

These developments are hardly surprising since the catalyst for according Buddhism a privileged position at the beginning of the Tokugawa era was the military government's determination to expel Christianity, something they believed would reduce the danger of Japan being colonized by one of the Western powers. Though not by its choosing, Buddhism thus became a mechanism to enforce religious intolerance. At the same time, the regime wished to insure that indigenous religious institutions, like all other institutions in society, were firmly under its control.

The Tokugawa government exerted control over institutional Buddhism through such policies as dividing the powerful Shin (True Pure Land) sect into two branches, popularly known as the Nishi (West) Honganji and Higashi (East) Honganji after their respective head temples in Kyoto. The government further made sure that every temple in the land, no matter how humble, was made subservient to a higher grade temple in pyramidal fashion, with an all-powerful central temple (*honzan*) controlling each sect at the top. While sectarian differences were tolerated, the central temple of each sect was made responsible, and held accountable, for the actions of its subordinate temples and affiliated clerics.

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<sup>1</sup> See Kitagawa. *Religion in Japanese History*, p. 164.

A second, and perhaps more severe, hidden cost to institutional Buddhism was what Robert Bellah described as the “general lethargy and uncreativity of Buddhism in the Tokugawa period.”<sup>2</sup> Anesaki Masaharu was even less flattering when he wrote: “The majority of the Buddhist clergy were obedient servants of the Government, and in the long period of peace they gradually became lazy, or else effeminate intriguers.”<sup>3</sup>

There were, of course, some clergy, typically living in richly endowed temples, who devoted themselves to learning. There were also reformers and innovators who attempted with some success to revitalize their respective sects. Yet many if not most others took advantage of their prerogatives as agents of the government to suppress or economically exploit their helpless parishioners. Joseph Kitagawa notes, somewhat ominously, that “the moral and spiritual bankruptcy of established Buddhism inevitably brought criticism and rebellion from within and without.”<sup>4</sup> It was all but inevitable that institutional Buddhism, regardless of sect, would face a day of reckoning.

### **Government Measures directed towards Buddhism**

On January 3, 1868 the young Emperor Meiji issued a proclamation announcing that he was resuming the reins of government although, initially at least, only very limited power had been restored to the throne. Nevertheless, a scant three months later, on April 6, 1868, the Emperor promulgated the Charter Oath, a document consisting of five articles which clearly expressed the anti-feudal aspirations of the new government.

The Charter Oath stated:

1. Councils widely convoked shall be established, and all affairs of State decided by public discussion.
2. All measures, governmental and social, shall be conducted by the united efforts of the governing and the governed.
3. The unity of the Imperial and the feudal governments shall be achieved; all the people, even the meanest, shall be given full opportunities for their aspirations and activities.

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<sup>2</sup> Bellah, *Tokugawa Religion*, p. 51.

<sup>3</sup> Anesaki, *History of Japanese Religion*, p. 260.

<sup>4</sup> Kitagawa, *Religion in Japanese History*, p. 166.

4. All absurd usages of the old regime shall be abolished and all measures conducted in conformity with the righteous way of heaven and earth.
5. Knowledge shall be sought for all over the world, and thus shall be promoted the imperial polity [i.e. state structure].<sup>5</sup>

Though the preceding seems, as far as Buddhism is concerned, to be innocuous in its content, Article 4 was a harbinger of the impending storm. What, exactly, were “all absurd usages of the old regime” that were to be “abolished”?

As far as Buddhism was concerned, part of the answer had already been made known, for a few days earlier, i.e. on March 28, 1868, the first of the “Separation Edicts” (*Shinbutsu Hanzen-rei*), designed to divorce Buddhism from Shintō, had been issued by a newly established governmental bureau known as the Office of Rites (*Jingi-kyoku*). The initial edict stated that all Buddhist clerics of any type were to be removed from Shintō shrines throughout the nation. Henceforth, only *bona fide* Shintō priests were to be allowed to carry out administrative and religious duties at shrines.

In a second edict, issued less than two weeks later, the use of Buddhist names for Shintō deities (*kami*) was prohibited. Not only that, Buddhist statuary could no longer be used to represent Shintō deities, or, for that matter, even be present in a shrine compound. Whatever the authors’ original intent may have been, these edicts were often interpreted at the local and regional levels as meaning that anything having to do with Buddhism could and should be destroyed.

In his excellent book on this period, *Of Heretics And Martyrs In Meiji Japan*, James Ketelaar points out that these separation edicts “necessarily included as an integral part of their formulation a direct attack on Buddhism.”<sup>6</sup> This is because, first of all, nearly every member of the Office of Rites was an active proponent of “National Learning” (*Kokugaku*). This Shintō-dominated school of thought taught that while both the Japanese nation and throne were of divine origin, their origin had been obscured and sullied by foreign accretions and influences, especially those coming from China, let alone India. Adherents of this school believed one of the first and most important jobs of the new government was to cleanse the nation of these foreign accretions, Buddhism first and foremost.

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Anesaki, *History of Japanese Religion*, p. 331.

<sup>6</sup> Ketelaar, *Of Heretics and Martyrs in Meiji Japan*, p. 9.

Closely associated with the National Learning school, at least in terms of its disdain for Buddhism, was the “Mito school” (*Mitogaku*). The origins of this school, located in the Mito domain north of Tokyo, lay in Neo-Confucianism, the political ideology adopted by the Tokugawa Shogunate. Like its Chinese counterpart, Neo-Confucianists were strongly opposed to Buddhism even though Neo-Confucian metaphysics had, in large part, been derived from that of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Nevertheless, and like their Confucian predecessors, Neo-Confucianists charged that Buddhism was nothing more than superstitious mumbo-jumbo, with its non-productive clergy little more than social parasites.

In Japan, the advocates of the Mito school advocated isolationism, nativism, and reverence of the emperor even as, at the end of the Tokugawa era, they sought to prevent the steadily weakening Shogunate from being overthrown. However, unlike the advocates of National Learning, adherents of the Mito school did not reject Chinese learning in its entirety, only Buddhism. The result was the closing of over 40,000 temples nationally, coupled with the destruction of countless temple artifacts and the forced laicization of thousands of priests.<sup>7</sup> Once again, it should be noted that the enforcement (and interpretation) of the Separation Edicts was, in general, left to the regional authorities. Hence, those areas where there was the greatest support for National Learning among local and regional officialdom were also those areas where the greatest destruction occurred.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 7.





*Image 3: Destroyed 1870\_dug up 1935*



*Image 4: Namu Amida Butsu*

For example, in the former Satsuma domain (present-day Kagoshima, southern Miyazaki, and Okinawa prefectures), whose leaders played a leading role in the Meiji Restoration, Buddhism had almost completely disappeared by the end of 1869. That is to say, approximately 4,500 Buddhist temples and halls were destroyed.<sup>8</sup> The priests housed in these temples were returned to lay life, with (former) priests between the ages of eighteen to forty-five immediately drafted into the newly formed Imperial Army. Those over forty-five were sent to become teachers in domainal schools while those under eighteen were sent back to their families.

### **Institutional Buddhism's Response**

In the face of these very real threats to its continued existence, it did not take long for some elements of institutional Buddhism to initiate a series of countermeasures. One of the first of these was undertaken primarily by the Higashi Honganji and Nishi Honganji branches of the Shin (True Pure Land) sect. On the surface, at least, it was a rather surprising measure: lending substantial amounts of money to the then cash-starved Meiji government. In effect, these two branches sought to bribe the government into ameliorating its policies of repressive rulings and restrictions.

The same two branches also took the lead in the summer of 1868 in forming the Alliance of United [Buddhist] Sects for Ethical Standards (*Shoshū Dōtoku Kaimei*). This was an unprecedented action for institutional Buddhism since under the previous Tokugawa regime all Buddhist trans-sectarian organizations had been banned. The new organization pledged itself, first of all, to work for the unity of *Rājā Dharma* (Law of the Sovereign) and *Buddha Dharma* (Law of the Buddha). Secondly, it called for Christianity to be not only denounced but prevented from reentering Japan as the Western powers were demanding.

Buddhist leaders were quick to realize that the best hope of reviving their faith was to align themselves with the increasingly nationalistic sentiment of the times. They concluded that one way of demonstrating their usefulness to Japan's new nationalistic leaders was to support an anti-Christian campaign which came to be known as *haja kenshō* (i.e. refuting evil [Christianity] and exalting righteousness).

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

As early as September 17, 1868 the new Ministry of State responded to the above noted “positive actions” on the part of Buddhist leaders by sending a private communique directly to the leaders of the Higashi Honganji and Nishi Honganji branches of the Shin sect. This letter contained a condemnation of those members of the Imperial court who wrongfully, and in contradiction to Emperor Meiji’s will, were persecuting Buddhism. The letter further noted, that in so doing, these “foul-mouthed rebels . . . antagonize the general populace.”<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, repression of Buddhism continued in the countryside.

Just how antagonized the general populace became is shown by the strong protest actions that arose in opposition to the continuing repressive, anti-Buddhist measures undertaken by local authorities. These protests started in Toyama region in late 1870 and were followed by two riots in Mikawa (present-day Aichi prefecture) and Ise (present-day Mie prefecture) in 1871. In each of the following two years there were also two major protests in widely scattered parts of the country.

The 1873 peasant protests in three counties of Echizen (present-day Fukui prefecture) were so large they had to be put down by government troops, the lower ranks of which were composed of peasant youth. It can be argued that it was the central government’s fear of these protests, possibly from among the troops themselves, which finally forced it to pay serious attention to the plight of the Buddhists. The government reached the conclusion that the suppression of Buddhism by local authorities could not be allowed to continue. Something had to be done.

Note, however, that the cause of the peasant uprisings did not lie in the laity rising up to protect the “Buddha Dharma” in the abstract. Instead, it was about protecting the spirits of generations of the laity’s ancestors, whose cremated remains were, in part, enshrined in charnel houses (*nōkotsudō*) on the temples’ precincts and/or in temple cemeteries. Thus, the peasant uprisings were concerned with the continuation of ancestor veneration rituals, one of the main services Buddhist clergy provided for the laity. These rituals, meant to console the spirits of dead ancestors, were too deeply engrained in the laity to be erased, especially as there was, at the time, nothing similar in Shintō. Shintō had long regarded death as a form of both physical and spiritual pollution, thus providing Buddhism, with its ancestor-veneration rituals, the opportunity to take root in Japan among the populace.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

## Resolution of the Conflict

The first nation-wide change in the Meiji government's policy toward Buddhism came in early 1872. It was at this time that what was then known as the Ministry of Rites (*Jingi-kan*) was transformed into the Ministry of Doctrine (*Kyōbushō*). This new ministry was given administrative responsibility for such things as the building or closing of both Shintō shrines and Buddhist temples, the approval of all priestly ranks and privileges, etc. However, by far its most important function was to propagate the "Great Teaching" (*Daikyō*) which had been developed the previous year. The three pillars of this teaching were as follows:

1. The principles of reverence for the (national) Deities and of patriotism shall be observed.
2. The heavenly Reason and the Way of Humanity shall be promulgated.
3. The Throne shall be revered and the authorities obeyed.<sup>10</sup>

Charged with promulgating these principles, the Ministry of Doctrine created the position of Doctrinal Instructors (*Kyōdō-shoku*). These instructors were to operate through a nation-wide network of Teaching Academies (*Kyōin*) which would be established in both Buddhist temples and Shintō shrines. The significance to Buddhism of this development is that for the first time Buddhist priests were given permission to serve in a state-sponsored institution, together, of course, with Shintō priests and scholars of National Learning.

By establishing the position of Doctrinal Instructor, the state was in effect creating a *de facto* state priesthood. Anyone outside of this system, that is to say, anyone uncertified by the state, was barred from either lecturing in public or performing ceremonial duties. They were also prohibited from residing in either shrines or temples. Nevertheless, Buddhists saw this as a way to escape from their ongoing oppression and eagerly took advantage of this new opportunity.

How successful Buddhists were in taking advantage of this opportunity can be seen from the fact that eventually more than 81,000 out of a total of some 103,000 officially recognized Doctrinal Instructors were Buddhist priests. Of this number, Shin-sect affiliated priests numbered nearly 25,000 and were the largest single group.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Anesaki, *History of Japanese Religion*, p. 335.

<sup>11</sup> See Ketelaar, *Of Heretics and Martyrs in Meiji Japan*, p. 105.

Inclusion into a new state religion, however, carried a heavy price for Buddhists, for it was clearly Shintō-inspired and controlled. Thus all Doctrinal Instructors were expected to wear Shintō robes, recite Shintō prayers, and perform Shintō rituals. Further, although the Ministry of Doctrine selected the famous Pure Land sect temple of Zōjōji in Tokyo as the administrative center, i.e. the Great Teaching Academy, for the national doctrine system, the Ministry demanded that the temple be extensively renovated for its new role.

Zōjōji's 'renovation' included replacing the statue of Buddha Amitābha (J. Amida) on the main altar with four Shintō deities (*kami*) and building a Shintō gate (*torii*) at the entrance to the temple. The Buddhist leadership of this sect was so anxious to support the new scheme that they even arranged to have their subordinate temples pay the renovation costs. Yet despite this seemingly cooperative beginning, conflict inevitably occurred between Buddhist and Shintō elements within the national doctrine system. Thus, as the anti-Buddhist movement began to subside, the Buddhist leaders sought to free themselves from Shintō domination.

An additional cause of friction was an announcement made on April 25, 1872 by the Ministry of State. This announcement, known as Order No. 133, stated that Buddhist priests could, if they wished, eat meat, get married, grow their hair long, and wear ordinary clothing. Although this decision neither prohibited anything nor ordered anything, it was seen by many Buddhist leaders as yet another attack on Buddhism. In their minds, Order No. 133 represented a further extension of the earlier separation of Shintō and Buddhism. That is to say, it represented the separation of Buddhism from the state itself. Buddhism would now have to fend for itself, no longer being of any concern to the state.

While it might be thought that this new found "freedom" from state control would have been welcomed by Buddhist leaders, such was not the case. On the contrary, strong Buddhist opposition to this measure took the form of numerous sectarian protest meetings and petitions criticizing the Ministry's decision, at least one of which was signed by over two hundred Buddhist priests. Some angry priests even went directly to the Ministry's offices to express their opposition. The irony of these actions is that Order No. 133 was one directive that had been taken at the request of a Buddhist, i.e. the influential Sōtō Zen sect priest Ōtori Sessō (1814-1904).

Ōtori was in a unique position to make his views known since, at the time the new Ministry of Doctrine was created, he had been asked to serve as a representative of Buddhist clerics (though he himself was required to return

to lay life during the duration of his government service). Ōtori's overall goal was ending the government's anti-Buddhist policies, and like his Buddhist contemporaries he believed the best way of achieving this goal was to demonstrate once again how useful Buddhism could be to the state, this time through promulgation of the Great Teaching.

Ōtori recognized that despite government regulations during the Tokugawa era forbidding clerical marriage, many Buddhist priests in the countryside had common law wives and were therefore, technically at least, criminals. This meant these priests were in no position either to become Doctrinal Instructors or effectively to fight Christianity. In Ōtori's mind, by lifting the government's ban on clerical marriage, etc., Buddhist clergy would be enabled to render more effective service to the nation. Despite many protests from sectarian leaders, Ōtori's reform effort was ultimately successful, and the new law remained. However, this effectively spelled the end of any traditional Buddhist precepts which the clergy were expected to follow.

In light of their defeat, Buddhist leaders came to realize that they not only had to free themselves from Shintō control but government control as well. Once again, the Shin sect played a leading role. It was leaders of this sect, particularly in the person of Shimaji Mokurai (1838-1911), who led the movement for change. Mokurai was particularly well suited to the challenge, not least because he had personally led troops in support of the Meiji Restoration.

As early as 1872, Shimaji wrote an essay while studying in Paris critical of the three principles contained in the Great Teaching. His basic position was that there was a fundamental difference between politics (*sei*) and religion (*kyō*). Accordingly, his essay called for the separation of the two (*seikyō bunri*). While it took some years for Shimaji and those who agreed with him to have a discernable impact on the Ministry of Doctrine, eventually, at the beginning of 1875, the government gave the two Shin branches permission to leave the Great Doctrine movement, and shortly afterwards the entire institution of the Great Doctrine was abolished. A new solution had to be found.

The Buddhists were not the only religious group to benefit from changing government policy. In 1871 a diplomatic mission sent to the West, headed by Senior Minister Iwakura Tomomi (1825-83), had recommended that if Japan were to successfully revise what it regarded as unequal treaties with the Western powers, it would have to adopt a policy of religious freedom.

The Western powers were, as far as religion was concerned, dedicated to ending the ongoing prohibition of Christianity in Japan. As a result, in 1873 the

government reluctantly agreed to abolish this prohibition, a decision which led to a rapid increase in the numbers of Western Christian missions and missionaries entering the country. However, even as they continued their own struggle to free themselves from government control, many Buddhist leaders took this occasion to renew and deepen their earlier attacks on Christianity. The irony was that in doing so, they allied themselves with their previous detractors, i.e. Shintō, Neo-Confucian and other nationalist leaders.

Shintōists, too, were undergoing changes at this time. Shintō's strongest supporters, the proponents of National Learning, had demonstrated to Meiji political leaders that they were "too religious to rule".<sup>12</sup> This in turn led to a reduction in their political power as evidenced by the 1872 changes in the government's religious policy toward Buddhism. Yet key members of the government were still dedicated to the proposition that one way or another the emperor system, as an "immanent theocracy" with roots in the ancient state, should be used to legitimate the new government. The question was, in the face of earlier failures, how could this be accomplished?

Part of the answer came in 1882 when the government 'divided' Shintō into two parts, one part consisting of cultic (emperor-related) practices and the other so-called "religious" practices. While the religious side of Shintō, i.e. Sect Shintō (*Kyōha Shintō*), received nothing from the government, the cultic side of Shintō, i.e. "State Shintō," received both financial subsidies and various other governmental privileges.

The government maintained this policy was justified because cultic practices relating to the emperor were patriotic in nature, not religious. Even today there are Japanese Buddhist scholars who continue to support this position. Professor Shibata Dōken of Sōtō Zen sect-affiliated Komazawa University, for example, maintains that "given the fact that Japan is a country consisting of a unitary people, with shared customs and mores, the assertion that [State] Shintō was not a religion can be sanctioned, at least to some degree."<sup>13</sup>

Other contemporary scholars of that era, however, hold a differing view. Joseph Kitagawa, for example, maintains that "'State Shintō' was essentially a newly concocted religion of ethnocentric nationalism."<sup>14</sup> In a similar vein, Helen Hardacre provides a more detailed description, writing:

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>13</sup> Shibata, *Haiibutsu Kishaku*, p. 195.

<sup>14</sup> Kitagawa, *Religion in Japanese History*, p. 213.



State Shintō [was] a systemic phenomenon that encompassed government support of and regulation of shrines, the emperor's sacerdotal roles, state creation and sponsorship of Shintō rites, construction of Shintō shrines in Japan and in overseas colonies, education for schoolchildren in Shintō mythology plus their compulsory participation in Shintō rituals, and persecution of other religious groups on the grounds of their exhibiting disrespect for some aspect of authorized mythology.<sup>15</sup>

Ironically, the creation of State Shintō actually served as a mechanism to facilitate the government's recognition, or at least toleration, of a certain degree of religious plurality within Japanese society. With a powerful, ostensibly *non-religious* legitimization of the new order in hand, the leaders of the Meiji government could finally address the question of religious freedom, something that was implicit in the call by Shimaji and others for the separation of government and religion.

The final, formal resolution of the religious question appeared in the Meiji Constitution of 1889. Chapter Two, Article Twenty-eight, reads as follows: "Japanese subjects shall, within limits not prejudicial to peace and order, and not antagonistic to their duties as subjects, enjoy freedom of religious belief."<sup>16</sup> It appears that within limits, not only Buddhism but Christianity and other religions would now be free of government interference or suppression. For Buddhists, the long, dark night of its first major suppression in Japanese history appeared to have come to an end. Appearances, however, were to prove deceiving.

### Ongoing Effects

In reality, the Meiji government granted only a nominal guarantee of religious freedom. "State Shintō," the government's non-religious artificial construct, was purposely and deliberately designed as a cult of national morality and patriotism. As such, it was held to be applicable to all religions. The Meiji government's policy was, in fact, "nothing but an ingenious (and dangerous) attempt at superimposing 'immanent theocracy' on the constitutional guarantees of religious freedom."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Hardacre, *Shintō and the State, 1868-1988*, p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Matsunami, *The Constitution of Japan*, p. 136.

<sup>17</sup> Kitagawa, *Religion in Japanese History*, p. 213.

There were still many influential people both within and without the government who remained highly suspicious if not directly opposed to religion in any form, Buddhism included. Representative of these was Inoue Tetsujirō (1855-1944), an influential professor at Tokyo University. In his opinion, religion was by its very nature “prejudicial to peace and order”, and, furthermore, those who practised it could not escape being “antagonistic to their duties as subjects”.<sup>18</sup> Inoue’s opinions are significant in that the Meiji government looked to him for the philosophical groundwork of its 1890 “Imperial Rescript on Education” (*Kyōiku Chokugo*). This key document proclaimed loyalty to the Throne and filial piety to be the cardinal virtues to which all Imperial subjects should adhere.

It was under these circumstances that Japanese Buddhists, with their newly won yet limited religious freedom, attempted to develop what came to be known by the late 1880’s as “New Buddhism” (*Shin-Bukkyō*). New Buddhism was designed to answer the anti-Buddhist critique of the early and middle years of the Meiji period. That is to say, it set out to demonstrate how priests and temples could make a valuable contribution to the nation’s social and economic life. Although Buddhism was admittedly “foreign-born” New Buddhists claimed that Buddhism could nevertheless effectively promote loyalty to the Throne, patriotism, and national unity. They maintained that Buddhism’s basic doctrines were not mere superstition but, on the contrary, were fully compatible with the Western science and technology then being so rapidly introduced into the country.

### **The World’s Parliament of Religions**

In order to demonstrate to doubters both at home and abroad Buddhism’s compatibility with Western science and technology, an eight member delegation was dispatched to attend the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions held in Chicago, Illinois as part of a World Fair. Three of the eight delegates were Buddhist priests affiliated with various sects while the others were interpreters and laymen. The Parliament had great consequences in that it set in motion a chain of events that was destined to significantly alter the religious consciousness of the Western world. At the same time, it demonstrated to domestic antagonists that even scientifically advanced Westerners respected Buddhism’s tenets.

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Ketelaar, *Of Heretics and Martyrs in Meiji Japan*, p. 132.

For the first time in world history representatives of all the major religions gathered together under the same roof in peaceful conference. Although on the surface the conference appeared to be a model of interreligious cooperation and mutual respect, there existed, just beneath the surface, a profound discord between the Western, predominantly Christian, and the Eastern, Buddhist and Hindu, delegates. Yatsubuchi Banryū (1848-1926), a Shin priest and delegate from Kumamoto, went so far as to state that in light of this underlying tension, the Buddhist delegates saw themselves engaged in a “peaceful war”. In this war, Buddhism would emerge, at least in his eyes, “having won the greatest victories and the greatest honor.”<sup>19</sup>

Given the strong Christian influence manifested in the overall conference, Banryū’s assertion may seem somewhat exaggerated, if not self-serving. Whatever the reality may have been, the Japanese delegates were convinced that Mahāyāna Buddhism was exactly what the West needed. In their eyes, Westerners were saturated with material comforts but were sadly lacking in the life of the spirit. The ‘formless form’ of Mahāyāna Buddhism as found in Japan was, therefore, the perfect antidote.

The Japanese delegates sought to recast Japan’s version of Mahāyāna Buddhism as a true world religion, if not *the* true world religion. This redefinition of their faith gave Japanese Buddhists a mission both at home and abroad. A kind of “Japanese spiritual burden” was born which included a duty to actively share their faith with the benighted peoples of the world. In 1899, Anesaki Masaharu (1873-1949), one of the most noted Buddhist scholars of that period, expressed this burden as follows: “Our Nation [Japan] is the only true Buddhist nation of all the nations in the world. It is thus upon the shoulders of this nation that the responsibility for the unification of Eastern and Western thought and the continued advancement of the East falls.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Buddhist Responses to Domestic Critics**

The Buddhist delegates to the World’s Parliament of Religions returned to Japan as conquering heroes. They were invited to give talks throughout Japan on the material progress they had seen in the West and their own progress in promulgating the teaching of the Buddha to receptive Western audiences. An

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<sup>19</sup> Yatsubuchi, *Shūkyō Taikai Hōdō*, pp. 35-40, 44-45.

<sup>20</sup> Anesaki, *Bukkyō Seiten Shiron*, p. 17.

observer of the time, Ōhara Kakichi, applauded their efforts by stating that it was now possible for “Buddhism in Japan in the Far East to turn the wheel of the Dharma in America in the Far West.”<sup>21</sup>

What had particularly impressed observers in Japan was the alleged ability of the Japanese delegates to not only hold their own against the far greater number of Christian participants, but to express the nationalistic aspirations of the Japanese people in the process. Hirai Kinza (1859-1916), a lay Buddhist and the delegation’s only fluent English speaker, provided the best example of what was possible in this regard.

Hirai’s paper was entitled “The Real Position of Japan Toward Christianity”. It began with a defense of the Tokugawa Shogunate’s banning of Christianity in the seventeenth century as a legitimate response to the possibility of Japan’s being colonized by Western nations proclaiming themselves to be Christian. He went on to point out that once again in the Meiji period allegedly Christian nations threatened his country through their imposition of unequal treaties which unilaterally guaranteed these nations the right to extraterritoriality and the regulation of tariffs. In concluding, he invoked America’s founding fathers and the preamble to the U.S. Declaration of Independence in defense of his call for true equality among nations.

Hirai succeeded in driving home his point of view as few foreign delegates were able to do thanks to the fact that he had ‘out-Christianized’ the Christians and ‘out-Americanized’ the Americans.<sup>22</sup> The fact that the predominantly American audience had cheered Hirai at the conclusion of his speech was used as further evidence in Japan to show just how effective Buddhists could be in advancing the nation’s interests abroad.

Based on their success in America, the Buddhist delegates, especially Shin priest Yatsubuchi Banryū (1848–1926), eagerly called for increased missionary work as they travelled and spoke throughout the country. Yatsubuchi emphasized the importance of both foreign language and secular education for aspiring missionaries, not to mention rigorous spiritual training. He advocated that such missionaries should first work among Japanese immigrants to other nations, but he also saw other uses for them. Foreshadowing the future, one of these other uses was the provision of spiritual training for the Japanese military. “‘Flashing like a sword and glittering like a flower’ . . . the Imperial Army and

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<sup>21</sup> Ōhara, *Bankoku Shūkyō Taikai Enzetsushū*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>22</sup> See Ketelaar, *Of Heretics and Martyrs in Meiji Japan*, p. 171.

Navy can, like the faithful Muslims who defeated the Russians in the Crimea, or the soldiers of the Honganji who held back the armies of Nobunaga, face all trials and tribulations with confidence and strength.”<sup>23</sup>

Yatsubuchi and his colleagues were not the first to call for Buddhist missionary work. Even in the darkest days of the repression of Buddhism in the early Meiji era, the Shin sect had actively participated in the Meiji government’s effort to colonize the northern island of Hokkaido. Hokkaido had long been the home of the non-Japanese, Ainu minority and was then only under nominal Japanese control. The Japanese government feared that Imperial Russia, having taken over Siberia, might also be interested in Hokkaido.

The Higashi Honganji branch initially dispatched more than 100 priests to Hokkaido and spent over 33,000 *ryō* (approx. 110 lbs. of gold in 1871) on constructing roads. Hokkaido was seen as a further opportunity to prove that Buddhism could make a valuable contribution to the state. This meant, however, that Buddhists would themselves become “colonizers” in the process.

Based on the success of this ‘internal’ missionary work, the Higashi Honganji branch next sent a group of priests headed by Ogurusu Kōchō (1831-1905) to establish a temple in Shanghai, China in June 1876. Yet another group headed by Okumura Enshin (1843–1913) was sent to Korea in September of the following year. As in the case of Hokkaido, these missionary activities were carried on in close collaboration with the government, for from the Meiji period onwards Japan was determined to advance onto the Asian continent. In fact, after the first Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95 these missionary efforts became so closely associated with Japan’s continental policies that after each war Japan fought the missionary efforts expanded accordingly.<sup>24</sup>

Ogurusu, mentioned above, was not simply interested in missionary work abroad. In 1877 he wrote: “Priests of this sect should use aid to the poor as a method of propagating the faith.”<sup>25</sup> Ogurusu, in common with many of his contemporaries, understood that the Buddhist reformation they advocated, popularly known as “New Buddhism” (J. *Shin-Bukkyō*), had to become active in charitable work. This interest came as a result of the threat the Buddhists recognized from primarily Protestant-based charities. While, on the one hand, Buddhist leaders typically pointed out what they considered to be the

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<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Ketelaar, *Of Heretics and Martyrs in Meiji Japan*, p. 168.

<sup>24</sup> See Daitō, *Otera no Kane wa Naranakatta*, p. 58.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in the October 8, 1877 issue of the *Meikyō Shinshi* (No. 534).

shallowness of Christian doctrines, they were forced to recognize the remarkable effectiveness of Christian philanthropy as a means of recruiting converts.<sup>26</sup>

Rinzai Zen Master Shaku Sōen (1859-1919) was abbot of Engakuji in Kamakura and would become best known in the West as D.T. Suzuki's Zen master. He urged Buddhists to overcome the practical superiority of Christianity by "establishing schools for the poor, charity hospitals, and reformatories; organizing work among soldiers and criminals; correcting the corruptions of society; and engaging in active work in every department of life."<sup>27</sup> Yet another advocate of this position was Inoue Enryō (1858-1919), a Shin priest, Buddhist scholar and reformer. Like Sōen, Enryō hoped to outdo the Christians by copying their educational institutions, hospitals and reformatories.

Yet for all their desire to emulate Christian social work, the New Buddhists did not change their longstanding negative attitude toward Christianity. Enryō in particular was one of the most articulate of the anti-Christian Buddhists. Typically, Enryō would criticize the alleged "irrationality" of Christianity as contrasted with the "rationality" of Buddhism. He based his arguments on a simple comparison drawn between the theism of Christianity and the non-theism of Buddhism. Inoue maintained that the latter position was in harmony with Western philosophy and science. The fact that Christianity was the religion of the powerful Western nations and seemingly inseparable from their political structures and imperial ambitions further bolstered his antagonism.<sup>28</sup>

In January 1889 Inoue joined other Meiji Buddhist leaders, including Shimaji Mokurai and prominent Buddhist layman Ouchi Seiran (1845-1918), to form a new popular Buddhist organization, the "United Movement for Revering the Emperor and Worshipping the Buddha" (*Sonnō Hōbutsu Daidōdan*). The organization's prospectus described its purpose as follows:

The goal of this organization is to preserve the prosperity of the Imperial Household and increase the power of Buddhism. The result will be the perfection of the well-being of the Great Empire of Japan. . . . The time-honored spiritual foundation of our Empire is the Imperial Household and Buddhism. The independence and stability of our Empire cannot be maintained if so much as the

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<sup>26</sup> See Yoshida, *Nihon Kindai Bukkyō Shakaishi Kenkyū*, p. 44.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Thelle, *Buddhism and Christianity in Japan*, p. 198.

<sup>28</sup> See Kitagawa, *Religion in Japanese History*, p. 230.

slightest injury is inflicted upon it. How can true patriots not be inspired and aroused to defend against such injury?<sup>29</sup>

In concrete terms, the founders of this new organization hoped to exclude Christians from all positions of power in society, especially those connected with politics. Toward this end they worked to induce some 130,000 Buddhist priests throughout the country to become politically active and ensure the election of Buddhist candidates. Some members, especially those living in regions where the Shin sect was strong, went so far as to violently disrupt religious services in local Christian churches.<sup>30</sup>

The establishment of the *Sonnō Hōbutsu Daidōdan* represented the organizational birth of a Buddhist form of Japanese nationalism which was both exclusionist and aggressively anti-Christian in character. The press, however, severely condemned the disruptive and sometimes violent tactics of its regional supporters, which in turn led to police intervention. Having turned out to be a political liability, these tactics were relatively short-lived. However, just as they were being abandoned, a new form of violence arose, a form of violence that was on a far, far grander scale than ever before. This violence was employed by the Japanese state itself, for the nation's leaders had decided to go to war.

### **Buddhist Responses to Japanese Expansion Abroad**

The Sino-Japanese War formally began in August 1894. In discussing the war, Ienaga Saburo, a noted historian of modern Japan, wrote the following: “Government leaders . . . started the quest for glory by fighting China for hegemony in Korea. Domination of Korea became a national goal shared by successive administrations and the public at large.”<sup>31</sup>

The “public at large,” of course, included Japan's Buddhist leaders. Not surprisingly, these leaders collaborated very closely with the ethnocentric nationalism that was by then so prevalent in society. For example, by this time Inoue Enryō had become a spokesman for the “Imperial Way” (*Kōdō*). In a work published in 1893 entitled “Treatise on Loyalty and Filial Piety” (*Chūkō Katsu-ron*), he wrote that due to the existence of the Imperial

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<sup>29</sup> Quoted in the March 11, 1889 issue of the *Daidō Shimpō* (No. 1).

<sup>30</sup> For details, see Yoshida, *Nihon Kindai Bukkyō-shi Kenkyū*, pp. 166-201.

<sup>31</sup> Ienaga, *The Pacific War, 1931-45*, p. 6.



Household, Japan, its land, and its people were, like the emperor himself, all “sacred and holy”.<sup>32</sup>

Enryō went on to assert that in Japan, unlike China, let alone the West, loyalty to the sovereign and filial piety were one and the same. This was because all Japanese were offspring of the imperial family. Thus the imperial family was the “head family” of all Japanese, which is to say, the emperor and his subjects were all part of “one large family”.<sup>33</sup> This led Enryō to conclude: “From ancient times, sacrificing one’s physical existence for the sake of the emperor and the country was akin to discarding worn-out sandals. . . . It is this unique feature of our people which has caused the radiance of our national polity and produced the supreme beauty of our national customs.”<sup>34</sup>

In 1894 Enryō also published an article on the ‘philosophy of war’ which, echoing the preceding sentiments, was strongly militaristic in temper.

As for the war itself, the Nishi-Honganji branch of the Shin sect was one of the first to comment. As early as July 31, 1894, the sect’s headquarters issued the following statement. It read in part:

Since the occurrence of the recent emergency in Korea, the head of our branch has been deeply concerned about the situation, acting on the truth of repaying one’s debt to the country through absolute loyalty to it. This is in accordance with the sect’s teaching that the Law of the Sovereign is paramount. . . .

Believing deeply in the saving power of Buddha Amida’s vow, and certain of rebirth in His Western Paradise, we will remain calm no matter what emergency we may encounter, for there is nothing to fear. . . . We must value loyalty [to the Sovereign] and filial piety, work diligently, and, confronted with this emergency, share in the trials and tribulations of the nation.<sup>35</sup>

For its part, the Jōdo (Pure Land) sect established, in 1895, the “Assembly to Repay [One’s] Debt to the Nation” (*Hōkoku Gikai*). Its purpose was defined as follows: “The purpose of this assembly shall be, in accordance with the power

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<sup>32</sup> Inoue, *Chūkō Katsu Ron*, pp. 61-66.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.66-70.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in the July 31, 1894 issue of the [*Honganji-ha*] *Honzan Rokuji*.



of religion, to benefit both those in the military and their families, to conduct memorial services on behalf of fallen patriots, and to provide relief for their families and relatives.”<sup>36</sup>

While there was almost no peace movement among Buddhists, there was no lack of Buddhist leaders who justified the war. One line of reasoning was based on Japanese Buddhism’s supposed preeminent position within all of Asian Buddhism. Thus an editorial entitled “Buddhists During Wartime” appeared in the August 8, 1894 issue of the newspaper *Nōnin Shinpō*. It asserted that Japanese Buddhists had a duty to “awaken” Chinese and Korean Buddhists from their indifference to the war, an indifference which allegedly stemmed from the pessimistic nature of the Buddhism present in those two countries.

Only a few days later, in the August 16-18<sup>th</sup> issue of the same newspaper, Mori Naoki expanded on this theme in an article entitled “The Relationship of Japanese Buddhists to the Crisis in China and Korea”. He identified both Indian and Thai Buddhists as being indifferent to the development of their own countries, once again because of the pessimistic nature of the Buddhism found there. Mori went on to advocate that Japanese Buddhists consider the battlefield as an arena for propagation of the faith, holding high the banner of “benevolence and fidelity”.

Coupled with the above was the viewpoint represented in an editorial entitled “Buddhism and War” which appeared in the July 25, 1894 issue of the newspaper *Mitsugon Kyōhō*. This editorial began by acknowledging that the destruction of all weapons of war was the Buddhist ideal. It then went on to assert, however, that when a war was fought for a “just cause” it was entirely appropriate for Buddhists to support it.

Another proponent of this point of view was Shaku Unshō (1827-1909), a Shingon sect priest and pioneer of Meiji Buddhist charitable activities. In an article entitled “A Discussion on the Compassionate Buddhist Prohibition against Killing”, which appeared in the newspaper mentioned above on January 25, 1895, he stated that there were two types of war: a “just war” and a “lawless war” (*bōsen*). While Buddhists should oppose the second type of war, they should support, as in this case, a just war because such a war prevents humanity from falling into misery.

In a short but none the less prophetic reference to a Zen connection to war, the Buddhist reformer Katō Totsudō (1870-1949) wrote the following in the

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<sup>36</sup> Quoted in the April 15, 1895 issue of the *Jōdō Kyōhō* (No. 213).

February 1895 issue of *Taiyō* (Sun) magazine: “The Zen that philosophers and poets are well acquainted with has [due to the war] also become familiar to military men. Even though the principle of transcending life and death is the basis of all Buddhist schools, Zen has a quality that is most welcomed by soldiers, for it possesses a special kind of vigor.”<sup>37</sup>

It should be noted that despite all the preceding declarations of Buddhist war support, it was actually Japanese Christians who took the lead in such practical activities as providing medical help for wounded soldiers and relief for families who had become poverty-stricken as a result of the war. The patriotic fervor of the Christians naturally had a favorable effect on public opinion, and even Buddhists reluctantly expressed admiration for their strenuous efforts. On the other hand, because of their own slow and relatively passive response, Buddhist leaders were widely criticized for their lack of patriotic spirit.

The fervent patriotism of Japanese Christians became the catalyst for not only a new (and positive) relationship with the state but with institutional Buddhism as well. Specifically, Christian patriotism fostered a new climate which promoted Buddhist-Christian cooperation, while emphasizing Christianity’s spiritual solidarity with the East. The end result was that both religions succeeded, in varying degrees, in entrenching themselves in the same citadel of nationalism. In light of the Christian emphasis on love, and the Buddhist emphasis on compassion, it is highly ironic that it was war-generated patriotism, and the death and destruction which it entailed, that provided the initial stimulus for a reconciliation between these two religions which had been bitter foes for so long.

Japan’s victory over China at the end of the first Sino-Japanese War in 1895 brought with it not only increased power over affairs on the Korean peninsula, but the island of Taiwan, torn from China, became its first overseas’ colony. However, due to the so-called Tripartite Intervention of 1895, not all of Japan’s territorial ambitions were met. Three Western powers, led by Imperial Russia with the support of France and Germany, forced Japan to give up its newly won control of the Liaotung peninsula in China. This would have been its first colony on the Asian mainland.

Japan regarded this intervention as a national humiliation and was more determined than ever to develop its military capabilities. For example, it

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<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Kirita Kiyohide in his article, “*Seinen Suzuki Teitarō Daisetsu no Shakaikan*” (*Young D.T. Suzuki’s Views on Society*) in *Zengaku Kenkyū* 72 (January 1994), p. 21.

added six new divisions to the regular army in 1896, thereby doubling its first-line strength. In addition, in 1898 it organized both cavalry and artillery as independent brigades, while at the same time establishing factories for the domestic production of modern armaments. By 1903 Japan could also claim to have a modern navy with some seventy-six major war vessels, including four battleships, sixteen cruisers and twenty-three destroyers. The Triple Intervention became the pretext, or excuse, for the further development of Japan's military might, despite the heavy tax burden it placed on the general populace.

In this atmosphere, the need for continued support of the military was also recognized by Buddhist leaders. In 1898, for example, Higashi Kan'ichi edited a book entitled, *Proselytizing the Military (Gunjin Fukyō)*. The purpose of this work was to advocate Buddhism's usefulness in imparting courage to soldiers on the battlefield. Just how seriously institutional Buddhist leaders took their responsibility in this regard is attested to, among others, by Ōtani Kōzui (1876-1948), chief abbot of Nishi-Honganji branch of the Shin sect.

The Buddhists had learned from the Christians just how closely linked their own survival was to their fervent support for Japan's overseas wars of expansion. By the time of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5, fought once again for control of Korea, Buddhist leaders like Ōtani were ready to play a leading role, so much so that the emperor commended him for the important role he played in sustaining the soldiers' morale. He was, of course, only one of many, many Buddhist leaders who would devote themselves to promoting Japan's ever expanding empire, requiring ever greater sacrifices of both wealth and life on the part of the Japanese people.

## Conclusion

There was no more important factor in fostering the final end to Buddhism's suppression than the unconditional support it gave to modern Japanese nationalism, something that quickly morphed into Japanese imperialism and its attendant wars of aggression. Sectarian leaders' unconditional support succeeded in establishing Buddhism as an authentic part of Japan's newly created national polity (*J. kokutai*), anchored, as it was, in unconditional loyalty to the emperor and his policies. New Buddhists found acceptance in 20<sup>th</sup> century Japan by further embracing what they had already become by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, i.e. super patriots, ever ready to meet the needs of the state.

While the embrace of modern nationalism was a new experience for Japanese Buddhists, readers of the first part of this article will realize that Buddhism's willingness to accommodate itself, if not accept, the prevailing beliefs of its host country had long been the norm. It was, for example, this willingness that long ago allowed Buddhism to recognize animistic Shintō deities as the local manifestations of universal Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Among other things, this meant that from an early date, Hachiman, the Shintō god (*kami*) of war, was recognized as a compassionate Bodhisattva, i.e. *Hachiman Bosatsu*. Thus this compassionate Bodhisattva was prayed to for victory up through Japan's defeat in 1945.

Although Buddhism's acceptance of animistic Shintō was unique to Japan, Buddhism has long accepted the animistic deities of all the Asian nations to which it expanded. In addition, Buddhism underwent many other changes before it finally reached Japan in the sixth century CE. One of the most momentous of these, even prior to its arrival to Japan, was the performance of esoteric rituals designed to protect the state from evil forces and invasion. Thus Buddhism effectively became an organ of the state in both China and Korea as well as other Asian countries. It is therefore not surprising that it performed this role in Japan as well.

Given this history, it was only natural that the Tokugawa Shogunate called on Buddhism to enforce its proscription of Christianity at the beginning of the 17th century, for because of its close connection to Western imperialist powers, Christianity was perceived as a threat to the Japanese polity. This resulted in the construction of temples in every village, no matter how small, and resulted in a vast expansion in Buddhist adherents in Japan. While this can be viewed as a positive development for Buddhism, history demonstrates that the forced imposition of any religion on pain of imprisonment and death ultimately leads to its degradation from within. Moreover, forced adherence to Buddhism is repugnant to the teachings of the Buddhism's historic founder, Shakyamuni Buddha.

With this background in mind, it can be seen that Buddhism in Japan, through its subservience to the state, beginning in the premodern period, ultimately dug its own grave, or at least paved the way for its repression at the outset of the Meiji era. Buddhism was then regarded, and properly so, as part and parcel of Japan's feudal past, a past that needed to be discarded if Japan were to become a modern state. What appeared to be Buddhism's strength, i.e. large numbers of temples in the Edo period (1603-1868), was, due to its role as an appendage of the state, including forced adherence, the source of its greatest weakness.

True, unlike the exclusivist Abrahamic faiths, Buddhism tolerated, even embraced, competing faiths like Shintō in Japan. Yet for centuries Buddhism had relegated that faith to a subordinate role in the land of its birth, placing Buddhist priests in charge of major shrine-temple complexes. Unsurprisingly, when given the chance, Shintōists sought to rid themselves of Buddhist control, if not take revenge on their longtime oppressors. Added to this was the fact that many of the Buddhist priests, living alone in countryside temples, had taken common law wives, compromising themselves still further in the eyes of both laity and government.

It can be claimed that Buddhism's adoption of modern Japanese nationalism/imperialism was, at least initially, an imminently successful strategy in ending the oppression it experienced at the beginning of the Meiji period. Yet in doing so Buddhism paid a heavy price in terms of twisted doctrine, abandoned ethics and militarist praxis that resulted in what turned out to be an ephemeral acceptance, lasting only until the Japanese empire's defeat and dissolution in August 1945. Inasmuch as I have written in detail about this period in my books *Zen at War*, *Zen War Stories* and *Zen Terror*, I will not repeat that here.

In defense of Japanese Buddhism, one can certainly ask what any religion would do upon finding itself under physical, even deadly, attack by the leaders of a country, together with a sizable segment of the common people, of which it had long been a part. Although years later, I vividly recall an elderly Zen priest who, at the end of my lecture on Buddhism in wartime Japan, said, "As a foreigner you can't understand what it was like to live in a Japan where there was no freedom of speech. What could we have done?" In response, I said, "You're right, I've never lived in a totalitarian society, and I'm sure I would have been frightened to speak out. Nevertheless, there is one thing you could have done – you could have remained silent. There was no requirement to become cheerleaders of the war." The elderly priest remained silent.

When this question is viewed from a transnational viewpoint there are few if any religions that have dared to challenge the modern state and the nationalist fervor it generates. The idiom, "go along to get along" seems to be the operating principle for all religions, or at least their leaders. Yes, there are sometimes "martyrs" for their faith who choose to take a stand on the basis of their conscience. Typically, however, they pay for their courageous stance with their lives, abandoned by their leaders and co-religionists and serving as a stern warning to any others who might be inclined to follow their lead.

Buddhism's longstanding syncretism clearly contributed to its readiness to serve as a useful adjunct of the state, beginning from the time it was first introduced to Japan. It continued to fulfill this role in one capacity or other down through the centuries, recovering from its severe suppression in the early years of the Meiji period by embracing and promoting modern Japanese nationalism/imperialism. In the postwar era, however, it paid a heavy price for having served as 'cheerleader-in-chief' of a disastrous war. For the most part, it is today a religion relegated to the role of caring not for the living but the dead, performing funeral services and ancestor memorial rites. Thus, although it is no longer in danger of persecution, this is largely because its teachings are regarded as irrelevant to the living.

Some might claim, myself included, that the suppression of Buddhism at the beginning of the Meiji period and subsequent developments were, in large part, Buddhism's just "karmic recompense" (*gōhō*). If so, it must not be forgotten that, in accordance with karmic doctrine, Japanese Buddhists have the opportunity to create a new future, i.e. new karma, no matter how heavily they may have been conditioned by past events. As Rupert Gethin notes: "From the Buddhist perspective certain experiences in life are indeed the results of previous actions; but our responses to those experiences, whether wished for or unwished for, *are not predetermined* but represent new actions which in time bear their own fruit in the future."<sup>38</sup> (Emphasis mine)

Like new growth on a gnarled plum tree, there are even now new developments in Japanese Buddhism occurring here and there. Will they be sufficient to regenerate the tree? Will they be sufficient to escape the dead weight of past karma accumulated over centuries? It is, frankly, difficult to be sanguine about the future, especially when so few contemporary Japanese Buddhist leaders seem aware of the true nature of the crisis they face. Can these leaders distinguish between the polluted 'bath water' of the past and the living 'baby' of the Buddha Dharma? Can they discard the former even while preserving (or restoring) the latter? Only time will tell.

For Buddhism as a whole, it is certainly true that its adaptability has been a major factor in its acceptance in the various countries to which it has spread. Viewed in a positive light, the doctrine of *upāya-kaushalya*, i.e. "skill in means", in the Mahāyāna tradition has allowed Buddhism to mould its message to fit a wide variety of circumstances, cultures and personalities. Buddhist history bears

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<sup>38</sup> Gethin, *Foundations of Buddhism*, p. 27.

ample witness to the contribution this has made to the spread of the Buddha Dharma throughout Asia and now the West. Yet, as both parts of this article demonstrate, Buddhism's "skill in means" can lead, and has led, to a betrayal of some of its core teachings.

This betrayal, moreover, is certainly not limited to Japanese Buddhism. One only needs to look at the current anti-Muslim *Bodu Bala Sena* (Buddhist Power Force) movement in Sri Lanka and the *Ma Ba Tha* (Association for the Protection of Race and Religion) movement in Myanmar to see how the adoption of violence-prone, ethnic and religious chauvinism by some (but not all) Buddhist leaders in those countries has betrayed Buddhism's concern for the wellbeing of *all* sentient beings. Given this, the lesson for Buddhism, if not for all religions, may well be found in the eternal, yet easily forgotten, verity spoken by Polonius in Act I, Scene III of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: "This above all: to thine own self be true."

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