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**ON SOME INSTANCES OF VIOLENCE OR KILLING<sup>1</sup>  
AND THEIR JUSTIFICATION  
IN CHRISTIANITY AND JAPANESE BUDDHISM**

**Violence and religion**

The main topic we attempt to discuss here is by no means no simple nor quite suitable to be considered in such a short article, but since our aim is not in showing all instances of justification of violence in the whole history of Christianity and Buddhism we feel that we may carry out our task with reasonable success. We will focus only on the most representative and common explanations that were employed as justification for acting against and, in fact, negating some of the central concepts of the very teaching of the respective religions.

We are aware that a Westerner writing about religion and violence is in a way biased by the recent trends of political correctness of regarding one religion as violent and easily absolving other that used or keep using violence in similar or even more extensive way. As a society we also like to think that violence for us is a thing of the past and that ours is the history of development of morality that deems violence unnecessary and unwelcomed. But, as John Docker states at the very beginning of his book on origins of violence it is more likely that: “The history of humanity is the history of violence: war and genocide; conquest and colonization and the creation of empires sanctioned by God or the gods in both polytheism and monotheism; the fatal combination of democracy and empire; and

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<sup>1</sup> Since killing is a form of violence there should be no need to make this distinction here, but we have chosen to specify killing as an extreme manifestation of violent behavior because it also seems to be generally perceived as something essentially different.

revolution, massacre, torture, mutilation, cruelty.”<sup>2</sup> No matter how hard we try, it is difficult to believe that overall presence of violence in the world is significantly lesser than a few decades ago, a few centuries ago or some thousands years ago. The only difference is that the violence is applied in a different way, but the essence of it seems remain intact and sound. It is an essential part of our lives and seems to be present at all levels and in all areas of our everyday activities. But even under such conditions, some try not to rely on any kinds of violence even in cases where it is openly accepted in a given time and place. We hope to think that higher level of cultural development, education and intelligence goes in hand with diminishing of violence, but the reality shows us that it is not the case and only the ways of implementing violence get more sophisticated.

Taking up these kinds of problems we also need to proceed with caution not to impose present moral standards on the past factors and refrain from making any judgments based on them, what is significantly more difficult when talking about religion. However since the main aim of this article lies not in evaluation of moral or religious behaviors but in the analysis of motivations and what triggers certain kinds of behaviors, the danger of imposing modern morality can be regarded as neglectable.

The problems discussed here are also very important for an individual moral agent, since, no need to say, the interpretation and evaluation of historical facts and developments have bearing on the moral choices an individual makes. They will also hopefully offer help in objective and thorough analysis of the motivation employed for certain moral decisions and behaviors of persons of religion based ethics.

And lastly we need to emphasize that we do not intend to criticize Christianity, Buddhism or any other religion as such but only will be trying to understand the motivations and expectations of believers objectively and clearly acting against the teaching of the very religion they follow, in other words, we want to consider, among others, if monks committing violence behave that way consciously against their beliefs or would they have committed similar crimes anyway even religion had been not involved, or is there something in their religious beliefs that makes them behave that way or at least does not condemn them for doing so.

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<sup>2</sup> John Docker, *The Origins of Violence. Religion, History and Genocide*, (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 2.

### On religious and non religious ethics

It seems that violence and killing are a part of our human condition and there is no way to be a human and not to feel a temptation for violence or even murder, but along the development of societies we have created rules for acceptable and forbidden behaviors that were later systematized and incorporated into religious beliefs to become laws that would later relate to these beliefs to hold. Thought it seems that there is no need for ethics or morality to be based on specific religious beliefs, religion seemed to offer the easiest way for implementing these rules and also provided a set of possible punishments for offenders that would not be available for nonreligious ethics and had, in some cases, also preventive effects.

When we try to consider the problem of violence usually it is necessary to make clear what kind of ethics and morality we are going to build our argument on. For some people the only reasonable ethical system is one that is based on solid religious grounds. Since if there is no God to warrant the rewards and punishments then the existence of morality is not possible whatsoever and the only option we have left is dog-eat-dog world. On the other hand we also have clear examples of working moral systems that are religion free and still gaining even better results than religion based ones.<sup>3</sup> Here we are not to decide which kind of morality is a better one, but just need to point out, that moral behavior of an individual may be guided by a religious belief or by certain convictions that are not religious in their nature. The reason is that when we try to analyze the violent behavior of a religious person we also need to consider if the person behaves in a certain way because he is a believer or would he behave in that particular way even if he did not believe. In other words is it the case that some Christians may have a kind of universal morality that makes them do certain things separate from the religious part of morality that would have made them act otherwise. To give an example, the part of my moral code that normally prevents me from killing my neighbor and taking his property seems to have nothing to do with my religious beliefs and that is the kind of morality I usually tend to act on if there are no other instructions form, for example, from my priest. Now, I have a vision or some of the elders of my church tell me that I should kill this very neighbor, what do I do then? Normally I think I would not kill that person, but a great number of Christians and also, in much smaller number of cases,

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<sup>3</sup> Japanese morality based in a great extend on the notion of shame is a secular one in most of its essential areas and the Japanese society is regarded as one of safest and most orderly societies in the world.

Buddhists for some reasons have made different choices, clearly because of their religious beliefs.

For any educated Europeans or Americans there is no need to remind famous sayings from the New Testament concerning not resisting evil, turning the other cheek or loving enemies. The pacifistic and nonviolent ideas of the early Christian church seems to have prevailed to our times, though the history of Christianity since the Constantine is anything but such. Bainton in his book *Christian Attitudes Toward War and Peace* points out that “The obvious point of beginning is the New Testament. Yet the New Testament has so little to say specifically on the subject that from its pages can be derived only principles rather than precepts. How those principles are to be applied the Christian must discover for himself in the light of changing circumstances.”<sup>4</sup> And later he continues: “Broadly speaking, three attitudes to war and peace were to appear in the Christian ethic: pacifism, the just war, and the crusade. Chronologically they emerged in just this order.”<sup>5</sup> Because we feel that no specific precept applies to a given situation, the interpretation of what principles and in what way should be applied remains free for interpretation fit to the liking of those in power to decide. The development from pacifism to just war and later to crusades seems more like regress than an evolution. Bainton says that “Pacifism is thus often associated with withdrawal, the just war with qualified participation, and the crusade with dominance of the Church over the world.”<sup>6</sup> So it would be closer to evolution of power and regress of faith.

In case of Japan, the situation is significantly different when it comes to morality and religion. In his monumental work *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples: India-China-Tibet-Japan* Nakamura writes as follows: “In the first place, we should notice that the Japanese are willing to accept the phenomenal world as Absolute because of their disposition to lay a greater emphasis upon intuitive sensible concrete events, rather than upon universals. This way of thinking with emphasis upon the fluid, arresting character of observed events regards the phenomenal world itself as Absolute and rejects the recognition of anything existing over and above the phenomenal world.”<sup>7</sup> It is essential to understand this when considering Japanese Buddhism and Buddhist ethics. Also thanks to this Japanese Buddhism was, for most of its history, free from frantic ideologically

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<sup>4</sup> Roland Herbert Bainton, *Christian Attitudes Toward War and Peace. A Historical Survey and Critical Re-evaluation*, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960), 13.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> Hajime Nakamura, *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples: India-China-Tibet-Japan*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1971), 350.

based hatred that would motivate religious violence and most violence that has occurred among various temples and schools of Buddhism was more about the influence and power and less about religion and ethics, which seems to have made it more independent of religion than everywhere else in the world.

It does not mean however that Japanese ethics was completely independent from religion, but only suggests that both good and bad influence of religions were not as visible as in Christianity. As Kalupahana points out “The Buddha’s maximum claim in the sphere of the moral life was not to harm himself or others, a claim he was able to uphold until the last moment of his life.”<sup>8</sup> It is very characteristic to Buddhism, when compared with Judaism or Christianity, that our attitude to other beings gets a priority before the relation to god. When we look at Ten Commandments, for example, we see that they stress the relation of a believer with god and leaves the human relations as less important in the order of priorities. With most Buddhist schools the ethics seems to be based on very simple and clear notions of not harming other beings and accepting consequences of our actions, but not as punishment, but merely as facts that follow from our choices. Seiko Hirata says that “The early Buddhist posture of nonviolence was based not on humanistic ideas about the value of life, but on a religious understanding of the workings of karma<sup>9</sup>. The Buddha’s ultimate refusal to act for the sake of clan and country was rooted in his belief that the Buddhist dharma transcends ethnic and national concerns.”<sup>10</sup> No doubt that karma has contributed a lot to the development of nonviolence, but, on the other hand, if the humanistic ideas, maybe not only of value of life, but also the precept of not causing pain to fellow beings as a part of social order and morality, also had to play its part in forming the ethics of nonviolence. This characteristics of looser connection between Buddhism and social morality has contributed to less cases of abuse of religious ethics and wider spread of tolerance. In contrast to early Christians, especially after Constantine, where we may find cases where the tolerance itself if fount intolerable, Buddhism from its beginnings, in spite of numerous quarrels concerning orthodoxy, did not develop clear justification of violence. Since Buddhists were seldom persecuted in the time of early formation of the religion they did not develop sectarian mentality so clearly seen in Christianity.

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<sup>8</sup> David J Kalupahana, *A History of Buddhist Philosophy. Continuities and Discontinuities*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992), 112.

<sup>9</sup> The notion of karma refers to action that bears consequences.

<sup>10</sup> Seiko Hirata, *Zen Buddhist Attitudes to War*, In: James W. Heisig & John C. Maraldo edit., *Rude Awakenings Zen, the Kyoto School, & the Question of Nationalism*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995), 4.

And lastly we need to remember that religious is not an equivalent of moral in a broader sense. There may be cases that religion requires that person behaves immorally or for some reasons acts against his or her convictions. We say it not in a sense of ethical relativism but to point out to cases of behavior that violates ones moral code of a given society but is acceptable on religious grounds. This situation usually occurs due to sophistication of religious systems and contradictions or imperfections such systems may contain, which may be also extremely difficult to spot.

### **Faith and organized religion**

The change in paradigm seems to be the reason of shifting the priorities from individual salvation to the protection of churches or temples as the tools of salvation of many, for the greater good. The greater good idea itself poses a great problem, since if followed consequently would have had to change our world and society completely. So it is invoked only when convenient, but applied carefully and with quite many limitations.

In case of early Christianity the teaching seemed to be followed to the letter no matter what the consequences were. Christians were choosing to be faithful even if it was to cost them not only their own lives but also lives of others. The nonconformist attitude had its contribution to acceptance of violence, however the building the church organization and shearing carrying out and experiencing the violence was crucial in shaping the morality of the early Christians. Another interesting characteristics of creating early Christian church is handling of idolatry which also contributed a lot not only to increase of violence but also to its acceptance. Many Christian solders of the Roman army have not refused killing or inflicting pain on others but only making sacrifices to pagan goods. The further back in time we go, the clearer it becomes, that Christianity was truly pacifistic and non violent religion for an extremely short period of time, and that preaching nonviolence and utilizing violent behavior in the same time is seen thorough most of its history. Furthermore one may risk saying that whenever Christians were able to implement violence they were choosing to do so. Though it may not apply to individual believers or churches in areas where Christianity was a minority, but once Christian organization was in place, the individuals tended to act on quite different ethical percepts. The fact that when Christianity becomes official religion of the Roman Empire violence becomes a wildly used practice of governance in both secular and religious realms also shows the above statement to be true. Similar view may be found in Thomsetts history of Inquisition. "How

did the Church evolve from the representative of peaceful philosophy of Christ into such an authoritarian worldly power? In the matter of its response to heresy, the Church's progression from nonviolence all the way to burning people at the stake has to be traced through the time when the Church aligned itself with the power of the Roman Empire to become the *Roman Catholic Church*. The point of view that heresy and other crimes against God or the Church deserved a death sentence emerged around the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Before that, excommunication was considered an appropriate punishment for non-temporal crime. St. Optatus of Mileve was the first to cite Old Testament examples to justify a sentence of death.”<sup>11</sup>

The case of Japanese Buddhism is much simpler. Through most of its history in Japan Buddhism had never claimed the absolute power over lay believers or even over the clergy. With some exceptions of *Jōdoshū* or PureLand and *Jōdo Shinshū* or True Pure Land schools which will be discussed briefly later in the article, followers were almost free to believe anything they wanted, as long as they followed the precepts and attend the rituals. Monks of one school could often participate freely in rituals of other sects and basically believers were not required to be affiliated with temples until early 17<sup>th</sup>, what accidentally is related to ban of Christianity that arrived to Japan about 60 years earlier. Because of its tolerant character the development and spread of the Buddhist faith did not lead in the direction of absolute dominance of one school or emergence of one dominant orthodoxy. The schools were mostly in state of healthy competition and the court and later the military governments were quite happy to keep it that way. For this reason the cases of violence among lay believers based on ideological or interpretational differences of the teaching had no place even when the religious organizations have developed enough to trigger this kind of behavior. The prominent Japanese philosopher Keiji Nishitani summarizes the relation between the believers and the religious organizations as follows. “People involve themselves with religion through activities such as Buddhist services or funerals, which are regarded more as social customs, and these religious activities are not tied to an individual's religious selfconsciousness. Here it is evident that religion does not have a firm grip on the individual person. This is connected with the fact that religion does not seem prepared to meet the religious demands of individuals at a level beyond mere social custom.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Michael C. Thomsett, *The Inquisition A History*, (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers 2010), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Kenji Nishitani, *On Buddhism*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 24.

### **Forms and origins of organized violence in Christianity from its early history to crusades and inquisition**

When we consider the problem of violence in Christianity we may notice two main sources of it: one is the conditions of persecution Christians were exposed to in the early years of the religion development that supported emergence of sectarian mentality and victimology, that justified later revenge and vengeance, and another one is acceptance of the Old Testament vision of God, who, as shown in the Book of Exodus, The Book of Joshua and numerous other places, actively participated in exercising violence on the enemies of Israelites. And as Michael Gaddis points out there were no limits to its abuse. “Accounts of religious conflict in late antiquity abound with murder, torture, and beating, from the sufferings of the martyrs to the vengeful punishment of unbelievers, not to mention acts of desecration against buildings or objects of worship—all of which we would have no trouble characterizing as quite straightforward manifestations of physical violence.”<sup>13</sup> He also claims that “For the first three centuries of their history, Christians were in little position to employ significant violence either in defense of their faith or in their own internal disputes. Nevertheless, the worldview shaped during the early centuries is essential to understanding the violent conflicts of later times. Earliest Christianity postulated a world sharply divided between truth and falsehood, beset by perceived enemies both outside and within.”<sup>14</sup>

The image of the God of Old Testament who is a character that himself exercises extreme violence and is an initiator of unspeakable atrocities when it fits his plan of salvation for his chosen people has contributed a lot to acceptance of violence as a way of fulfilling gods will and also to developing of mechanism of moral exceptions for actions that could be classified as prompted by god. For example killing might have been wrong but if the victim was an enemy, and it was god’s will, the killing was morally acceptable, and not only not punishable but even regarded as suitable for reward. It may be illustrated by a citation from John Malalas Chronicles where it is believed that god himself ordered the assassination. “That same night Basil, the most holy bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia, saw in a dream the heavens opened and the Saviour Christ seated on a throne and saying loudly, ‘Mercurius, go and kill the emperor Julian, who is against the Christians’. St Mercurius, standing before the Lord, wore a gleaming iron breast-plate. (334)

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Gaddis, *There Is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ. Religious Violence in the Christian Roman Empire*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 3.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.



Hearing the command, he disappeared, and then he re-appeared, standing before the Lord, and cried out, 'The emperor Julian has been fatally wounded and has died, as you commanded, Lord.'" <sup>15</sup>

After Christianity has become the state religion of Roman Empire it has evolved into a powerful institution that needed to add one more important task to its priorities, which was the self-preservation, an aspect which was later used to justify almost any kind of behavior on religious grounds. As Michael Gaddis discusses in the earlier mentioned book "Like the state, a church consisted of a hierarchically organized institutional structure that attempted to exercise a monopoly of power, in this case, over spiritual authority and the definition of religious truth, as well as a monopoly in a more concrete fashion, over ecclesiastical space and public worship services." <sup>16</sup> This fixation on monopoly became one of representative features of Christianity and seem to have been exercised whenever the conditions allowed it. No need to say, that the real motivations for actions that were in accordance with gaining and maintaining religious and, if possible, secular monopoly had to be disguised, particularly in cases that required violence, with plausible explanation for such actions. One of such rationalizations that also applies to religious authorities can be found in Michael Gaddis's book. "The tragedy of state violence lay in the fact that its perpetrators all too often believed themselves to be acting with the best of intentions: charity, didactic responsibility, and an authoritarian paternalism that allowed them to justify a 'disciplinary' coercion they knew was in their subjects' own best interests." <sup>17</sup> The justification of violent actions that they were being carried out for the sake of the victims became omnipresent and probably most often used in the western cultures, both in religious and secular areas.

The theological differences and seeking victory over opponents seem to have been much more important than good life and harmony in the community. Once violence was accepted as a possible solution to theological problems, then, also due to necessary vengeance, there was no way to stop it and try nonviolent alternatives. And glorification of martyrdom also is to blame for contributing to the omnipresence of violence in the Christian reality. The agreement on controversial topics, such as acceptance of the Nicene Creed, was possible in Christianity only by inflicting excessive power, violence and persecutions, but never by peaceful discussions and some kinds of compromises. For that reason one may expect that

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<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Jeffreys, Michael Jeffreys and Roger Scott trans. *The Chronicle of John Malalas*, (Melbourne: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 1986), 181–182.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Gaddis, *There Is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ. Religious Violence in the Christian Roman Empire*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 21.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid* p. 65.

there must be something in Christian teaching that lets everybody who believes that only they themselves are right and anybody else is wrong.

Jonathan Riley-Smith sees as an outcome of tradition of sacred violence that was present in Christianity for centuries. “Crusade theory was an adaptation of a much more ancient tradition of Christian sacred violence, the foundations of which had been laid by theologians in the fourth and fifth centuries, in a Roman empire which was now Christian, with a government that had assumed the responsibilities of its pagan predecessor for assuring internal order and defence.”<sup>18</sup> And later he adds an explanation of another crucial factor, which is an incentive for an individual to participate in carrying out the violence. “Crusade propagandists took trouble to conform their arguments to the patristic criteria of right intention, just cause and legitimate authority, because throughout the history of the crusading movement people had to be persuaded that the danger to which they were going to expose themselves was worthwhile.”<sup>19</sup>

Circumstances are quite different with Inquisition. Most violence was done here systematically and planned to the smallest detail, so we can't say that perpetrators acted on their rage or madness. In such case we need to ask how was it possible that persecutors, who usually were man of the cloth, did not hesitate to voluntarily and repeatedly inflict unbearable pain of fellow Christians? Here, as in times of early church the violence was not justified by gaining personal salvation (for example martyrdom) and passage to heaven by the perpetrator or persecutor, but was motivated by the care for the victims. Why was the torture necessary? One probable answer would be, to apply purifying power of pain and suffering. And the only simple justification: for the good of the victims. But how the inquisitors could believe with no doubt that that was the right way? Nowadays the argument concerning permissibility of torture seems to be circulating around its effectiveness in reaching certain goals, but we tend to forget its ethical dimensions. Anyhow, comparing the inquisition and crusades as two different types of violence, we can notice here that when the violence is committed by monks, clergy or initiated by them, there is a tendency to employ the care for victims justification, and when the crimes are to be committed by lay believers on much bigger scale, the justification by the good of victims seems not to be that important as securing sufficiently tempting intensives.

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<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Riley-Smith, *Christian Violence and the Crusades*. In: Anna Sapir Abulafia edit. *Religious Violence between Christians and Jews. Medieval Roots, Modern Perspectives*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 5.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

### Warrior Monks and Japanese Buddhism

Unfortunately there is no much literature in western languages devoted to the problem of warrior monks in Japan. Because of perception of Buddhism as a pacifistic religion in most cases only those familiar with specificity of Japanese Buddhism are aware of their existence. Only recently the problem of Buddhism and violence has surfaced again in connection with monk's involvement in Sri Lanka.<sup>20</sup> Books and articles concerning the *sōhei* or warrior monks in Japanese are also quite scarce. Serious studies on the topic seem to have started before the Pacific War and were continued by a few scholars only for some time after the war. And relatively recently in 2003 the history of warrior monks was published which was written by two generations of *sōhei* scholars, Shōichi Hioki and his son Eigō Hioki.<sup>21</sup> However there are some issues that Japanese scholars seem not to pay sufficient attention to. One is the very definition of warrior monks and another one is concentrating on the social and historical aspects of the phenomenon and not paying much attention on the religious aspects the contradiction of being a warrior monk.

When we compare the history of development of Christianity and Buddhism, we can see that in the case of Buddhism different schools of thought and interpretations of Buddha's teaching usually were coexisting in peace and, in contrast to Christianity, were not trying or had no means to dominate and destroy each other at any cost. In Christianity the readiness to destroy all heresies had doubtlessly something to do with acceptance of violence and eagerness to use it. The claims to heaving the only truth and the only right interpretation of religious teaching not only allowed but also justified any atrocities that those implementing violence deemed necessary. Christianity seemed never tolerant to anything incompatible with its teaching, if only had a power do destroy or overcome the opponent. The tolerance came only with decreasing of power to implement violence and exercise the power that would guard the purity of the only true faith.

Here again when we try to make comparisons with Buddhism it is clear that Buddhism never was able to develop mechanisms of forcing its teachings on somebody by implementing violence and secular power, nor has ever used significant violence to guard the purity of its teaching. The varieties of Buddhists schools that were active throughout its history are so abundant, that almost any possible interpretation is accounted for, from true atheism to theology almost identical

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<sup>20</sup> Refer to: Mahinda Deegalle edit., *Buddhism, Conflict and Violence in Modern Sri Lanka* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>21</sup> Eigo Hioki edit., *Sōhei no rekishi*, (Tokyo: Ebusu Kosyo Publication Co., Ltd., 2003).

with catholic teaching. For that very reason we may try to look for the causes of such mutations and explain but not justify the acceptance and usage of violence in some of Japanese Buddhist schools.

Taking the above into consideration it seems that there is no doubt that the very emergence of warrior monks in Japan is closely related to secularization of Buddhist Monasticism. As early as the Nara period (710–794) the power, wealth and influence of Buddhist monasteries was prodigious enough to justify the need not only for protection but also securing means of acquiring more. But from written materials concerning that period that we have we can presume that at that stage people employed as guards and, when needed, as a private army were not monks, but more likely that they were slaves belonging to the temples or members of lower rank lay servants. Some iconography depicts the warrior monks as persons with shaved heads or with their heads covered with cowls, what would suggest that they may have taken vows and were a part of clergy, but we need to remember also that the iconography shows mostly how these warrior monks were perceived by the painter, thus a popular image that could have been different from the real state of affairs. As Mikael Adolphson points out “The presence of armed fellows among the lower-ranking clergy is indisputable, but the above account still offers no support of the view that they were full-fledged monks. If anything, the note about the acolyte wearing armor together with a monk’s robe points in the opposite direction, indicating that armed clerics were little more than monastic employees.”<sup>22</sup>

The situation changes by the end of Heian Period (794–1185) when the Enryakuji temple of Kyoto<sup>23</sup> in several occasions seemed to exercise their power employing armed groups that were perceived as regular private army of the monastery. In case of the Enryakuji Temple the warrior monks seemed to be used mainly to execute the influence of the temple on other Buddhist schools within the city or on the secular government.

As Mikael Adolphson points out, after a Japanese scholar Toshio Kuroda,<sup>24</sup> when considering any historical phenomena or events we can’t concentrate only on its secular or only on its religious aspect. Kuroda distinguishes three different institutions of power that not only rule and administer the country, but also, in most cases, warrant and try preserve each other advantages. “These elites were the leaders of three power blocs—the court nobles (kòke or kuge), the

<sup>22</sup> Mikael S. Adolphson, *The Teeth And Claws Of The Buddha: Monastic Warriors And Sōhei In Japanese History*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), 61.

<sup>23</sup> Nowadays the Enryakuji Temple is located within boundaries of Otsu City, Shiga Prefecture, but the location physically has not changed since the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>24</sup> Toshio Kuroda, *Kuroda Toshio Chosakushū*, (Kyoto:Hozokan, 1994).

warrior aristocracy (*buke*), and temples and shrines (*jisha*)—which ruled the realm together by sharing responsibilities of government and supporting each other’s privileges and status.”<sup>25</sup> In fact, in Japan, since the introduction of Buddhism in 6<sup>th</sup> century, in spite of several attempts to use religion for political purposes, long-lasting antagonism between the native religion of Shinto and Buddhism or among various schools of Buddhism never has really developed. Another fact contributing to maintaining generally peaceful characteristics of Buddhism in Japan was failure to develop supremacy of one particular school over others, strong enough that the school or sect could get enough influence on secular and military powers to grant them sufficient troops to destroy the opponents. In case of the court and later of the military governments, they seemed eager to rather maintain a healthy balance of power between competing temples or schools that to get involved, also military, in resolving any theological or economical issues they might have had.

But even under such well balanced conditions, such contradictions as warrior monks have emerged. This fact is not to be neglected, but for us not the historicity of the group is as important as trying to consider if those called warrior monks were indeed properly ordained monks or were called so only because they were armed forces used by temples or affiliated with the temple in some other way? If the second was the case they may as well have been bandits or trained peasants just hired by the temples to do their dirty work. But for us the problem is that, were they properly ordained monks, what would be the motivation to act against their vows? The interpretation of *sōhei* as ordained monks is supported by Toshiharu Hirata in his article<sup>26</sup> *Sōhei ron (Theory on Monk Warriors)*. Unfortunately we do not have any conclusive evidence as to a single answer to our problem. It is very likely that during few hundred years of history, where the notion of warrior monks appears now and then, its essence has changed completely. However even though there is no sufficient account that would substantiate any attempt of describing their motivations, we may risk some statements to eliminate some motives as unlikely.

As in the case of crusades we were able to easily point out at least few motives, starting with securing a passage to heaven up to doing god’s will for the good of the victims. In case of Buddhist warrior monks non of those motivations is plausible enough. Taking into consideration the above conditions we may reason that in case of Japanese warrior monks the religious aspect of motivations to violate

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<sup>25</sup> Mikael S. Adolphson, *The Gates of Power. Monks, Courtiers, and Warriors in Premodern Japan*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2000), 11.

<sup>26</sup> Toshiharu Hirata, *Sōhei ron*, In: Yukio Ōshima edit. *Sōhei no hasseiki ni kansuru isshikiron*, (Tokyo: Komazawa Daigaku Daigakuin Shigakukai Kodaishi Bukai, 1978).

the basic teaching was close to none and their very existence and behavior had almost entirely secular foundations. They had no reasons to expect any religious gratifications, rewards or positive religious consequences of their doings, there was no one to absolve them from taking responsibility for their actions. The secularity and the sole military aspect of the phenomenon may be also found in two most prominent cases that had shaped the popular image of warrior monks in Japan. One is the literary character of Benkei<sup>27</sup> and another one is the complete destruction of Enryakuji temple by Nobunaga Oda in 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Since the vows of not harming or killing living beings would be clearly violated by the kind of behavior the warrior monks were accused of, it is very likely that those involved were not at all or seldom members of the proper monastic hierarchy and from the documents mentioning their appearances follows that, if they had anything to do with the religious ordain at all, they probably were private monks or would be monks that preferred absolute freedom and violence than prayer or just occasional mob consisting of lay followers. In any case, compared with Christian Military Orders, the scale or level of institutionalization of Japanese warrior monks was so small and low, that there is no sufficient basis for making any serious comparison.

### **Ikkō Ikki religious uprisings**

However the situation is quite different with the case of religious uprisings and violence employed not by monks, though they were mostly only the initiators, but by ordinary lay followers. The uprisings seem to be a consequence of secularization and empowerment of temples and shrines mainly during Muromachi Period (1337–1573) and also due to weakening of Muromachi military government and spreading violence between feudal lords for acquiring land and influence. We need to remember that not all uprisings were related to religious institutions, but for the purpose of this article we will briefly examine two, that were doubtlessly of a religious background. The first is Ikkō-ikki or Ikkō Uprising and another one is Shimabara no ran or Shimabara Uprising. The Ikkō Uprising is difficult to describe and evaluate since it consists of numerous separate uprisings that had occurred over more than hundred years, but all of them have in common

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<sup>27</sup> The character of Benkei popularized through numerous stories and theatre plays, especially the famous kabuki play *Kanjinchō*, contributed a lot to how the warrior monks were perceived by ordinary population. But even partially a legend, we can see that he was more a warrior than a monk anyway.

the involvement of the Jōdo Shinshū (True Pure Land) sect of Buddhism also called the Ikkō sect. As McMulling points out “It should not be thought that the Ikkō uprisings were simply sporadic outbursts involving only a few hundred people. In the latter half of the sixteenth century there were occasions on which tens of thousands of monto<sup>28</sup> were mobilized, many of them equipped with firearms.”<sup>29</sup>

During 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Warring States Period, the True Pure Land sect have established a Ishiyama Honganji fortress temple as main center of power, that served not so much religious purposes, but rather economic, political and military ones. For some time it seemed there was no single secular power that could threaten or overcome this religious empire. But shortly it turned out that this overconfidence brought the religious power and many lives of the followers to end. Nobunaga Oda, who was the initiator of unification of the warring states, soon found out that the Ishiyama Honganji temple and the followers of the True Pure Land sect became a great obstacle on this way. Both sides were not reluctant and did not hesitate to use necessary force and violence, the religious institution to protect its secular power, and Oda to get closer to his goal of unifying the country. Oda was a warrior and not religious enough to feel pity for his opponents, no matter clerics or lay. The situation should be different on the side of the True Pure Land sect. One could suppose that since in case of sōhei, because most likely they were neither proper monks and probably nor real followers of the path of Buddha, the use of violence was not much of an issue. However, the situation with Ikkō uprisings and fights with Nobunaga forces was quite different. Here the violence was carried out by ordinary lay believers who, because of being Buddhists, should not indulge in violence or killing. The motivations for lay followers to join the violence McMullin describes as follows. “Kennyo ceased pretending to be uninvolved in the struggle against Nobunaga, and on October 5, 1570, he sent out appeals to the monto of seven provinces around Osaka to defend Shinran’s ‘Lights of the [Buddhist] Law’ by making war on Nobunaga whom he referred to as the ‘enemy of the [Buddhist] Law (hoteki). In those appeals Kennyo encouraged the monto to be willing to give up their lives in order to prevent Nobunaga from destroying the ‘school of our founder’ (kaizan no ichiryū), and he enforced his appeals by threatening to excommunicate any monto who failed to heed them.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Monto is a term that designates a lay followers of certain school of Buddhism usually associated with a specific temple.

<sup>29</sup> Neil McMullin, *Buddhism and the State in Sixteenth-Century Japan*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 48.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

In case of Pure Land and True Pure Land Buddhism we see a radical shift in the basic Buddhist belief on salvation from *jiriki*<sup>31</sup> to *tariki*<sup>32</sup>. It meant not only moving the whole burden of salvation from the believer to the merciful god, but also gave the clergy elites control over the mediation and methods of salvations, and furthermore ways of providing intensives for easy control of the behavior of followers. Not only that but it also created a great danger of abuse by religious authorities, since believers were not granted salvation because of what they do or did, but only because of the mercy and benevolence of god. Because of this following the authorities even on morally doubtful and purposeless cause was not perceived as a sinful conduct. In other words they believed that they were saved not because of what they did with their lives, as would most Buddhist schools believe, but only because of the good will of their god.

Lastly we also need to mention briefly the Shimabara Rebellion (1637–38). Historians don't quite agree on how the Christian aspect of the uprising should be evaluated, but since the Christianity was present at all stages of the uprising and most participants are regarded to be believers we may categorize it as the relatively large religious uprising. Here again looking at the only two significant religious uprisings in the history of Japan, we notice that both involve religions that have such features as the authoritarian hierarchy and salvation through mercy of god, in common.

### **How are these instances of violence explained and justified?**

As we have seen, in spite of violence and actions clearly opposite to the moral teaching of a given religion which are treated and condemned as such, unfortunately there are also actions of violence that are accepted and not treated as morally punishable. The reasons for violent behavior based on religious and non religious motivations are in a way similar, but also have a few distinctive features. If we look at the God of the Old Testament we do not see any justification of killing of whole tribes based on the good of the victims, but the only justification is the good of the perpetrators and the doing of the will of the God. This led to reasoning that the God's mandate justifies any kind of behavior and moral rules do not apply whatsoever. This God's mandate though seen in a slightly

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<sup>31</sup> The term "jiriki" means by one's own power and refers to obtaining salvation or nirvana due to one's own efforts.

<sup>32</sup> The term "tariki" means someone's power and refers to obtaining salvation through one's own efforts but by the act of will of the god.



different form in China, is quite absent from Japanese history. The presence of Tennō or the Emperor of Japan, who was also believed to be a god, supplied the mandate for secular powers, but never was involved in any matters concerning solutions to problems of religious controversy. Another important characteristics is that even the Emperor was believed to be a god, he never had an absolute power and because of him being on Earth, and available for consultations, the abuse of the God's will notion in Japan was close to impossible.<sup>33</sup>

The God's mandate idea developed later into the form of Christian Catholic church hierarchy who's absolute power and authority, the right to decide on all matters without any limitations. Since it was not possible to confirm if something is or is not God's will, the power of the church was literally unlimited and the morality and ethics was left solely to the church's liking. The followers of such a church had no reason to doubt and no reason to fear any consequences of any conduct as long as they had a blessing of the church. About the nature of authority, Benn Piers writes as follows "To be in authority entails having the right to obedience, at least in certain specific circumstances. It is different from power, which is simply the ability to enforce your wishes regardless of your right to do so. At the same time, the position of being in authority does not necessarily bring with it wisdom, justice or any particular expertise. A foolish person may be in authority over others, through being placed in that position by some agreed procedure, for instance, by being put there ('authorized') by somebody already in authority. Whether the authority he claims is genuine usually depends more on the legitimacy of the procedures which put him in this role than on his own personal qualities."<sup>34</sup>

Apart from the authoritarian mechanism that shapes the evolution and application of the teaching and also supplies systems of punishments and rewards, there is also another level of motivations that are available for some believers. They are based on personal judgments concerning actions based not on the authority of the organization, church or temple, but on effort to objectively apply the teaching to particular circumstances and cases. It presumes availability of the means of verification and also a lot of personal courage. If we take into consideration the motivations of Christians attacking pagan temples, crusaders killing nonbelievers and inquisitors torturing or ordering the tortures of fellow Christians it seems that they had almost no chance and felt no need to verify actions against the Christian teaching because they probably were convinced that the teaching itself

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<sup>33</sup> Abuse of Imperial Institution during Meiji Restoration and Pacific War may seem to proof that this argument is false, but both cases concerned are not directly related to religion thus have no say here.

<sup>34</sup> Piers Benn, *Ethics*, (London: UCL Press, 1998), 6.

justifies their conduct, especially in the situation where the teaching was shaped in a way to look as if the justification was sufficient and thorough.

In case of Japanese Buddhism, in spite of Japanese being very vulnerable in face of authority, with exception of Pure Land and True Pure Land sects, as we have already mentioned, the religious authority was never absolute, what allowed for development of personal responsibility and necessity of evaluation of plural ethical systems that were available at a given time. It is well known that most Japanese in the past as it is now were both Shintoists and Buddhists as well, and the fact that those religions are not compatible did not cause any problems. To be interested in and even actively participate in different schools of Buddhism or even quite different religion was seldom regarded as something morally wrong and this natural state of religious pluralism and tolerance created conditions where believers were extremely seldom faced with the real dilemma of acting against their moral convictions and committing violence for religious reasons in cases they would not do it if the religious justification was not in place. Furthermore even if facing such situations, the verification of options itself, the doubt itself, would never be a sin. It seems that the teaching of Karma as objective law that can't be modified by any authority save Buddhism and Buddhists from committing violence and killing for religious reasons.

Fallowing from the authoritarian conviction that one knows better and has a right and authority to act on it, comes the strong belief of acting for the victims sake. As Gaddis puts it "The violence of the center always justified itself as being in the best interests of its victims—for their own good, whether they knew it or not."<sup>35</sup> Though omnipresent in all atrocities committed by Christians, this justification has not been seen in Japan much. Neither the warrior monks, nor the followers of True Pure Land sect giving their lives to protect the teaching of their school were doing it convinced that it can do some good to their victims. It seems clear that due to lack of this kind of flexible justification a significant amount of religious violence was avoided.

And the last of the main justifying factors is the existence of the ultimate award and the sure way of obtaining it. Extreme violence justified on religious grounds comes from extreme forms of egoism and uncontrolled urge to gain one's own salvation at any cost. Just wars and crusades promised the participants salvation or opportunity for penance that would eventually lead to salvation. And once the salvation is granted, there are no limits to what one will do.

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<sup>35</sup> Michael Gaddis, *There Is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ. Religious Violence in the Christian Roman Empire* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 7.

## Conclusion

“Claims that religion is ‘an actor in its own right’ or that it ‘causes violence’ are subtly misleading and reveal that we have made a mistake in logical thinking. This mistake is called the ‘fallacy of misplaced concreteness’ whereby we have treated an abstract concept as though it were a concrete entity having agency in its own right.”<sup>36</sup> Burns claims that because of reification<sup>37</sup> we tend to believe that religion itself can be acting agent, but in fact only human agents are able to be so. But even if religion has no characteristics of an actor, the religious organization has and religious ideas have the power to act through both, these organizations and believers as well being initiators of actions both moral and non moral.

When we think about monks in late antiquity attacking pagan temples and massacring and killing pagan idolaters we need to be aware that their actions may not be self motivated voluntary actions but rather forced on them, or being just consequence of certain beliefs and ideas that are primary sources of certain behavior and actions. We may say that they had a free will to choose to act on them or not, but it may not be that simple. Certain ideas they had followed where the primary actors there and the situation that allowed such acts was just a trigger. Usually this kinds of behaviors may be controlled by external laws, fears or wish to avoid consequences, but once these controlling factors are not present anymore or lose their effectiveness for some reason, the idea may become an initiator and motor of violent acts. In consequence religious teachers, those who propagate these ideas, even if they declare that violence was not their intention, need to take responsibility for violent actions of those who act on ideas thought by those teachers.

Nowadays it is wildly accepted in the western countries that Islam is the only violent religion we need do deal with and should be the only target of criticism. But if we try to look at what’s happening now with Islam from the standpoint of history of the Judaism and Christianity, we can’t ignore the fact that Judaism and Christianity offer exactly the same capacity for violence as Islam does. No need to say, all these religions have also great potential to spread peace. We should also try to utilize the knowledge we gain from analyzing the mechanisms of religious violence to protect ourselves and the society from avoidable and unnecessary suffering. But how can we protect ourselves from violent religions? This is not an easy question, but also a one we can’t ignore. Not letting religions have power to implement any kind of violence or exposing and identifying religions that justified,

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<sup>36</sup> Charlene P. E. Burns, *More Moral than God. Taking Responsibility for Religious Violence*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 1.

<sup>37</sup> Burns defines the term as error of regarding phenomena as concrete objects.

justify or have a capacity to justify violence are only some possible solutions. To justify any violence or atrocity once one gets flexible system of rewards that would attract the salvation gamblers does not seem difficult at all. The methods and reasons used for justification seem to be universal for all religions, but, as we have seen, some religions are less likely to offer tools for justification and others may be able to supply them quite easily. This is also extremely important point for individuals when they chose their religion or belief, because the choice usually comes with all the consequences of both, proper use and abuse of the religious faith.

We do not wish to pass any judgments or evaluate any behaviors of those individuals and institutions involved in the instances we have presented in this short article. The only thing we were aiming at was presenting some mechanism and possible explanations of actions and their justifications related to contradictions in religious ethical systems. Since we are aware that human conditions allow for denying or accepting judgments in spite and against any reasonable proof and reasoning, showing clear conclusions will not present any additional values to presented earlier argument. It is for the reader to decide what conclusions to draw and how to evaluate them.

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