

The “Crazy Priest”: Subversive Aspects of Japanese Buddhism

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Dedicated to
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and friend in good and bad times

1. Introduction

Reading *setsuwa* 説話 (Buddhist edifying literature) of the Heian and Kamakura periods, one frequently encounters stories that portray Buddhist priests or monks behaving quite unconventionally. Their strange behavior brings such clerics into collision with existing religious and social orders. These stories propose certain religious values that contradict those of established society and religion. What surprises us is that the compilers of this kind of *setsuwa* evaluate the unconventional behavior as positive. In this essay I apply the interpretative term “subversive” to such behavior. I do so fully cognizant that there appears to be an incongruity between the compilers’ positive evaluation of what I call “subversive” and the negative judgment that this word commonly connotes. I will return to this issue later.

A striking example to illustrate this matter is the story of Eijitsu 睿實, a Tendai monk of the tenth century, as it is portrayed in the *Konjaku monogatari shū* 今昔物語集 (12:35), a *setsuwa* collection of the late Heian period.¹ Eijitsu, a fervent devotee of the Lotus Sutra, was known for his powers to exorcise and heal. Once, when Emperor En’yū 円融 (r. 969-984) was very ill and no treatment seemed to help, his advisors discussed whether

¹ Miner et al. 1985, p. 188. I am indebted to Prof. Yoshiko Dykstra of Kansai Gaidai University for kindly helping me to relocate the story of Eijitsu after I had misplaced the reference and had searched for it quite some time in vain.

to summon Eijitsu. They were well aware of his reputation for sometimes causing embarrassment, but deciding that they had no other chance to cure the ailing sovereign, they eventually agreed to call Eijitsu. An imperial messenger was sent with an oxcart to bring the unpredictable priest to the court. Unable to refuse the imperial order, he went with the messenger. However, on the way, Eijitsu noticed a sick woman lying by the roadside, and he told the envoy, “There are many noble priests in the palace and they don’t need me so urgently. But this patient needs help immediately. I will do something for her so that she can take food. I will come to the palace by this evening. Meanwhile, why don’t you go ahead and tell this to the emperor.” The secretary tried to stop him, saying, “This is inconvenient. You should not be bothered with a sick person like this while you have an imperial order.” “Just relax and calm down,” said Eijitsu and jumped down from the cart. The secretary thought that Eijitsu was a crazy priest [*kuruu sō* 狂フ僧], just as he had heard, but could not very well arrest him.²

Eijitsu compassionately inquired about the woman’s illness, sent for food, and chanted a chapter of the Lotus Sutra. Only then did he continue on the cart to the imperial palace, where he successfully exorcised the evil spirit possessing the emperor by chanting a chapter of the Lotus Sutra. Offered a reward of a priestly rank, Eijitsu declined, and made his way out of the palace as quickly as he could.

In this story we observe a clash between two different value systems or orders, the religious and the secular. For Eijitsu, the religious authority of the Lotus Sutra, teaching compassion towards all beings, is higher than the command of the emperor. The secular order is relegated to an inferior position by the religious order. By including such a story in this *setsuwa* collection, the compiler apparently affirms the superiority of the religious order over the secular. Considering the historical context, this is remarkable, because during the Nara period Buddhism functioned as a servant to the state, while during the Heian period it gradually attained first an independent position, and then reached an equal standing with the state.³

² Dykstra 1998, p. 154; Yamada et al. 1965, pp. 192 f.

³ On the basis of their huge landholdings (*shōen* 莊園), during the Heian period the big temple complexes were able to establish themselves alongside the nobility and

A survey of similar stories leads to certain distinctions in our topic that will provide the structure of the subsequent study. Each part may help clarify different aspects of religious subversion. First, stories will be treated in which the established secular or social order is outweighed by religious values. Next, I introduce stories in which the established religious order is trumped by a higher religious order. In both cases, the religious motivation of individual monks functions as the subversive element for the religious and social establishment. In the third section I take up a case in which this subversive aspect of religion is associated with a claim for political power itself; in other words, I consider how religious subversion becomes social and political subversion.

In the final section I shall put individual, religiously motivated subversion in the broader context of collective, socio-political forms of subversion, and also in the context of religions other than Buddhism. Viewed from such a perspective, additional conclusions may be drawn and implications for related phenomena may become clear. This approach may provide new perspectives for future research in the fields concerned.

2. Religious Order Outweighing Secular Order

The story of Eijitsu belongs to this category. The presentation of some other tales demonstrates that he is not a singular case, and this may help to illustrate our subject more clearly. According to the *Hokke genki* 法華驗記 (1: 22), a *setsuwa* collection focusing on the miraculous powers of the Lotus Sutra (eleventh century), the priest Shunchō 春朝 (early Heian period), a fervent adherent of the Lotus Sutra, was admired by many people, high and low, because of his compassion towards sentient beings as well as for his beautiful recitation of the Lotus Sutra. Once, when he became aware of the two prisons of the capital, he began to worry about the salvation of the prisoners and he made a vow to save them. On the basis of the Sutra's

the imperial court as the third of the powerhouses (*kenmon* 権門). This was justified by citing the Buddhist teaching of *buppō ōbō* 仏法王法 according to which the secular and the religious laws are compared with two (equal) wheels of a car. For this issue see Kuroda 1996.

teaching of “skillful means” (*hōben* 方便), he decided to break the law in order to enter the prisons and help the inhabitants to attain religious liberation. He broke into the mansion of a nobleman, stole a silver bowl, and then let himself be caught and incarcerated. As soon as he was in prison, he recited the Lotus Sutra, whereupon the prisoners began to pray and weep tears of joy. Because of his fame Shunchō was not examined and tortured, as prisoners normally were. The chief police official had a dream of Bodhisattva Fugen in which the bodhisattva offered food to Shunchō. Taking this as a sign, the chief released Shunchō. The priest, however, consistent with his vow, continued to commit burglaries, altogether seven times. Each time he was thrown into prison, where he recited the sutra for the other prisoners before being released again. Whereas the police officials label him an “evil thief” (*tōaku* 盜惡), the narrator in contrast calls him a “holy man” (*hijiri* 聖, 聖人) and the officials “most wicked without any good” (*gokuaku fuzen* 極惡不善).⁴

According to this story, the moral order had been suspended by the religious order, the law of compassion to save all sentient beings. Accordingly, the narrator reverses the values of good and bad. As theoretical legitimation for his unconventional behavior, the concept of *hōben* is introduced as it is taught by the Lotus Sutra. Thereby, religious authority comes into conflict with secular authorities.

One of the best known unconventional monks was Zōga 增賀 (917-1003),⁵ who, according to the *Hokke genki* (3: 82), at the age of ten years entered Tendai on Mt. Hiei. He became famous for his scholarship, his fervent recitation of the Lotus Sutra, and his practice of repentance rites. He dedicated his life to religious practice in seclusion. Although he “avoided secular fame and profits,”⁶ Emperor Reizei 冷泉 (r. 967-969), wanted to make him the Imperial Guardian Priest (*goji-sō* 護持僧). Zōga avoided this by “uttering with his mouth crazy words (*kyōgen* 狂言)⁷ and performing

⁴ Dykstra 1983, p. 51; Inoue and Ōsone 1974, p. 81

⁵ These dates as those of the following monks rely on *Nihon Bukkyō Jinmei Jiten Hensan* Iinkai 1992.

⁶ Dykstra 1983, p. 103

⁷ This is the same word as is later used for noh comedies.

with his body crazy things (*kyōji* 狂事).”⁸ On another occasion, when Emperor Ichijō’s 一条 (r. 986-1011) mother Fujiwara no Sonshi 藤原詮子 (d. 1002) asked Zōga to perform her ordination as nun, again “he spoke in a rude and vulgar fashion” and thereby avoided again worldly fame.⁹ The *Uji shūi monogatari* 宇治拾遺物語 (143), a collection of the early Kamakura period, portrays this event in more concrete terms:

When he [Zōga] had finished cutting her hair and was about to leave, the holy man called out in a loud voice, “Why did you insist in having me come? I can’t think why. Was it because you’d heard I’ve got a big you-know-what? [‘dirty thing’] It is bigger than other people’s, certainly, but it’s all wilted and floppy now, like a bit of silk.” At this everyone present—the ladies-in-waiting attending the Empress, the high court nobles and other courtiers, and the priests—stood aghast ... Gone was any atmosphere of holiness.¹⁰

This was not the end, however, as the story continues:

On his way out, he squatted down on the verandah of the western wing of the building, pulled up his clothes and emptied his bowels, exactly like pouring water out of a tub. It went off with a loud report, and the stink was appalling. ...The younger courtiers found it a great joke, but the priests were bitter about the Empress’s having sent for such a crazy lunatic [*monogurui* 物狂ひ].¹¹

The narrator concludes: “There were several occasions on which Zōga deliberately did crazy things [*monogurui* 物狂ひ] of this kind. But in spite of

⁸ Inoue and Ōsone 1974, p. 157.

⁹ Dykstra 1983, p. 103. As theoretical reasoning for such unconventional behavior, the narrator again employs the term *hōben*, as in the case of Eijitsu (Inoue and Ōsone 1974, p. 157) The historicity of Zōga’s eccentric behavior has been questioned by scholars, because the early sources only indicate it while later ones elaborate it to a considerable degree (Groner 2002, p. 341-343). The main focus of the present investigation is not so much the historicity of each event, but the fact that *setsuwa* compilers portrayed such behavior frequently and evaluated it as positive.

¹⁰ Mills 1970, pp. 362 f.

¹¹ Mills 1970, p. 363; Watanabe and Nishio 1960, p. 339.

them, his reputation for holiness continued to grow.”¹²

Such unconventional behavior by this eccentric priest is called “crazy” or “lunatic” according to the established moral value system. The same Japanese character 狂 (*kyō* or *kuruu*) is used also in the case of Eijitsu above. The kanji 狂 is translated in English as “mad,” “crazy,” “lunatic,” or “wild.”¹³ In the story I have cited, by his provocative behavior Zōga confronts not only the highest social class, but also the religious establishment. While for ordinary monks an invitation to perform a ceremony at the imperial court would be the greatest honor, Zōga treads such values with his feet, to the embarrassment of both court aristocracy and the higher echelons of clerics. However, there are in the story two indications that Zōga’s behavior is not evaluated negatively by all: the younger courtiers seemed to be amused by it, and there were people increasingly admiring him, as the narrator emphasizes in the end. Since the story does not explicitly mention among whom the provocative man gained popularity, we can only assume that it was the ordinary people. Even the narrator of this story has to be counted among Zōga’s admirers when he evaluates his disrespect for authorities of established society as positive. Zōga’s popularity grows in spite of or indeed because of his crazy behavior. The more Zōga behaves in a crazy way, the more he becomes suspect for established religion and society, while, at the same time, and in contrast, his fame as a holy person (*shōnin*, *hijiri* 上人) grows among the ordinary people. Thus, the contradiction between these two competing value systems has to be expressed in paradoxical terms. A significant implication of the alternative religious value system is a considerable independence or freedom from the rest of society including established religion. Because they assert religious liberty, these

¹² Ibid.

¹³ The *Nihon kokugo daijiten* (Vol. 6, p. 653) defines *kuruu* as an unusual and exceptional state, behavior or mind. It can reach from divine possession (*kamigakari* 神がかり) to an insane (*kichigai* 気違い [also written as 気狂い], lunatic, fanatic) state of mind. The connection with *kamigakari* indicates already a positive understanding of the term in the religious context besides the negative notion. Kenkyusha’s *New Japanese-English Dictionary* (Masuda 1974, p. 992) translates *kuruu* with mad, insane, crazy.

monks can act in a “crazy” way, thereby manifesting religious values as independent of and superior to secular norms.¹⁴

Another example may help to illustrate the social implications of such a spiritual independence from secular authorities. At the height of their power during the Heian period, the Fujiwara house burnished its undisputed political status by building lavish temples. One such building project was undertaken by the son of the famous Fujiwara no Michinaga 藤原道長, Yorimichi 頼道, who constructed the famous temple Byōdō-in 平等院 in Uji, together with the surrounding garden, in order to represent Amida’s Pure Land in this world. So impressive was this beauty of the earthly representation of the Western Paradise that a saying of the time was: “Those who have doubts concerning the [Land of] Utmost Bliss should pray at the [Amida] Hall in Uji.”¹⁵ Yet according to the *Shasekishū* 沙石集 of the Kamakura period, during its dedication, the priest in charge of the ceremony—an *ajari* 阿闍梨 (ascetic monk) from Mt. Hiei—attacked the noble owner of the temple, saying, “For having built this temple, he [Yorimichi] will fall into hell!”¹⁶ When he later was asked why he had spoken so harshly in his sermon, the *ajari* explained that Yorimichi had not paid sufficient wages for the construction workers. Yorimichi is said thereupon to have corrected his failure.

This story reveals the reverse side of the splendid buildings we admire still today. They were constructed by forced labor and other forms of exploitation. At the same time, this story also elucidates that these “crazy monks” were not so insane as often portrayed by established religion and

¹⁴ One such independent figure is Mongaku, who challenges the retired emperor for donations to restore a temple, as he is portrayed by the *Heike monogatari*. (McCullough 1988, pp. 179-183) I am indebted to Michael Watson for calling my attention to this story. According to the Heike tale, it was Mongaku who inspired Minamoto no Yoritomo to “revolt” and to “rule Japan.” (McCullough 1988, p. 183) which eventually led to the end of the sole court rule and the establishment of the Kamakura shogunate. Leaving here apart the question whether it is historically true that Mongaku inspired Yoritomo to revolt, this tale draws a direct connection between religious and socio-political subversion.

¹⁵ Inoue and Ōsone 1974, p. 669.

¹⁶ Morrell 1985, p. 191

society. In a way they represented, and put into practice, the common sense of ordinary people. It is for this reason that they were loved by many and that their stories were not suppressed, but transmitted until today.

In the last story we also observe that an independent-minded priest not only works to save all beings in a religious way, but also attempts to realize social justice and to ease their economic burden. Another example showing the social consequences of such an independent way of thinking is the famous monk Gyōki 行基 (668-749) of the Nara period, who was active among the people in the countryside constructing bridges, dikes, and other facilities in order to improve their living and working conditions.¹⁷ Thereby he broke the contemporary law (*sō'ni ryō* 僧尼令), which restricted clerics' activities exclusively to service to the state.¹⁸ The promulgation of such a law apparently reveals that from early times on the state feared the subversive potential of Buddhism. The Japanese authorities might have learned this sense of apprehension from the Chinese. I shall return to Gyōki later. In the following section, subversive elements of Japanese Buddhism related to established institutions will be treated.

3. Religiously Motivated Criticism of Established Religion

I begin with the story of Yōshō 陽生 (904-990), a Tendai monk from Enryakuji during the end of the tenth century, as it is recorded in the *Hokke genki* (2: 42). Yōshō is said to have performed ascetic practices with the sole goal of attaining religious liberation. In 989, when he was already very old, he was appointed Tendai abbot (*zasu* 座主). The appointment was against his own wish, as we hear:

He visited the Sannō Shrine and tearfully appealed to the [protecting] deity [of Mt. Hiei], saying, “For scores of past years, bearing cold and hunger and sequestering myself in the mountains, I only have been seeking the completion of my practices to be reborn in the Pure Land, and praying to attain Buddhahood. I have desired nothing in secular affairs, and never

¹⁷ Augustine 2001, p. 6

¹⁸ Augustine 2001, p. 2 f; cf. Sansom 1934, p. 127-134.

asked for the position of Tendai Abbot. I am sorry that you, the Sannō Deity, have not understood me correctly!”¹⁹

Upon hearing of this, people were impressed by “his unusual purity in seeking the Way.”²⁰ Shortly after his complaint Yōshō resigned from the position as abbot, and soon he passed away with his face directed towards the west in expectation of attaining birth in the Pure Land. This story portrays the gap between a distinguished monk motivated only by his wish to “attain the Way” and a temple administration that had become secular. Thus, this story exemplifies authentic religious criticism of an established religious institution.

An impressive example of refusal to take up administrative functions in the temple for religious reasons is the story of Ninkai 仁戒 (dates not known), as it is recorded in the *Uji shūi monogatari* (194). As monk at Yamashina-dera he dedicated himself only to religious practice. Pursuing this path, he planned to leave the temple in order to practice austerities in the solitude of mountains.²¹ When the abbot did not permit him to do so, Ninkai married a woman from a nearby village and exhibited his relationship in public “in order to convince everyone that he had become a libertine.”²² However, he did not sleep with his wife, instead spending his nights in devotion in a chapel. Hearing of this, the abbot “felt more than ever moved by Ninkai’s saintliness, and sent for him, whereupon Ninkai became desperate and ran away.”²³ Eventually, he married again, this time the daughter of a district governor, but he soon escaped into the mountains to perform ascetic practices. The father-in-law, who tried to follow him and provide him with food, gained Ninkai’s consent to return to the house for his last hour. Ninkai kept his promise and soon after returning home he passed

¹⁹ Dykstra 1983, p. 68.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Since the Heian period it was not uncommon that monks, who originally had left the world (*shukke* 出家) for religious purposes, again left their temples (*tonsei* 遁世) which to a certain degree had become worldly in order to pursue the Way alone or in small communities in remote areas.

²² Mills 1970, p. 431.

²³ Ibid.

away in the proper posture facing west. Here, like in the case of Shunchō above, we encounter the motive of breaking Buddhist precepts in order to realize an authentic religious life.²⁴ In other words, by his unconventional behavior a monk disdains established religion for the sake of pursuing the Way in authentic form.

Moreover, the cases of Ninkai and Yōshō illustrate that their spiritual motivation undermines the hierarchical structure of religious institutions. In this respect they are similar to the aforementioned Eijitsu, Zōga, and the *ajari*, who were subversive *vis-à-vis* secular authorities and hierarchies. Since during medieval times not only religious and social hierarchies corresponded with each other, but both were at the same time closely related to a metaphysical hierarchy in the world beyond, the subversive power of religion did not stop even here, as we shall see in the next stories. These concern monks who were, and still are, considered both famous and significant for the development of Japanese Buddhism. This is remarkable because it is not an easy task to criticize persons whose name and fame are generally acknowledged.

First, the *Hokke genki* (1: 2) narrates the story of the two famous Nara-period priests, Chikō and Gyōki. Chikō 智光 (709-ca. 770/80) was an eminent scholar monk of the Sanron school, while Gyōki, who was mentioned before, held only a low clerical rank. The latter, however, was very successful in helping to build roads and bridges and to improve irrigation and rice cultivation, and in conveying basic religious teachings to ordinary people. Even though Gyōki had broken the law (the *sō'ni ryō*) prohibiting religious activities among ordinary people, in the end Emperor Shōmu granted Gyōki the title of Grand Abbot (*daisōjō* 大僧正) for his practical achievements. Chikō resented this award and became jealous, claiming, “I am a well-learned Great Abbot [*chigyō no daisōjō* 智行の大僧正], while Gyōki is a mere priest without much learning [*senchi no shami* 浅

²⁴ This is also the case with the most famous “mad” figure during the Edo period, Ikkyū, the son of an emperor and an outstanding Zen priest. He even called himself “Crazy Cloud” or *kyōun* 狂雲. (Covell 1980, p. 87-89). Thereby he confirmed the positive evaluation of crazy or subversive behavior, as it is to be found among compilers of *setsuwa*.

智の沙弥]. Why does the emperor appreciate him so much more and ignore me?”²⁵ Holding a grudge against emperor and Gyōki, Chikō retired and died soon afterwards. He then traveled in the underworld and encountered a splendid palace where, he was told, Gyōki was to live after his death. To his surprise, Chikō himself was led to hell and tortured for his sin of jealousy. Only after repenting was he released, whereupon he returned to life and apologized to Gyōki.

According to this story, performing religious practice has much more value than scholarly learning and high clerical status. Again, the value system of established Buddhism is questioned and the unconventional religious approach is praised.

The *Ōjō gokurakuki* 往生極樂記 (11) conveys another critical story about Chikō. For many years, at Gangōji 元興寺 (Nara) he shared quarters with Raikō 賴光, an otherwise unknown monk. In his last years Raikō did not carry on any visible religious practice, and then he died. In a dream, Chikō learns that Raikō had been born in the Pure Land, but that he, Chikō, would not be born there. Asking for the reason, he is taught that he had not performed the proper practice for birth into the Pure Land—the contemplation of Amida Buddha and the Pure Land. Raikō had. After awaking from his dream, Chikō began to practice this contemplation and, on the basis of a vision, also created the famous Chikō Mandala for which he is best known today.²⁶

In this story Chikō is criticized for not performing the proper religious practice, while the previous one points at his sin of jealousy. Even though he is famous, learned, and highly recognized by established religion and society for his achievements, the narrators of both stories do not refrain from elaborating on his shortcomings as a human being. In the second case he is contrasted with an unknown priest whose undertaking of proper religious practice in secret (privately, it might be more accurate to say) is praised, while in the first case he is outshone by a monk of inferior scholarly learning and clerical rank. Both stories affirm a reversal of the established religious value system. This may be called the subversive aspect of religiosity within a

²⁵ Dykstra 1983, p. 28; Inoue and Ōsone 1974, p. 52.

²⁶ Inoue and Ōsone 1974, pp. 24 f.

religious establishment.

The previous two tales compare and contrast their protagonists as means of critique. Two subsequent records measure famous persons according to the standards within a given framework. According to the *kakochō* 過去帳 biography, the well-known Heian monk Genshin 源信 (942-1017), author of *Ōjō yōshū* 往生要集 and other influential treatises, experiences implicit criticism upon his death. The early *kakochō* biography first relates all religious achievements of the eminent monk, information intended to support his suit for a favorable fate after death. His followers learned in a dream after his death, however, that Genshin had not attained birth in the upper grade (*jōbon* 上品) of the Pure Land, but elsewhere. He is said to have conveyed in this dream: “It is an extremely difficult matter to be born in (the Land of) Supreme Bliss. That is why I remain within the outermost circle (of sages surrounding Amida Buddha).”²⁷

A similar criticism occurs in the case of the most powerful man of his time. Fujiwara no Michinaga had built the splendid Hōjōji 法成寺 with great effort in order to realize Pure Land on earth and, at the time of death, hoped to attain birth in the Pure Land on a high level by virtue of his accumulated merits. However, according to the *Eiga monogatari* 栄華物語, after Michinaga passed away, his daughter, the Empress Ishi 威子, learned in a dream that he had attained birth into the Pure Land not on the upper level, as expected, but on the lowest of the nine levels. “That’s not at all what I expected,” she remarked. “I can’t believe it.” “It’s a pity the level is so low,” a brother said, “considering how he devoted himself night and day to the construction of this temple, and how he invoked the holy name down to his last breath. But it’s wonderful, anyway, that he is in the paradise.”²⁸

In these tales, dreams of the Pure Land and *post mortem* experiences of hell serve as ultimate authority to undermine the generally acknowledged, immanent religious system. While the stories about Eijitsu, Shunchō, and Zōga, as well as Yōshō and Ninkai, mainly occur in an immanent framework of this world (where the authority of a sutra is sufficient), the tales about Chikō, Genshin, and Michinaga extend the frame of reference to a

²⁷ Rhodes 1996, p. 66; Hirabayashi 1985, p. 51

²⁸ McCullough 1980, p. 770.

transcendent dimension and derive ultimate authority from that. The world-beyond relativizes and corrects behavior in this world. Such a view *sub specie aeternitatis* (view from the world beyond) does not function here as escape from worldly realities, as it occurs frequently and is criticized accordingly; rather it serves in a critical and subversive role and is focused on this world.

The fact that these stories were transmitted is remarkable because they find fault with generally acknowledged religious and secular authorities. We must conclude from the fact of this transmission that in certain circles the critical and subversive function of religion towards established social and religious institutions was accepted as having positive value. This critical function is, as we saw, first of all limited to religious concerns, but then it extends also to social issues, as in the case of Fujiwara no Yorimichi. However, this inherent subversive role of religion can also reach the political realm and turn into a claim for political power. The famous case of the Nara-period monk Dōkyō 道鏡 may serve as an example. I would like to portray this event from such a perspective in the next section.

4. Religious Attempts at Political Subversion

Dōkyō (?-772) was an influential monk who is said to have healed the ex-empress Kōken 孝謙 in 761.²⁹ Subsequently and due to a power vacuum at court—the Fujiwara had temporarily lost influence at this time—Dōkyō was able to climb in the court hierarchy and in 765 eventually became Chancellor (*daijō daijin* 大政大臣); that is, he held the highest office in the bureaucracy. In 766, Dōkyō received the title *hōō* 法王 (Dharma King) whereas the emperor or empress traditionally were called *hōō* 法皇 (Dharma Emperor/Empress). Through his new title the monk was promoted to the same level as the empress.³⁰

²⁹ The daughter of Shōmu Tennō reigned under the name Kōken from 749-758, and again from 764-770 under the name Shōtoku.

³⁰ The *Shoku Nihongi* characterizes the relationship of the empress to the monk as having “favor” (*chō* 寵); only later would Heian traditions construct a scandalous relationship. (Bender 1979, p. 139).

During his time at court, Dōkyō fostered also a close relationship with the Usa shrine in Kyushu by repeatedly donating land.³¹ In 769, the *Shoku Nihongi* reports that a shrine priest “fabricated a pronouncement of Hachiman, which said: ‘Let Dōkyō be made emperor and there shall be great peace in the realm.’” The empress, however, after having had a dream, sent Wake no Kiyomaro to Usa to inquire about Hachiman’s true intention. Kiyomaro, appealing to the *kami* that this is “a matter of grave importance for the state,”³² received the following oracle:

Since the establishment of our state the distinction between lord and subject has been fixed. Never has been there an occasion when a subject was made lord. The throne of heavenly sun succession shall be given to one of the imperial lineage; wicked persons should immediately be swept away.³³

When Kiyomaro returned and delivered this message, Dōkyō sent him directly into exile. Some time later, however, the court revised this decision by exiling Dōkyō and rehabilitating Kiyomaro.

Dōkyō’s case represents a priest’s attempt to assume political power by subjugating the highest secular powers to religious authority. It illustrates the subversive function of religion in the political realm. Earlier the unconventional and provocative behavior of monks had avoided secular power or merely offered criticism, but Dōkyō’s motivation is blunt desire for political power. Therefore, as a cleric he follows the secular rules and remains within the boundaries of the secular realm, whereas the other monks transcend it. Even though these two kinds of behavior differ considerably, both can be called subversive. The difference lies in the respective motivation for, and the goal of, subversive behavior. While quite different in nature, from a formal point of view both forms manifest the common aspect of the subversive function of religion.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 140 f.

³² Ibid., p. 143.

³³ Ibid., p. 142.

5. Collective Forms of Subversion in Buddhism and Other Religions

This investigation to this point has brought to light various forms of Buddhist subversion, reaching from religious criticism of religious and social organizations to the religious claim for supreme political power. The number of occurrences as well as the religious motivation and authorization for such subversive behavior suggest that it cannot be considered exceptional; it is, rather, an inherent element of Japanese Buddhism. Further, while subversive behavior generally has a negative connotation, the stories introduced above (except the last one) treat it as a positive value. In this section I extend the scope of my survey to broader contexts. One context is non-Buddhist religious traditions. This approach of comparative religious studies enables us to detect a similar phenomenon—subversion seen in a positive light—in folk religion, Christianity, and new religions. Another approach, that of the study of socio-political history, allows us to proceed from individual, religiously motivated subversion to collective forms of subversion. Broadening the context in another way, the temporal scope of survey can be extended from the medieval period to later eras of Japanese history. The structure of this section roughly follows a combination of historical and systematic order in the hope that such an approach may provide new insights as well as incentives for more detailed research in the fields concerned.

One figure located on the borderline between individual and collective subversion is Hōnen 法然 (1133-1212). Even though he is not known for crazy behavior, contemporary authorities perceived him as being subversive when they marked his teachings as “heretical.”³⁴ The implications of the Pure Land doctrine of “Birth (into Pure Land) in equality” were criticized for not only reversing the religious, but also the social hierarchy. His teaching of the “exclusive nembutsu practice” (*senju nenbutsu* 専修念仏) effectively denied the necessity of religious practices such as donations (*fuse* 布施) and thereby threatened the economic foundation of Buddhist institutions. Some

³⁴ For this section, see Repp 2004. The label “heretical” signifies the subversive potential of individuals or groups. Its relativity becomes clear when considering the fact that this attribute later was quite often changed into “orthodox.”

decades later, for example, Nichiren 日蓮 blamed Hōnen for the deterioration of temple buildings. Even though Hōnen himself did not aim at religious or social subversion intentionally, his teachings were implicitly subversive from the point of view of the Buddhist establishment. For this reason, the monks of Enryakuji and Kōfukuji³⁵ attacked him and his disciples. As the focal point and leader of the contemporary nembutsu movement, Hōnen has to be placed on the borderline between individual and social subversion.³⁶

Beginning with clearly collective religious subversion, we first have to mention the “forceful appeals” (*gōso* 強訴) or “divine demonstrations” of Tendai monks since the beginning of the twelfth century.³⁷ When disputes about imperial patronage emerged, large groups of monks and servants descended from Mt. Hiei into the capital, carrying weapons and a portable shrine of the protecting deity of the mountain in order to influence court policies by force.

During the Insei period (1086-1185), retired emperors tried to increase their landholdings (*shōen* 莊園) in the countryside by force. Their objective was to strengthen their political power, but their actions resulted in legal insecurity of the *shōen*, a situation which triggered the emergence of the samurai as physical protectors of property.³⁸ The fact that temples such as Enryakuji and Kōfukuji also were among the big landowners and needed to protect their property gave rise to the armed “evil monks” (*akusō* 惡僧). In fact, these armed monks and the samurai have to be seen as parallel phenomena.³⁹ Whereas the samurai eventually rose from guards of manors to an independent social and political power which in the end of the Insei period

³⁵ See Jōkei’s criticism of Hōnen in the Kōfukuji sōjō (# 6 and 9). (Kamata and Tanaka 1971, pp. 36-38. 41 f; cf. Morrell 1987, pp. 82. 86-88).

³⁶ While Hōnen’s teaching itself was limited to the religious realm, Nichiren clearly reached out to the political arena in his attempt to establish a Buddhist country based on the teachings of the Lotus Sutra. He was persecuted and exiled for his attempt at political subversion.

³⁷ Adolphson 2000, pp. xv, 109 f.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 62 f. In later times they were called warrior monks (*sōhei* 僧兵).

overthrew the sole rule of the court and established the Kamakura shogunate,⁴⁰ the *akusō* eventually were organized in small armies and employed by the temples in political power struggles.⁴¹ In 1571, Nobunaga, unwilling to brook the challenge posed by temple armies any longer, attacked the largest base, Enryakuji. As is well known, he burned it down and killed many soldier monks together with ordinary monks.

In 1549, Christianity entered the stage of Japanese history. Initially accepted, after a few decades it came to be considered subversive for the state when authorities understood that it had served as vanguard of Portuguese colonialization in other countries. The Japanese apostate Fabian Fukan commented on the first commandment: “In this precept lurks the intention to subvert and usurp the country, to extinguish Buddha’s Law and Royal Sway.”⁴² Hence, Christianity was severely persecuted. The persecution was carried out in various forms, reaching from levying heavy taxes or sending people into exile to torture and killing. When the government punished the peasants of largely Christianized Kyushu by levying severe taxes, they began to suffer under starvation and thus raised a rebellion in Shimabara 1637/38 under a Christian banner. They were defeated with the help of ship cannons by another Christian power, the Protestant Dutch, who came to aid the *bakufu* for trade purposes. The young

⁴⁰ This revolution by the *buke* 武家 subduing the *kuge* 公家 was social and political subversion at the same time. Hōnen’s religious subversion has to be seen in this broader historical context of the Insei period.

⁴¹ See for example Jien’s reports in his *Gukanshō* (Brown and Ishida 1979, pp. 124, 138, 330-333).

⁴² Elison 1988, p. 282. Similarly, the Jesuit apostate Ferreira described the same commandment as the “root of rebellion, and the inception of reign’s overthrow.” (Elison 1988, p. 303) In 1854, Ōkuni Takamasu, a late Edo period critic of Christianity, indicated the social dimension of the potential subversive behavior of Christians by stating: “When Christians form themselves into societies, neither lord nor father can hold sway over them.” (Breen 1996, p. 184) For the communal organisation (*confraria*) of the early Japanese Christians, its similarity with the *kō* of Jōdo Shinshū believers (see below), Hideyoshi’s common perception of both, and the role of the communal structure for the survival of Hidden Christians, see Higashibaba 2001, pp. 120-122, 129 f, 155-160.

leader of the revolt, Amakusa Shiro, lost his life, but later became an inspiration for other peasant uprisings.⁴³

Turning from the Christian rebellion, let us consider the best known communal attempts at subversion in Japanese history, the *ikki* 一揆. These reach back as far as to the *tsuchi ikki* 土一揆 (land uprisings) during the fourteenth century, which peaked in the fifteenth century, then evolved into the *kuni ikki* 国一揆 (provincial uprisings), and later during the Edo period into the *hyakushō ikki* 百姓一揆 (peasant revolts).⁴⁴ Leaving aside the economic reasons, different forms, and various developments of *ikki*,⁴⁵ here I concentrate on the religious factors of this phenomenon. As in ordinary life, also in extraordinary situations religion serves as motivation for action as well as provider of meaning to cope with difficulties. For example, even though an uprising may fail to attain economic and social justice, participants may believe that deities after all will punish the unjust officials or ruler whose actions caused the uprising, thus providing hope for ultimate justice and meaning even in failure. Apart from the above mentioned Christian element of the Shimabara rebellion, we find—roughly distinguished, though frequently overlapping—three forms of religious involvement in the *ikki*: folk religion with or without world renewal hopes (*yonaoshi* 世直し), Maitreya beliefs connected with *yonaoshi* expectations, and Jōdo Shinshū.

The story of the rebellion leader Sōgorō in the Nagano area during the seventeenth century may serve as an example for folk religious elements in general. The cause for the uprising was that the lord of the Sakura domain, Hotta Masanobu, had levied cruel taxes. In the end, Sōgorō and his wife O-San were caught and crucified. As their children were decapitated before their eyes, according to tradition the mother said to her husband:

My body may be left to hang on this cross, but my resolve is unshakable. Even if I am reborn five hundred years hence, I will seek retribution for the resentment I feel now. No matter how many times I live and die, my wrath will never be dispelled. I will not take advantage of Buddha's pledge to get myself into

⁴³ Cf. Walthall 1991, pp. 87-91.

⁴⁴ Earns 1983, p. 268 f.

⁴⁵ For these basic factors see Davis 1974, Earns 1983, and Bix 1986.

paradise. My body has been hanged on this tree for the sake of all people, and I do not have a evil heart, but my wrath will become demons and devils. I warn you that I will kill you to avenge my children. Aah, was that a kind of punishment? (Walthall 1991, p. 66)

Sōgorō agreed with that, and said further: “Before three years have passed, heaven will punish Kōzuke no suke [Hotta Masanobu] without his realizing it.” (Ibid.)

After death, the power of angry spirits will bring forth ultimate justice. This folk religious belief in *onryō* 怨霊 or *goryō* 御霊 is known to have played an important role in Japan since the Heian period by the latest.⁴⁶ Further we observe in this story the Buddhist Pure Land belief of birth into the Pure Land is relativized for the sake of immediate punishment to achieve justice in this world.⁴⁷ Leaders of peasant revolts were sometimes called *gimin* 義民 or “righteous people.”⁴⁸ Their death for a just cause transforms them into “exemplary martyrs”⁴⁹ or “peasant martyrs”⁵⁰ and, according to folk beliefs, into *kami* 神 or deities, who eventually are venerated in shrines as guarantors for justice. They were also perceived as savior figures who sacrificed themselves for the sake of their community.⁵¹ The idea of “sacrifice for the sake of others” or “redeeming suffering” is a fundamental

⁴⁶ Sugawara no Michizane’s (845-903) case is the best known example for a dead person’s angry spirit that revenged injustice and eventually was appeased by being venerated as *kami* in the Kitano Tenman-gu, a shrine in Kyoto. (Cf. Hori 1968, pp. 111-117).

⁴⁷ In the narratives of peasant uprisings we also observe frequent criticism of established religion which compromises with unjust secular authorities. (Cf. Walthall 1991, pp. 131. 155 f)

⁴⁸ Bix 1986, p. xxxiii

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Walthall 1991, p. 173.

⁵¹ Cf. Walthall 1991, pp. 36, 165 f., 192. A similar practice can be found in communities of Hidden Christians (*kakure kirishitan*) in which certain members surrendered to authorities for the survival of the others. This practice was one of the reasons the *kakure kirishitan* communities escaped extinction for more than 250 years of persecution.

religious notion spread all over the world. In our context it serves as religious authorisation for subversive actions.

Another type of peasant revolt motivated by folk religious or Shintō beliefs was the *yonaooshi ikki* (world renewal uprising) during the late Tokugawa and Meiji periods.⁵² In one such case, Amaterasu’s younger brother Susanoo was portrayed as “perhaps the first rebel kami (god) in the Japanese pantheon,”⁵³ thereby providing an ultimate religious authorisation for an uprising. A similar incident occurred in North Japan 1834 when a “gray haired old man ... allegedly emerged from the clouds and urged peasants to rise up, saying ‘I am the deity of renovation [*yonaooshi daimyōjin*] ... The time has come. Until now I have had a role to play. Hereafter there will be those who succeed to it.’”⁵⁴ This term appeared for the first time in 1796 when three men were martyred after an uprising in the Tsu domain and then were worshipped as *yonaooshi daimyōjin*.⁵⁵

Shifting the focus to Buddhist collective forms of subversion, we find that millennial expectations form the bridge between the folk religious notion of *yonaooshi* and Buddhist world renewal ideas. One important source of inspiration was Maitreya,⁵⁶ the future Buddha, who (according to traditional Buddhist teaching) after the period of the end of the dharma (*mappō*) would reintroduce the authentic dharma again.⁵⁷ According to folk beliefs, however, Maitreya would bring forth an ideal world, the *miroku no yo* 弥勒の世.⁵⁸ Belief in the coming Maitreya in connection with *yoanaoshi*

⁵² Esenbel 1998, p. 22. According to Miyata Noboru, the word *yonaooshi* (the noun form of a transitive verb) derives from the word *yonaoori* (the noun form of an intransitive verb) designating the self-renewing natural cycle of planting and harvesting, etc. When this cycle is disturbed by obstacles, they have to be removed, and the process is called *yonaooshi*. (Bix 1986, p. 144) In other words, when this term was applied to *ikki*, it was transferred from the realm of nature religion to the social sphere, which is quite a remarkable shift.

⁵³ Esenbel 1998, p. xvii.

⁵⁴ Bix 1986, p. 145.

⁵⁵ Walthall 1991, p. 241, cf. p. 30.

⁵⁶ Esenbel 1998, p. 26.

⁵⁷ Rhodes 1998, pp. 53 f.

⁵⁸ Ooms 1993, pp. 81-83.

ideas inspired for example the Tenmei uprisings during the 1780s, which were directed against unjust taxation and economic exploitation.⁵⁹ The folk religious tradition that combined Maitreya worship with millennial expectations of a religio-social world renewal, revived also in Japanese new religions such as Ōmoto, which will be treated later.

One form of communal uprising inspired by Buddhist beliefs were the *ikkō ikki* 一向一揆,⁶⁰ the Jōdo Shinshu peasant revolts or “Shinshū leagues”⁶¹ which began in the 1470s and were most successful in the Hokuriku area. A number of religious factors contributed to the *ikkō ikki*.⁶² Thanks to its simple teaching and practice, Jōdo Shinshū was able to spread among peasants to a greater degree than other Buddhist schools. Also it was able to combine communal and religious leadership by converting locally influential farmers and using their large homes as religious meeting places (*dōjō* 道場). Jōdo Shinshū believers succeeded in taking over local self-governing structures (*sō* 惣) and transforming them into religio-social communities (*kō* 講).⁶³ Further, Shinshū also converted lower samurai who, bound together with the peasants by a common faith in the equality of Amida’s compassion, contributed significantly to the success of the *ikkō ikki*.⁶⁴ Thus, the *ikkō ikki* not only became “the largest organized peasant struggle in Japanese history,”⁶⁵ but also the most successful one, able to control Kaga province for nearly a century from 1488.⁶⁶ In 1580, however, Nobunaga destroyed the Jōdo Shinshū military power,⁶⁷ as he had done with that of Enryakuji in 1571.

⁵⁹ Esenbel 1998, p. 26; cf. Bix 1986, pp. 109-113.

⁶⁰ *Ikkō* is an old name for Jōdo Shinshū, derived from *ikkōshū* 一向宗, the Pure Land teaching of the single-minded (exclusive) nenbutsu practice.

⁶¹ Dobbins 1989, p. 140.

⁶² For accounts and analyses (including the religious factors), see Davies (1974, pp. 238-243), Earns (1983, p. 269), Solomon (1983, p. 269) and Nagahara (1990, pp. 338-341).

⁶³ Nagahara 1990, p. 339.

⁶⁴ Cf. Dobbins 1989, p. 140; Nagahara 1990, p. 340.

⁶⁵ Nagahara 1990, p. 338.

⁶⁶ Solomon 1983, p. 269.

⁶⁷ Earns 1983, p. 269.

Religiously inspired subversion appears also in the new religions that have flourished in Japan since the Meiji period. Here also, millennial expectations drew from previous traditions such as the *yonaoshi* idea. Deguchi Nao 出口なお (1837-1918), the foundress of Ōmoto-kyō, for example, taught the reconstruction and reformation of this world that would be brought forth by Ushitora no Konjin 良の金神, the guardian deity of the Northeast direction.⁶⁸ This folk religious expectation of *yonaoshi* overlapped with Buddhist expectations; Ōmoto leaders believed also that world renewal would be realised by Miroku (Maitreya) in the *miroku no yo*.⁶⁹ One of the reasons the government persecuted Ōmoto and imprisoned its leaders in 1936 was that it taught world renewal.⁷⁰

Conclusions

While the individual attempts at subversion described above aimed at putting certain religious values into practice, the (religiously inspired) collective attempts at subversion aimed at realizing social and economic justice. Both forms of subversion have to be seen against the common background of a society that had been structured in a strict hierarchy. Moreover, these religiously motivated subversions share this common background with social and political forms of subversion. Facing such subversive threats in various forms, authorities were constantly concerned with maintaining the hierarchical order. This threat was felt from early times on, as suggested by the quotation from the Dōkyō incident of the Nara era: “Since the establishment of our state the distinction between lord and subject has been fixed. Never has been there an occasion when a subject was made lord.”⁷¹ Later, since the Namboku period (1337-1392), this threat was called *gekokuujō* 下剋上, “those below overthrow those above,” or the “inferior overthrows the superior.”⁷² As mentioned before, one major socio-political

⁶⁸ Ooms 1993, pp. 47-49.

⁶⁹ Ooms 1993, pp. 81-85.

⁷⁰ Nadolski 1975, p. 264.

⁷¹ Bender 1979, p. 142.

⁷² Kumakura 1994a, p. 40; 1994b, pp. 135-137; cf. Ruch 1990, pp. 541 f.

revolution had occurred during the transition from the Insei to the Kamakura period in the twelfth century, when the samurai overthrew the rule of the *kuge* 公家, whose servants they previously had been, and established themselves as *buke* 武家 in the Kamakura bakufu. Once they had formed their military rule, the new rulers (the shoguns) followed in the footsteps of the old in their concern with maintaining the social order. We see this for example in Tokugawa Ieyasu's (1542-1616) Laws governing the military households: "Lord and vassal, superior and inferior, should observe what is proper to their station in life."⁷³ Religious attempts at subversion were certainly perceived by authorities as serious threats for the social fabric.

Religious, cultural,⁷⁴ social, and political forms⁷⁵ of subversion have in common that they are attempts by lower strata of society to influence the upper, mostly based on certain values, be those religious or social (such as justice). While the higher levels of society try to maintain the *status quo* and thereby tend to be conservative in the sense of "preserving," subversive attempts by lower levels of society tend to be innovative in their efforts to improve the *status quo*. This can be said of all forms of religious, cultural, social, and political subversion.

Finally, viewing the Japanese cases of religious subversion in the context of other countries and religions, we observe similar phenomena elsewhere as well. Traditional Korean shamanism could become subversive,⁷⁶ as could the religiously inspired secret societies in China such

⁷³ de Bary 1964, p. 328.

⁷⁴ In the history of cultures we observe a similar interaction between popular and elite culture. For the case of Japan see Repp 2003. Sen no Rikyū is a good example to illustrate the subversive and innovative power of popular culture. (Cf. Repp 2003, pp. 17 f.) For another case in Japanese literature see Brazell 1997, pp. 35-52.

⁷⁵ For political subversion by ordinary Japanese people during the time of World War II see the inspiring investigation by Schauwecker (2003). That this issue does not remain of historical interest alone, but is relevant today as well, was made clear recently by a Japanese court ruling that sentenced a citizen "to a suspended 14-month prison term for antiwar graffiti at a park restroom" in Tokyo. The graffiti voiced protest against the deployment of troops to Iraq. (*Japan Times*, 13 February 2004).

⁷⁶ Cf. Pettit 2003.

as the Taiping.⁷⁷ In Europe we find individual saints who were considered to be “fools,” and we also find collective forms of religious subversion such as the peasant uprisings of the Reformation period. The observations of this paper lead to the conclusion that religion is not *per se* conservative or—as “opium for the people”—an instrument for secular authorities, as certain historians have claimed. As it cannot be denied that religion played such a role all too often in history, the present investigation suggests to shift the focus of attention to its innovative role. Both aspects complement each other to yield a complex picture.

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⁷⁷ Cf. Dunstheimer 1972; Spence 1996.

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