

**NONE BUT “WE HEATHEN”: SHAKU SŌEN AT THE WORLD’S PARLIAMENT OF  
RELIGIONS**

by

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The aftermath of the performance by the Japanese delegation at the World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 has been well documented—it marked the beginning of the West’s introduction to Japanese Buddhism. What has been less well documented is the intellectual background and influences that went into producing that performance, in particular the performance of the man who would eventually emerge as the delegation’s most historically prominent member, Shaku Sōen (1859-1919). This paper attempts to use Sōen as a case study to examine the intellectual and political milieu which Japanese Buddhism helped to inform, and was informed by, during the Meiji Era (1868-1912). It draws upon established research, as well as primary sources (including Sōen’s own Parliament addresses, writings, and journals) in order to support this examination.

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## PREFACE

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The World's Parliament of Religions at the Columbian Exposition of 1893 was a moment of religious convocation that was unique for its time, in its execution if not in its culturally Darwinist guiding principles. A convocation of every major world religion, massive in its scope and realization, the Parliament was, for its architects, a noble undertaking that was meant to demonstrate to the world not only the arrival of the United States—and, in particular, American Protestant Christianity—as a cultural power the equal of Europe, but also the ascendancy of that same American Protestantism as the enlightening philosophy of the new, modern age, which would cover the world and show the other religions—who “grop[ed] in a dimmer illumination,” according to the Parliament's chair, the clergyman John Henry Barrows—the redundancy of their beliefs in the light of Christianity's all-encompassing, ultimate truth (Barrows 1893: 28).

In light of the attitude of the Protestant architects of the Parliament of Religions, the question naturally arises: what were the attitudes of those non-Christian parliamentarians of 1893 to this convocation? To pursue the question further, what would have convinced them to take part in an event in which, from the start, they knew they would be on the defensive, and be required to take part in debates that were consistently and deliberately skewed to favor a Christian world view? It is beyond the scope of this paper to take into account the reactions and motivations of all of the scores of religionists who took part (among them Jews, Hindus, Muslims, Confucians, Eastern Orthodox Christians, Indian Buddhists and others); however, I



would like to turn attention to the Japanese Buddhist delegation to the Parliament, and in particular, the figure of Shaku Sōen 釈宗演 (1859—1919), the priest who came to the Parliament as the nominal representative of the Rinzai sect of Zen, and a man hailed by his Japanese biographer as the “high priest of Meiji and Taisho” (Inoue 2000: 2) and by Natsume Sōseki as embodying “wisdom itself” (Inoue 2000: 2). Sōen was the virtual embodiment of the cosmopolitan “New Buddhist”—a temple priest well-traveled and educated in Western learning, who corresponded with Leo Tolstoy and had an audience with President Theodore Roosevelt (Victoria 1997: 29, 59).

Recent scholarship has begun to address the issue of the Asian delegations to the World’s Parliament, after some decades during which the World’s Parliament as a whole was only occasionally treated with serious scholarly inquiry, and the non-Christian delegations even less often. In particular, recent research by Judith Snodgrass, James Ketelaar, and John Harding has shed much needed light on the Japanese contributions to the Parliament. Their research, thorough as it is, leads to a tantalizing question that I feel calls out for a fuller and lengthier investigation: what concerns led Sōen—D.T. Suzuki’s master and the man who, arguably, did more to light the spark of twentieth century Zen than any other single individual—to decide to undertake the journey to the Parliament, and what concerns informed his presentations there? Moreover, what were Sōen’s attitudes toward Christianity, the framework religious worldview of the Parliament? In what contexts, both on the national and on the personal levels, might Sōen have forged these attitudes? It is my contention that Sōen was making an attempt to contribute to a religious front in the struggle for parity between Japan and the West, a struggle that had already taken on military/industrial and political forms. He desired to show, through his addresses and performance at the World’s Parliament, as well as subsequent writings and

addresses, that Eastern Buddhism<sup>1</sup>—a magnanimous appellation that served to overstep sectarian division and construct Japanese Buddhism as a culmination and apotheosis of Buddhism at large—was equal to, if not superior to, Christianity and was better suited as a religion of the modern, empirical age, because it was not only “authentically ancient” but also “pragmatically modern,” in Harding’s formulation (2003: 158). It was a conclusion that perhaps finds one of its threads in the two-year sojourn that Sōen took to Ceylon, during which he had had the opportunity to witness firsthand the effects of colonialization and the rapacious desire of missionizing Christianity to overtake and swallow other religions. Another possible thread was a new kind of Buddhist apologetics emerging in the middle of the Meiji Period (1868-1912), exemplified by a new class of educated, Japanese “New Buddhists”, who attempted to reform and bolster Buddhism domestically through recourse to the Western-style learning that Tokyo Imperial University, Keio University, and other institutions were beginning to offer young, ambitious Japanese. As such, Sōen’s addresses represent part of a trend among Meiji intellectuals to gain parity for Japan by promoting it amongst the world community, while at the same time refusing to reject what they viewed as unique aspects of Japanese culture.

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<sup>1</sup> Following James Ketelaar, I have conflated the terms “Eastern Buddhism” and “Japanese Buddhism” when discussing the particular Buddhism presented by Sōen and the other delegates at the World’s Parliament of Religions (1990: 160, et passim). I have decided to eschew the appellation “Mahāyāna Buddhism” (except where specifically quoted from sources) as Sōen, et al. regarded this “Eastern Buddhism” as an apotheosized Mahāyāna (a point to which I will return) found uniquely in Japan, and were largely unconcerned with representing or defending Buddhism as it was practiced in China, Korea, Tibet, or other parts of Asia.

## **2.0 THE MEIJI STRUGGLE: PARITY THROUGH MODERNIZATION**

During the Meiji Period in Japan, prominent intellectuals verbalized a philosophy of modernization, but grappled with how to modernize the nation without forsaking its indigenous forms and foundations. This modernization was not simply modernization for its own sake, but was rather aimed at achieving parity with the Western powers.

### **2.1 UNEQUAL TREATIES AND *FUKOKU KYŌHEI***

In the decade and a half preceding the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the Japanese had had to endure a series of unequal treaties forced upon them, first by the Americans, and then by the British. In 1854, the Convention of Kanagawa had opened up Japanese ports to American ships, guaranteed the safety of shipwrecked sailors, and established a permanent U.S. consul in Japan. In 1858, the Harris Treaty between Japan and the U.S. further solidified American gains, with more ports opened to not only American but also other origins of foreign trade, the freedom of U.S. nationals to live and work in those ports, a forced exchange of diplomatic agents, and, most galling of all, rights of extra-territoriality for resident aliens. The Anglo-Japanese Treaty of Amity and Commerce, brokered the same year as the Harris Treaty, allowed British subjects to live in Edo and Osaka, and opened up additional ports to British trade.

This series of humiliations, as well as the vivid awareness that China and Korea were suffering the same indignities, with China being afforded the further indignity of being effectively colonized and sliced into European spheres of influence, led the Meiji government to conclude that the only way to avoid continued humiliation and a similar fate of colonialization for Japan was to develop national political and industrial forms on par with those of the Americans and Europeans.

The Meiji leaders could see that, so long as Japan lagged behind in industrial development and military matters, it would never be treated as an equal by the Western powers. As Mikiso Hane has pointed out, the Meiji bureaucracy was interested in winning for Japan a place of parity among nations, so that they, too, could play the game of international politics (Hane 2001: 92). This urgency for modernizing the nation was summed up in the slogan *fukoku kyōhei* 富国強兵 (“Enrich and strengthen the nation”).

Under the banner of *fukoku kyōhei*, the initial decade of the Meiji era was characterized by a sort of Western frenzy, with not only Western industrial and military methods adopted, but also Western modes of fashion and philosophy. In 1870, the Ministry of Public Works was established, and in 1873, the Home Ministry followed it, each charged with the duty of bringing in foreign technology and laying the groundwork for a juggernaut manufacturing sector. In 1871, a modern army was established; in January, 1873, the government promulgated a conscription law, requiring all male subjects to serve a minimum of three years in active duty, and an additional four years in a reserve capacity. (It was modeled on the French military system.) As a result of the industry of the public works ministry, there were 2,000 miles of railroad track, 100,000 tons of steamships, and 4,000 miles of telegraph lines in 1893. In a material sense, at least, Japan was on its way to parity with the Western powers.

By 1878, school attendance was up to 40% (Hane 2001: 112). The educational system of early Meiji was thoroughly Western-inspired, and was formulated under the inspiration of Fukuzawa Yukichi 福沢諭吉(1834-1901), who had encouraged Western learning and a de-emphasis on classical Confucian and Shintō learning in works like *Gakumon no susume* 学問のすすめ (“Encouragement of Learning”, 1872-1876) and *Bunmeiron no gairyaku* 文明論之概略 (“Outline of Civilization”, 1875). Before a conservative, anti-Western tide began in the mid-1880s (which swung the pendulum back towards Confucian education and State Shintō indoctrination, culminating in the Imperial Rescript on Education in 1890), a number of the most prominent sources of Western learning came from Christian missionaries, who were serving as important conduits for Western knowledge, and who counted among their students important Meiji leaders like Saigō Takamori 西郷隆盛 (1827-1877) and Ōkuma Shigenobu 大隈重信 (1838-1922). One of these missionaries, Guido Verbeck (1830-1898), drew more than a thousand students to a lecture he gave on the New Testament and the US Constitution in 1871 (Hane 2001: 115-116).

In the interest of winning revision of the unequal treaties that had been concluded under duress during the *bakumatsu* period (as well as to pay the emperor’s respects to foreign dignitaries and conduct an investigation of Western culture), the Meiji government sent abroad a delegation of diplomats and government officials to meet with leaders throughout the United States and Europe. The Iwakura Mission (1871-1873) took a group of Japanese politicians and intellectuals on a tour through the Western world, and they returned at once in awe of, and dismayed at, the advancement of the Europeans and Americans—as well as empty-handed in their quest to win treaty revision. Kido Takayoshi 木戸孝允 (1833-1877), an important Meiji minister who was part of the Iwakura Mission, despairingly wrote home from America that the

“present civilization” of Japan was not “true civilization” at all, and that the Western governments had made it clear that they would never begin to treat Japan as an equal until she reformed herself politically (McClain 2002: 173). After they returned home in August, 1873, the oligarchs set about laying out the various forms of government they had encountered on their voyage. The American model they discarded as too liberal and anti-authoritarian, while the Spanish and French models struck them as too inclined to despotism. Finally, they settled upon the Prussian model, which allowed for the establishment of a parliamentary system, but which still situated sovereignty and authority in the person of the monarch.

Despite, or perhaps as a result of, the rapid advancements Japan was making in her quest for modernization, an uneasiness regarding national identity emerged. Although Japan had been ambivalent towards the West since Commodore Matthew Perry’s black ships arrived in Yokohama in 1853, the eagerness with which the Meiji reformers pursued modernization, and with which many cosmopolites adopted Western modes of dress, food, and even speech, led to a sense among some that something purportedly authentically Japanese was in danger of being lost in the struggle for parity. Although this distrust of the reforming mentality of the Meiji oligarchs may be said to have culminated with the failed revolt of Saigō Takamori in 1877, distrust of supposedly inauthentic cultural phenomena never entirely disappeared, and was only exacerbated by the continued ill treatment of Japan by the Western powers, and religious disorder at home.

## **2.2 RELIGIOUS RHETORIC OF MODERNIZATION: THE NEW BUDDHISM**

Developments in domestic religion continued apace with the industrial and military developments of Meiji, in ways that would have a profound effect on the intellectual

development of young Shaku Sōen. In the third month of 1868, the Meiji government had ordered the separation of Shintō and Buddhism, and the centuries-old policy of *shinbutsu shūgō* 神仏習合 (“Shintō/Buddhist overlap”) gave way to an attempt at their complete separation—*shinbutsu bunri* 神仏分離. In the ensuing schism, Buddhism was accused of being a “foreign” religion, inauthentically Japanese, and insufficiently patriotic compared to Shintō, which would be elevated in the 1889 Constitution to the status of established religion. During the *haibutsu kishaku* 廃仏毀釈 campaign, temples and land were seized, and priceless art treasures expropriated. The government policy of *shinbutsu bunri* had slid into open persecution and harassment, and between 1871 and 1876, the number of temples declined from 465,049 to 71,692, and the number of monks from 75,925 in 1872 to 19,490 in 1876. In 1872, the government announced that henceforth monks were allowed to marry and keep non-vegetarian diets, a bitter blow to centuries of practice that Buddhists traced back to Shakyamuni Buddha himself.

Ironically, the response to this persecution was not bitterness or open rebellion, but rather a strategy of accommodation. In response to accusations of uselessness to the state or lack of patriotism, Buddhist intellectuals developed a movement that came to be known as *Shinbukyō* 新仏教 (New Buddhism), which strived to show how Buddhism could be useful to the state, and motivate the emperor’s subjects to greater loyalty and self-sacrifice. Ketelaar identifies New Buddhism as, first of all, “social” (1990: 164). That is to say, social in the sense of being useful to the people at the grassroots level, through operation of Buddhist social organizations, charities, hospitals, and other endeavors, as well as (or, rather, especially) being useful to the state at the highest levels by publicly supporting and providing practical support for official Meiji policies. More than that, though, New Buddhism was to be constructed as

“compatible with scientific principles and evolutionary laws” (Ketelaar 1990: 164) and to use the new Western learning in accordance with a “rational operation of the Buddha dharma” (Ketelaar 1990: 167). Put a different way, New Buddhism was “enlightened to the demands of a modern, industrial, urban, and cosmopolitan society” (Ketelaar 1990: 86).

The Buddhists formulated a number of replies to government slogans such as *fukoku kyōhei*, like *sonnō hōbutsu* (“revere the emperor and serve the Buddha”), *aikoku gohō* (“love the nation and protect the Dharma”), and *kōzen gokoku* (“protect the country by propagating Zen”), all intended to demonstrate in slogan form the usefulness of Buddhism to the state, and its patriotic sincerity (Davis 1989: 308). New Buddhism proved its usefulness to the state in various ways, including assisting in the settling of Hokkaido, in order to help “prevent European and Christian expansion” onto the Japanese doorstep (Ketelaar 1990: 73). Also, New Buddhists formed trans-sectarian organizations like the Organization of United Buddhist Sects, whose stated goals were to “promote the inseparability of the Kingly Law and the Buddhist law” (Ketelaar 1990: 73), i.e. to reinforce the consonance of Buddhist teachings and praxis with the new emperor-centered political system, and to “critique and [expel]” Christianity (Ketelaar 1990: 73). In this way, Ketelaar argues, Buddhism in Meiji, through the New Buddhist movement, succeeded in “reconstituting itself as non-heretical” (1990: x); in other words, non-threatening to the status quo and in fact supportive of the ideology of the Meiji Restoration.

Winston Davis has identified “four Buddhisms” of this period, and it is useful at this point to look briefly at them, in order to better classify Sōen and understand where he stood. All four span the scope of the New Buddhist movement, from the conservatives who wanted to redeem Buddhism through a return to an ancient, idealized past, to social progressives who were willing to advocate radical change for the sake of modernization. Davis’s four Buddhisms are:



- 1.) The praxis masters: Largely conservative, they were concerned with traditional discipline, and redeeming Buddhism by recapturing the spirit and practice of the ancient precepts. They were also eager to prove their loyalty to the throne.
- 2.) The “Buddhist Enlightenment” thinkers: These Buddhists, also firmly loyal to the state, were exemplified by thinkers like Inoue Enryō 井上円了(1858-1919), who eagerly embraced Western science and philosophy, and sought in it an affirmation of Buddhist teachings. Unlike the praxis masters, they were largely unattached to or even alienated from the temple system.
- 3.) The “progressive” Buddhist movements: Few in number, these Buddhists stressed their responsibility to “all sentient beings”, or society at large, not only to the state. They were considered activist, and some had socialist tendencies.
- 4.) Institutional Buddhism itself: The temples whose primary concern seemed to be protecting their prerogatives through a strong policy of accommodation or strategic silence/ambiguity with regard to political matters (Davis 1989: 311-312)

Of these four groups, Sōen seems to straddle the line between praxis master and “Buddhist Enlightenment” thinker. He showed concern for adopting an ostensibly pure or disciplined Buddhism by traveling to Ceylon in 1887 to be ordained as a Theravada monk, as one concerned with praxis orthodoxy might be expected to do. He also undertook Western learning, and, as I will show, he attempted to show the suitability of Buddhism as a system of thought according to Western empirical standards. However, he demonstrated no alienation

from the priesthood, as did Inoue Enryō. He also did not approach the social progressivism of the various progressive Buddhist movements; and though he was a temple priest, in none of his writings have I uncovered any thought that implies the self-interest of institutional Buddhism. In any case, Sōen seems to defy simple categorization. I would like to now turn, then, to an examination of Shaku Sōen himself, and to see in what ways he exemplified the idea of the New Buddhist, and how his development along those lines was both typical and unique.

### 3.0 SHAKU SŌEN: A NEW BUDDHIST IN CEYLON, AND VISIONS OF A CHRISTIAN THREAT

Shaku Sōen was born on December 18, 1859 (Ansei 6) in the province of Wakasa (modern day western Fukui Prefecture), and came of age as not only a thoroughgoing New Buddhist, but also as a modern Japanese who looked with interest and curiosity to the outside world (Inoue 2000: 3). From the age of 6 or 7, he attended a *terakoya* (temple school) at a nearby temple, Chōfukuji, and entered a monastery at the age of 11, in March 1871 (Inoue 2000: 7). After completing his Rinzai Zen training under Imakita Kōsen (1816-1892), Sōen enrolled as a student at Keio University, from 1885 to 1886, where he was able to receive an education in Western science, philosophy, and religion that, to a Zen monk of the previous generation, would have been unthinkable.

In an 1893 letter to the American Paul Carus, Sōen made clear his view of himself as a religionist:

As for my part, I am a Buddhist, but far from being a conservative religionist, my intention is rather to stir up a reformation movement in the religious world. In other words, I am one who insists on the genuine and spiritual Buddhism to renovate that formal and degenerate Buddhism. (Harding 2003: 162)

In setting himself in opposition to the “formal and degenerate Buddhism,” Sōen was using the very rhetoric of those who had earlier demanded the removal of Buddhism from Japanese religious life. It was a classically New Buddhist move—distancing himself from what he freely admitted were Buddhism’s alleged faults (as defined by the anti-Buddhist factions of early Meiji Japan) while simultaneously insisting on the reality of a “genuine” Buddhism that could and should replace the “degenerate” Buddhism.

As a New Buddhist, Sōen was also concerned with demonstrating the relevance of his religion to the military and imperialist concerns of Meiji and Taishō Period (1912-1926) Japanese; he traveled as a chaplain with the First Division of the Japanese army during the first months of the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), and was a vocal advocate for the unique potency of Zen training in animating *Yamato damashii*, the intrepid and death-defying spirit of the Japanese that was considered crucial to Japan’s astounding military success in that war (Victoria 1997: 26).<sup>2</sup>

Part of what made Sōen unique among the New Buddhists, however—and an aspect of Sōen’s story that is largely unexplored in most of the published research—was his time spent traveling abroad, in particular his two years spent living and practicing in Ceylon, modern day Sri Lanka, from 1887 to 1889. In an inverted, religious parallel to the Iwakura Mission, Sōen’s journey to Ceylon was made in search of Buddhism’s ancient origins: while there, he intended to undertake study in Sanskrit and Pāli and complete his monastic training (Jaffe 2004: 80). Sōen’s sojourn in Ceylon was facilitated by one Hayashi Tadasu, who also assisted another monk (Shaku Kōzen 積興然 of Shingon) in gaining contacts to study and train in Ceylon concurrently

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<sup>2</sup> During a visit to the United States following Japan’s victory over Russia in 1905, Sōen was quoted as having commented that the victory was “impossible to explain... in terms of military equipment and logistics... [It] was due to the samurai spirit, the Spirit of Japan [*Yamato damashii*], nurtured by the country over the past two thousand years” (Victoria 1997: 59).

with Sōen. Sōen ended up taking the tonsure as a Theravada monk, and accepted the ordination name Pannaketu (transliterated into Chinese characters as 洪嶽 and read either *Kōgaku* or *Gugaku*) (Sōen 2001: 5, 30). Sōen studied under the Ceylonese master Paññāsekharā, himself a close associate of Hikkaduve Sumangala (1826-1911), an ally of the American Theosophist and early convert to Buddhism, Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907) who served as the clerical head of Olcott's Buddhist Theosophical Society (Jaffe 2004: 81). It would prove a fortuitous development.

Sōen's May 6, 1887 ordination as a Theravada monk was attended by more than a thousand people, as he recorded it in his journal, and was celebrated with fireworks and genial fraternization; a Ceylonese layman told him during the festivities that the celebration was, in part, for "Japanese-Sri Lankan Buddhist solidarity" (Sōen 2001: 47, Jaffe 2004: 83). Despite the affection the Ceylonese Buddhist community obviously felt for Sōen, however, he remained ambivalent about the state of what he called "Southwestern" Buddhism: although he had come to Ceylon hoping to find something of the roots of Buddhism, and took evident pride in wearing his Theravada robes, he felt that Ceylonese Buddhism was deficient in meditative rigor, and, compared to the Rinzai tradition in which he had been educated and ordained, was overly reliant on textual study (Jaffe 2004: 83). In an April 1906 speech before the National Geographic Society in Washington, DC, Sōen expounded at some length on the deficiencies he saw in the Buddhism of South Asia when compared to his own Japanese Buddhism:

[W]hat is understood by the Western people as Buddhism is no more than one of its main divisions, which only partially expresses the spirit of its founder. I said here "divisions," but it may be more proper to say "stages of development." For Buddhism, like so many other religions, has gone

through several stages of development before it has attained the present state of perfection among the Oriental nations. [...] Properly speaking, Hinayāna Buddhism is a phase of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The former is preparatory for the latter. It is not final, but merely a stepping stone which leads the walker to the hall of perfect truth. Hinayānism is therefore more or less pessimistic, ascetic, ethical (to be distinguished from religious), and monastical. It fails to give a complete satisfaction to a man's religious yearnings. It does not fully interpret the spirit of Buddha. The Buddhism now prevailing in Ceylon, Burma, and Siam may be considered to be betraying in a certain way a Hinayāna tendency. [...] The Buddhism of present Japan, on the other hand... is more comprehensive, more religious, more humanistic, and more satisfying to the inmost needs of the religious consciousness. (1906: 79-81)

After this incrimination of the incomplete, “pessimistic”, and “ethical” as opposed to “religious” Buddhism that he studied and, indeed, took monastic orders from in Ceylon, Sōen went on to declare that “what I firmly believe is that in the Buddhism of Japan today are epitomized all the essential results reached through the unfolding of the religious consciousness during the past twenty or thirty centuries of Oriental culture” (1906: 81). In this statement we have perhaps the clearest encapsulation of what Sōen felt that he was transmitting when he wished to bring “Eastern Buddhism” to the West. Rather than attempting to represent Mahāyāna at large (or, perhaps, rather than representing Mahāyāna as a transnational, multifarious tradition), Sōen essentialized it as “Eastern Buddhism” or “Japanese Buddhism,” arguing that what had been developing in the past “twenty or thirty centuries” of Asian religious tradition had only

culminated and reached its “present state of perfection” among the Japanese. It is in unequivocal, declarative statements such as these that Sōen’s presentation of Buddhism elides into a triumphalist form of Japanese nationalism. It may be, based upon Sōen’s Ceylonese journals and later addresses on Buddhism, that his Ceylonese experience hardened him in his dedication to this essentialized “Japanese Buddhism.”

It may reasonably be asked, after reading comments like these, what inspired Sōen to travel to South Asia in the first place? Besides his previously mentioned curiosity and budding worldliness, Sōen himself was often confoundingly elusive as to his reasons. In his published journal of his trip abroad, *Seiyū nikki* 西遊日記 (*Diary of a Journey to the West*), he writes that it was the “force of his karma” (*ōnen gōfū* 往年業風) that caused him to “drift ashore” at Ceylon (Sōen 2001: 3). A few pages later, he explains his reasons by saying that “students of Zen must attend to mysterious things... I just wanted to recover a style of religion that had already been lost” (Sōen 2001: 5). Based upon Sōen’s own writings, it is evident that he felt admiration for Kitabatake Dōryū 北畠道龍 (1820-1907), a Jōdo Shin cleric who had traveled to India in 1872 in search of Bodh Gaya and other historic Buddhist sites (Jaffe 2004: 70-79). Writing as a young student monk, Sōen had praised Kitabatake as being “aged”, but still “walking in the footsteps of Shakyamuni” (Inoue 2000: 47). As Sōen was preparing for his voyage to Ceylon, his teacher, Kōsen, composed a poem of encouragement that specifically cited the example of Kitabatake:

Nanjō<sup>3</sup> and Kitabatake have already pioneered;

I hear tell that they have gone into India, and beyond—

Running through deserts in all directions, astride sturdy steeds, and

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<sup>3</sup> Here Kōsen refers to Nanjō Bun’yū 南條文雄 (1849-1927), a Jōdo Shin priest of the Ōtani school who, in 1875, traveled to Europe, studied Sanskrit and Pāli under Western Buddhologists, and attained a considerable command of English.

Sailing across deep and unknown seas.  
It would be good for you to travel, and not to stop at Ceylon,  
But to stretch your legs even to America.  
Even those who master Sanskrit and European languages  
Must consent that it is better to live the Buddha's Great Teachings  
Than merely to speak his words. (Sōen 2001: 30)

It is interesting to note that as early as 1887, Sōen was being encouraged to spread the Dharma to America.<sup>4</sup> The extent to which this directly influenced his later decision to travel extensively in the US is difficult to gauge, but from his master's evocation of Kitabatake, it is perhaps reasonable to conclude that one facet of Sōen's motivation to travel to Ceylon (and perhaps also, later, to the US) was in emulation of or to honor the wishes of his forbears in the Dharma.

Regardless of his expressed ambivalence to the religious practices of his hosts, Sōen left Ceylon in 1889 having been exposed to something that would strongly influence his conception of Buddhism's role in Asia, and give impetus to his eventual presentation of Buddhism at the World's Parliament: Western/Christian imperialism. His time in Ceylon—a short boat trip from India, the 'Jewel in the Crown of the British Empire'—allowed Sōen to bear witness to the indecency of colonialism, and the arrogance with which the Western colonizers treated their newfound subjects. In the book he published upon his return to Japan, *Seinan no bukkyō* 西南の仏教 (*Buddhism of the Southwest*, 1889), Sōen commented bitterly on the plight of Buddhism in South Asia:

The present crisis [concerning the survival of Buddhism in South Asia]

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<sup>4</sup> Kōsen would not live to see his pupil fulfill his dream, however; he died in 1892, and Sōen immediately succeeded him as abbot of Engakuji (Harding 2003: 85).



remains a serious one. The reader, whether knowledgeable or ignorant of the present conditions of South Asian Buddhism, must know that, at the top, the government is failing to protect religion and, at the bottom, the hunger and thirst of the believing community cries out for relief. At the front gate, the jaws of the wolf of Christianity stretch wide, while at the back gate the Muslim tiger sharpens his claws. Yesterday, there were strong believers of Buddhism who faced the bo tree and offered fragrant incense; today, those same people have wavered, and instead they call out “Amen!” and venerate a cross on an altar. (Sōen 1889: 86)

It is evident that the ravenousness of the Western Christians in South Asia—and their success in winning converts—left a strong impression on Sōen, and gave him an urgent sense of looming danger to Asian Buddhism as a whole, a danger that paralleled the threat of colonialization to Japan that the political and industrial modernizers of Meiji were determined to forestall. If the Meiji oligarchs and others saw a threat in the West’s superior armies and factories, Sōen recognized a threat in the unchecked spread of Christianity.

In this regard, Sōen had an ally in the figure of Henry Steel Olcott. One of the first, and most visible, Western converts to Buddhism, Olcott regarded Christianity as a serious threat to the continued survival and success of his adopted creed. In order to check this threat, Olcott was determined to bring about a reconciliation between the Northern and Southern (Mahāyāna and Theravada) branches of Buddhism, and create out of this reconciliation a “United Buddhist World” that could withstand the onslaught of Christian missionaries in Asia. To this end, Olcott arrived in Kobe on February 9, 1889, and set about a speaking tour of Japan. Calling

Christianity “our great enemy,” he delivered an appeal before an assembly of monks in Kyoto, saying:

Why should the two great halves of the Buddhist church be any longer ignorant and indifferent about each other? Let us break the long silence; let us bridge the chasm of 2,300 years; let the Buddhists of the North and those of the South be one family again. (Prothero 1996: 125)

In furtherance of this goal, he drew up a fourteen point “Buddhist Platform,” which summed up the teachings of Shakyamuni as “to cease from all sin, to get virtue, [and] to purify the heart,”<sup>5</sup> and encouraged Buddhists to form social welfare organizations and fraternal societies of their own, to counter Christianity’s success in the field of social work (a concern also shared by Sōen and Inoue, as previously mentioned), and also encouraged them to conduct missionary work in Christian-majority countries (Prothero 1996: 125, 130).

Despite his avowed reservations regarding the value of South Asian Buddhism, Sōen, like Olcott, saw unification between Northern and Southern Buddhists as the most effective defense against Christianity. Aware of the growing interest in Buddhism in the West, Sōen encouraged the Buddhists of North and South to join together and proselytize in the West, thereby helping to preserve and propagate the faith while at the same time bringing the fight to Christianity on its own home turf. In *Seinan no bukkuyō*, he contrasted the differences in image veneration between Northern and Southern Buddhists, and concluded that the veneration of diffuse figures and founders in Northern Buddhism was a serious impediment to Buddhist unity. Instead, Sōen suggested that Rinzai, at least, should adopt Shakyamuni as its primary figure of

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<sup>5</sup> When this platform was placed before a convocation of representatives from Northern and Southern sects, only the delegates from Ceylon, Burma, and Chittagong fully accepted it. The majority of the Japanese sects accepted it merely as being “included within the body of Northern Buddhism,” and the Jōdo Shin sect rejected it altogether (Prothero 1996: 130n).

reverence, and thereby provide commonality with Southern Buddhists, as well as Europeans and Americans who were familiar with Buddhism, since even those who were generally ignorant of the finer points of Buddhism at least knew of Shakyamuni. Shakyamuni, Sōen insisted, was “the image of veneration that is karmically connected with the civilized world of the twentieth century” (Sōen 1889: 46).

Although it might be going too far to suggest that Sōen developed his ideas for Buddhist unity as a result of the “United Buddhist World” rhetoric of Olcott, and it is unclear if the two ever met face-to-face, Sōen’s writings clearly indicate a familiarity with and an appreciation for Olcott’s works and goals. In his Ceylon journals, Sōen, on May 22, 1887, records for the first time a mention of Olcott’s book *A Buddhist Catechism* (Sōen 2001: 118). The book was a primer that “presented Buddhism as a textual, rational, scientific religion centered on... Shakyamuni” (Jaffe 2004: 82). Within a week of this entry, Sōen was using the *Catechism* as an English primer, writing out in longhand passages of the book in his diary (Sōen 2001: 122). The book apparently aroused his curiosity enough that on June 27, 1887, he made an effort to examine firsthand the work that Olcott was doing with the Theosophical Society and with Buddhism:

In the morning, relaxed. At one p.m., along with another monk [Shaku Kōzen], boarded a horse cart and traveled two miles to visit the home of Mr. H. Don. David of the Theosophical Society. The building next door is the private Buddhist academy [*bukkyō shijuku* 仏教私塾] of Mr. Olcott from America. (Sōen 2001: 152)

Sōen also singles out Olcott in *Seinan no bukkyō*, published after his return to Japan, for praise as a friend of Buddhism (Sōen 1889: 89).

Whatever the level of feeling that Sōen felt for Olcott and his mission, the fact that Olcott presented Buddhism as a “scientific” and “rational” religion is not insignificant, as it echoes Sōen’s words before the World’s Parliament, four years after his return from Ceylon.

### **3.1 SHAKU SŌEN AT THE WORLD’S PARLIAMENT OF RELIGIONS**

The convocation of the World’s Parliament of Religions, called as part of the celebrations of the 1893 Columbian Exposition, which was itself intended to celebrate the four-hundredth anniversary of Columbus’s arrival in the Americas, was magnanimous in its stated aim of universal brotherhood, but clearly biased towards Christianity in its construction. It was clear from the outset of the Parliament that this was to be a severely restricted discussion, with the overarching principle being cast in decidedly Christocentric terms. Christianity was to be constructed as “the only transethnic, transnational, and thus the only universal religion” (Ketelaar 1990: 149), and so was treated as the yardstick by which all other religions were to be measured. This can easily be seen in chairman John Henry Barrows’ welcoming remarks on the opening day of the Parliament, September 11, 1893:

Welcome, most welcome, O wise men of the East and of the West!  
May the star which has led you hither be like that luminary which  
guided the sages of old... If anything great and worthy is to be the  
outcome of this Parliament, the glory is wholly due to Him who  
inspired it, and who, in the Scriptures which most of us cherish as the  
Word of God, has taught the blessed truths of divine Fatherhood and  
human brotherhood... I appeal to the representatives of the

non-Christian faiths, and ask you if Christianity suffers in your eyes from having called this Parliament of Religions? Do you believe that its beneficent work in the world will be one whit lessened? (Seager 1993: 24-25)

The Parliament occurred at an historical moment that Kenneth Pyle has identified as “a major watershed in Japanese history” that saw a “profound psychological change” (1969: 188) in the new generation of Meiji Japanese, from a self-doubting, self-consciously borrowing and experimenting Japan to a Japan of heightened self-esteem and feeling of national destiny. The Japanese Buddhist delegation—consisting of Sōen (representing Rinzai); Yatsubuchi Banryū, the Jōdo Shin representative; Toki Hōryū, representing Shingon; Aishitsu Jitsuzen, of the Tendai sect; and two laymen, Hirai Kinzō and Noguchi Zenshirō—fully anticipated the Christian slant that the Parliament would have, and yet welcomed the opportunity to engage in a face-to-face confrontation with Christianity and, by extension, the imperial powers. This was despite the fact that the delegation enjoyed no official sanction or financial support from any of the major sects or trans-sectarian Buddhist organizations in Japan at the time.<sup>6</sup> One year after the close of the Exposition, Banryū would write of his views on the matter:

Our age is the age of collision between the European and Asian cultures. It is the age of competition between the white and yellow races. It is the age of conflict between the powers of the Orient and of the Occident. (Ketelaar 1991: 44)

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<sup>6</sup> Each delegate was forced to come up with the requisite funds on his own, or by scraping together donations from temple donors. James Ketelaar repeats a rumor that Sōen funded his trip by selling antique Buddhist artwork to a collector of foreign extraction in order to purchase his ticket (1990: 264n81). However he raised the funds, Sōen was the only Japanese delegate to travel first class (Ketelaar 1990: 156).

Despite the seeming disadvantage that the Japanese delegates faced in attempting to explain their non-theistic religion in an ultra-theistic context, they were determined to emerge victorious from the Parliament. But what constituted victory? John Harding has pointed out that the Japanese delegates “faced the... burden of representing as scientific the less-known and more-maligned Mahāyāna” (2003: 156), rather than the Hinayāna with which the Western audience was mainly familiar through Western-penned contemporary Buddhist scholarship, and with which they were at least partially sympathetic. Ketelaar corroborates Harding’s reading of the Japanese Buddhists’ motives, and adds that they wished to carry the aura of esteem they might gain from being globe-trotting, worldly priests with them on their return to Japan, where they could deploy this esteem in the furtherance of a renewed domestic Buddhism (1990: xii).

This dovetails into another facet to the question of what constituted success. Not only did the delegates, and Sōen in particular, wish to convince the Western intelligentsia of the equality of their religion to Christianity, but they also wished to demonstrate to pro-Western Japanese that modernization and parity with the West did not have to mean the abandonment of Buddhism; rather, they wanted to show that Buddhism could, in fact, be superior to Christianity (Snodgrass 2003: 136), and thus the construction and presentation of Eastern (i.e. Japanese) Buddhism at the Parliament had a nationalistic overtone, as well. This conviction on the part of the delegates can best be seen in the address that they delivered before the Yokohama Young Men’s Buddhist Association, upon their return from the Parliament:

The Parliament was called because the Western nations have come to realize the weakness and folly of Christianity, and they really wished to hear from us of our religions and to learn what the best religion is. The meeting showed the great superiority of Buddhism over

Christianity, and the mere fact of calling the meetings showed that the Americans and other Western peoples had lost their faith in Christianity and were ready to accept the teachings of a superior religion. (Snodgrass 2003.: 297)

The Buddhist press in Japan was no less ebullient in its enthusiasm, and their acclamations carried more than a slight tone of the “nationalistic aspirations of the Japanese people” (Victoria 1997: 16). One Shingon journal, *Dentō* (August 1893), trumpeted the delegates as avatars to the benighted West:

These five [sic] have journeyed to the Parliament to represent Mahayana Buddhism, to stand amidst heterodox and barbarian teachings and to learn the subtle aspects of each. Clearly no easy task. All subsequent priests who journey to the Occident will be judged by their standard... They have placed the brilliant light of Mahayana in the heavens over the Occident and have provided for the salvation of all believers in foreign religions. (Ketelaar 1991: 47)

After the sextet’s return, in November 1893, the journal *Kokkyō* said of them:

These globally minded priests are the true pioneers of Buddhism’s international movement... The priests have returned singing the songs of victory and their speeches have profoundly moved the religious world of Japan. They have in fact come to embody the ideal hopes of religious revolutionaries throughout the land. (Ketelaar 1991: 50)

These brief quotations are representative of the generally effusive praise heaped upon the delegation. It is clear from these entries that the domestic Buddhist community, too, recognized the importance of success at the Parliament.

In line with Sōen's dawning realization while in Ceylon that, as one way of combating Christianity, Buddhists would have to unite and proselytize in the West, the Japanese delegation came to Chicago armed with the means with which to win converts. They had printed "tens of thousands" of English-language pamphlets containing translations of brief essays on Buddhism, and passed them out everywhere they could find, including "coffee shops, restaurants, and private homes," and also in the "Buddhist room" that had been specially constructed for them at the Parliament (Ketelaar 1991: 47). Their evangelizing purpose did not go unnoticed in the American press, which, nonplussed, commented on the delegates' intention of opening a Buddhist mission somewhere in the U.S. (Ketelaar 1991: 45).

Sōen delivered two addresses at the Parliament<sup>7</sup>: "The Law of Cause and Effect, as Taught by Buddha" and "Arbitration Instead of War." The first, and longer, essay (neither address takes up more than three printed pages) was a shot across Christianity's bow, a point by point critique of what Sōen regarded as Christianity's irrationality when compared to Buddhism. In a deliberate and systematic explanation, Sōen laid out the rational and non-theistic basis of Buddhism's cosmological and moral sensibility, which he summed up in the idea of the "law of causality":

The law of causality... exists for eternity, without beginning, without end. Things grow and decay, and this is caused not by an external

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<sup>7</sup> Sōen's English was poor, and so he had to rely upon translators for addresses and writings delivered in English. For his addresses before the World's Parliament of Religions, he relied upon D.T. Suzuki and Natsume Sōseki to prepare his remarks before he sailed for North America (Harding 2003: 172).



power but by an internal force which is in things themselves as an innate attribute. [...] Just as the clock moves by itself without any intervention of any external force, so is the progress of the universe.

(Barrows 1893: 831, Houghton 1894: 380)

In this section of his address, Sōen takes on the Judeo-Christian concept of an “external” God, who acts on the world and causes things to come into being and then to die. By identifying this process as an “innate attribute,” and equating it with the “progress of the universe,” he implicitly criticized Christianity as an unempirical religion out of step with contemporary scientific understanding by pointing out the natural progress of life which Sōen claimed was observed by the Buddha. Judith Snodgrass has pointed out (2003: 213) that Sōen seems to have deliberately avoided using terms like “rebirth” and “transmigration” in the address, in an apparent attempt to avoid focusing attention on aspects of the Buddhist religion that could be viewed as superstitious or tainted with undertones of Theosophy (which had, by the time of the Parliament, begun to be viewed popularly as mere spiritism or conjuring). Instead, the absence of such terms moved the focus to “humanist concerns of individual morality and theodicy” (Snodgrass 2003: 213).

Further, Sōen took on the concept of a divine creator:

The assertion that there is a first cause is contrary to the fundamental principle of nature... From the assumption that a cause is an effect of a preceding cause which is also preceded by another, thus, ad infinitum, we infer that there is no beginning in the universe. (Barrows 1893: 829-830, Houghton 1894: 379)

By taking a reductive approach, he attempted to show that the idea of an original Creator was contrary to the “fundamental principle of nature,” i.e. scientific rationalist laws. Rather, he asserted, the Buddha taught that all phenomena were the effects of preceding causes, and, therefore, an original “beginning” was impossible to find, according to both rational logic and, significantly, Buddhist philosophy. Later, in a chapter titled “The God-Conception of Buddhism” and included in his *Sermons of a Buddhist Abbot*, Sōen would expand his criticism of this “exterior” conception of God:

There is a favorite saying in Buddhism which declares that “sameness without difference is sameness wrongly conceived, while difference without sameness is difference wrongly conceived”; to express this in Christian terms, “God not in the world is a false God, and the world not in God is unreality.” All things return to one, and one operates in all things; many in one and one in many; this is the Buddhist conception of God and the world. Billows and waves and ripples, all surging, swelling, and ebbing, and yet are they not so many different motions of the eternally selfsame body of water? The moon is serenely shining up in the sky, and she is alone in all the heavens and on the entire earth; but when she mirrors herself in the brilliant whiteness of the evening dew which appear like glittering pearls broadcast upon the earth from the hand of a fairy,— how wondrously numerous her images! And is not every one of them complete in its own fashion? This is the way in which an enlightened mind contemplates God and the world. (Soen 1906: 30)

In the same essay, while allowing that to a “limited intelligence” there might appear to be “beginnings and endings” in the world, an enlightened (i.e. Buddhist) reading of cosmology reveals that there are no such beginnings or endings (Sōen 1906: 29).

Finally, Sōen, in his Parliament address, took aim at questions of morality and personal accountability:

We enjoy happiness and suffer misery, our own actions being causes;  
in other words there is no other cause than our own actions which  
make us happy or unhappy. [...] Heaven and hell are self-made.  
God did not provide you with a hell, but you yourself. (Barrows  
1893: 830-831, Houghton 1894: 379)

Extending his argument about the causal nature of natural phenomena to the moral realm, Sōen rejected the idea of a personal God who granted reward or meted out punishment through His own mysterious, inscrutable methods. Rather, Sōen placed the responsibility for and cause of happiness or unhappiness squarely at the feet of the individual—an attractive idea for a scientific, rationalist age in which singular human ingenuity was making previously unimaginable feats commonplace. In fact, Sōen would later make explicit his belief that what made Buddhism unique among religions—and specifically superior to Christianity, which was “not so intellectual” (Soen 1906: 127)—was precisely its rationalist, scientific approach, and its readiness to submit itself to rational investigation:

Let me point out... what is most characteristic of Buddhism as  
distinguished from any other religion. I refer to a predominant  
tendency of Buddhism toward intellectuality, and it seems to me  
that the reason why Buddhism is always ready to stand before the

tribunal of science and let her pass her judgment upon its merits or demerits is due to this intellectual tenor. (Sōen 1906: 81)

As the preceding passages attest, Sōen did not confine his English-language criticisms of Christianity's supposedly unscientific nature and its inferiority to Buddhism to his prepared remarks at the Parliament. In 1896, in response to an unflattering review of Buddhism by John Henry Barrows in an issue of the *Chicago Tribune*, Sōen composed an open letter to Barrows, taking him to task for misrepresenting Buddhist doctrine concerning nirvana. In a remarkably personal criticism of Christ himself, Sōen derided Christ's miraculous feeding of the multitudes, in particular the "great draft of fishes, which involve[d] a great and useless destruction of life... [n]or has Jesus attained to the dignity and calmness of Buddha, for the passion of anger overtook him in the temple, when he drove out with rope in hand those that bargained in the holy place" (Sōen 1906: 124-125). In response to Barrows' assertion that, in Buddhism, "human life does not breathe... the atmosphere of divine fatherhood, but groans under the dominion of inexorable and implacable laws," Sōen retorted that the Buddha's teachings on natural law were "in *exact agreement with the doctrines of modern science*" (Sōen 1906.: 123, emphasis added).

By the sixteenth day of the Parliament, Sōen had apparently grown somewhat weary of the convocation's Christian bent, and its insistence on balancing any challenge to Judeo-Christian theology with a reassertion of Christianity's inexorable destiny to spread the world over and win more converts. That sixteenth day was dedicated to a special congress on Buddhism, and arrayed alongside Sōen were his Japanese compatriots and the Buddhist representatives from India and South Asia. Before he began his second and final address of the Parliament, "Arbitration Instead of War," Sōen stood before the assembled congregation and

commented ironically, in Japanese, how wonderful it was to have none but “we heathen” (*ikyōsha* 異教者, literally “one who ascribes to mistaken teachings”) on the platform (Snodgrass 2003: 77). It was an appropriate opening, as the subtext of his address was the unfair treatment that Japan had received at the hands of the allegedly superior Christian West.

This second address was unique in that it had little in it that was explicitly religious, at least from a doctrinal standpoint. Rather, it appealed to the “universal brotherhood” of man ostensibly propagated by the Parliament, and its situation on a day devoted to the Buddhist religion—and its presence in the Parliament record as a whole—implied a religious or moral duty for nations to treat one another equally and nonviolently.

Its applicability to the status quo that resulted from the unequal treaties of the preceding decades was clear. First, Sōen appealed to his listeners’ religious sensibilities, drawing on what he portrayed as similarities in the humanist concerns of Buddhism and Christianity:

Our Buddha, who taught that all people entering into Buddhism are entirely equal in the same way, as all rivers flowing into the sea become alike, preached this plan [of universal equality] in the wide kingdom of India just 3,000 years ago. Not only Buddha alone, but Jesus Christ, as well as Confucius, taught universal brotherhood.

(Houghton 1894: 797)

Sōen would return to the theme of “universal brotherhood” in a chapter of *Sermons* (“Assertions and Denials”). In discussing the Buddhist concept of “non-ego”, Sōen identified the source of international and interpersonal strife as attachment to the “yoke of the ego-soul”(1906: 44), a “self-made, self-imposed prison” (1906: 44) that prevents one from entering

into the “ego-less atmosphere” in which one will “forget the limitations of individualism and participate in the feeling of universal brotherhood” (1906: 44). Thus did Sōen most explicitly link the potential for international peace and cooperation with the doctrines of the Dharma.

After having appealed to their religious sensibilities in the opening of his second address, Sōen reached the crux of his argument:

[N]ow we have international law which has been very successful in protecting the nations from each other and has done a great deal toward arbitration instead of war. *But can we hope that this system shall be carried out on a more and more enlarged scale...?* We must not make any distinction between race and race, between civilization and civilization, between creed and creed, and between faith and faith. You must not say “go away” because we are not Christians. You must not say “go away” because we are yellow people. All beings in the universe are in the bosom of truth... Truth be praised! (Houghton 1894: 797-798, emphasis added)

Here, the appearance is of Sōen making a poignant plea for fair treatment of Japan as an equal partner on the world stage. Leaving aside for a moment his criticism of Christianity, he simultaneously praises extant international law for its success in resolving disputes amicably, and pleads for this same law to be applied more broadly and generously, so that non-Christian nations such as Japan might enjoy the same bounties and benefits as the Western powers enjoyed amongst themselves.

Robert Aitken has offered an intriguing Buddhist-historical analysis of Sōen’s second Parliamentary address. Drawing a parallel between Sōen’s construction of a world run by

“international law” which “protects the nations from each other” and the *Sutra of the Golden Light*, a scripture important to early Japanese Buddhists which envisions a world of international peace and wealth through the exercise of virtues like freedom, non-aggression, and forbearance, Aitken argues that with this address Sōen is allying himself with the earliest Japanese Buddhist notions of compassion and universality (1985: 156-157). Contrasting this stance with Sōen’s later sanction of Japan’s wars against China and Russia (a point to which I shall return), Aitken asserts that the move from Sōen’s “Arbitration Instead of War”, with its calls for “universal brotherhood”, to his post-Parliamentary writings in favor of violence by military means represents a shift from the rhetoric of the *Sutra of the Golden Light* to a style of rhetoric that echoes more closely Shōtoku Taishi’s Seventeen Article Constitution, with its deployment of Buddhism as an agent of the imperial state (1985: 157). Aitken argues that this is explicable by the need for Japanese Buddhism as a “foreign guest” (both in Shōtoku’s time and in Sōen’s) to prove its usefulness to the state apparatus (1985: 157), and that the shift proves Sōen’s ability to “distinguish between civilization and civilization and subordinate his concern for peace to the economic and political compulsions of his nation-state” (1985: 156). Indeed, by the end of the nineteenth century (and, in fact, by the time of the World’s Parliament of Religions in 1893), New Buddhism’s duty to the nation and the people had become inextricably equated with fealty to the ideology of the state (Ketelaar 1990: 171). It is an intriguing observation that Sōen’s evident rhetorical shift signals a shift in priorities required by a changed situation—from Japan as international underdog in 1893 to imperial power in its own right by 1905. I find myself in agreement, at least, with Aitken’s idea that both rhetorical strategies can be read as accession to the state’s respective priorities of 1893 and 1905-1906.

Bearing in mind that in a few short years the “equal” treatment that Sōen (and the Meiji state) evidently sought would amount to little more than the opportunity for Japan to be as imperially rapacious as its Western antagonists, one can still appreciate the desire of an evidently sincere Japanese Buddhist to see his nation treated equitably and justly, free from the racial and religious bigotry that it had been the unfortunate recipient of to that point. Reflecting on Japan’s changed position before an assembly at George Washington University in April 1906, Sōen would thank the United States for its fair treatment of Japan:

There must have been many causes and conditions through a happy combination of which Japan was able to do what she has done; and among those conditions I could count the influence of American friendship and sympathy as one of the most powerful. If America had tried to play some high-handed diplomacy, imitating some of the European powers, she could have easily seized my country and held it under subjection since Commodore Perry’s entrance into Uraga.

The fact that the United States did not stoop to play a mean trick upon Japan helped not a little to lift her to the present position. For that reason, we, people of Japan, owe a great deal to you, people of the United States of America. (1906: 180)

Reflecting on his “long thinking” of how to reward the United States for this gift of “friendship and sympathy”, Sōen concluded that the best way would be to present the US with the gift of Buddhism in the spirit of “mutual understanding”, and that it had been his “duty and pleasure” to be able to do so (1906: 181). Despite the historically questionable, but contextually understandable, assertion of America’s “friendship and sympathy” with Japan in the nineteenth



century, it is an interesting point to note that by 1906, thirteen years after the Parliament, Japan's position on the world stage had changed sufficiently that Sōen could speak confidently of “repay[ing] the special favor” (1906: 180) to the US with the gift of Japanese Buddhism.

### 3.2 A ZEN MASTER IN DEFENSE OF WAR

It is one of the more troubling aspects of Shaku Sōen's career—and indeed of the history of Japanese Buddhism—that Buddhist teachings could be pressed into the service of a plainly imperialist and aggressive cause, but indeed they were in the course of Japan's period of colonial expansion from the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) to the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905). Sōen was certainly not alone in justifying war through Buddhist means, as Brian Victoria has thoroughly catalogued in his book *Zen at War*. Among others, Inoue Enryō attempted to paint the use of violent aggression as an expression of Buddhist compassion, arguing that taking up arms against Russia was merely “repaying the debt we [the Japanese subjects] owe to Buddha,” and that the war was “the conduct of a bodhisattva attempting to save untold millions of living souls throughout China and Korea from the jaws of death” (Victoria 1997: 29). As I will show, this line of reasoning was certainly not peculiar to Inoue, but was echoed in the war and post-war writings of Sōen, as well. As Victoria has already given such thorough attention to this topic, I wish here to touch upon just a few of Sōen's war writings, in an attempt to show how his statements on the subject fit into his construction of Buddhism, and how Sōen's construction of Buddhism fits into the question of Meiji nationalism.

It is impossible to read Sōen's war writings without being constantly reminded that they are the works of a New Buddhist who was attempting to put his religion and his own particular religious understanding to work in the service of the Meiji state. Even where he evinces sorrow at the human cost of war, Sōen consoles the reader with the assurance that those who died did so in the cause of something "great and noble" (Sōen 1906: 203). The intellectual contortions in which he is not infrequently required to indulge in order to justify this militarism are at times difficult to credit.

It will be remembered that a part of Sōen's construction of Buddhism was that it was somehow "unique" and unlike any other religion. For example, compared to Christianity, Buddhism was "intellectual," "rational," and "scientific." In expounding on the unique quality of the religion to an audience at the San Francisco Buddhist Mission in November, 1905, Sōen linked Buddhism's unique "rationality" to another trait that Buddhism alone allegedly enjoyed:

[T]his rationality of Buddhism is perhaps one of the many causes which make Buddhists remarkably tolerant and broad-minded toward their rival religionists. It is the pride of every conscientious Buddhist that the history of his faith is perfectly free from the stain of blood. When we of modern days turn over the pages of religious cruelty and barbarism, we are struck with a bitter sense of irony. It seems incredible that a religion proclaiming the gospel of love [i.e. Christianity] could practice such inhumanity.

(Sōen 1906: 112-113)

In another address, undated but contemporaneous with the one quoted above, Sōen again boasts that the "history of Buddhism" is "perfectly free from bloodshed and inhumanity" (1906: 76).

If this is the case, though, and, in fact, the rational nature of Buddhism makes it singly “broad-minded” and “tolerant,” and has spared it from the stain of bloodshed, how then to explain the violence of the then-recent Russo-Japanese War? Sōen maintains, in an article titled “The Buddhist View of War” and originally published in *The Open Court* magazine on May 3, 1904, that there is, indeed, a Buddhist rationale for war. In answering his own rhetorical question, “Why do Buddhists fight if all beings are Buddha’s children?”, Sōen writes:

Because we do not find this world as it ought to be. Because there are here so many perverted creatures, so many wayward thoughts, so many ill-directed hearts, due to ignorant subjectivity. For this reason Buddhists are never tired of combating all productions of ignorance, and their fight must be to the bitter end. They will show no quarter. They will mercilessly destroy the very root from which arises the misery of this life. To accomplish this end, they will never be afraid of sacrificing their lives, nor will they tremble before an eternal cycle of transmigration. (Sōen 1906: 193-194)

So, in Sōen’s construction, an ostensibly “Buddhist” war is justified because it is the rooting out of “misery” and “ignorant subjectivity.” This rationale makes it sound as though Sōen takes as his enemy states of mind, or of being, and that Buddhist war is merely war against them.

Sōen goes on, though, to assert that, indeed, there are actual enemies against whom he is advocating war and bloodshed. However, in Sōen’s incredible formulation, the “history of Buddhism” remains untouched by bloodshed, even after this, because, although a Buddhist may occasionally be required to “deprive his antagonist of [his] corporeal presence” (1906: 194):

Enemies are... wicked, avaricious, shameless, hell-born, and, above all,

ignorant... Therefore, *what is shed by Buddhists is not blood*—which, unfortunately, has stained so many pages in the history of religion—*but tears issuing directly from the fountainhead of lovingkindness*. (1906: 194-195, emphasis added)

So, in Sōen's formulation of Buddhist war, the killing of an enemy is reframed as an act of compassion, in some way having something to do with "the fountainhead of lovingkindness." I suggest that this example of mental gymnastics be read in the context of an increasingly militarized and colonizing Japan, and that in this case, perhaps, Sōen was attempting to retain his idea of a "rational" and "superior" Buddhism through finding some way of recontextualizing war and violence into an abstracted act of compassion, however perverted and incredible his claim may seem.

Sōen himself did not merely stand outside of the horrors of war and comment or advocate. On the contrary, he volunteered as an army chaplain and saw action, a decision which he explained by claiming that he "wished to have [his] faith tested by going through the greatest horrors of life," but he also "wished to inspire, if [he] could, our valiant soldiers with the ennobling thoughts of the Buddha, so as to enable them to die on the battlefield with the confidence that the task they are engaged in is great and noble" (1906: 203). Aitken argues that he might also have felt it was his "duty as a religious leader" (1985: 156) to encourage Japan's soldiers, a conclusion that seems to be borne out by Sōen's own comments above, a contextualization of Sōen as a New Buddhist, and by a reading of the events in the light of late Meiji ideology.

Sōen wrote of his battlefield experiences in the article "At the Battle of Nan-Shan Hill," published in *The Open Court* in December 1904. In a moving evocation of the sight of dead

soldiers “lying on the ground in piles, stiff and stark like logs” (Sōen 1906: 200), he speaks of the experience of battle as a “hell let loose on Earth” that makes “[e]ven the fight between the Asura and the Sakrendra, the demons and angels, witnessed by our Buddha” seem tame by comparison (1906: 198, 203).

Nevertheless, in the midst of the carnage, he was able to justify it from a Buddhist viewpoint:

In this world of particulars [Skt. *nāmarūpa*], the noblest and greatest thing one can achieve is to combat evil and bring it into complete subjection. The moral principle which guided the Buddha, [...] and which pervades his whole doctrine, however varied it may be when practically applied, is nothing else than the subjugation of evil. To destroy the ninety-eight major and eighty-four thousand minor evils, that are constantly tormenting human souls on this earth, was the guiding thought of Buddha. [...] War is an evil and a great one, indeed. But war against evils must be unflinchingly prosecuted till we attain the final aim. In the present hostilities, into which Japan has entered with great reluctance, she pursues no egotistic purpose, but seeks the subjugation of evils hostile to civilization, peace, and enlightenment. [...] [T]he firm conviction of her cause has endowed her with an indomitable courage, and she is determined to carry the struggle to the bitter end. (1906: 200-202)

A war fought “with no egotistic purpose” and fought only according to the “guiding thought of the Buddha,” which is to “subjugate evil”: this is how Shaku Sōen chose to portray the Russo-Japanese War. It was, in truth, the deployment of Buddhist rhetoric in the service of

justifying a policy of the Meiji state, regardless of whether Sōen was sincere in delivering it (and he does seem to have been sincere). As such, it is an example of the New Buddhist strategy of cooperation with the state ideology, carried to its greatest extreme.

Rather than the insistence on an “egoless” war fought for the noblest of Buddhist purposes, it might have profited the Meiji state, and Sōen himself, to pay closer attention to a statement Sōen made during the same period in which he made his statements on Buddhism and war. It provides an apt coda to this sad chapter of Meiji Buddhist history:

A man who is self-assertive pushes himself forward without any regard to the welfare of his brother creatures; he hails himself when he reaches the heights of self-aggrandizement; but unfortunately he fails to perceive that his success is but the road to his final destruction. For self-assertion really means self-annihilation. We live in fact in the oneness of things and die in isolation and singleness. (1906: 126)

## 4.0 CONCLUSION

Shaku Sōen's addresses and actions at the World's Parliament of Religions and after represent a flowering of thought and concern that traced its path through the birth and growth of the New Buddhist movement and into his years spent as a monk in Ceylon, and from the observation of the brutal effects of colonialism there and the unequal treatment of Japan by the same Western powers who were occupying the birthplace of Buddhism and, he believed, were threatening its continued success and survival. After these years of observation and reflection, he became convinced that the best way to counter Christianity was to show how it suffered in comparison to Buddhism as a religion for the modern age.

Also, as a New Buddhist and a Meiji intellectual, Sōen was concerned with gaining for Japan parity with the Western powers, as well as staving off the colonialist fate that had befallen China and so much of the rest of Asia. His addresses at the Parliament were an attempt to contribute, in a religious aspect, to the other attempts by Meiji oligarchs and intellectuals to exhibit Japan as an equal of Europe and the United States. These addresses, in particular "The Law of Cause and Effect, as Taught by Buddha," were an attempt to formulate "Eastern Buddhism" as a religion superior to Christianity, through a deliberate explication of how the teachings of the Buddha—as framed by Sōen—were empirically based and in consonance with modern scientific understanding.

Later, Sōen's construction of Buddhism, inevitably nationalist because of its essentialized Japaneseness and further influenced by the imperative of New Buddhism to prove its usefulness and loyalty to the Meiji state, led Sōen to the perhaps unavoidable extreme of using the Dharma to justify violence and warfare for the sake of "subjugating evil"—an evil as defined by the needs and aims of the Meiji state itself. In other words, in Sōen's writings on war, we see the New Buddhist need to ally itself with the whims of the state carried to an end in which the Meiji state's aims are virtually equated with the Buddha's (the destruction of an "ignorant" and "hell-born" evil).

In the end, Sōen's formulation of Buddhism that he presented at the World's Parliament and in his subsequent work was itself a construction, not out of whole cloth, but an essentialized "Japanese Buddhism" that posited Japan as the final and most "perfect" receptacle of the Buddha's Dharma. I suggest that an essential part of understanding Sōen's addresses and writings as a form of contestation with Christianity is by also looking at them as an assertion of Japanese national(ist) identity at a crucial and precarious time. Sōen was less concerned with defending or celebrating something called "Mahāyāna Buddhism," per se (which would have required an approach that gave equal or at least representative attention to those forms of Mahāyāna practiced in other parts of Asia), and more concerned with proving the worthiness and even global superiority of, in particular and exclusively, a construction dubbed alternatively "Japanese Buddhism" or "Eastern Buddhism".



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