

H-Net Reviews

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Brian Daizen Victoria. *Zen War Stories*. London: Routledge, 2003. xviii + 268 pp. \$190.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7007-1580-0; \$51.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7007-1581-7.

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Brian Victoria's work, following on the heels of the highly acclaimed but also highly provocative *Zen at War* (Weatherhill, 1997), continues his withering attack on the embracing of wartime ideology by leading Zen masters and practitioners in Japan. Victoria seeks to show that the attitude characteristic of numerous examples of prominent Zen monks and scholars was not a matter of only benignly resisting, or even of passively accepting, the rhetoric of Imperial Way Buddhism by clergy who were pressured and powerless to stand up to the authorities. Nor was it an example of innocently recognizing historical and ideological affinities between Zen monastic discipline and military training.

On the contrary, the Zen masters discussed here eagerly and enthusiastically endorsed some of the most excessive and reprehensible aspects of imperial ideology in the name of a corrupted vision of spiritual realization as a tool to spread the doctrine of the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere. They also used Zen wedded to hypernationalism and imperialism as a tool to misread the historical records of their own tradition and to help transport Japanese supremacy to China and Korea, while refusing to acknowledge or repent for their actions with the defeat of Japan. This outlook also infected numerous politicians and military figures who turned to Buddhism as a way of explaining away or masking their roles leading up to, as well as during and after World War II.

In part 1 of *Zen War Stories* Victoria documents several masters who have become icons in the West for their apparent adherence to Zen tradition linked with an ability to address contemporary culture. After showing in chapter 4 that Omori Sogen, praised for his prowess in swordsmanship and other arts, had a fascistic, "Mr. Hyde" side as manifested in the founding in 1932 of the Kinno Ishin Domei (League for Loyalty to the Emperor and the Restoration), Victoria turns to the case of Yasutani Haku'un. In chapter 5, "Zen Master Dogen Goes to War," we find that Yasutani, known as the teacher of Philip Kapleau and inspiration for *The Three*

Pillars of Zen, wanted to smash all universities for being traitors. He was a fanatical militarist who "transformed the life and thought of Zen Master Dogen (1200-1253), the thirteenth-century founder of the Soto Zen sect in Japan, into a propaganda tool for Japanese militarism" (p. 68).

In particular, Yasutani tried to argue that Dogen's famed pilgrimage to Song China in 1223 was triggered not by a longing for Buddhist Dharma but by disgust with the new Shogunate and infatuation with preserving the Imperial House. According to Victoria, Yasutani's corrupted spirituality did not end with a support for militarism. He was also even more "ethnic chauvinist, sexist, and anti-Semitic" (p. 68) than his teacher Harada Daiun Sogaku, whose "most memorable wartime quote is: '[If ordered to] march: tramp, tramp, or shoot: bang, bang. This is the manifestation of the highest Wisdom [of enlightenment]'" (pp. 66-67).

After discussing in the seventh chapter, "Zen 'Selflessness' in Japanese Militarism," how Zen's historical relation to the samurai was misinterpreted to support imperial ideology about the acceptance of death by D. T. Suzuki and other prominent representatives of Zen, including former Eihei-ji temple abbot Kumazawa Banzon, part 2 takes up examples of the involvement with Buddhist thought by military and political leaders. While this section is less devastating as a critique of Zen than of Japanese Buddhism and society in general, Victoria explains in chapter 10, "Buddhism—The Last Refuge of War Criminals," how easily the moral basis of religion can be distorted and subverted. For example, as recollected by Buddhist studies scholar Hanayama Shinsho, seven Class A war criminals who were condemned to death continued to cling to Buddhism while on death row to find a hypocritical feeling of solace. For instance, Hirota Koki never abandoned his sense of Zen and the warrior class and used Zen to stiffen his resolve to "die naturally" returning to nothingness" (p. 179), while General Tojo Hideki kept ties with Pure Land, and for Itagaki Seishiro the Nichiren school provided comfort.

Anyone reading the book interested or intrigued by Japanese religion and culture as a model for behavior that is impartial and free from attachment will likely be disturbed by the words and deeds cited in *Zen War Stories*, portrayed not as exceptions to the rule or unusual cases, but the widespread ethos of at least a generation of monks. Unlike *Zen at War*, which discussed the case of Soto Zen priest Uchiyama Gudo and other politically radical Buddhist priests—Uchiyama was for Victoria a martyr convicted and executed as part of the High Treason Incident (Taigyaku Jiken) of 1910 (pp. 30-48)—*Zen War Stories* is an unrelenting ride through a “tunnel of hate,” lacking any counter-example. Save for very brief mentions of figures like Hanayama, Rinzai Zen priest Ichikawa Hakugen, or intellectual Maruyama Masao, Victoria does not present a more positive side of Buddhism or Japanese thought that has or could be used for generating criticism of the state or as a means of self-criticism. Nor does he mention leading Buddhist thinkers like Ienaga Saburo or Tanabe Hajime, who, from nearly opposite political angles, infused postwar works with a critical approach toward those, including himself in the case of Tanabe, who supported imperialism.

I am not suggesting, however, that Victoria’s book is one-sided, deliberately or not, because I think the work fulfills his goal of creating “a ‘sourcebook’ of wartime pronouncements by Zen and other institutional Buddhist leaders, both lay and clerical” (p. xv) by letting the words

of these figures speak for themselves. In doing so, he has punctured not a few holes in many trial balloons that have been launched facilely in support of Zen as a socially aware form of mysticism by those who remain closed to learning of the notorious circumstances surrounding the war. In that sense, Victoria has made a profound contribution to overall Zen scholarship.

My critical comment is that with the two books, Victoria has not taken the opportunity to attempt to point beyond the reprehensible shortcomings and glaring warts toward a compromise view of Zen and its complex connections with society, in a way that works constructively with the strengths as well as the weakness of the tradition. I assume that Victoria on some level cares very deeply about Zen and its place in Japan and the world, so the challenge would be to help define Zen’s role creatively lest the tradition become buried under the avalanche of criticism or, contrariwise, the research behind these books gets relegated to the realm of sensationalism.

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