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Peasant Revolts as Anti-Authoritarian Archetypes for Radical Buddhism in Modern Japan

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Abstract

The late Meiji period (1868–1912) witnessed the birth of various forms of “progressive” and “radical” Buddhism both within and beyond traditional Japanese Buddhist institutions. This paper examines several historical precedents for “Buddhist revolution” in East Asian—and particularly Japanese—peasant rebellions of the early modern period. I argue that these rebellions, or at least the received narratives of such, provided significant “root paradigms” for the thought and practice of early Buddhist socialists and radical Buddhists of early twentieth century Japan. Even if these narratives ended in “failure”—as, indeed, they often did—they can be understood as examples of what James White calls “expressionistic action,” in which figures act out of interests or on the basis of principle without concern for “success.” Although White argues that: “Such expressionistic action was not a significant component of popular contention in Tokugawa Japan”—that does not mean that the received tales were not *interpreted* in such a fashion by later Meiji, Taishō and Shōwa-era sympathizers.

Keywords

Buddhist modernism – radical Buddhism – peasant rebellion – religion and politics

September 1905. A stunning victory over a major European power in the Russo-Japanese War provided substantial wind to the sails of emerging Japanese imperialism and justified, to some degree, the political and cultural changes that had roiled the nation since the Meiji Restoration of 1868. At the same time, however, societal and economic fractures brought on by industrial capitalism, combined with an influx of liberal and radical thought from Russia and West-

ern Europe gave birth to a nascent—and highly eclectic—socialist movement, which found support among those who were opposed to the war.¹ Japanese Buddhist institutions, for the most part, either supported the prevailing ideological winds or stayed cautiously out of the fray, but there were those—both individual priests and young lay scholars and activists—who sought to build bridges between progressive thought and praxis and Buddhist ideals. The New Buddhist Fellowship, born in 1899 and led by young lay-Buddhists Sakaino Kōyō 境野黄洋 (1871–1933), Watanabe Kaikyoku 渡辺海旭 (1872–1933), Sugimura Sojinkan 杉村楚人冠 (1872–1945), Takashima Beihō 高嶋米峰 (1875–1949)—and including a young Suzuki Daisetsu 鈴木大拙 (1870–1966)—is perhaps the best example of a progressive (though not radical) form of Japanese Buddhist modernism that flourished in the waning years of Meiji. The same period saw the emergence of what I refer to as “radical Buddhism,” exemplified in the life and work of Takagi Kenmyō 高木顕明 (1864–1914) and Uchiyama Gudō 内山愚童 (1874–1911), two renegade Buddhist priests who sought a radical transformation of individual and social being through a fusion of Buddhist ideals and left-wing political theories such as socialism, communism and anarchism. These early experiments in radical Buddhism were brought to an abrupt end with the government crackdown known as the High Treason Incident (Taigyaku jiken 大逆事件) of 1910–1911, which also serves as a coda to Meiji-era Buddhist progressivism.

I have dealt with most of the above figures and movements, examining in some detail their historical context and their religious and philosophical sources, elsewhere (e.g., Shields 2012, 2014; Shields and Ladwig 2014). In this paper, I examine the question of precedents to “radical Buddhism” in East Asian—and particularly Japanese—peasant rebellions of the early modern period. I suggest that these rebellions, or at least the received narratives of such, provided significant “root paradigms” for the thought and practice of early Buddhist socialists and radical Buddhists such as Takagi Kenmyō and Uchiyama Gudō (see White 1995: 107; Bercé 1980: 334; Najita and Koschmann 1982: 129). In many rural areas of early modern Japan, such “cultures of contention”—passed down via legends, songs, and chronicles—provided a deeply rooted set of models and a vocabulary for resistance and rebellion, if not outright revolution. Some of these tales transcended regional relevance to become multiregional or even nationally known legends (Yokoyama 1975: 225). Even if these narratives ended in “failure”—as, indeed, they often did—they can be understood

1 It should also be noted that even many Japanese who had supported the war were enraged by the terms of the Portsmouth Treaty, which lacked provision for territorial gains and monetary reparations. Rioting ensued.

as examples of what James White calls “expressionistic action,” in which figures act out of interests or on the basis of principle without concern for “success” (see Scott-Stokes 1974; Morris 1975). Although White argues that: “Such expressionistic action was not a significant component of popular contention in Tokugawa Japan”—that does not mean that the received tales were not *interpreted* in such a fashion by later Meiji, Taishō and Shōwa-era sympathizers (White 1995: 16 n. 20).

Peasant Revolts and Religion in East Asia

Peasant revolts are a standard feature in the histories of virtually all civilizations, and those of East Asia are no exception to the rule. As in Christian Europe, such revolts usually began with grievances related to taxation, drought or some other agrarian crisis, but would quickly take on a religious—and frequently messianic—coloring.² One precedent for popular revolt in China was, of course, the Mandate of Heaven (Ch. *tiānmìng* 天命), which, as interpreted through Mencius and adopted by Neo-Confucians such as Wang Yangming 王陽明 (Ō Yōmei, 1472–1529), left open the possibility that the rule of the sovereign was contingent on a certain measure of stability and security within the realm. If such security and stability was perceived to be lacking, or the moral character of the Emperor judged to be wanting, then regime change could be justified as “divinely ordained revolution” (*ekisei kakumei* 易姓革命). While major uprisings in China are more often associated with Daoism (e.g., the Yellow Turban Rebellion and Five Pecks of Rice Rebellion of the late second-early third centuries CE), a long tradition of looking for the return of the bodhisattva and future Buddha Maitreya (Miroku 弥勒) was occasionally invoked as a justification or explanation for political unrest on the part of the lower strata of society—the peasants in particular. Perhaps the best example of this in China was the White Lotus Rebellion of 1796–1804, in which an appeal to the return of Maitreya—and a promise of universal salvation—was combined with anti-Manchu sentiments in an (unsuccessful) attempt to overthrow the Qing regime.³

2 The *locus classicus* for medieval Europe is the well-known Peasants' Revolt of 1381, led by Wat Tyler, John Ball and Jack Straw, often credited with bringing about an end to serfdom in England. These figures would serve as inspirations to nineteenth-century British socialists such as William Morris (1834–1896).

3 The White Lotus Rebellion set the precedent for the much larger Taiping Rebellion of 1851–1864, which is arguably the bloodiest peasant uprising in East Asian (if not world) history.

In Japan, the most significant peasant rebellions associated with Buddhism were the *ikkō-ikki* 一向一揆 revolts of the Muromachi period (1336–1573).⁴ In this case, peasant farmers, monks and some nobles banded together to fight against samurai rule under the inspiration of Amida Buddha and the Jōdo Shinshū 浄土真宗 teachings.⁵ Contemporary Shin sect reformer Rennyo 蓮如 (1415–1499), who preached a form of Pure Land Buddhism that was populist in nature, was a clear inspiration to the rebels—though he was careful to distinguish himself from the uprising and subsequent violence (Weinstein 2006: 55). In particular, Rennyo attempted to clarify that while single-mindedness (i.e., *ikkō*) was to be encouraged in the context of devotion to Amida’s vow of salvation, it should *not* extend into militant or antinomian activities. Despite Rennyo’s admonitions, in 1488 the *ikki* successfully overthrew the rulers of Kaga 加賀 province, and established bases in other regions over the next few decades. Unsurprisingly, this caught the attention of the secular authorities, but while the *ikki* of Mikawa province were defeated at the Battle of Akukizaka in 1564, other branches continued to exist throughout the Edo period (1603–1868), partly due to alliances with powerful *daimyō*, including Ashikaga Yoshiaki 足利義昭 (1537–1597) and, for a time, Toyotomi Hideyoshi 豊臣秀吉 (1537–1598). Eventually, Oda Nobunaga 織田信長 (1534–1582) and his forces would destroy the fortresses of the *ikkō* sect at Nagashima 長島 and Ishiyama Honganji 石山本願寺 (now Osaka Castle), and the sect, or what was left of it, would be outlawed under the Tokugawa *bakufu*.⁶

Here, too, religious ideology was central, though in this case it was the idiosyncratic Christianity of revolt leader Hong Xiuquan 洪秀全 (1814–1864). And of course, Japan had experienced its own version of a “Christian” uprising two centuries previous, with the Shimabara Rebellion (Shimabara no ran 島原の乱) led by Amakusa Shirō 天草四郎 (1621–1638). While smaller in scale than the Taiping Rebellion, the Shimabara Rebellion “left lasting memories of peasant resistance to tyrannical lordship” (Bix 1986: 7).

- 4 For reasons that may be obvious, peasant uprisings in Japan have attracted a significant amount of scholarly attention, including the following full-length works in English: Kelly (1985); Bix (1986); Vlastos (1986); Walthall (1986, 1991); White (1995); Esenbel (1998). See also Najita and Koschmann (1982), which deals with the general issue of conflict in modern Japan. Perhaps the best source in Japanese is Yokoyama (1975).
- 5 The *ikkō* sect was originally founded by Ikkō Shunjo 一向俊聖 (1239–1287), a teacher of the Chinzei branch of the Jōdo 浄土 or Pure Land sect. However, under pressure from crackdowns by authorities against all forms of Amidist pietism, most of his followers would eventually defect for the “mainstream” Jōdo Shin or True Pure Land sect, and adhere to the teachings of Rennyo; see Pauly (1985: 361).
- 6 See Amstutz (2010: 66–67) for more on *ikkō-ikki* in relation to Shin Buddhism and the *burakumin*; also see Tsang (2007).

Though it is usually, and with some justification, lauded as an era of peace and security after centuries of near constant warfare, the succeeding Edo period witnessed the emergence of several individuals whose “progressive” ideas and activities in support of the rural poor would have a significant impact on the lives and work of progressives and radicals throughout the Meiji period. The first of these, who would serve as a direct inspiration to Uchiyama Gudō, is Sakura Sōgorō 佐倉惣五郎 (1605–1653), a semi-legendary farmer whose direct appeal to the *shōgun* to ease the tax burden on peasants and assist with their lack of agricultural productivity led to his arrest and crucifixion—but also to a remission of the taxes and excess duties. While the story of “self-sacrificing man” Sōgorō passed into legend via *gimin densetsu* 義民伝説 (legends of exemplary martyrs) and the *kabuki* stage—itself an important outlet for popular resentment in the early to mid-Edo period—it is nearly impossible to verify any historical facts in his tale. What is certain is that, in the mid-eighteenth century, a hundred years after Sōgorō’s death, a temple was erected in his memory, where the peasant martyr was worshipped as a *daimyōjin* 相明神—i.e., a high-ranking Shintō deity.⁷ The temple soon became a pilgrimage site, and the story of Sōgorō was carried throughout the country, reaching even remote parts of Kyushu. By the nineteenth-century, he had become, in Anne Walthall’s words, “the patron saint of protest.”⁸

Unlike Sōgo-sama, two other figures that bear mention in this regard both lived and died within the living memory of those of the early Meiji period, and thus can be taken as historical rather than simply literary models. The first of these, Ōshio Heihachirō 大塩平八郎 (1793–1837), was a low-ranking samurai police inspector as well as a Neo-Confucian scholar in Osaka. Increasingly fed up with corruption within the city administration, in 1830 Ōshio resigned his post, and established his own training center called the *Seishindō* 洗心洞 (lit., Heart-mind Cleansing Den). His teachings and lecture notes would eventually be compiled in a text known as *Seishindō sakki* 洗心洞箴記. In 1836, as Japanese farmers struggled through the most severe famine in decades, Ōshio, like Sōgō-

7 It bears noting that, as with the Heian-period cult of Tenjin-sama 天神様 (Sugawara no Michizane 菅原道真, 845–903), the enshrinement of Sōgorō as Daimyōjin Sōgo-sama was at least as much a way to pacify his restless and vengeful spirit (*goryō* 御霊) as it was a form of gratitude for his deeds.

8 Walthall 1991c: 36–37. Sōgorō’s fame was so widespread by the end of the nineteenth century that at least two versions of his story were translated into English: George Braithwaite’s *Life of Sogoro: The Farmer Patriot of Sakura* (1897)—prefaced with several biblical passages enjoining sacrifice as well as an appeal to the Japanese to embrace “the love of the Lord Jesus Christ”—and Viscount Hayashi Tadasu’s *For His People* (1903).

sama before him, made a direct appeal to regional magistrates to help the people. Refused (though not, in this case, crucified), he reportedly sold all his possessions—including his substantial library—to purchase food for the suffering poor.

At this point, Ōshio's tale seems a near-perfect recapitulation of the Sōgo-sama legend. However, things take on a more radical—or perhaps *modern*—turn in the following year, 1837, when the former police inspector published a manifesto charging the chief city magistrate (*bugyō* 奉行) with corruption. After invoking the name of both the Emperor, who “has been kept in seclusion and has lost the power to dispense rewards and punishments,” and the founder of the Tokugawa shogunate, who “decreed that to show compassion for the widows, widowers and the lonely is the foundation of benevolent government (*jinsei* 仁政),” the manifesto states its aims in a remarkably forthright manner:

For the sake of all under heaven, knowing that we have no one to depend on and that we may bring on punishments to our families, [... we] resolve to do the following: First we shall execute those officials who torment and harass those who are lowly. Next we shall execute those rich merchants in the city of Osaka who are accustomed to the life of luxury. Then we shall uncover gold and silver coins and other valuables they hoard as well as bags of rice kept hidden in their storage houses. They will be distributed to those who do not own fields or gardens in the domains of Settsu, Kawachi, Izumi and Harima, and to those who may own lands, but have a hard time supporting fathers, mothers, wives and other members of the family [...] What we do is to follow the command of heaven to render the punishment of heaven.

LU 1997: 280–281

Soon afterwards, Ōshio led an “army” of (mainly landholding) peasants, students, low-ranking samurai officials and social outcasts—along with two Shintō priests—on a rampage of destruction throughout Osaka. The rebels, carrying banners festooned with “save the people” and “Amaterasu,” succeeded in burning down one-fifth of the city before being quashed by government troops. Amidst the resulting confusion and conflagration, Ōshio went missing for forty days, at which point he was tracked down by the authorities and committed suicide upon being discovered. Despite the failure of his uprising, “Ōshio-sama” immediately became a folk hero among peasants and even some merchants and samurai—a Japanese version of American abolitionist folk hero John Brown (1800–1859). After his death, handwritten copies of his manifesto spread throughout the country, touching a chord with peasants in

many regions. His story was retold (and embellished) in Mori Ōgai's 森鷗外 (1862–1922) novella *Ōshio Heihachirō*, published in January 1914, not long after the High Treason Incident, and over the succeeding decades served as inspiration to a diverse group of movements and people, including the Freedom and Popular Rights Movement of the 1870s and 1880s, General Nogi Maresuke 乃木希典 (1849–1912), Mishima Yukio 三島由紀夫 (1925–1970) and left-wing student radicals of the 1960s. According to Marius Jansen: “His ill-fated revolt served as the climax to the Tokugawa tradition of protest, and it foreshadowed later expressions of nihilistic violence” (Jansen 2000: 223).

Like Ōshio, Ninomiya Sontoku 二宮尊徳 (1787–1856) was born in the late-eighteenth century, and thus spent most of his adult life in the tumultuous final decades of the *bakufu* period. Born into a poor peasant family in Kayama 栢山, Sagami 相模 province (now western Kanagawa prefecture), by his late twenties the famously self-educated Ninomiya had become a wealthy landowner as well as an agricultural innovator. Catching the attention of the authorities for his administrative techniques, he was eventually recruited to run one of the *shōgun's* estates, a significant honor for a person of such humble beginnings. His ideas soon became the accepted standard for land management in the late Edo period, and Ninomiya was granted the name Sontoku 尊徳 (lit., priceless virtue) for his talents and accomplishments. Upon his death in 1856, he was granted posthumous honors, and is revered even today as a model of educational diligence and selfless virtue. This brief biography reveals a striking distinction with the other *gimin* discussed in this section—and also with the earlier *ikkō-ikki* movement. While committed to agricultural reforms to alleviate the suffering of the rural poor, Sontoku was not, in any sense, a “rebel” or “radical.” He never engaged in political activism against the state, and as a result was never subject to persecution. I will return to this difference below, as I believe it is instructive in helping us to understand the various forces at work in shaping the *gimin* narrative that would pass into the social discourse of the Meiji era.

While it would be anachronistic to call these movements or individuals “socialist”—at least in the way the term is usually understood today—they play an important role as precedents for “righteous revolt” on the part of the common people against the secular authorities. Whether we follow Yokoyama Toshio in understanding of early modern peasant revolts as the incipient formation of a revolutionary class consciousness, or Ann Walthall's more moderate reading of such as calls for social reform, one common feature of these movements is the self-conscious employment and reinterpretation religious doctrines as “political” (in some cases, military) slogans, in a way that prefigures the work of progressive and radical Buddhists of the modern period (see

Yokoyama 1977; Walthall 1991c). The *ikki* carried banners with the words “*Namu Amida butsu*” 南無阿弥陀仏 and “Renounce this Defiled World and Attain the Pure Land.” While these are traditional phrases within both Jōdo and Shin Buddhism, the political implications go well beyond traditional interpretations. For one, an appeal is made to Amida, and Amida’s vow of universal salvation, as a “law” that extends beyond those of the realm, including “secular” customs of harmony, hierarchy, loyalty and obedience. Second, the invocation to “renounce this defiled world and attain the Pure Land” seems to indicate a belief in the possibility of establishing a “Pure Land” here on earth—similar to the understanding of the “Buddha land” (*bukkokudo* 仏国土) within the Nichiren 日蓮 sect and related to the more general expression *yonaooshi* 世直し, which gained currency in the later Edo period (see below).

The term *ikki* itself invites further comment in this regard. Though the word originally implied “identity”—i.e., two apparently distinct things being, in the familiar Buddhist expression “not other than [one another]”—by the time of the Kenmu Restoration in the fourteenth century it had become linked to the expression *ichimi dōshin* 一味同心 (i.e., solidarity band, but literally: “people working together with one mind”). *Ichimi dōshin* were special social groups established in order to formulate an “objective” decision on issues involving matters of justice.⁹ The underlying belief was that in making such a bond one was released from both personal but also familial biases; in other words, by entering the *ichimi dōshin* one aligned oneself with the (impersonal and objective) “will of heaven” (Bix 1986: 143). Though the terminology here is Chinese, there are echoes of indigenous beliefs concerning the ability of humans to channel and carry out the will of the heavenly *kami* 神 or buddhas.¹⁰ Furthermore, Walthall notes that during the Muromachi period, “self-governing bodies of monks drew on the Kamakura model [of *ichimi dōshin*], plus a primitive Bud-

9 Though rarely involved in political unrest, the *kō* 講 confraternities that proliferated in the early nineteenth century may be considered descendants of the *ichimi dōshin* in the sense that they were social groups based on common interests, and were often, though not always, focused on achieving worldly benefits. Some, like Fujikō 富士講, evolved into new religious movements. For more on *kō*, see Ito (1952); for *buraku* confraternities, see Andachi (1997: 591–593); Yamamoto (1999: 383–413); Nobi (2007).

10 Katsumata (1982: 23–24); also see Walthall (1991a: 12): “Peasants also used the shrine precincts and other sacred places on the margins of human habitation for village assemblies. Meeting in the presence of the gods was believed essential if human beings were to reconcile their differences and reach a consensus because it seemed to take a miracle for unanimity to be reached. It was claimed that this sign of a divine presence made the decision legitimate.”

dhist system of autonomous, sacred assembly, to unite in a union both political and religious when debating matters that pertained to the group as a whole” (Walthall 1986: 16).

In short, as Bix concludes, relying on the work of Katsumata Shizuo 勝俣鎮夫:

The consciousness of man’s oneness with the gods shapes many of the characteristic features of the *ikki*: its belief in justice beyond consanguineous ties, initiative among participants in the solidarity band, and their strong independence and freedom from the ruling powers ... So the *ikki* was not only a habit, a defense, and a right to be exercised by peasants in times of acute crisis. *It was also a ritual for keeping alive prefeudal ideas of impartial justice, equality, and equity in a society dominated by kinship, hierarchy and fixed status.*

BIX 1986: 143 (my emphasis)

Of particular note here is the assertion that the *ikki* peasant revolts involved a complete refashioning of both kinship ties and hierarchical models of society—a shift, we might say, from a strictly vertical and largely static vision of the world to one that is radically horizontal and fluid. One thinks of the classical Chinese phrase “heaven-humanity-together-one” (Ch. *tianren heyi* 天人合一), but the conflation of the two realms is arguably much stronger in the *ikki*, reminiscent of Andō Shōeki’s radical homophonic transposition of the categories *ten/chi* 天地 (heaven and earth) with *tenchi* 転定 (movement and rest) (Najita 2002: 71). In symbolic terms, this radical transposition is most apparent in the act of signing a petition or oath in circular or umbrella shape, a practice that dates to some early *ikki* but becomes especially common with the *yonaoshi* movements of the 1860s and 1870s (see Esenbel 1998: 26; Katsumata 1982: 131).

While the specific doctrinal connections may be less apparent than with the *ikkō-ikki*, the heroic narratives of the individual *gimin* discussed above also show Buddhist—or at least Buddhistic—elements. It is certainly possible to interpret the actions of Sōgō-sama as a bodhisattva (*bosatsu* 菩薩) in the traditional Mahāyāna understanding of the term. Bodhisattvas are understood as beings whose infinite compassion for other beings drives them to make sacrifices, both with regard to material comforts (like Śākyamuni) and, in popular texts such as the *Jātaka Tales*, by giving up their lives for others, if the occasion demands it. It bears noting, here, that while the term *gimin* can be translated as “martyr,” it is normally distinguished from *junkyōsha* 殉教者, the traditional term for “religious martyr.” While the former can be literally glossed as “(a per-

son of) public spiritedness,” the latter implies a “person who dies for (a set of) teachings.” Instead of personal sacrifice for an idea or doctrine(s), the *gimin* is one who sacrifices for the “people”—meaning the village community, rather than the state. Bix defines *gimin* as “village representatives who pitted themselves against the bakuhan state, suffering torture and martyrdom for the sake of their villages. Because they saved others and preserved the community by their painful deaths, they acquired in time the quality of deities” (Bix 1986: xxiii). Finally, as an extension of their anti-authoritarian tone, narratives of *gimin* and *ikki* often display a strong anti-clerical streak—albeit one that rarely questions basic Buddhist doctrine or cosmology. Rather, as with the later New Buddhists of mid-Meiji, priests are chastised for failing to live up to their professed standards of ethical conduct—and particularly their vow of compassion for all people.¹¹ There is a layer of irony here, given that prominent twentieth-century historian Tsuji Zennosuke 辻善之助 (1877–1955) argues that Buddhist participation in and organization of *ikki* is one of the five aspects that identify Edo-period Buddhism as “degenerate” and worthy of the persecution it received at the hands of Shintōist elements acting in the name of the fledgling Meiji state. For Tsuji, this was part and parcel of the larger “problem” of the unrepentant worldliness of Buddhist sects and priests, who, in his evocative phrase, had “fallen into realism” (*genjitsushugi ni dashita* 現実主義にだした).¹²

11 In one nineteenth-century version of the Sōgorō legend, the narrator interrupts his story at its climax to make the following “comment”: “It was fine for the priest from Tōkō-ji to appear at this juncture and accept the children’s remains, but it would have been even better had he busied himself before the children were killed, so as not to have had to take care of them ... ‘What is the purpose of priests putting on dyed robes and rolling the Buddha’s name around in their mouths?’ people muttered to each other ... There are lots of priests in the important temples of the Sakura domain besides this one from Tōkō-ji, but they value their lives, keep their mouths shut from one year to the next, and it is asking too much of them to turn to the Buddha even when they are sick. How these bonzes stink of meat!” (Walthall 1991c: 65). We might read this as a popular version of the anti-clericalism of Edo-period Confucian scholars such as Kumazawa Banzan 熊沢蕃山 (1619–1691) and nativists like Hirata Atsutane (1776–1843), which was to some extent internalized by Buddhist modernists from the late-1880s and reiterated by radical Buddhists such as Seno’o Girō in the 1930s.

12 Tsuji (1984: 27–102); see Ketelaar (1990: 11–12). To add another layer of irony, this charge runs directly counter to the common rebuke of Buddhists from Edo-period Confucians (and reiterated by some Meiji-era secularists); i.e., that Buddhism was “other-worldly” (*segaiteki* 世外的) and Buddhists priests should be (and at times were) compelled to “return to the secular” (*genzoku* 還俗).

Bix goes on to note several implications we can derive from the emergence of the *gimin* in the Edo period: 1) an implicit rejection on the part of the peasants of the ruling-class ideology that social relations were natural and unbreakable rather than artificial and malleable; 2) a lingering ideal of pacifism (ideal *gimin* were not violent, though they fought in self-defense and destroyed property); 3) *gimin* legends were most evident when the *bakufu* state was strong, suggesting a type of psychological compensation; 4) as noted above, stories of past *gimin*, especially when “sacralized” by deification, could act as spurs for further unrest, creating an ongoing “theology of resistance.”¹³ By the time of Ōshio Heihachirō in the 1830s, peasant revolts, whether led by *gimin* or otherwise, had begun to take on a more explicitly religious tone, with some participants referring to themselves as *kami* of world renewal (*yonaoshi*) (Bix 1986: 142). Though the term *yonaoshi* has ancient agricultural roots—having to do with the removal of any obstacles inhibiting a good rice-growing season—by the late Edo period it had come to imply a complete transformation of social (and economic) life, whether brought on by a *gimin*, *kami*, *ikki*, or some combination of the three.¹⁴ Of note, however, is the fact that *yonaoshi* was most often understood as world-affirming, seldom if ever implying any sort of a religious transcendence or rejection/negation of this world.¹⁵ In this sense,

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- 13 Bix (1986: xxxiii–xxxiv); “theology of resistance” is my term, not Bix’s. I use it in full awareness that “theology” invokes a Western/Christian paradigm; and yet, I believe that the term invokes a “faith” perspective that falls somewhere between “ideology” and simple reactive impulse to oppression (what Mannheim would call *chiliasm*). While obviously not “systematic” in any sense, it involves a strong soteriological component reminiscent of Christian “liberation theologies.”
- 14 Marius Jansen is dismissive of the political implications of *ikki* movements, suggesting that “there was little thought of devising a different social order.” And as for the *yonaoshi* experiments, which seem to imply a more thorough transformation, “their net total was as often ludicrous and carnival as it was purposeful” (Jansen 2000: 236). I disagree, following Bix and other scholars who see in the Edo peasant revolts, if not “revolutionary” intent, a clear precedent for appeals to egalitarian justice and social (as well as economic) change. As for *yonaoshi*, I defer to Emma Goldmann’s (1869–1940) classic (possibly apocryphal) epithet: “If I can’t dance, it’s not my revolution.”
- 15 Bix (1986: 145). Unsurprisingly, this was also the time of the emergence of new religious movements such as Tenrikyō 天理教, Konkōkyō 金光教, Kurozumikyō 黒住教, Maruyamakyō 丸山教 and Fujikō, all of which preached some form of “world renewal”—though Bix argues that ultimately these new religions *inhibited* radical social change by privileging “self-renewal and reconciliation” (Bix 1986: 154). In other words, by directing the energies of class conflict internally, they acted much like the Buddhist and Christian socialist movements inspired by Tolstoy in the early twentieth century (see Shields forthcoming).

the religious language subsumes a message that is overtly political (and quasi-socialistic), however “utopian.”¹⁶

In our discussion of religious influence on peasant instigators, we can dig much deeper with Ōshio than we were able to do with Sōgo-sama, by virtue of the fact that we have a record of his teachings, including a detailed account of his adherence to the Neo-Confucian philosophy of Wang Yangming, whose ideas had an impact—often indirect—in shaping the intellectual climate of late Edo Japan. While not necessarily radical, Wang Yangming’s idealism was rooted in several assumptions about human knowledge and action that allow for a connection with the activism of *gimin* like Ōshio. First and foremost is Wang’s insistence on the mutuality of knowledge and practice or action (Ch. *zhīxíng héyī*; Jp. *chikō gōitsu* 知行合一) which privileges practical activity, and especially ethical action, above abstract wisdom. Second, Wang argues that while “innate” knowledge can only emerge from a cleansed heart-mind (Ch. *xin* 心), once this has been achieved one can rely on intuition or spontaneous activity as a foundation for action. Third, Wang taught that: “all people in the street are sages” (Chan 1962: 207). These principles have a clear affinity with some interpretations of Buddha-nature or Buddha-mind within the Chan/Zen traditions, and are also redolent of certain aspects of classical Daoist thought, especially the primitivist and Yangist/antinomian elements of the *Zhuangzi*. At any rate, in this radically leveling perspective there is no need to rely on a higher authority, since even “heaven” (*tian*) is now “within you.”

Before I went to Nanking, I still harbored a few ideas of the goody-goody villager [who is pleasant but not always honest]. Now I believe in innate knowledge. To me, what is right is right and what is wrong is wrong. I act freely without any more effort to cover up or to conceal. Only, now I have come to have the mind of the restrained. Let all people in the world say that I do not cover up my words or deeds. It is all right with me.¹⁷

16 Walthall (1986: 223). Others have argued that, compared to China, “Japanese Maitreya worship was passive, awaiting the coming of the messiah but not actively cleansing the ground for his arrival” (White 1995: 117; see Yasumaru 1975: 94ff; Miyata 1970: 243). My view is that even the “passive” use of Miroku (fused with other deities such as *yonaoshi daimyōjin* 世直大明神) as a symbol for societal regeneration or world renewal constitutes a political act.

17 Cited in Chan (1962: 208). Here Wang is responding directly to critics charging his followers with (“Zenist”) recklessness and libertinism.

By all accounts, this analysis of the human condition—which, while couched in traditional Confucian (and, to a lesser extent, Daoist and Buddhist) terminology, is in some respects strikingly “modern”—was a primary inspiration for Ōshio’s decision to rebel against the authorities.¹⁸ Indeed, the spirit of forthrightness is evident in his 1837 manifesto, which bears comparison with radical Zen Buddhist Uchiyama Gudō’s 1908 *Anarcho-communist Revolution* (see Shields 2014).

As noted, the case of Ninomiya Sontoku presents us with a very different outcome—one in which the “hero” is recognized not only by the people but by the state as well. In order to flesh out the reasons for this difference, we should turn first to Ninomiya’s ideas, including the religious currents that undergird his thought. Like Confucius, the teachings of Ninomiya do not come directly from the master himself, but were recorded by his students and published after his death. His work is an eclectic blend of 1) “Shintō” animism: uplifting agriculture because of its connection to the *kami*; 2) Confucian moralism: insisting on the constant cultivation of virtue; and 3) Buddhist compassion, which manifests itself in a commitment to sharing agricultural surplus with the entire community. As with Ōshio (and Wang Yangming), Sontoku was convinced that thought must always manifest as action—action that has an ethical or social component. Thus his “philosophy” emerges as a form of ethical principles and standards. While the *bakufu* adopted many of Sontoku’s techniques, it was his moralistic vision that would have a more lasting cultural impact in the emergence of the rural Hōtoku 報徳 societies of the early twentieth century. Initially formed by progressive landlords in the early Meiji period, these societies found government favor in their attempt to promote the “harmony of morality and economics.” From 1903, they began to receive official support from the Home Ministry, and in 1906 were organized under an umbrella organization, the Hōtokutai 報徳隊. “Invoking the example of the Tokugawa agricultural moralist, Ninomiya Sontoku, they encouraged technical improvements

18 As a side note—and possible topic for further research—Wang’s direct criticism of Chan Buddhism, which focuses on the function (as opposed to the nature) of the mind, and particular its social and ethical implications, is strikingly prescient of modernist interpretations of Buddhism extending from Inoue Enryō 井上円了 (1858–1919) and the New Buddhists through Seno’o Girō 妹尾義郎 (1889–1961) and Kawakami Hajime 河上肇 (1879–1946). To some extent, this is unsurprising, given: a) the influence of Wang Yangming on Edo period Neo-Confucianism, and b) the impact of Neo-Confucian attacks of Buddhism on post-*haibutsu* 廃仏 “reform” movements. See Chan (1962: 211–214), for an analysis of Wang’s critique of Buddhism. For Chan, these attacks “proved” that Wang Yangming was not really a “Buddhist”—but perhaps he was simply a “Buddhist” of another sort?

and the repayment of virtue (*hōtoku*) through honesty, diligence, and communal cooperation” (Gluck 1985: 190). Thus, despite the fact that Sontoku’s ideas about communal farming are the most explicitly “socialistic” of the three figures described above, his lack of “resistance” to the Tokugawa state—and later Meiji co-optation as a symbol of virtue, diligence and loyalty—render him an ambiguous archetype for late Meiji socialists and radicals.¹⁹

Finally, it is worth noting the emergence in mid-Meiji—coinciding perfectly with the birth of the Buddhist Enlightenment in the writings of Inoue Enryō—of a group representing a fascinating conflation of traditional Buddhist lay confraternities (*kō*), peasant unrest against “feudalism,” and the anti-clerical tone of a fledgling New Buddhism. This organization, known as the Dannadera Ridatsu Dōmei Kessha 壇那寺離脱同盟結社 (Allied Lay Society for Breaking Away from Parish Temples), went so far as to produce a manifesto (or “prospectus”) in 1886, declaring their aims in the following fashion:

In regards to our school, today’s system appears to be exactly like the feudalism of ancient times. All the subtemples around the country are like the lords, and the believers affiliated with each temple are like their property. In this situation where orders from the head temple are often not carried out, [the subtemples] cannot engage in any dynamic movement ... This being the case, how could the situation be improved? Even if we report this to the head temple, it would not be capable of doing [anything ...] Even if we seek the advice of subtemples, there is no one [capable] there [...] We and our like-minded comrades (*wagahai dōshi* 我ガ輩同志) make a pledge: we shall break away from our ancient parish temples; we shall call ourselves simply “followers of the Honganji branch of the Shin sect”; we shall choose by divination the appropriate location to build a place for practice (*dōjō* 道場), which will also serve for propagating our teachings; we shall invite a priest whom we respect and trust, and he will be asked to supervise [this center].

—Meiji 20/04 (April 1887), [signed by] the advocates for the improvement of the Honganji branch of the Shin sect.²⁰

19 Sontoku remains popular today. In a 2006 nation-wide survey of the “100 Most Influential People Ever” (including Japanese and non-Japanese) he comes in an impressive fortieth place, just below Miyazawa Kenji (38) and John F. Kennedy (39), a full twenty-two spots ahead of Jesus Christ (62).

20 “Ridan shuisho” 離壇趣意書, in *Meikyō shinshi* 2065 (12 August 1886); trans. Ikeda (1998: 33–34).

Despite the still-volatile political climate at the end of the second Meiji decade, this movement still came as something of a surprise to Honganji 本願寺 leaders, as well as to the editors of *Meikyō shinshi* 明教新誌, who worried that it would soon engulf not only Ise province but the entire country.²¹ And yet, despite the fact that, as Ikeda notes, “sectarian Buddhism had already entered into a period of stability” by the late 1880s, accompanying this “stability” was increasing tension between the clergy and laity. This was particularly true within Jōdo Shinshū:

The Honganji branches’ treatment of its lay followers was changing radically around this time. Evidence of this can be found in the revised regulations for teaching assemblies and lay societies, where the former spirit of “oneness between clergy and laity” (*sōzoku ittai* 僧俗一体) had fundamentally collapsed. In the revised version we see that the “society of priests” (*sōryōsha* 僧侶社) and the “society of believers” (*shintōsha* 信徒社) are divided in two separate sections [...] It was also a period when the head temple was strengthening its administration system with priests at the center, thereby moving in the direction of instituting a fixed category represented by the separate small organizational element called “society of believers.”

IKEDA 1998: 34

Thus, while the Allied Lay Society for Breaking Away from Parish Temples may represent an extreme case of lay Buddhist intransigence, in the context of the times it becomes clear that they represent a fairly widespread desire for autonomy—or at least, greater independence—among lay Buddhists, both those associated with teaching assemblies and lay societies. Moreover, the carryover of language and themes between the Allied Lay Society and the Edo-period movements discussed above is clear, and bears witness to a significant current of grassroots “protest,” one that by the 1880s had merged to some degree with the Freedom and Popular Rights Movement.

Conclusion

I conclude with a few points regarding several pitfalls to which I suggest contemporary scholars are prone. The first is the idea that, since the Shimabara

²¹ *Meikyō shinshi* 2064; trans. Ikeda (1998: 34).

Rebellion of 1637–1638 (and perhaps even here, too), *religion*—generally meaning religious *belief* as opposed to religious symbols and language—played little or no role in popular contention in early modern Japan. This idea, which one finds repeated in virtually every study of peasant rebellions of the Edo period, is summarized well by James White: “It was not that there was no spiritually based dissent in early modern Japan; rather, it occurred most frequently *on exclusively religious terms*, and what there was of a political and or social nature never caught on” (White 1995: 116–119; see also, e.g., Walthall 1986: 123). My concern here is with the phrase: “exclusively religious terms.” What does this mean, in the context of Japanese religious traditions? The logic behind such a claim is that the campaigns of Nobunaga and Hideyoshi “succeeded in obliterating religion as a political force,” while the Tokugawa regime, “established as an antireligious entity, [was] determined (despite its own reliance on neo-Confucian justifications of its rule and Buddhist temples as agents of regulation of the people) to eliminate religious organizations and beliefs as competitors for the allegiance of the people” (White 1995: 116; see Aoki et al. 1981, 4: 279ff).

At one level this is quite correct. Certainly Nobunaga and Hideyoshi were (rightly) threatened with the power of the Buddhist institutions of the day, and took pains to defang the political power of these institutions in various ways. And the early Tokugawa shoguns were concerned in turn with the dangers of emergent Christianity, which explains their overwhelming reaction to the Shimabara Rebellion. And yet, this hardly makes these figures or the *bakufu* “antireligious.” As White notes, the shogunate was more than happy to make use of the structures of institutional Buddhism and the ideas of Neo-Confucianism to justify and sustain its rule. Moreover, using the work of Aoki Michio 青木道夫, White goes on to relate the numerous ways that contentious peasants, as well, utilized religious symbols and sacred spaces, invoked the authority of clerics, made vows and petitions to deities, and frequently deified their rebellious leaders after the fact. What is it that renders these actions *nonreligious*?²² The problem here is a familiar one to scholars in the field of religious studies: it is an attempt to locate the essence of religion in “belief”

22 In summing up his brief discussion of the *bakumatsu yonaoshi* movements, White asserts: “Religious imagery along does not necessarily make social contention religious, and aggressive behavior does not necessarily make a religious celebration a political movement” (White 1995: 119). Perhaps, but this begs the question: *What does?* I concur with Selçuk Esenbel, who argues that, despite attempts at suppression, “Tokugawa-Meiji uprisings continued to exhibit this religious character [i.e., of the early *ikki*], and professed a traditional ethical vision of politics that combined the past and present in symbolism and ideology” (Esenbel 1998: 26).

as something ostensibly separate and readily distinguishable from matters of culture, society, politics and economics. The assumption that religion used as a means of either “social control” from above or “resistance” from below is not actually *religion* is based on a flawed, essentialist premise, one that not only distinguishes, for example “this-worldly benefits” from “millenarian salvation,” but implicitly suggests that the former does not belong to the category of “religion.” Given the scholarly work over the last few decades on the centrality of just such “worldly benefits” (*genze riyaku* 現是利益) to Japanese religious practice, this assumption is particularly problematic.

The final issue I would like to raise is the assumption that historical actors such as those mentioned in this paper were concerned with identifying with a particular stream of Japanese religion or philosophy—Buddhist or otherwise. Ninomiya was self-consciously eclectic in his sources and inspirations, and while Ōshio was committed to Wang Yangming Neo-Confucianism, this tradition is itself famously hybrid, fusing elements of Chinese Daoism, Confucianism and (especially Chan/Zen) Buddhism. We also see hybridity at work in the work of the Buddhist Enlightenment figures and New Buddhists, though here the influences tend to be Western in origin (Hegel, Theosophy, Unitarianism, and so on). Moreover, even in the work of Uchiyama Gudō and Takagi Kenmyō, who as Buddhist monks associated with particular sects may be expected to feel more pressure to conform to doctrinal exclusivity, we can find clear signs of influence from outside their respective sects—especially with Uchiyama, whose anarcho-communist vision is flavored with Zen, Nichiren, Christian, Daoist and animist elements. Finally, I would like to reject the temptation to conclude, upon discovery of these “external” influences, that the ideas or activities of these figures are not thereby “Buddhist”—or only marginally so. Again, this assumes that: a) these traditions were cleanly delineated in the minds and/or the social discourse of the period; b) it would make any difference even if they were.

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