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Discourses on Religious Violence in Premodern Japan

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What is religious violence and why is it relevant to us? This may seem like an odd question, for surely we can easily identify it, especially considering the events of 9/11 and other instances of violence in the name of religion over the past decade or so? Of course, it is relevant not just because of acts done in the name of religion but also because many observers find violence involving religious followers or justified by religious ideologies especially disturbing. But such a notion is based on an overall assumption that religions are, or should be, inherently peaceful and harmonious, and on the modern Western ideal of a separation of religion and politics. As one scholar opined, religious ideologies are particularly dangerous since they are “a powerful resource to mobilize individuals and groups to do violence (whether physical or ideological violence) against modern states and political ideologies.”¹ But are such assumptions tenable? Is a determination toward self-sacrifice, often exemplified by suicide bombers, a unique aspect of violence motivated by religious doctrines? In order to understand the concept of “religious violence,” we must ask ourselves what it is that sets it apart from other violence. In this essay, I will discuss the notion of religious violence in the premodern Japanese setting by looking at a number of incidents involving Buddhist temples.²

My goal is to address two specific questions. Is there a “religious warfare,” where battles and skirmishes are fought with weapons and strategies fundamentally different from other kinds of violent confrontations? And, what was the ideological setting within which such “religious violence” occurred? While I am interested in the larger question of ideological justifications for violence, I do not intend to make sweeping generalizations or address cases across the globe and the span of history in this brief essay, but I will nevertheless make occasional comparisons to relevant cases to the extent that it may help contextualizing violence. In either case, an introduc-

¹ James Wellman, introduction to conference on “Religion, Conflict and Violence: Exploring Patterns Past and Present East & West,” May 13-14, 2004, University of Washington; http://depts.washington.edu/eacenter/spring_0304.shtml.

² Though my focus in this essay is on discourses of violence involving clerics in premodern Japan, I am drawing from my *The Teeth and Claws of the Buddha: Monastic Warriors and Sōhei in Japanese History* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii press, 2007).

tion to the framework and character of monastic violence in premodern Japan will be useful before addressing its strategic features and intellectual contexts.

Monastic Violence in the Premodern Japanese Setting

The Buddhism that was imported to and eventually adopted in Japan was influenced by the Chinese and Korean settings from which it came. As one might expect, the Japanese codes for the behavior of monks and nuns reflected experiences on the continent, where temples had been involved in political and military struggles.³ The codes thus stipulated that Buddhist members were prohibited from killing, stealing, keeping and reading military manuals, forming rambunctious bands, and receiving weapons.⁴ These rules would obviously not have been proclaimed had there not been cases of monastics engaging in these activities on the continent to begin with. In other words, there was never a “pure stage” or a “golden age” for Buddhism, when everyone followed the rules against killing or stuck strictly to the monastic rules. Rather, it seems clear that many precepts were adjusted or simply not followed in practice, and that it was for that reason that governments from early on issued specific laws and edicts for Buddhist clerics. It is important to note, however, that these laws were not mainly based on Buddhist doctrines but rather on the perspective of the government, which desired no challenges from the only organized religious and political powers beside itself.

And yet, in Japan these laws proved insufficient as well, as indicated by the occasional notice in early records. One account dating to 624, noted in the early eighth century chronicle the *Nihon shoki* (*Chronicles of Japan*, 720), mentions that a monk struck his paternal grandfather with an axe, which induced the court to expel all Buddhist adherents in Japan. Eventually, however, a memorial from a Paekche monk is said to have persuaded the nobles not to carry out their plans.⁵ Interestingly, despite criticism of such incidents, there are also examples of monks participating in wars at the request of the imperial court. For instance, in 764, we learn that monk novices were part of the government army that defeated the rebelling Emi no Oshikatsu (706–764), though it is unclear in what capacity they participated.⁶

³ The best known example on the continent is the Shaolin monastery, which supported the Tang rulers against remnants of the Sui Dynasty in battles in 620–621 (Meir Shahar, “Epigraphy, Buddhist Hagiography and Fighting Monks,” 15–21).

⁴ Ryō no gige, “Sōni ryō,” article 1, in *Shintei zōho kokushi taiki*, vol. 22, p. 81; Hirata Toshiharu, *Sōhei to bushi* (Tokyo: Nihon kyōbunsha, 1965), 16–19; Hioki Eigō, *Sōhei no rekishi: Hō to yoroi wo matotta ara hosshi tachi* (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1934), 51–52.

⁵ W. G. Aston, *Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan from the earliest Times to A.D. 697*, 152–153. See also *Nihon shoki*, part two, in *Shintei zōho kokushi taiki*, 164–165.

⁶ *Shoku Nihongi*, Tenpyō jingo 2 (766) 9/6.

Other records reveal sporadic outbursts of violence within monastic compounds throughout the Nara (710–784) and early Heian (794–1185) eras, but it is first in the mid-tenth century that we begin to see an increase and an intensification of armed conflicts. We note, for example, that menial workers from the imperial temple of Tōdaiji rioted in 935, though they were eventually subdued by an imperial police captain.⁷ In 959, a dispute in Kyoto between Gion’s Kanjin’in (under Enryakuji control) and Kiyomizudera (a branch of Kōfukuji) resulted in brawls that similarly induced the imperial court to dispatch imperial police captains to arrest the violators.⁸ But, it is perhaps the Tendai monk Ryōgen (912–985), who has come to embody the challenges and opportunities with the presence of armed monastics in the tenth century more than anyone else.⁹ Ryōgen’s intellectual ability was recognized at a young stage, as he was appointed to prestigious religious debates when he was still in his twenties, though it also meant that he had adversaries from other schools.¹⁰ In 966, he was appointed Tendai head abbot and immediately proceeded, with the support of allies from the powerful Fujiwara family, to rebuild several buildings on Mt. Hiei that had been damaged in fires or suffered from a lack of maintenance.

Then, in 970, he issued a set of regulations for the monastic complex on Mt. Hiei. Consisting of 26 articles, it is one of the richest and most important documents of the tenth century, reflecting both Ryōgen’s concerns and ideals. Relevant to the discussion here are two articles that specifically condemn the presence of rowdy and armed monks within the monastic complex. At the same time, Ryōgen’s tenure was one of expansion as Enryakuji gained control over the Gion complex in Kyoto, while solidifying his branch’s grip of the head abbotship in competition with monks from Onjōji, which even earned Ryōgen a reputation of promoting the use of arms.¹¹ Be that as it may, the late tenth century was clearly a time when weapons were used to extend and protect privileges within as well as outside monastic complexes, and while the court by and large disapproved of the arming of clerics, its own stance varied depending on the circumstances. In 982, for example, the court actually encouraged members of the Onjōji faction, which it was now supporting, to station armed guards at their residences to deter and protect from possible attacks by Enryakuji supporters.¹²

⁷ *Chōya gūnsai*, in *DNS* 1:6, Shōhei 5 (935) 6/31 (p. 921).

⁸ *Nihon kiriyaku*, Tentoku 3 (959) 3/13; *DNS* 1:10, 539.

⁹ For a comprehensive study of Ryōgen and his times, see Paul Groner’s *Ryōgen and Mt. Hiei* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001).

¹⁰ See for example, *Jie daisōjō den*, in *Gunsho ruijū*, vol. 4, p. 15; *DNS* 1:6, 146. ¹¹ *DNS*, 1:13, Tenroku 1 (970) 7/16 (p. 213); Groner, xii, 358–359.

¹¹ *DNS*, 1:13, Tenroku 1 (970) 7/16 (p. 213); Groner, xii, 358–359.

¹² *Fusō ryakki*, Tengen 5 (982) 1/10; Groner, *Ryōgen and Mt. Hiei*, 221–222.

Ryōgen's articles notwithstanding, armed members became increasingly prominent in conflict resolution. But this increase in violence was not unique to religious institutions, as mid-Heian Japan was a society where military power came to play a more important role both locally and centrally. In the capital, the most significant event during the tenth century was the so-called Anna Incident of 969, when the Fujiwara chieftain eliminated his opponents with the help of the military commander Minamoto no Mitsunaka (912–997), famously known as the “teeth and claws of the Fujiwara.”¹³ Still, it is at the local arena where the changes appear most drastic in the tenth century.

Opportunistic governors and other provincial officials used appointments to enrich themselves by raising taxes or adding other dues, often allying themselves with local strongmen to achieve their goals. There are too many cases to note them all here, but suffice it to mention the well-known 988 “Petition of the District Officials and Local Notables of Owari Province” (*Owari no kuni gunji haykushō ra gebumi*), where the governor was accused of mismanagement. In a thirty-one article long complaint, the local residents charged the governor with unjustly raising taxes, changing the exchange rate between silk and rice to increase his own profit, and with forcing local notables to raise and provide horses in excess of custom for the delivery of taxes to the capital. The petition served its purpose as the governor was dismissed, but it did not stop other appointees from engaging in the same kind of behavior. In fact, from 970 to 1041, we know of no less than eighteen grievances of the same kind, only six of which resulted in dismissals of the accused provincial officials.¹⁴

Local violence indicated an inability of the court to control the provinces solely with the help of laws and edicts, and though it worked on occasion, the court had little choice but to find ways to co-opt the emerging warriors in the countryside lest it lose control entirely. What the Kyoto elites spearheaded was an ingenious transformation in which formerly bureaucratic functions and relationships were privatized, put squarely in the hands of the individual elites and their closest retainers. They thus managed to create a tightly knit hierarchy, tying estates and provinces directly to the capital, without the intervention of officials appointed by a court often lacking an understanding if the appointee was suited or not. The main tool in this process was the expansion of private estates, or *shōen*, which came to serve as effective links between the capital elites and local strongmen, between capital and countryside, securing income at a predictable level for

¹³. Adolphson, *The Teeth and Claws*, 34; Kuroda Toshio, *Jisha seiryoku: mō hitotsu chūsei no shakai* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1976), 33.

¹⁴. Charlotte von Verschuer, “Life of Commoners in the Provinces,” in Mikael Adolphson, Edward Kamens and Stacie Matsumoto, eds., *Heian Japan, Centers and Peripheries* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), 305–328.

those comprising the Heian state.

This deliberate relaxation of the state's direct control over the provinces was done out of need, offering armed administrators and provincial strongmen a share of the income and an appointment that could be passed on to later generations, while allowing the Kyoto elites to stay in control. For local strongmen, it also meant an opportunity to receive protection afforded, as opposed to disengaging land entirely from the capital elites, which would have left them open to other local challenges. For farmers, this might seem like bad news, but in fact, it gave them more options. They could become part of a private estate with clear expectations of dues and a secure tenure of their land and appointment, or they could stay on provincial lands, where conditions might actually have improved because of the availability of a more attractive option. In either case, the privatization of land benefitted enough people that the system lasted well into the fifteenth century.

Often overlooked by scholars, the tenth century was an important turning point in Japan's classical age—in a recent collaborative work described as “something of a quiet watershed”—when the imperial court, facing challenges in the countryside, made important adjustments to maintain its supremacy.¹⁵ The result was an ingenious system of shared income and responsibilities in which capital and provincial leaders co-operated to control land and income from it. The drawback to this privatization was a factionalization in the capital where the elites now came to compete with one another for land and retainers in the provinces. And as factionalism became a more pronounced factor in court politics, the elites in the capital area moved away from a political and social system that relied exclusively on a bureaucratic framework. So, while the adjustments that were made allowed for more direct and effective ties between the emerging local powers and individual noble houses, they also carried with them a new element of violence. It is in this context that nobles and temples created and came to rely on their own networks of resources and supporters in the disproportionately intensified cultural and socio-political competition in the Kinai.

The Nature of Monastic Violence

Violence involving clerics was closely tied to general social, political, economic and military developments of the mid-Heian age. By the late eleventh and twelfth centuries, confrontations over land and appointments had become commonplace among armed retainers of the capital

¹⁵ Mikael Adolphson, Edward Kamens & Stacie Matsumoto, *Heian Japan, Centers and Peripheries* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii press, 2007), 3.

elites, including religious institutions. Overall, the patterns of conflict were identical between nobles and among competing temples, centering mainly on two issues: rank and appointments, and land and branch institutions. One was thus tied to social and political standing, while the other was a matter of human and material resources. A few examples of each kind will be useful in offering a sense of what religious institutions and clerics considered worth fighting for.

In the socio-political arena, the aforementioned competition between Enryakuji and Onjōji, the Tendai siblings, stands out as one of the earliest and simultaneously most enduring. The contest dates to the ninth century when the two lineages emerged, eventually resulting in a physical separation with Enryakuji spread out on Mt. Hiei and Onjōji settled on the eastern foot of the mountain. However, the physical separation was not accompanied by an ideological one, and so the two branches continued to compete for titles and the headship of the school throughout the Heian and Kamakura periods. For example, in 1038–39, the Fujiwara chieftain—then in control of the imperial court as regent—supported the appointment of an Onjōji monk to head Tendai, but he was eventually pressured to appoint someone from the Enryakuji complex instead.¹⁶

Having failed on numerous occasions to control Tendai through its abbotship, the Onjōji clergy eventually resorted to seeking a clean separation by appealing for an independent ordination platform. Such requests were occasionally supported by members of the imperial court who wished to weaken Enryakuji's control of ceremonies and assets, such as retired emperors (*in*) in the twelfth century. Go-Shirakawa (1127–1192, r. 1155–1158, *in* 1158–1192), for instance, favored Onjōji and even seemed to grant it an independent platform in 1161 when he announced that he would receive his initiation at an Onjōji branch. Enryakuji protested and pressured Go-Shirakawa to attend a scaled down ritual. However, the next year he struck back by appointing an Onjōji monk head abbot of Tendai, which further exacerbated the tensions between the two branches.¹⁷

It is no exaggeration to state that the *insei* period (rule by retired emperors, 1086–1185), when forceful retired emperors attempted to gain more direct control of religious appointment and temple assets, was particularly intense in terms of monastic violence. Go-Shirakawa likely imitated his great-grandfather Shirakawa (1053–1129, r. 1072–1086, *in* 1086–1129), who was especially active in this area, appointing his own allies to numerous ceremonies and abbotships while ignoring precedent. In 1102, for example, Shirakawa suspended the Kōfukuji head abbot Kakushin (1065–1121) following disputes over land and an earlier appointment of his own

¹⁶ Adolphson, *The Gates of Power*, 64–65.

¹⁷ *Sankaiki*, Eiryaku 2 (1161) 4/7–9; *Tendai zasu ki*, 95; *Hyakurenshō*, Ōhō (1162) int. 2/1.

protégé for an important ceremony. The Nara clergy reacted by attacking the mansion of Shirakawa's protégé, eventually forcing the retired emperor to reinstate Kakushin.¹⁸ Six years later, Shirakawa upset the Tendai clergy by appointing a favored Shingon monk to perform a ceremony at Sonshōji, one of the imperially sponsored temples in the eastern part of the capital. This appointment had rotated among monks from Onjōji, Enryakuji and Tōji, but Shirakawa attempted to give the latter additional favor through this ceremony. Despite their frequent animosity, the two Tendai centers protested together in a rare display of solidarity, causing great commotion in the capital in anticipation of a confrontation. The protest took place peacefully and Shirakawa had his way, but the noble members of the imperial court agreed that the retired emperor had indeed broken precedent.¹⁹

Control of branch temples and shrines frequently took the form of appointment conflicts, but they were ultimately concerned with the assets that each branch provided in terms of estates and human resources. A particularly telling example involves Kōfukuji, the Fujiwara clan temple, and Enryakuji. In 1113, Shirakawa had a certain Ensei (n.d.) appointed abbot of Kiyomizudera, a prominent temple in the eastern hills of Kyoto.

However, Ensei was a monk with affiliation to Enryakuji and Kiyomizudera was, as noted above, a branch temple of Kōfukuji, which decided to launch a protest in the capital. As a result, another monk was appointed, which in turn prompted the Enryakuji clergy to attack Kiyomizudera. The destruction was substantial and there were a few fatalities. Kōfukuji demanded that the Enryakuji perpetrators be punished, but the court was unable to agree on a judgment, in part because its own members made the decision that caused the discord in the first place. Dissatisfied with the lack of action, Kōfukuji assembled armed supporters from both the temple compound and various estates in the Nara region. In response, Enryakuji clerics prepared to engage the approaching opponents, but at this point, the court finally acted by sending out a force led by a seasoned warrior named Taira no Masamori (?–1121). A confrontation ensued where some forty Kōfukuji followers were killed as opposed to only two among the government warriors.²⁰

To note one more example, let us turn to Tōnomine, a temple-shrine complex located east of Nara in Yamato Province. It was a highly contested center since it supposedly housed the remains of the Fujiwara progenitor, Kamatari (614–669), but the temple had been established by

¹⁸ *Chūyūki*, Kōwa 4 (1102) 8/6, 8, 12, 15, 18, 21, 23, 26, 9/4, 5, 28, 29, 10/9, 17; *DNS* 3:6, 517–519, 534–544, 556–558, 584–586, 601–605.

¹⁹ *Chūyūki*, Tennin 1 (1108) 3/20, 23, 30, 4/2; *DNS* 3:10, 112–114, 123–124.

²⁰ *Denryaku*, Eikyū 1 (1113) int. 3/20, 21, 22, 29, 4/1; *Chōshūki*, Eikyū 1/int. 3/20, 21, 22, 4/1, 30, 5/4; *DNS* 3:14, 137–140, 145–147, 179–180, 182–183, 185; *Tendai zasu ki*, 77–78. See also Adolphson, *The Teeth and Claws*, 38–39.

a Tendai monk, so both Kōfukuji and Enryakuji made claims to Tōnomine as a branch. The imperial court, under the leadership of Fujiwara no Michinaga (966–1027), had recognized Enryakuji’s rights to the center, but since it was located in Yamato, the Kōfukuji clergy repeatedly poked at it to dislodge it from Enryakuji control. In 1072, Kōfukuji decided to erect new tollgates in Yamato, some of which impeded the flow of traffic to and from Tōnomine, whose clergy reacted by tearing one of them down. In retaliation, members of the Kōfukuji clergy charged Tōnomine itself on several occasions, burning down much of the center. The court made a number of efforts to deal with the perpetrators, but the clergy resisted by not appearing in the capital. When the aggressive clerics finally did agree to come to Kyoto, they threatened to bring the entire clergy with them, indicating that they considered themselves protected by the divine right of *Yamashina dōri* (discussed more in detail below), according to which a unanimous clergy was considered to be justified in their actions by the gods. The court saw little choice but to hand down mainly symbolic punishments and to implore the clergy to refrain from attacking Tōnomine.²¹

It would seem, then, that the violent clerics considered their actions justified and that the court did not argue against it. And whereas there was little by way of condemnation among contemporary nobles and monks, there has been no lack of criticism by modern scholars. As I will argue below, however, there was nothing that set this violence apart in terms of what the clerics fought for, their ideological justification, who fought or how they fought. Let us turn to the latter two before addressing the ideological context.

Monastic Warriors and Warfare

The twentieth century representation of monastic forces has, as I have argued elsewhere, focused on the largely fictive figure of the *sōhei* (僧兵), or “monk-warriors.” Drawing from artistic representations from the fourteenth century, this image first emerges as a coherent literary concept in the early Tokugawa age, but was likely imported in the late sixteenth century from Korea when Toyotomi Hideyoshi’s forces encountered fierce resistance from Korean “monk-warriors” (*sunghyōng*). Thus attached to a negative stereotype, the Tokugawa samurai, despising any other warrior history than their own, continued to use the image to criticize the perceived greed of religious institutions and to curb any challenges to their own political, social and cultural superiority. That story is in itself fascinating, but what is perhaps most perplexing is how

²¹ Adolphson, *The Gates of Power*, 144–145; *Gyokuyō*, Jōan 3 (1173) 5/20, 6/21, 25, 27, 30, 7/1, 7, 12–15, 21; *Tōnomine ryakki*, Jōan 2 (1172) 9/6, int. 12/24, Jōan 3/6/8.

modern scholars bought the fabricated image of the *sōhei* wholesale. The notion of “religious warfare” in Japan thus centered on monastic warriors dressed in monk robes, head cowls and wooden clogs fighting in muddy battlefields mainly with their typical glaives (*naginata*).

Ludicrous as that image is, it remained so strong that even when common sense would have dictated that such a battle attire would be highly impractical, or when both contemporary diaries and later artistic depictions contradicted it, few scholars questioned it. From a personal perspective, seeing Matsudaira Ken struggling to stay on top of a horse while swinging a ten-foot *naginata* replica as Benkei (?–1189), the loyal monk and retainer of Minamoto Yoshitsune (1159–1189), in the 2005 NHK *taiga dorama* series truly felt like one of the low points in Japanese film-making. In reality, those fighting for temples in premodern Japan were identical to those fighting for nobles or the imperial court. They came from one of two groups: local land managers and their retainers who had armed themselves to perform their duties and expand their control, or mid- to low-level aristocrats, who armed themselves to make careers as provincial officers or guards in the capital.

If we begin with the latter, it soon becomes clear that commanders of monastic forces were of the same stock as those who led any other armed men. Indeed, they came from the same families, such as the Minamoto, the Taira or the Fujiwara, descendants of the mid-level nobles that had become “bridging figures” between the capital elites and local administrators and strongmen.²² About a dozen or so of those monastic commanders are known to us in historical records, but none is better documented, and perhaps more infamous, than Shinjitsu (1086–?), who in one source is noted as “Japan’s number one evil, martial monk.”²³

A descendant of the Seiwa Minamoto, Shinjitsu came from a long line of military leaders, who had served in various capacities in estate management and provincial administration. His father, Minamoto no Yoriyasu (n.d.), was known as a “troublemaker” because of his attempts to appropriate land for his own gains.²⁴ Shinjitsu was not much different from his ancestors, except that his master was the Fujiwara clan temple of Kōfukuji in Nara rather than a courtier or the imperial court in Kyoto. Indeed, while Shinjitsu was involved in disputes that centered on his monastery, he was no less a warrior than his predecessors. The question, of course, is if the

²² Jeffrey P. Mass first argued the central importance of these “bridging figures.” See his *Warrior Government* and “The Kamakura Bakufu,” 49.

²³ *Sonpi bunmyaku*, vol.3 , 162; *Kōfukuji bettō sangō keizu*, 27.

²⁴ *Sonpi bunmyaku*, vol.3 , 162; *Kōfukuji bettō sangō keizu*, 27; Tsunoda Bun’ei, “Shōmu tennō haka,” in idem, *Ōchō no meian: Heian jidai shi no kenkyū*, vol. 2 (Tokyo: Tōkyōdō shuppan, 1977), 339–340. It is worth noting that Shinjitsu was also a direct descendant of the aforementioned Minamoto no Mitsunaka.

identity of his master changed the way that he acted and fought, and how the world around him perceived him.

In the early twelfth century, Kōfukuji had become an arena for competition between different factions at the imperial court in Kyoto, mainly because the temple controlled many important court rituals but also because it held numerous estates and branch institutions. For example, in 1129, the new retired emperor, Toba, who had gained control of the court following the death of his grandfather, wanted to promote one of his monk-allies to a prominent position at Kōfukuji. However, several clerics opposed the favoritism, which led to an attack on the unsuspecting monk when he traveled back to Kyoto after an event in Nara. Toba, furious with this assault, sent government warriors led by renowned military leaders to punish the “evil monks” (*akusō*), resulting in the deposing of the head abbot, and the exile of several of the instigators. Although Shinjitsu was not directly involved, as far as we can tell, he was also punished but soon pardoned owing to the intervention of Kōfukuji’s secular patron, Fujiwara no Tadazane (1078–1162).²⁵

Shinjitsu’s activities from 1137, when he was appointed assistant head administrator (*gon no jōza*), reflect his rise through the ranks, aided in large by his military prowess, which he used to increase Kōfukuji’s influence as well as his own assets. In 1139, Shinjitsu headed forces that first opposed a newly appointed and rather unpopular head abbot, and later defended against a retaliatory attack launched by the head abbot. Both sides counted experienced warriors and even well known military leaders, but it was Shinjitsu’s forces that had the upper hand.²⁶

Shinjitsu remained a central figure throughout the 1140s and the first half of the 1150s. The peak may have come in 1148, when he was in charge of the temple in the absence of a head abbot, something that was virtually unprecedented. Shinjitsu does not appear to have had much training in Hossō doctrines or mastered any complicated religious rituals, but his support from one of the Fujiwara leaders apparently was enough to allow him to effectively lead Kōfukuji for three full years until a new head abbot was appointed.²⁷ His career came to a halt in the Hōgen Incident of 1156, when two feuding factions within both the imperial family and the Fujiwara regental branch resorted to violence to resolve their competition for control of the imperial court. Many military leaders were drawn into this court conflict, the first time in centuries that armed men were used to settle a political dispute in Kyoto itself. Given his training and background, one should perhaps not be surprised that Shinjitsu was one of the commanders called in to

²⁵ *Kōfukuji bettō shidai*, 13–14; *Chōshūki*, Daiji 4 (1129) 11/11, 12, 21, 24, 28, 30; *Chūyūki*, Daiji 4/11/12, 25, 29.

²⁶ *Kōfukuji bettō shidai*, 16–17; *Nanto daishū jūrakuki*, 325–327.

²⁷ Adolphson, *The Teeth and Claws of the Buddha*, 97.

support the secular ally of his temple, Fujiwara no Tadazane (1078–1162). What is perhaps more surprising is that a war tale notes that the monk-commander was to bring a full thousand out of the sixteen hundred troops for the Tadazane side. Unfortunately for Tadazane, his generals seem to have hesitated for too long and so his opponents struck first before Shinjitsu and his forces could reach Kyoto. Shinjitsu returned to Nara without engaging the enemy forces, and was subsequently neutralized as a leader within Kōfukuji.²⁸ But his fate was no different from other military commanders who chose the “wrong” side, inevitably drawn into the court competition through their patrons.

Compared to Shinjitsu and other monk-commanders, there are few sources that offer details about the rank-and-file clerics who engaged in violence. However, a careful examination of historical records reveal that, despite many scholars’ attempts to pinpoint one group or another as being equivalent to the *sōhei*, they came from diverse backgrounds. In general, we can distinguish between those who resided within the monastic complexes as members of the clergy and those who resided at branches or in estates controlled by a temple. Among the clergy, a number of terms were used to refer to those who took up arms—*daishu* (大衆, “clergy”), *dōshu* (堂衆, “hall clerics”), *akusō* (悪僧, “evil monks”) or *jinnin* (神人, “shrine people”)—but much of that stemmed from confusion about their identity among diarists and chroniclers.²⁹ The resident clerics generally hailed from lower level groups of society, who took care of grounds keeping, preparations for rituals and the general management of buildings and services. The terms used to describe these groups could differ between monasteries, though *akusō* was generally reserved for clerics who were seen as violating the order or acting against the wishes of the temple in general, but I will return to that term in more detail later in this paper.

Armed supporters residing away from the monastery were identical to the warrior-administrators and their retainers who served secular masters in various *shōen*. As long as they delivered levies and managed the estate according to expectations, they received protection by their patrons, which in turn enabled them to gain more strength in the local arena. On occasion, they were called to support their patrons in the factional competition in the capital, at which time they are noted in chronicles and diaries with different combinations of the character for “warrior” (*hei*, 兵), such as *zuihei* (隨兵, “accompanying warriors”), *gunpei* (軍兵, “warrior bands”), *heishi* (兵士, “warriors”) or as *bushi* (武士, “military men”). The most telling example involving

²⁸ *Hōgen Monogatari*, in *Nihon koten bungaku taikai*, vol. 31, 85, 125; *Heihanki*, Hōgen 1 (1156) 7/11.

²⁹ Adolphson, *The Teeth and Claws*, 58–71. For a more in-depth treatment of the *dōshu*, see Adolphson, “The *Dōshu*: Clerics at Work in Early Medieval Japanese Monasteries,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 67:2 (2012), 263–282.

temples dates to the 1113 conflict between Enryakuji and Kōfukuji mentioned above, when one of the nobles noted in his diary that “the clergy of the Southern Capital riot incessantly, assembling warrior bands [*gunpei*] from Kinpusen and Yoshino, as well as estate and provincial residents of Yamato. They all carry bows and arrows, following the lead of the Kōfukuji clergy.”³⁰ Other terms are as well used in contemporary sources, but whatever they are called, there are no signs of any *sōhei*. Those who fought for temples were simply armed men, nothing more and nothing less.

Finally, when it comes to the type of weapons used and warfare strategies, it should not be difficult to understand that claims of “religious warfare” in premodern Japan based on weaponry is grossly misplaced. Indeed, even idealized literary and pictorial sources depict monastic warriors using the full range of weapons one would expect by any warrior. For example, the *Heike Monogatari* repeatedly describes monastic warriors using bows and arrows, swords, dirks as well as the *naginata*.³¹ There are additionally records of clerics who mastered the ultimate skills among warriors, shooting arrows while riding a galloping horse. We see this on later picture scrolls but also in a temple record, which indicate that novices at Tōdaiji displayed skills of *yabusame* (rapid shooting from horseback) and *kasagake* (long distance shooting from horseback), leaving no doubt as to the skills of these warriors. In picture scrolls, we find mounted archers in a number of works, such as the *Kasuga gongen kenki e* (early fourteenth century). Though some picture scrolls, especially those of later ages, tend to include head cowls to distinguish monastic warriors from other fighters, numerous scrolls also show temple forces looking exactly like secular forces.³²

Additional similarities in warfare include the use of barricades and simple fortifications, which were common in the siege and position warfare of the late Heian and Kamakura eras. These barricades were not fortifications with wooden palisades, but more commonly simply piles of debris, mounds and earth meant to slow down the advancement of troops, or for protection while firing arrows. Even in terms of punishments, monasteries used the same kind, including executions to deter criminals and internal disturbances. In short, everything in the *modus operandi* of monastic warriors reflects the activities, not of a specific group of religious warriors, but of the emerging warrior class in general. Historical sources make it abundantly clear that the armed

^{30.} *Chūyūki*, Eikyū 1 (1113) 4/14; *DNS* 3:14, 143–144. See also Adolphson, *The Teeth and Claws*, 71–78.

^{31.} See for example the fascinating description of Jōmyō Meishu in McCullough, *The Tale of Heike*, 153–154, 194–195. See also *Genpei seisuiki*, 579.

^{32.} Adolphson, *The Teeth and Claws*, 79–83, 132–135. For another telling example of non-sōhei like depictions of temple warriors, see the *Hōnen shōnin eden* (Adolphson, *The Teeth and Claws*, 82).

monastics were nothing like the coherent groups of *sōhei* shown in later sources. Rather, they were simply part of an increased tendency to solve conflicts with the use of arms that occurred across society from the tenth century and on.

The Ideological Framework

As should be obvious from the incidents accounted above, violence involving clerics cannot be disengaged from the socio-political factionalism of the time. Indeed any attempt to separate the spheres of court politics from religious competition and violence is doomed to misrepresent the context and history of late Heian and Kamakura Japan. To be sure, there were minor conflicts that seem to have little to do with any actions taken by members of the court elites, but such an interpretation rests on the assumption that humans act in vacuum without any contextual factors. In contrast, I would argue that the very setting of this era was based on cooperative rule that also contained competition between the various elites, leading ultimately to members of the lower echelons acting to promote their own interests, but with the patronage of their elite masters in mind. The salient question here is not why specific violent events involving clerics occurred, but rather what the mental framework, or the *mentalité*, of the age was like that allowed religious institutions such a prominent role in this historical context.

At the most basic level, it is important to point out that religious rhetoric is surprisingly absent concerning violence by Buddhist clerics. When we do find statements, they either deplore the general decline of the state of affairs, or they are simply inconsistent, at times criticizing clerics for carrying weapons, at times encouraging them to use them. Lacking evidence of condemnations of religious violence on doctrinal grounds in Japan's early medieval age, we must, however, ask if religious rhetoric was not used in the opposite way; i.e. to justify violence, but it is difficult to find statements to that effect. Members of the traditional schools certainly accused the newer schools that emphasized the superiority of Amida Buddha, for example, of being a misguided form of Buddhism, but even in those cases, that rhetoric is mixed with concerns about losing patrons, funding and religious appointments. The case of the Jōdo Shinshū believers and their recruitment of commoners to fight for the faith seem to constitute one exception from the premodern period, though it belongs to the late medieval era of the 15th and 16th centuries. However, recent research has increasingly emphasized the non-religious rhetoric in the recruitment and battle rhetoric, and so even here it seems to have been if not entirely non-existent, at least played much less of a role than modern scholars assumed. The uprisings of the Warring States Period were about taxation and local political control, and those headed by the believers of

the True Pure Land sect were similar to other *gekukujō* (“the lower overturning those above”) movements of their time.³³

And, yet there was an ideological framework within which violence by clerics occurred. During Japan’s early medieval age, there are in particular three sets of ideas that played a large part in justifying clerics in armed conflicts, the precepts notwithstanding. First, while Buddhist texts, including the *Sutra of Brahma’s Net* (*Bonmōkyō*), specifically prohibit the possession, use of arms as well as resorting to violence, there was also a discourse within Buddhism about deities using arms to battle evil beings or other threats. The prime examples here are of course the Shitennō (the Four Deva Kings), frequently depicted with arms and fierce expressions, such as can be seen among the statues at Tōdaiji and at many paintings. Rarely expressed in the texts of the Heian and Kamakura periods, the very existence of these deities in the Buddhist pantheon provided its armed clerics with at least a way around the strict prohibitions against arms and killing.

But, in contrast to Europe, there was no evil “other” to fight in medieval Japan. As a political entity, Japan was in many ways a state of the Buddha, with a plethora of Buddhist ceremonies performed by different monastic centers for individual court families and the state at large. Indeed, they outnumbered those that might be considered Shintō today. Of course, they were performed by different schools, different temples and sponsored by different factions, but any temple would be hard pressed to justify attacks on other temples from a doctrinal perspective since they were all ultimately committed to protecting the state through Buddhism. This brings us to a second ideology, which I would argue was the most fundamental and important foundation in guiding on a principal level much of the interaction between temples and the imperial court, between clerics and courtiers. It is known as the “mutual inter-dependence between the Imperial and Buddhist Law,” or *ōbō buppō soi*, and it first appears in a tenth century document, which explains that a violation of the Imperial Law was also a crime against the laws of Buddhism. A more explicit case of co-dependence is made in an appeal filed by an estate manager from Tōdaiji in 1053, where the complainant compared the laws of the state and Buddhism to the two wings of a bird or the two wheels of a cart.³⁴ The co-dependence of these spheres could justify violence in times of a perceived decline, and Buddhism could be seen as the final outpost of defense in protecting the imperial state. Such notions were especially strong in the late tenth

³³ See for example, Carol Richmond Tsang, *War and Faith: Ikkō ikki in Late Muromachi Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007).

³⁴ Adolphson, *The Gates of Power*, 272; Hirata, *Sōhei to bushi* (find original?), 124–125; *Heian ibun*, volume 3, document 702, *Mino no kuni shōshi jūnin ra gesu*, Tengi 1 (1053) /7 (pp. 834–835), Kuroda Toshio, *Jisha seiryoku*, 48.

and eleventh centuries, when ideas of Buddhism's decline (*mappō*, "the end of the law") had become common among the noble elites.

Violence associated with monasteries were thus linked to that decline, for which there was not much one could do, or it could be interpreted as the final barrier of defense against a continued decline. For this reason, comments in diaries about religious disturbances rarely speak of clerics as breaking codes against violent behavior, but rather lament the general state of affairs as reflected through such violations of order and the laws of the Buddha and the state.

The concept appears through the Kamakura age, and there is abundant evidence that it was more than just a theoretical idea mentioned in a few documents. Courtiers were quite mindful that any decline—material or in terms of religious rituals, for example—of any of the state-sanctifying temples was either a reflection of a court in decline or a foreboding of it. The court's continuous support and willingness to ensure the wellbeing of its religious allies are evident in the frequent reconstructions of damaged buildings throughout the Heian and Kamakura periods. At times, not even the court could afford the reconstruction, as was the case with Tōdaiji after its infamous destruction at the hands of the Taira in 1180, when general fund raising campaigns took place across Japan to rebuild the state's most imperial temple. But, it was for the sake of the temple *and* the state that the funds were collected, so even in such cases, it reflects the widespread belief in the mutual inter-dependence of the state and Buddhism.

That the monasteries and their inhabitants also subscribed to this ideology is hardly surprising. In fact, it was this ideology that lay behind the practice of divine demonstrations (*gōso*), by which the clergy would carry carts containing *kami* symbols from associated shrines to the capital to protest a decision or policy made by the court. Such protests emerged in the late eleventh century and they were frequent until the late fourteenth, when they lost their efficacy with the warrior aristocracy in charge. Following the idea of the mutual dependence, any of the carriages that may have been damaged during the protest was rebuilt at the court's expense. These protests were accordingly predicated on the elite temples being closely associated with the welfare of the state, and so when decisions regarding promotion of monks, appointments of head abbots or disputes over land rights were perceived to endanger the temple, its inhabitants would equate the decline of their institution with the state of the court. And the court was frequently forced to accede to the demands of the clergy since they feared that negligence of the elite temples would make matters worse within the imperial court.³⁵

The third idea is less known but none the less important. Based on an idea of divine rights of

³⁵ Adolphson, *The Gates of Power*, 272–273.

the larger community, there was a sense that a unanimous group was justified in its actions and supported by the *kami*. Hailing from local beliefs and sometimes used by villages in opposing what the inhabitants considered unfair practices, the idea of *ichimi dōshin* (一味同心), or “fellows of one heart,” was adopted by monastic communities as well. In a world dominated by hierarchies and vertical ties, community solidarity and majority opinions were not commonly worth much. Such was the Heian and Kamakura periods, but monastic communities show some remarkable exceptions in this regard. For example, noble ranks were the determining factors at court, for major provincial appointments and anything in-between, but monastic organizations in theory based their organizational rankings on years of service rather than social standing. Indeed, for the first half of the Heian age, most promotions follow such principles. However, from the late tenth century, more and more sons of nobles were taken to monasteries where they were put on short-tracks to abbotships. By the late Heian and Kamakura ages, we find mainly head abbots and abbots of noble rank leading religious institutions and important ceremonies. Still, the idea that the clergy had certain rights even vis-à-vis their own masters remained central in the ideological framework of this age, and the clergy used *ichimi dōshin* to declare that if there was unanimous consent about specific issues or grievances, there was therefore divine justification for the course of action proposed. At Kōfukuji, such divine rights were called *Yamashina dōri* (Yamashina justice), named after the purported location of the temple when it was first founded.³⁶ The most telling example of this kind of group mentality may be an incident dating to 1142, when a group of armed Onjōji clerics ascended Mt. Hiei to wreak havoc and burn five buildings at one of the monastic compounds there. Two ringleaders were detained and interrogated about the attack, but they defended themselves by claiming that they acted on behalf of the entire clergy, invoking the idea of *ichimi dōshin*.³⁷ The similarities of this kind of reasoning with modern mob mentalities, as described by E. P. Thompson, is rather striking despite the chronological and geographical distances between such historical settings.³⁸

It is in the context of *ichimi dōshin* that we must consider the term *akusō* (“evil monks”), which is undoubtedly one of the most significant terms of this period. In contrast to the notion of divine justice for an entire group, the term *akusō* was used to describe members who acted on their own without the approval of the entire clergy. In the above noted attack on Enryakuji in 1142, the two ringleaders expressly attempted to avoid being labeled *akusō* by using the notion

³⁶ Adolphson, *The Teeth Claws of the Buddha*, 64–65; Adolphson, *The Gates of Power*, 271–272.

³⁷ *Heian ibun* 6, document 2471, “Onjōji sō Chōjun ra shinji ki,” Kōji 1 (1142) 5/8 (pp. 2073–2074); *Honchō seiki*, Kōji 1/3/17.

³⁸ E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common*, 188.

of divine justice. In another incident from that same year, we find that fifteen “evil monks” from Kōfukuji were exiled to the province of Mutsu in northern Japan for being rebellious.³⁹ An additional example is the Enryakuji monk Yūkei, who took the lead in freeing the popular abbot Myōun as the court was taking him to exile in 1177. Yūkei is recorded as having put on arms and carried a *naginata* as he led a select number of followers to ambush the procession.⁴⁰

But not all *akusō* were armed, despite the tendency among modern scholars to equate *akusō* with *sōhei*. In fact, a diary entry from 1104 indicates that they were not always seen as one and the same. In the tenth month of that year, two military leaders were ordered “to secure the western and eastern sides of Mt. Hiei, and to arrest evil monks and fellows carrying arms who ascend the mountain.”⁴¹ The contrast here between merely evil monks, who may or may not be armed, and fellows in general carrying arms reflects a clear notion that monks may be in the “evil” category for a number of reasons, while the fellows ascending Mt. Hiei with arms were to be arrested for their militant gear. Another way of better understanding the usage of the term is to look at the Historiographical Institute’s database, which reveals that about one third of *akusō* refers to the appropriation of harvests or intrusions in landed estates, while less than one fourth can clearly be linked to the use of arms.⁴²

The term *akusō* is thus far from an absolute term, but rather reflects biases of rulers and courtiers writing at the time. And, indeed, the “evil” was not reserved for members of the cloth. We find numerous compounds with the term, ranging from “evil bands” (*akutō*), “evil people” (*akunin*) to “evil deeds” (*akugyō*). Its usage may even appear rather arbitrary since we find the same people on both sides of the divide. For example, the aforementioned Shinjitsu was labeled an evil monk, but was nevertheless recruited by one of the factions in the Hōgen Incident. Had his record been different if his faction had won? Likely. Similarly, in the Genpei War of 1180–85, the anti-Taira faction called upon temples, such as Onjōji, to step in militarily numerous times, but are not referred to as being “evil” in those instances. An even more telling example may be the Ashikaga shogunate, which encouraged Jōdo Shinshū believers to rebel against a local warlord, but some twenty years earlier had in fact ordered the sect’s head to stop any such activities.⁴³ In short, when it suited the rulers or the patrons, temple forces were obviously not called “evil,” so in the end, such labels depended entirely on the circumstances and the perspec-

^{39.} *Taiki*, Kōji 1 (1142) 8/3.

^{40.} *Genpei Seisuki*, 110–111; McCullough, *The Tale of the Heike*, 61; Adolphson, *The Teeth and Claws*, 62–63.

^{41.} *Chūyūki*, Chōji 1 (1104) 10/30.

^{42.} See my search done in 2004, cited in Adolphson, *The Teeth and Claws*, 63 and fn. 15, p. 173.

^{43.} Carol Richmond Tsang, *War and Faith*.

tive of the dominating or victorious factions in Kyoto. Given such conditions, it also stands to reason that religious rhetoric would not have played a major role from the perspective of the nobles since armed monastics were just as often recruited as they were criticized.

Conclusions

Modern observers have frequently condemned violent activities by clerics in premodern Japan, but contemporary sources do not provide any support for the idea that “religious violence” was somehow less acceptable or worse than any other violence. In fact, in early medieval Japan, there was no such thing as “religious violence,” since it was not viewed differently from other violence, and there was no way of separating one from the other since they ultimately were concerned with the same issues: patronage, factionalism, rankings and assets. What was condemned rather were activities that were considered upstaging to the order or “illegal” from the perspective of those in power.

Indeed, criticism of violent clerics on doctrinal grounds is rare. Some monks, such as Ryōgen, undoubtedly felt that many monastic members were not following the precepts or the rules, but even in such cases, we see few references to doctrinal statements. Rather, the main concern is that of order and respect of hierarchical structures, the same that we find in noble diaries of the period. Criticism of armed clerics cannot be seen as blanked disapproval of religious violence, but rather as part of a broader understanding of order and harmony in the court-centered polity of Heian and Kamakura Japan.

It is equally futile to look for “religious warfare” in premodern Japan.⁴⁴ Those who fought came from the same category of lower-level menial workers or land administrators. Contrary to the Tokugawa age, warfare and the carrying of arms were not privileges of a single class in Heian and Kamakura times, but rather anyone with the inclination do so could engage in armed conflicts. What brought such people into the at times intense factionalism between the elites in the capital were mid-level aristocrats, who had taken on leadership roles in land and temple administration. Among those who fought, be it for nobles or temples, they emerged from the same setting, sharing resources, fighting techniques and sometimes even the same surnames. The creation of the *sōhei*—monastic warriors with distinct backgrounds and warfare strategies—is

⁴⁴ While scholars today seem to acknowledge the futility of separating religious violence of warfare from other types of violence, the continued emphasis on the constructed *sōhei* indicates that some scholars are still committed to that paradigm. For a recent example of the “religious warfare” approach, see Jerryson, Michael K. and Juergensmeyer, Mark. Eds. *Buddhist Warfare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

thus a later construct designed to elevate a more “pure” version of the warrior class we now refer to as the *samurai*. Since those who did take up arms for their temples and shrines were of such diverse backgrounds, but usually connected to and acted in the name of their master, it would be more appropriate to talk about monastic violence, assuming that we understand that it refers to those who fought and not necessarily to a specific mode of warfare.

In the end, it is the ideological context of violence that informs us best about the conditions of premodern Japan. The co-existence of cases where the use of arms by clerics was criticized and the very same members were praised for their violent acts indicate an ambiguous and perhaps malleable setting. In part, it derives from Buddhism itself, since there was a notion that allowed members of temples and shrines to legitimately take up arms in defense of Buddhism, and in its extension of the state itself, but in Japan, it was less based on legal or moral principles regarding violence than on a general desire for order in society. If monks and their retainers were criticized for violent behavior, it was because they had chosen the wrong side within the imperial order, and if they were praised, it was because they had sided with the winning side in the factional struggles at court. As long as the imperial court and the Law of the Buddha were seen as co-dependent and members of a community could claim divine justice based on *ichimi dōshin*, there were no doctrinal obstacles to armed clerics and monasteries. The notion of “religious violence” was foreign to both nobles and commoners of the medieval age, and the concept itself belongs more to the modern world than the times preceding it.