Book Reviews

Japan's Holy War: The Ideology of Radical Shintō Ultranationalism

Walter A. Skya

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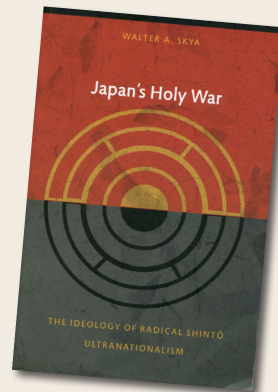

On 7 December 2011, the 70th anniversary of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor was commemorated. The solemnization in the same year of the 10th anniversary of the terrorist attacks of "9/11" recalled the plethora of allusive comparisons: both after all were surprise attacks that occurred on American soil and thrust the nation into war with non-Christian enemies.[1] However, there has been little comparative analysis of the ideological underpinnings that sanctified both attacks as a "holy war" against the West.

In Skya's view, Japan in the early twentieth century saw "a political trajectory from secular to religious fundamentalism similar to that we have seen in the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 and in the broader radicalization of much of the Islamic world" (p. 11). He aims to answer "why radical Shintō ultranationalists were convinced of the necessity of waging […] an 'ethnic and religious jihad' against secularized Western civilization much like that proclaimed by many radical Islamic fundamentalists today" (p. 4).

Japan's Holy War provides comprehensive analyses of writings by five leading constitutional scholars and political philosophers from late Meiji, Taishō, and early Shōwa. Ambiguities within the Meiji constitution of 1890 resulted in differing interpretations and opposing theories of state. Most influential were Hozumi Yatsuka's (1860–1912) authoritarian patriarchal family-state theory of absolute monarchy and Minobe Tatsukichi's (1873–1948) rival interpretation of the emperor as an "organ" of a more liberalistic parliamentary state. A third approach was that of Kita Ikki (1883–1937) who saw the Meiji Restoration as a social democratic revolution and endeavored to formulate the national polity along (national) socialist lines.

Uesugi Shinkichi (1878–1929) and Kakehi Katsuhiko (1872–1961) responded to the rise of political consciousness among the urban masses in the early twentieth century by recasting Hozumi's hierarchical doctrine of absolute monarchy into a new horizontal form that molded the masses by linking state to ultimate morality.

Having established Uesugi's thought as the spiritual force mostly resonating with the

1 Besides compelling similarities there are of course also huge differences, and it might rather be the U.S. reaction and attributed symbolisms that provide the most convincing link. John Dower in his recent work *Cultures of War: Pearl Harbor/Hiroshima/9-11/Iraq* (W.W. Norton, 2010) juxtaposes both events and their long term implications in a triangular dimension by including all the belligerents in the equation.

common Japanese soldier, Skya then focuses on incidents of "politics by assassination." He identifies a shift "from political terrorism in the Meiji period to religious terrorism in the Taishō and Shōwa periods" (p. 246). The final chapter discusses the government's publication of *Kokutai no hongi* in terms of "disenlightenment" of the masses and "orthodoxation" of radical Shinto ultranationalist ideology that now included the idea of an imperial holy war against the outside world.

Skya is to be commended for providing a nuanced picture of the ideological structure of the prewar Japanese state. By succinctly tracing differing theories on state and sovereignty from Meiji to early Shōwa, he counters notions that State Shinto underwent no significant change. Skya also ably demonstrates that no official political or ideological consensus on a state orthodoxy existed prior to the publication of *Kokutai no hongi* in 1937. He furthermore challenges claims that the patriarchal family-state concept was a core component of State Shinto and a distinctive characteristic of Japanese "Fascist" ideology. Indeed, one of the book's strengths is its comparative theoretical engagement with European forms of Fascism, while asserting the validity of the "Fascist" label for early Shōwa Japan.

Skya insists that only an examination of the relationship between religion and the political order reveals the transformation "from a quasi-religious or quasi-secular state constructed by the Meiji oligarchs to Hozumi Yatsuka's traditional conservative theocratic state in the 1890s and, finally, to radicalized and militant forms of extreme religious nationalisms in the state theories of Uesugi Shinkichi and Kakehi Katsuhiko in the 1920s" (p. 10).

However, *Japan's Holy War* is pervaded by a multitude of distinctions and convoluted concepts with seemingly random variants: "(ultra)conservative (religious) Shintō (ultra) nationalism;" "counter-revolutionary/reactionary/fundamental Shintō ultranationalism;" "(extreme) Shintō (religious ethno-)nationalism;" "(radical) Shintō (ultranationalist) terrorism;" or his subtitle's "radical Shintō ultranationalism" that is divisible into a "militarist" or "revolutionary" strand and a "controlled" faction. What leaves the reader further perplexed is Skya's often interchangeable usage of these vague terms. For example: "Under Uesugi's state theory, conservative, reactionary, or counter-revolutionary Shintō ultranationalist ideology had become radical Shintō ultranationalist ideology or totalitarian ideology and militant radical Shintō fundamentalism" (pp. 183–84).

Skya's monolithic labeling of almost all forms of nationalism as "Shintō" or "religious" is problematic, and he does little to clarify these concepts in context. Besides the implicit assumption that State Shinto and Shinto ultranationalism essentially are the same (pp. 183, 261), he conflates theology, ideology, and religion by asserting that "[t]he theology of Kakehi Katsuhiko best represents one form of radical religious nationalism, and the ideology of Uesugi Shinkichi represents another" (p. 11). Skya later contradicts this argument by claiming that religion did not feature prominently in Uesugi's totalitarian ultranationalist ideology: "The Japanese state, consisting of ethnic Japanese, constitutes one body under the rule of the emperor. Other criteria of the state—[... including] religion [...]—did not constitute a basis on which to establish the value of the state" (p. 173).

Skya asserts that all Shintō ultranationalists "were highly religious people" who "believed in the core doctrines" of the divinity of the living emperor, the divine origin of the Japanese ethnic group, and the ancestral deity Amaterasu as divine source of political authority (p. 324). Shinto indeed is closely connected to the imperial institution and the legitimization of power, but perhaps with the exception of Kakehi, the featured ideologues

do not seem to base their ambitions intrinsically on "religion." Instead, their arguments mainly focus on Japan's Imperial Way and a "holy war" against the impure and morally degenerated Western values of materialist individualism. Skya himself characterizes ultranationalism as a "political phenomenon" (p. 19) that "includes a powerful religious component" (p. 22) and admits that "Shintō doctrines [...] were all used to mobilize the nation" (p. 25).[2] Thus, at most, Shinto ultranationalism was faith-based secular thinking that used religious rhetoric for political ends.

Furthermore, Skya unfortunately fails to link the ideas of his ideologues with the common people. He argues that "radical militant Shintō ultranationalism proved to be the most powerful ideology in the debate over state and sovereignty and the one used by those who would take over the Japanese state in the 1930s and mobilize the Japanese people for total war" (pp. 95–96). The success of this branch of nationalist ideology was due to it being "mass-based and thus designed to capture the hearts and minds of the masses," resulting in "radical religious mass politics" (p. 110). Skya remarks that "the militarization or radicalization of the masses did not occur automatically," but was instigated by "the intellectual elites at the top of Japanese society" (pp. 151–52). Yet, how exactly did intellectual discourse among constitutional scholars directly influence the masses? Skya mentions that the "Shintō 'orthodox' kokutai ideology of the state was indoctrinated into the Japanese masses through a national education system" (p. 125). However, this passing explanation fails to clarify the powerful role of mass media in shaping public opinion or to consider socio-economic conditions that made the population more receptive to extreme ideas and radical political change. Also conspicuously absent from Skya's monolithic view of "the masses" are any patterns of dissent among the people.

In sum, *Japan's Holy War* incites new interest in the complex web of competing (ultra-)nationalist ideologies among the nation's elite. While challenging previously held assumptions, Skya's thought-provoking arguments provide much insight into the nature and significance of the debates over state and sovereignty from 1890 to 1937. Unfortunately, careless typographical errors, tedious repetitions, redundant footnotes, disorder in the enumeration of arguments, varying translations of words, and incorrect readings of Japanese names overshadow the book's importance and strengths.

Reviewed by Michael Wachutka

2 Surprisingly, not once throughout the book is the Japanese word for "holy war" (*seisen*) given.