

Article

# Discourses on Religious Violence in Premodern Japan

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**Abstract:** This article asks what religious violence is and why it is relevant. It questions common assumptions by focusing on how monastic violence unfolded in premodern Japan. It argues that there was nothing that set this particular form of violence apart in terms of what the clerics fought for, their ideological justification, who fought, or how they fought. Although myths prevail on the largely fictive figure of the *sōhei*, or “monk-warriors,” closer scrutiny indicates that their depiction first emerged as a coherent literary concept in the early Tokugawa period. Regarding the ideological framework in which incidents of so-called monastic violence took place, the paper demonstrates that the individuals involved in such conflicts—including the clerics—cannot be dissociated from their own socio-historical context. This is because the medieval Japanese setting was based on rules of cooperation that also implied competition among various elites. The paper further complicates our understanding by showing that the central issue is not why specific violent events involving clerics occurred, but rather what constituted the mental framework—or *mentalité*—of the age, and how it allowed religious institutions to play such a prominent role.

**Keywords:** religious violence; monastic violence; premodern Japan; Japanese history; monk-warriors; *sōhei*; medieval Japanese society; history of *mentalité*; Buddhist clerics; Buddhism

## 1. Introduction

What is religious violence and why is it relevant? The answer might seem obvious, insofar as we believe in our ability to identify it easily in the wake of 9/11 and other instances of violence in the name of religion in the recent past. Of course, it is relevant not only because of such events but also because many observers find violence involving followers of a religion, or justified by religious ideologies, particularly disturbing. The concept of religious violence, however, is predicated on the assumption that religions should promote peace and harmony, and on the modern Western ideal of the separation between religion and politics. Some scholars have even argued that religious ideologies are particularly dangerous, since they are considered to be “uniquely able to act as a vehicle for politically oppressed and socially marginalized groups” (Wellman and Tokuno 2004, p. 294). Thus, religion appears to trump all other ideologies, including nationalism, in being able to motivate groups and individuals toward violence.

Such assumptions deserve to be scrutinized. For instance, is a determination toward self-sacrifice—suicide bombers being an extreme example—a unique aspect of violence motivated by religious doctrines? To understand the concept of “religious violence” we must first ask what sets it apart from other forms of violence. This essay will discuss religious violence in the premodern Japanese context by examining incidents involving Buddhist temples.<sup>1</sup> The goal is to address two specific questions:

<sup>1</sup> I am drawing from my book *The Teeth and Claws of the Buddha: Monastic Warriors and Sōhei in Japanese History* (Adolphson 2007), though I have significantly expanded the discussion on discourses for this article.

is “religious warfare” fundamentally different from other kinds of violent confrontations when it comes to the weapons and strategies used?<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, what was the ideological context for such occurrences of “religious violence”? The larger question, about ideological justifications for violence, may be of great significance to the fields of history and religion in general, but this paper abstains from making sweeping generalizations or addressing cases pertaining to the global context. A brief introduction of the framework and characteristics of monastic violence in premodern Japan should prove useful before focusing on its general features and intellectual context.

## 2. Monastic Violence in the Premodern Japanese Context

The forms of Buddhism imported into Japan and eventually adopted there received the imprint of both the Chinese and Korean cultural environments through which they transited. In response to events on the continent, where temples had been involved in political and military struggles, the imperial court issued regulations regarding the behavior of monks and nuns.<sup>3</sup> These regulations stipulated that they were prohibited from killing, stealing, keeping and reading military manuals, forming rambunctious bands, and receiving weapons. Such laws would not have been necessary if a “pure stage” of Buddhism had ever existed in Japan (“Sōni ryō,” in (*Ryō no gige* 1939, p. 81; Hirata 1965, pp. 16–19; Hioki 1934, pp. 51–52)). Rather, it seems clear that in practice many precepts were either freely interpreted or simply not followed, and that this was the reason why, from an early period, the government kept issuing specific laws and edicts targeting Buddhist clerics. That is, the laws did not reflect Buddhist doctrines but rather stemmed from the government’s determination to prevent challenges from the only other organized religious and political power beside itself.

In Japan these regulations did not succeed in preventing abuse, however, as indicated by occasional accounts in the early records. One, dated 624 that was later noted in the eighth-century chronicle *Nihon shoki* (*Chronicles of Japan*, 720), mentions that a monk struck his paternal grandfather with an axe, and that this incident led Empress Suiko to consider punishing all Buddhist followers in Japan. Eventually, however, an appeal from a Paekche monk is said to have persuaded the court not to punish the whole clergy (Aston 1972, pp. 152–53)<sup>4</sup>. Interestingly, despite the court’s criticism of such incidents, we also see examples of monks participating in combat in response to a request from the imperial court. For instance, in 764 novice monks were enrolled in the government army that defeated the rebellion instigated by Fujiwara no Nakamaro (706–64, also known as Emi no Oshikatsu), although it is unclear in what capacity they participated (*Shoku Nihongi* 1982, Tenpyō jingo 2 (766) 9/6):

Other records reveal sporadic outbursts of violence within monastic compounds throughout the Nara (710–84) and early Heian (794–1185) eras, but it is only in the mid-tenth century that we begin to see such armed conflicts increase and intensify. For example, a dispute in 959 in Kyoto between Gion’s Kanjin’in (under Enryakuji control) and Kiyomizudera (a branch of Kōfukuji) resulted in brawls that led the imperial court to dispatch imperial police captains to arrest the violators.<sup>5</sup> More than anyone else, it is perhaps the Tendai monk Ryōgen (912–85) who best embodies the challenges and opportunities linked to the tenth-century presence of armed monastics.<sup>6</sup> Ryōgen’s intellectual ability was recognized at a young age: he represented his denomination in prestigious religious debates when he was still in his twenties. In the years to follow, he faced an increasing number of adversaries from other schools as he was seen as a threat.<sup>7</sup> In 966, when he was appointed head abbot of Tendai with the support of allies from the powerful Fujiwara family, immediately he began rebuilding several buildings

<sup>2</sup> For a proponent of the idea of “Buddhist warfare,” see Jerryson and Juergensmeyer (2009).

<sup>3</sup> The best-known example on the continent is the Shaolin monastery, which supported the Tang rulers against remnants of the Sui in battles in 620–21. (Shahar 2000, pp. 15–21).

<sup>4</sup> See also *Nihon shoki* (1984, part 2 In *Shintei zōho kokushi taikai*, pp. 164–65); and Kojima (1996, pp. 586–87).

<sup>5</sup> (*Nihon kiriyaku* 1980, Tentoku 3 (959) 3/13; DNS 1903–).

<sup>6</sup> For a comprehensive study of Ryōgen and his times, see Groner (2001).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, (*Jie daisōjō den* 1898, 15; DNS 1903–).

on Mount Hiei that had been damaged in fires or had not been maintained. Then, in 970, he issued a set of regulations for the Enryakuji monastic complex. Comprising 26 articles, this constitutes one of the richest and most important documents of the tenth century, which reflects both Ryōgen's concerns and ideals. Of special relevance to this chapter's focus, two of these articles specifically condemn the presence of rowdy and armed monks within the monastic complex. Conversely, Ryōgen's tenure coincided with the expansion of Enryakuji, which gained control over the Gion complex in Kyoto while solidifying his faction's grip on the head abbotship also coveted by monks from Onjōji. Ironically, this rivalry earned Ryōgen a reputation for promoting the use of arms.<sup>8</sup> Be that as it may, the late tenth century clearly was a time when weapons were used to extend and protect privileges both within monastic complexes and outside their boundaries. By and large, the court disapproved of the arming of clerics, but its own stance varied depending on the circumstances. In 982, for example, the court actually encouraged members of the Onjōji faction to station armed guards at their residences to deter and protect from possible attacks by Enryakuji supporters.<sup>9</sup>

Ryōgen's regulations notwithstanding, armed members of the clergy gained an increasingly prominent position in conflict resolution. Yet this increase in violence was not unique to religious institutions, as military power was gaining importance in mid-Heian Japan, both locally and among the ruling elite. Aristocratic warriors started serving high-ranking nobles in the capital, while opportunistic governors and other provincial officials used appointments in the local province to enrich themselves by raising taxes or adding other dues, often allying themselves with local strongmen to achieve their goals. Such cases abound, suffice to mention the well-known 988 "Petition of the District Officials and Local Notables of Owari Province" (*Owari no kuni gunji hyakushō ra gebumi*), in which the governor was accused of mismanagement. In a complaint listing 31 articles, local residents charged the governor with unjustly raising taxes, changing the exchange rate between silk and rice to increase his own profit, and forcing local notables to provide horses to local officials in excess of what was customary for the delivery of taxes to the capital. The petition served its purpose, since the governor was dismissed, but it did not stop other appointees from engaging in the same kind of behavior. In fact, from 970 to 1041, no less than 18 similar grievances are known of, of which only six resulted in dismissals of the accused provincial officials (Von Verschuer 2007, pp. 305–28).

Because violence at the local level indicated the inability of the elites in the capital to control the provinces solely with the help of laws and edicts, the court had little choice but to find ways to co-opt the warriors in the countryside lest it lose control entirely. What the Kyoto elites spearheaded was an ingenious transformation, through which former bureaucratic functions and relationships were privatized, thus creating a tightly knit hierarchy tying estates and provinces directly to the capital without the intervention of officials appointed to provincial posts by a court that was largely unaware of local conditions. The main tool in this process was the expansion of private estates, or *shōen*, which came to serve as effective links between the capital's elites and local strongmen, between the capital and the countryside, securing income at a predictable level for those holding positions of power in the Heian state. For local strongmen, this meant an opportunity to receive protection, as opposed to disengaging land entirely from the capital elites, which would have left them open to other local challenges. In short, this privatization of land benefitted enough people to last well into the fifteenth century.

Often overlooked by scholars, the tenth century was a turning point in Japan's classical age—it has been described in a recent collaborative work as "something of a quiet watershed"—during which the imperial court, facing challenges in the countryside, made important adjustments to maintain its supremacy (Von Verschuer 2007, p. 3). The drawback to this privatization was factionalization in the capital, where the elites started to compete with one another for land and retainers in the provinces.

<sup>8</sup> (DNS 1903–, Tenroku 1 (970) 7/16, p. 213; Groner 2001, xii, pp. 358–59).

<sup>9</sup> (*Fusō ryakki* 1965, Tengen 5 (982) 1/10; Groner 2001, pp. 221–22).

In this way, while the adjustments that were made allowed for more direct and effective ties between the emerging local powers and individual noble houses, they also carried with them a new element of conflict and potential violence. It is in this context that nobles and temples created their own networks of resources and supporters and came to rely on them within the increasing cultural and socio-political competition taking place in the Kinai region surrounding the imperial court.

### 3. The Nature of Monastic Violence

Violence involving clerics was closely tied to the general social, political, economic, and military developments of the mid-Heian age. By the late eleventh and twelfth centuries, confrontations over land and appointments had become commonplace among armed retainers of the capital elites, including religious institutions. Overall, the patterns of conflict were identical among nobles and competing temples, centering mainly on two issues: rank and appointments, or land and branch institutions—in other words, social and political standing, or human and material resources. A few examples provide a sense of what religious institutions and clerics considered to be worth fighting for.

In the socio-political arena, the competition between Enryakuji and Onjōji, the Tendai sibling temples, stands out as one of the earliest and most enduring rivalries. Their confrontation began in the ninth century, as soon as the two lineages emerged, and eventually resulted in their physical separation, Enryakuji being spread out on Mount Hiei while Onjōji settled in at the eastern foot of the mountain. The physical distance separating the headquarters was not accompanied by an ideological one, however, so that these two branches continued to compete for titles and the abbotship of the school. For example, in 1038–39 the Fujiwara chieftain—then in control of the imperial court as regent—supported the appointment of an Onjōji monk to head Tendai, but he was eventually pressured to appoint someone from the Enryakuji complex instead (Adolphson 2000, pp. 64–65). Having failed on numerous occasions to control Tendai through its abbotship, the Onjōji clergy eventually resorted to seeking a clean separation by appealing for an independent ordination platform. Occasionally, such requests received the support of individuals at the imperial court who wished to weaken Enryakuji's control over ceremonies and assets. Such was the case of retired emperors (*in*) in the twelfth century, including Go-Shirakawa (1127–92, r. 1155–58, *in* 1158–92), who favored Onjōji. In 1161, when he announced that he would receive his initiation in the Onjōji branch, he even appeared to grant it an independent ordination platform. As a result of Enryakuji's protests and pressure, however, Go-Shirakawa eventually attended only a scaled-down ritual.<sup>10</sup>

It is no exaggeration to state that the *insei* period (rule by retired emperors, 1086–1185) was particularly intense in terms of monastic violence. Go-Shirakawa likely imitated his great-grandfather Shirakawa (1053–1129, r. 1072–86, *in* 1086–1129), who was especially active in this area, appointing his own allies to numerous ceremonies and abbotships while ignoring the previous appointee. In 1102, for example, Shirakawa suspended the Kōfukuji head abbot Kakushin (1065–121) following disputes over land and an earlier appointment of his own protégé for an important ceremony. The Nara clergy reacted by attacking the mansion of Shirakawa's protégé, eventually forcing the retired emperor to reinstate Kakushin.<sup>11</sup> Six years later, Shirakawa upset the Tendai clergy by appointing a Shingon monk he favored for the performance of a ceremony at Sonshōji, one of the imperially sponsored temples in the eastern part of the capital. This appointment had rotated among monks from Onjōji, Enryakuji and Tōji, but Shirakawa attempted to privilege the latter on the occasion of this ceremony. Despite their frequent animosity, the two Tendai centers protested together in a rare display of solidarity, causing great commotion in the capital in anticipation of a confrontation. Eventually, the protest took place

<sup>10</sup> (Sankaiki 1936, Eiryaku 2 (1161) 4/7–9; Tendai zasu ki 1973, p. 95; Hyakurenshō 1965, Ohō (1162) int. 2/1).

<sup>11</sup> (Chūyūki 1965, Kōwa 4 (1102) 8/6, 8, 12, 15, 18, 21, 23, 26, 9/4, 5, 28, 29, 10/9, 17; DNS 1903–).

peacefully and Shirakawa proceeded according to his wishes, but some courtiers agreed that the retired emperor had indeed set a new precedent.<sup>12</sup>

Control of branch temples and shrines frequently involved conflicts over appointments but, ultimately, they boiled down to the assets that each branch provided in terms of estates and human resources. A particularly telling example involves Kōfukuji, the Fujiwara family temple, and Enryakuji. In 1113, Shirakawa had a certain Ensei (n.d.) appointed abbot of Kiyomizudera, a prominent temple in the eastern hills of Kyoto. Ensei was a monk affiliated with Enryakuji, whereas Kiyomizudera was a branch temple of Kōfukuji, whose clerics launched a protest in the capital. Consequently, another monk was appointed, which in turn prompted the Enryakuji clergy to attack Kiyomizudera. The destruction was substantial and even resulted in a few fatalities. Although Kōfukuji demanded that the Enryakuji perpetrators be punished, the court was unable to agree on a judgment, in part because its own members had made the decision that caused the discord in the first place. Dissatisfied with this lack of action, Kōfukuji assembled armed supporters from its temple compound and various estates in the Nara region. In response, Enryakuji clerics prepared to engage the approaching opponents, but at this juncture, the court finally acted by sending a force led by Taira no Masamori (?–1121), a seasoned warrior. A confrontation ensued during which some 40 Kōfukuji followers were killed, whereas only two fatalities occurred among the government warriors.<sup>13</sup>

Based on the overall lack of punishment of clerics involved in these types of conflicts, the court appears to have been less concerned with the identity of the fighters than with the general spread of violence in society. Indeed, as argued below, there was nothing that set this particular form of violence apart in terms of what the clerics fought for, their ideological justification, who fought, or how they fought. Let us turn to the identity of violent clerics and their preferred weaponry before addressing the ideological context.

#### 4. Monastic Warriors and Warfare

Twentieth-century depictions of monastic forces have, as argued elsewhere, focused on the largely fictive figure of the *sōhei* 僧兵, or “monk-warriors.” Drawing from artistic representations from the fourteenth century, this image first emerged as a coherent literary concept in the early Tokugawa period. The term itself was likely imported from Korea in the late sixteenth century, when Toyotomi Hideyoshi’s forces encountered fierce resistance from Korean “monk-warriors” (*sunghyōng*) (Adolphson 2007, p. 146). The Tokugawa samurai, despising any other warrior history than their own, attached a negative stereotype to all clergy involved in violence, and they continued to use the same image to criticize the perceived greed of religious institutions and to curb any challenge to their own political, social and cultural superiority. This side of the story is in itself fascinating, but what is most perplexing is how modern scholars bought into the fabricated image of the *sōhei* wholesale. Thus, the notion of “religious warfare” in Japan centered on monastic warriors dressed in monk robes, wearing head cowls and wooden clogs while fighting in muddy battlefields, usually using their distinctive glaives (*naginata*), a type of long sword.<sup>14</sup> Ludicrous as this image is, it remained so strong that even when common sense would have dictated that such battle attire would be highly impractical, or when both contemporary diaries and later artistic depictions contradicted it, few scholars questioned it.<sup>15</sup> In reality, those fighting for temples in premodern Japan were identical to those fighting for nobles or the imperial court. They came from one of two groups: local land managers and their retainers

<sup>12</sup> (*Chūyūki* 1965, Tennin 1 (1108) 3/20, 23, 30, 4/2; DNS 1903–).

<sup>13</sup> (*Denryaku* 1956, Eikyū 1 (1113) int. 3/20, 21, 22, 29, 4/1; *Chōshūki* 1965, Eikyū 1/int. 3/20, 21, 22, 4/1, 30, 5/4; DNS 1903–; *Tendai zasu ki* 1973, pp. 77–78). See also (Adolphson 2007, pp. 38–39).

<sup>14</sup> For a full analysis of the *sōhei* paradigm in Japanese scholarship, see Adolphson (2007, pp. 7–20).

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Matsudaira Ken’s efforts to fight with a *naginata* on horseback in the 2005 NHK *taiga drama* series “Yoshitsune.” For a telling example of a rather uncritical scholarly approach to monastic warfare, see Watanabe Morimichi (1984).

who had armed themselves to perform their duties and expand their control, or mid- to low-level aristocrats who armed themselves to make careers as provincial officers or guards in the capital.

A serious investigation soon reveals that commanders of monastic forces were of the same stock as those who led any other armed men. Indeed, they came from the same families, such as the Minamoto, the Taira or the Fujiwara—all descendants from the mid-level nobles who had become “bridging figures” between the capital elites and local administrators and strongmen.<sup>16</sup> About a dozen or so of those monastic commanders are known to us through historical records. Among them none is better documented and perhaps more infamous than Shinjitsu (1086–?), who is characterized in one source as “Japan’s number one evil, martial monk.”<sup>17</sup> A descendant of the Seiwa Minamoto, Shinjitsu came from a long line of military leaders who had served in various capacities in estate management and provincial administration. His father, Minamoto no Yoriyasu (n.d.), was known as a “troublemaker” because of his attempts to appropriate land for his own gain.<sup>18</sup> Shinjitsu was not much different from his ancestors, except that he served the Fujiwara family temple of Kōfukuji in Nara rather than a courtier or the imperial court in Kyoto. Indeed, while Shinjitsu was involved in disputes focusing on his monastery, he was no less a warrior than his predecessors. The question, of course, is whether the identity of his master changed the way in which he acted and fought, and how he was perceived by the world around him.

In the early twelfth century, Kōfukuji had become an arena for competition between different factions at the imperial court in Kyoto, mainly because the temple controlled many important court rituals but also because it held numerous estates and branch institutions. For example, in 1129 the new retired emperor Toba (1103–56, r. 1105–23, in 1123–56), who had gained control of the court following the death of his grandfather, wanted to promote one of his monk-allies to a prominent position at Kōfukuji. Yet several clerics opposed this form of favoritism, and it led to an attack on the unsuspecting monk when he traveled back to Kyoto after an event in Nara. Toba, enraged by this assault, sent government warriors led by renowned military leaders to punish the “evil monks” (*akusō*). This resulted in the sacking of the head abbot and in several of the instigators being sent into exile. As far as we can tell, Shinjitsu was not directly involved, but he was punished and then soon pardoned thanks to the intervention of Kōfukuji’s secular patron, Fujiwara no Tadazane (1078–162).<sup>19</sup>

Shinjitsu’s influence subsequently grew within the monastic compound and, by the 1140s, he had become a central figure despite his lack of training in the Hossō doctrines or his overall mastery of Buddhist rituals. He may have reached the peak of his prestige in 1148, when he was in charge of the temple in the absence of a head abbot, something that was virtually unprecedented. Support from one of the Fujiwara leaders was apparently enough to allow him effectively to lead Kōfukuji for three full years until the appointment of a new head abbot (Adolphson 2007, p. 97). Eventually, his career came to a halt with the Hōgen Incident of 1156, when two feuding factions within both the imperial family and the Fujiwara regent’s branch resorted to violence to resolve their competition for control of the imperial court. Many military leaders were drawn into this court conflict, the first time in centuries that armed men were used to settle a political dispute within the imperial capital of Kyoto. Shinjitsu was one of the commanders called in to support his secular ally, Fujiwara no Tadazane. A later war tale notes that the monk-commander was to contribute a full 1000 individuals out of the 1600 troops siding with Tadazane, the highest proportion of warriors. Unfortunately for Tadazane, his generals seem to have hesitated too long, so that his opponents struck first before Shinjitsu and his forces could

<sup>16</sup> Jeffrey P. Mass first argued the central importance of these “bridging figures.” (Mass 1990, p. 49).

<sup>17</sup> (*Sonpi bunmyaku* 1962, 3: 162; *Kōfukuji bettō sangō keizu* n.d., p. 27).

<sup>18</sup> (*Sonpi bunmyaku* 1962, 3: 162; *Kōfukuji bettō sangō keizu* n.d., p. 27; Tsunoda 1977, pp. 339–40). It is worth noting that Shinjitsu was also a direct descendant of the aforementioned Minamoto no Mitsunaka.

<sup>19</sup> (*Kōfukuji bettō shidai* 1917, pp. 13–14; *Chōshūki* 1965, Daiji 4 (1129) 11/11, 12, 21, 24, 28, 30; *Chūyūki* 1965, Daiji 4/11/12, 25, 29).

reach Kyoto. Shinjitsu was forced to return to Nara without engaging the enemy forces, and he was subsequently neutralized within Kōfukuji.<sup>20</sup>

Compared to Shinjitsu and other monk-commanders, few sources offer details about the rank-and-file clerics who engaged in violence. A careful examination of historical records reveals, however, that they came from diverse backgrounds, despite many scholars' attempts to pinpoint one group or another as corresponding to the *sōhei*. In general, we can distinguish between those who resided within the monastic complexes and were members of the clergy, and those who resided in branch temples or in estates controlled by a temple. Among the clergy, a number of terms were used to refer to those who took up arms: *daishu* 大 (clergy), *dōshu* 堂 (hall clerics), *akusō* 憎 (evil monks) or *jinnin* 神人 (shrine people) (Adolphson 2000, pp. 58–71).<sup>21</sup> These resident clerics generally hailed from a lower background; they took care of keeping grounds, prepared for rituals, and assumed the general management of buildings and services. The terms used to describe these groups could differ between monasteries, though *akusō* was generally reserved for clerics considered to have violated the order or acted against the interests of the temple in general. These will be discussed below in more detail.

Armed supporters residing away from the monastery were identical to the warrior-administrators and their retainers, who served secular masters in various *shōen*. As long as they delivered levies and managed the estates according to expectations, they received protection from their patrons, which in turn enabled them to gain more power in the local arena. Occasionally, they were called to support their patrons in factional confrontations in the capital, at which time they are referred to in chronicles and diaries with different combinations of the character for “warrior” (*hei* 兵), such as *zuihei* 隨兵 (accompanying warriors), *gunpei* 軍兵 (warrior bands), *heishi* 兵士 (warriors), or *bushi* 武士 (military men). The most telling example involving temples dates to the 1113 conflict between Enryakuji and Kōfukuji, when one of the nobles wrote in his diary that “the clergy of the Southern Capital riot incessantly, assembling warrior bands [*gunpei*] from Kinpusen and Yoshino, as well as estate and provincial residents of Yamato. They all carry bows and arrows, following the lead of the Kōfukuji clergy.”<sup>22</sup> Other terms are also used in contemporary sources but, whatever they are called, there are no signs of any *sōhei*. Those who fought for temples were simply armed men, nothing more.

When it comes to discussing the type of weapons used and warfare strategies, it is easy to see that applying the category of “religious warfare” to premodern Japan is grossly misplaced. Later narratives as well as most scholarly accounts tend to emphasize the *naginata* as the preferred weapon for the *sōhei*. However, even idealized literary and pictorial sources depict monastic warriors using the full range of weapons one would expect any warrior to use. For example, the *Heike monogatari* (*The Tale of the Heike*) repeatedly describes monastic warriors using bows and arrows, swords, dirks, as well as the *naginata*.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, some records also mention clerics who mastered the ultimate skill among warriors: shooting arrows while riding a galloping horse. We see this in later picture scrolls but also in a temple record, which indicates that novices at Tōdaiji had acquired some skills in *yabusame* (rapid shooting from horseback) and *kasagake* (long-distance shooting from horseback). In picture scrolls, we find mounted archers in a number of works, such as the *Kasuga gongen kenki e* (early fourteenth century). Though some picture scrolls, especially those of later ages, tend to include head cowls to distinguish monastic warriors from other fighters, numerous scrolls also show temple warriors looking exactly like secular forces (Adolphson 2007, pp. 79–83, 132–35).

Additional similarities between lay warriors and their clerical counterparts in the way they conducted warfare include the use of barricades and simple fortifications, which were common in the siege and position warfare of the late Heian and Kamakura eras. These barricades were not

<sup>20</sup> (*Hōgen Monogatari* 1961, 85, 125; *Heihanki* 1965, Hōgen 1 (1156) 7/11).

<sup>21</sup> For a more in-depth treatment of the *dōshu*, see (Adolphson 2012, pp. 263–82).

<sup>22</sup> (*Chūyūki* 1965, Eikyū 1 (1113) 4/14; DNS 1903–). See also Adolphson (2007, pp. 71–78).

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, the fascinating description of Jōmyō Meishu in McCullough (1988, pp. 153–54, 194–95). (See also *Genpei seisuiki* 1927, p. 579).

fortifications with wooden palisades, but more commonly simply piles of debris or mounds made of earth, meant to slow down the advance of troops; they also served as protection for warriors firing arrows. In short, everything in the *modus operandi* of monastic warriors faithfully reflects techniques that were not reserved to a specific group of religious warriors but belonged to the emerging warrior class in general. Historical sources make it abundantly clear that armed monastics were nothing like the coherent groups of *sōhei* shown in later sources. Rather, they simply participated in the increasing tendency to solve conflicts through the use of arms, a practice that had become common across Japanese society from the tenth century onward.

## 5. The Ideological Framework

The incidents referred to so far indicate that any attempt to separate the spheres of court politics from religious competition and violence is doomed to misrepresent the context and history of late Heian and Kamakura Japan. To be sure, some conflicts also seem to have little to do with actions taken by members of the court elites, but this misleading perception rests on the assumption that people can act in a vacuum and that they can make decisions disconnected from their own socio-historical context. In contrast, it is argued here that the very setting of this era was based on rules for cooperation that also implied competition among the various elites. This ultimately led members of the lower echelons to promote their own interests while keeping in mind the crucial patronage of their elite masters. The major question here is not why specific violent events involving clerics occurred, but rather to ask what constituted the mental framework—or *mentalité*—of the age, and how it allowed religious institutions to play such a prominent role.

At the most basic level, religious rhetoric is largely absent; very little transpires in terms of justifying violence committed by Buddhist clerics. When we do find such statements, they either deplore the general decline in the state of affairs, or they simply display inconsistencies, at times criticizing clerics for carrying weapons, at times encouraging them to do so. Since evidence for the condemnation of religious violence on doctrinal grounds is lacking, at least in Japan's early medieval period, we should ask whether religious rhetoric was used to justify violence, but it is similarly difficult to find statements to that effect. For instance, members of the traditional schools certainly accused the newer schools that emphasized Amida Buddha of being a misguided form of Buddhism, but even in those cases such rhetoric is peppered with concerns about losing patrons, funding and religious appointments. The case of the Jōdo Shinshū (True Pure Land) believers and their recruitment of commoners to fight for their faith seems to constitute one exception from the premodern period, although it belongs to the late medieval era of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Nevertheless, since recent research has increasingly highlighted the non-religious rhetoric in the recruitment and battle rhetoric, even in these cases it seems to have played a much less important role than what modern scholars assumed, although it was not entirely nonexistent. The uprisings of the Warring States Period were about taxation and local political control, and those led by the believers of the True Pure Land sect were similar to other *gekokujō* ("the lower overturning those above") movements of their time (See, for example, [Tsang 2007](#)).

An ideological framework prevailed during this period within which such cleric-led violence could occur. During Japan's early medieval age, we can in particular identify three sets of ideas that played a large part in justifying the engagement in armed conflicts of monastics, their precepts notwithstanding. First, while Buddhist texts, including the *Brahma's Net Sutra* (*Bonmōkyō*), specifically prohibit both the possession and use of arms, Buddhist literature also includes depictions of deities using arms to battle demons or other threats. The well-known Four Heavenly Kings (*Shitennō*), frequently depicted with weapons and fierce expressions, can be seen among the statues at Tōdaiji and on numerous paintings. Although this type of justification is rarely used in texts from the Heian and Kamakura periods, the very existence of these deities in the Buddhist pantheon provided armed clerics with a visual clue allowing them to circumvent the strict prohibitions against carrying arms and killing.

Unlike Europe, however, there was no evil “other” to fight in medieval Japan. As a political entity, Japan was in many ways a state infused with Buddhism, given the plethora of Buddhist ceremonies performed by a range of monastic centers for both individual families linked with the court and the state at large. Although such rituals were performed by different schools and at different temples, and were sponsored by different factions, particular temples would be hard pressed to justify attacks on other temples from a doctrinal perspective since, ultimately, they were all committed to protecting the state through Buddhism. This brings us to the second type of ideological justification, known as the “interdependence between Imperial Law and Buddhist Law” (*ōbō buppō sōe*).<sup>24</sup> The concept first appears in a tenth-century document, which explains that a violation of the Imperial Law was also a crime against the Buddhist Dharma. A more explicit case emphasizing their interdependence emerges in 1053, in an appeal filed by an estate manager from Tōdaiji, where the complainant compares the laws of the state and those of Buddhism to the two wings of a bird and to the two wheels of a cart.<sup>25</sup> The interdependence of these spheres was used to justify violence in times of a perceived decline, when Buddhism could be seen as the final line of defense to protect the imperial state. Such notions were especially strong in the late tenth and eleventh centuries, when ideas about Buddhism’s decline (*mappō*, “the end of the law”) had become prevalent among the noble elites. In fact, comments in diaries about religious disturbances rarely characterize clerics as breaking codes forbidding violent behavior; rather, they lament the general state of affairs reflected in such violations of order, which disturb the laws of the Buddha and of the state.

That the monasteries and their residents also subscribed to this type of ideology positing interdependence with secular power is hardly surprising. In fact, it was this ideology that lay behind the practice of “divine demonstrations” (*gōso* 強訴・嗽訴), by which the clergy would march to the capital, carrying portable shrines containing *kami* symbols, thereby protesting a decision made by the court or a specific policy. Such protests emerged in the late eleventh century and remained frequent until the late fourteenth century, when they lost their efficacy once the warrior aristocracy had assumed power. Following the idea of interdependence, any of the carriages that was damaged during the protest would be rebuilt at the court’s expense. Accordingly, these protests were also predicated on the elite temples’ close association with the welfare of the state. When decisions regarding the promotion of monks, the appointment of head abbots, or disputes over land rights were perceived to endanger the temple, its residents would equate the decline of their institution with the state of the court. As a result, the court was frequently forced to accede to the demands of the clergy because of the fear that negligence of the elite temples would make matters worse within their own realm (Adolphson 2000, pp. 272–73).

The third type of ideological justification is less widely known but nonetheless important. Based on an idea that a unified community had the support of the *kami*, there was a sense that a unanimous group would be justified in its actions against policies or decisions made by those in charge. Hailing from local beliefs and sometimes used by villages in opposing what the inhabitants considered unfair practices, this idea—articulated as *ichimi dōshin* 一味同心 (fellows of one heart)—was occasionally adopted by monastic communities. In a world dominated by hierarchies and vertical ties, community solidarity and opinions defended by a majority were rather uncommon. In spite of this general social orientation, in this regard monastic communities show some remarkable exceptions. For example, whereas noble rank served as the determining factor at court, theoretically monastic organizations based their hierarchical rankings on the number of years since ordination rather than on social standing. Indeed, for the first half of the Heian period, most promotions followed this principle. Yet from the late tenth century onward, an increasing number of sons of the nobility were sent to monasteries,

<sup>24</sup> Historians often read the expression as *ōbō buppō sōi* as opposed to *sōe*. Here, I have followed the pronunciation suggested by Nakamura Hajime in his *Kōsetsu bukkyōgo daijiten* (Tokyo: Tōkyō shoseki, 2001), vol. 2, p. 1057b.

<sup>25</sup> (Adolphson 2000, p. 272; *Heian ibun* 1963–1974, vol. 3, document 702), *Mino no kuni shōshi jūnin ra gesu*, Tengi 1 (1053) seventh month; (Kuroda 1980, p. 48).

where they would be fast-tracked to abbotships. By the late Heian and Kamakura, we find mainly head abbots and abbots of noble descent leading religious institutions and important ceremonies. Still, the idea that the clergy had certain rights even vis-à-vis their own masters remained central in the ideological framework of this age, and the clergy used *ichimi dōshin* to assert that if there was unanimous consent about specific issues or grievances, they had “divine justification” for the course of action proposed. At Kōfukuji, such special rights were called *Yamashina dōri* (Yamashina justice), named after the purported first location of the temple when it was founded (Adolphson 2007, pp. 64–65; Adolphson 2000, pp. 271–72). The most telling example of this kind of group mentality may be an incident dating to 1142, when a group of armed Onjōji clerics ascended Mount Hiei to wreak havoc and burn five buildings in one of the monastic precincts. Two ringleaders were detained and interrogated about the attack, but they defended themselves by claiming that they acted on behalf of the entire clergy, invoking the idea of *ichimi dōshin*.<sup>26</sup>

It is in the context of *ichimi dōshin* that we must consider the term *akusō* (“evil monks”), which constitutes one of the most significant terms of this period. In contrast to the notion of divine justice granted to an entire group, the term *akusō* was used to describe individual members who acted on their own without the approval of the clergy. In the aforementioned attack on Enryakuji in 1142, the two ringleaders expressly attempted to avoid being labeled *akusō* by using the notion of divine justice. In another incident from that same year, we find that 15 “evil monks” from Kōfukuji were exiled to the province of Mutsu in northern Japan for being rebellious.<sup>27</sup> Clearly, then, not all *akusō* were armed, despite the tendency among modern scholars to equate *akusō* with *sōhei*. In fact, a diary entry from 1104 indicates that armed clerics and “evil monks” were not always seen as one and the same. In the tenth month of that year, two military leaders were ordered “to secure the western and eastern sides of Mount Hiei, and to arrest evil monks and *tomogara* [fellows] carrying arms who ascend the mountain.”<sup>28</sup> The contrast here between “evil monks,” who may or may not be armed, and *tomogara* who generally do carry arms, reflects a clear notion that monks may be in the “evil” category for a number of reasons, while clerics ascending Mount Hiei with arms were to be arrested for their militant gear. Another way to gain a better understanding of how this term was used is to look at the Historiographical Institute’s database, which reveals that about one third of the occurrences of *akusō* refer to the appropriation of harvests or to intrusions in landed estates, while less than one fourth can clearly be linked to the use of arms.<sup>29</sup>

The term *akusō* is thus far from a definitive term, and it rather reflected the range of biases held by rulers and courtiers writing at the time. Furthermore, the adjective “evil” was not reserved for members of the cloth. We find numerous compounds including this term, ranging from “evil bands” (*akutō*), “evil people” (*akunin*), to “evil deeds” (*akugyō*). Its use can appear rather arbitrary, since we find the same people variously assigned to both sides of the good-versus-evil divide. For example, in the Genpei War of 1180–85, the anti-Heike faction repeatedly called upon temples such as Onjōji to step in militarily, although they are not referred to as “evil” in those instances. An even more telling example may be the Ashikaga shogunate, which first encouraged Jōdo Shinshū believers to rebel against a local warlord, but some 20 years earlier had explicitly ordered the sect’s head to stop any such activities (Tsang 2007). In short, when it suited the rulers or the patrons, temple forces were not called “evil,” revealing that such labels depended entirely on the circumstances and on the perspective of the dominant or victorious factions in Kyoto. Given the context of these utterances, it also stands to

<sup>26</sup> (*Heian ibun* 1963–1974, 6: 2073–74, document 2471), “Onjōji sō Chōjun ra shinji ki,” *Kōji* 1 (1142) 5/8; (*Honchō seiki* 1935, *Kōji* 1/3/17).

<sup>27</sup> (*Taiki* 1965, *Kōji* 1 (1142) 8/3).

<sup>28</sup> (*Chūyūki* 1965, *Chōji* 1 (1104) 10/30).

<sup>29</sup> See author’s search done in 2004, cited in (Adolphson 2007, pp. 63, 173), fn. 15. For the database, see *Tōkyō Daigaku Shiryō Hensansho* (n.d.).

reason that from the perspective of the noble elites, religious rhetoric did not need to play a major role, since armed monastics were just as often recruited as they were criticized.

## 6. Conclusions

Although modern observers have frequently condemned violent activities by clerics in premodern Japan, historical sources dating to that period do not provide any support for the idea that “religious violence” was somehow less acceptable or worse than any other form of violence. In fact, in early medieval Japan, there was no such thing as “religious violence,” since it was not viewed differently from any other form of violence, and there was no way of separating one from the other because, ultimately, they resulted from competition over the same things: patronage, factionalism, rankings and assets. Condemned activities, rather, included those considered to be defying social order or “illegal” from the perspective of those in power. Indeed, criticism of violent clerics on doctrinal grounds is rare. The main concern, rather, was that of order and respect of the hierarchical structures in tones similar to those found in noble diaries of the same period. When criticism of armed clerics emerged, it cannot be taken as a blanket disapproval of religious violence; in the court-centered polity of Heian and Kamakura Japan, it reflected one facet of a broader understanding of order and harmony.

It is equally futile to look for “religious warfare” in premodern Japan. Those who fought mostly came from the same category of lower-level menial workers or land administrators, and their affiliation with the clergy or lack thereof was secondary. Unlike the Tokugawa age, in these earlier times warfare and the carrying of arms were not the privilege of a single class. Anyone with the inclination to do so could engage in armed conflict. Those who fought, be it for nobles or for temples, emerged from the same setting, sharing their resources, their fighting techniques, and often the same surnames. The creation of the *sōhei*—monastic warriors with distinct backgrounds and warfare strategies—is thus a later construct, partially designed to promote a “purer” version of the warrior class we now refer to as the samurai. Those who did take up arms for their temples and shrines included individuals from remarkably diverse backgrounds but who nonetheless usually were linked to a particular master. This is why it would be more appropriate to talk about monastic violence, as long as we understand that it refers to the institutional affiliation of those who fought and not necessarily to a specific mode of warfare.

In the end, it is the ideological context of violence that informs us best about the conditions of premodern Japan. The coexistence of cases where the use of arms by clerics was both criticized and praised indicates an ambiguous and perhaps malleable setting. In part, this seems to derive from the Buddhist doctrine itself, since textual and visual elements left the door open for followers of temples and shrines to take up arms legitimately in defense of Buddhism, and by extension in defense of the state. Yet, in the particular case of Japan, this broad tolerance of violent action appears less grounded in legal or moral principles regarding violence than in a general desire for order in society. When monks and their retainers were criticized for violent behavior, it was because they had chosen the wrong side within the imperial order, and when they were praised it was because they had sided with the winning side in the factional struggles stemming from the court. As long as the imperial court and the Buddhist Law were seen as interdependent, and as long as members of a community could claim divine justice based on the idea that it resulted from the consensus of “fellows of one heart,” no doctrinal obstacle could prevent the existence of armed clerics and monasteries. The notion of “religious violence” was foreign to both nobles and commoners of the medieval period and, accordingly, we should abstain from projecting this concept belonging to the modern world onto premodern times.

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