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BOOK REVIEW BY PARIDE STORTINI

Brian Victoria's *Zen Terror in Prewar Japan: Portrait of an Assassin* concludes a trilogy of books the author started in the 1990s that explore the collusion between Zen Buddhists and Japanese fascism, militarism, and expansionism in the first half of the twentieth century. Even more than the first two volumes,[1] this book is aimed at provoking its readership, as is evident also in the choice of title, and to challenge stereotypical views of Zen and Buddhism as peaceful religious traditions. The innovative structure of the book, which gives plenty of detail from primary sources while also providing a rich apparatus of appendixes to contextualize the main character and events discussed, makes it accessible to a readership broader than scholars of Japanese or Buddhist studies. As this review will argue, the same structure might constitute one of the weaknesses of this publication, as its separate historical and religious analysis of the primary sources reveals an important and unsolved tension in Victoria's scholarship. *Zen Terror* offers a deep reflection on key questions concerning Buddhism and violence that the author first raised in *Zen at War*—a book that stirred heated debates both among Zen practitioners, especially in the West, and in scholarship on modern Japanese religions—making this last installment of the trilogy worth reading.

While the previous two volumes by Victoria survey Zen Buddhist lay and monastic participation in imperialist ideology and military expansion, *Zen Terror* focuses on one single figure: Inoue Nisshō 井上日召 (1886–1967). A radical Buddhist with experience as an army spy and extensive connections with the military and right-wing groups, Inoue led an assassination plot in 1932 known as the Blood Oath Corps Incident (*ketsumeidan jiken* 血盟団事件) that caused the deaths of a former finance minister and of a businessman. Largely building on Inoue's autobiographical account and on the transcripts of his 1933 trial, Victoria aims at investigating Buddhist justifications of violence and terrorism from the insider perspective of the terrorist band leader Inoue. He structures his analysis of the primary sources into two main arguments: a historical one, where he stresses the responsibility of Emperor Shōwa 昭和 (1901–1989) in supporting right-wing political agitations and assassinations that ushered in 1930s totalitarianism; and a religious one, where he claims that Inoue's radical view of Buddhism must be traced to his Zen training and experiences, rather than to the inspiration of the thirteenth-century monk Nichiren 日蓮 (1222–1282) and Nichiren's modern nationalist interpreters, which is how Inoue has usually been described.

1 The first two volumes are *Zen at War* and *Zen War Stories*.

The specific case of Inoue and the historical study of Buddhist-justified terrorism in modern Japan represent for Victoria a constructive purpose: that anyone identifying with a religious faith should keep a self-critical attitude in order to prevent terrorist actions.

The book's chapters are structured by separating primary sources from scholarly analysis and contextualization in order to, as Victoria argues, provide the readers with an insider's perspective on religiously justified terrorism. After two prefaces, an introduction, and a chapter sketching out the historical context, the largest part of the book (chapters 3–12) recounts in detail Inoue's autobiography and the transcripts of his trial, what Victoria calls in the introduction the "insider's perspective" (pp. 6–8). This is followed by two chapters where Victoria provides his interpretation of the sources through a historical (chapter 13) and religious (chapter 14) argument. He then adds a "trilogy conclusion" where he links this book to the previous two, presenting his views on the relation between Buddhism and violence, and closes with an additional epilogue that expands beyond the Japanese context and offers a constructive argument aimed at preventing religiously justified terrorism. The appendixes enrich the book with additional cases of Zen-related terrorist actions and a list of all mentioned historical figures connected with Inoue.

The two prefaces—by the author and by James Mark Shields, who has contributed greatly to research on Japanese Buddhism and political radicalism[2]—significantly contextualize the book within the legacy of Victoria's previous work and introduce its impact on both the scholarly investigation of Buddhism and on Zen communities and practitioners in the West. These prefaces reveal that the purpose of the book is not limited to historical investigation but includes a constructive proposal about religion and violence. The introduction clarifies Victoria's methodology and use of concepts. His definition of terrorism as "a tactic employed, typically by the weak, to place pressure on the powerful, especially governments, to do the terrorists' bidding" (p. 2), presents one of the main conundrums of the book: the agency of individuals, such as Inoue, coming from a low-class background but deeply embedded in military and radical political networks that reach Emperor Shōwa. The author explains his choice of a "life history" method centered on Inoue's own account of his life and motivations leading to the assassination plot and concludes by clearly stating that the ultimate aim of the book is to prevent future reiterations of religiously motivated terrorism.

Before Inoue's life history, Victoria sketches the dire socioeconomic conditions which informed the discontent of radical groups that organized political assassinations in pre-World War II Japan, and introduces his perspective on Emperor Shōwa's role in weakening the democratic institutions that flourished in the 1920s. Starting from chapter 3, the reader ventures into the life of Inoue, based on Victoria's detailed retelling of Inoue's autobiography *Ichinin issatsu* 一人一殺, published in 1953.[3] We learn that Inoue's youth was marked by family problems, alcoholism, flirts with socialism, and a moral and religious crisis that inspired suicidal thoughts (chapter 3). We then follow his activities as a spy and political agitator in China in the 1910s, where he built his connections with the Japanese military and started to experiment with the Buddhist practices of Zen meditation and sutra chanting (chapters 4 and 5). Chapters 6 and 7 offer more information on Inoue's commitment to Buddhism after he returned to Japan at the end of World War I: Victoria details how Inoue reached enlightenment after practicing *zazen* 座禅 meditation, solving his childhood moral doubts about the distinction between good and evil. These chapters also provide early evidence for Victoria that despite Inoue's devotion to the *Lotus Sutra* and connection with the nationalist Nichiren thinker Tanaka Chigaku 田中智学 (1861–1939), Inoue's Buddhist views were dominated by Zen training (pp. 76–77, 86–88). Chapter 8 shifts the focus to the early 1930s, with the growing involvement of Inoue with military and ultranationalist groups and political assassination plots in Tokyo, including the one he was most directly involved in: the Blood Oath Corps Incident of 1932. This was the attempt by a group of right-wing extremists to initiate a socioeconomic revolution and overturn the government by assassinating twenty politicians and businessmen. The group was successful in killing only two of the targeted victims, and its members were ultimately arrested. Victoria then

2 See Shields, *Against Harmony*, which provides a large survey of Buddhist intellectuals' engagement with political thought and differing views of modernity, freedom, nationalism, and socioeconomic equality.

3 Later in the book (chapter 8), Victoria clarifies that the title chosen by Inoue for his autobiography means "one person, one kill" and is linked to the assassination strategy used for the 1932 Blood Oath plot.

turns to another source, the transcripts of the trial that followed the incarceration of Inoue (chapter 9). In particular, he points out the Zen concepts and logic that Inoue used to justify his violent plot, also mentioning a further experience of enlightenment allegedly recognized by Inoue's Zen master Yamamoto Genpō 山本玄峰 (1866–1961). The two subsequent chapters tell of Inoue's life in prison and explain how his political networks allowed him to go from an initial death sentence to becoming a secret advisor to Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro 近衛文麿 (1891–1945). The last chapter on Inoue's life focuses on the investigation of his war responsibilities after the end of World War II and reports his pride in winning arguments against his interrogators through the use of Buddhist thought.

Chapter 13 is the first of two chapters that contain Victoria's analysis of Inoue's actions and focuses on what the author considers the main historical point his book wants to make: that Inoue's terrorist plot and his later political role are evidence of Emperor Shōwa's responsibilities in the demise of Taishō (1912–1926) democracy and the rise of Japanese totalitarianism. Building on the historian Maruyama Masao's 丸山眞男 (1914–1996) interpretation of Japanese fascism, Victoria defines Inoue as an example of an "outlaw" who contributed to the establishment of totalitarian imperialism in Japan (pp. 181–83). That said, Victoria also suggests that Inoue's actions "from below" were connected with interests and interventions "from above," as the emperor benefited from Inoue's attacks on the political and economic elites, and Inoue's release from prison and service to Konoe's pro-emperor politics can be seen as further evidence of this link (p. 183).

After the historical argument, Victoria invokes a religious one in the following chapter, centering on two main points: he argues against previous scholarship that saw Inoue as a Nichiren Buddhist, shifting focus to the centrality of Zen in both his practice and ideas, and then discusses the main problem of Buddhist justifications of violence. This last point is further explored in the conclusion, which is meant as an overarching reflection on the content of his three books. Victoria sees the embrace of violence as the result of Zen's focus on selflessness, action, and intuition, especially in the modernist form exemplified by Suzuki Daisetsu Teitarō 鈴木大拙貞太郎 (1870–1966), one of the main targets of the author's criticism. Victoria argues that the lack of ethical reflection in East Asian Buddhism is one of the main causes of the modern Buddhist acceptance of Japanese militarism. While this consideration brings him to look for better models of nonviolent and ethical forms of Buddhism in Theravāda and in Buddhist canonical sources,[4] he admits that history has provided us with examples of religiously justified violence in both East Asian and South Asian Buddhist traditions, and identifies potentially problematic passages also in Buddhist scriptures. The final comparison with other religions further extends this consideration of the link between violence and religion. In the additional epilogue, Victoria returns to his initial definition of terrorism as a strategy used by the weak against the powerful, using Inoue as a case study to discuss the political manipulation of religious justifications for violence, and to criticize how terrorism has been dealt with in recent American foreign policy. The last chapter, the conclusion, and the epilogue testify to Victoria's long-term commitment to exploring the link between Buddhism and violence—and give him the chance to introduce his next project on violence across religious traditions.

Victoria's argumentation reveals both the complexity of the topic and his assessment of it, while at the same time exposing tensions within the author's approach. The book, and more broadly Victoria's research, reveals a tension between history and religion and the attempt to separate the two and place violence in the former category. Despite Victoria's call for awareness over historical connections between religion and violence, which he documents at length, the epilogue seems to use Inoue's political plots and the role of the emperor as a way to disassociate religion from violence, or at least suggest the manipulation of the former for political purposes: "Religion-related terrorism is not primarily a religious phenomenon" (p. 246), which might lead one to conclude that this terrorism is ultimately political and motivated by historical, socioeconomic conditions, and not religious ones.

I believe that Victoria's analysis of religious terrorism and its inherent tension between history and religion might have benefited from engaging with some of the previous scholarship on the topic, such as Bruce Lincoln's work on the 9/11 terrorist attacks and their

4 Victoria made a similar comparison in previous publications such as *Zen at War* and "A Buddhological Critique of 'Soldier-Zen' in Wartime Japan," but in *Zen Terror,* we can see further developments that correct an attempt to isolate a more ethical Buddhism in either South Asian traditions or in early canonical sources.

aftermath.[5] Lincoln's distinction between maximalist and minimalist views of religion allows for a spectrum of religious roles in society, while avoiding the dismissal of religiously justified violence as an irrational and unexplainable event (chapter 4). Lincoln's consideration of the revolutionary potential of religion (chapter 6) can also be applied to cases of Buddhist justification of violence against state power, left-wing radical action, and socialist utopias that would have nuanced Victoria's argumentation.

In this sense, Victoria's analysis of religious terrorism and its relation to totalitarianism in *Zen Terrorism* would have benefited from a discussion of the anarchist Zen monk Uchiyama Gudō 内山愚童 (1874–1911), executed for his participation in a plot to assassinate Emperor Meiji 明治 (1852–1912) in 1911, which Victoria himself had included in his first book and was later the focus of a publication by Fabio Rambelli.[6] In addition, Victoria's effort to identify in East Asian Buddhist thought potential elements that led to an acceptance of imperialism and militarism could have included consideration of the left-wing and progressive stances also present in modern Japanese Buddhism.[7]

In light of the ultimately constructive intention of *Zen Terror*, it is also possible to understand why it is so important for Victoria to define Inoue's approach to Buddhism as based on Zen, rather than on Nichiren thought. The author points out every connection with Zen ideas and practices that can be found both in Inoue's autobiographical account and in his answers to the interrogations during the 1933 trial and the post-World War II ones. Even if Victoria's argument for the Zen basis of Inoue's action can be an important correction to previous scholarship on him, the reader is left to wonder why it is so important to identify and isolate a Zen core when the autobiography contains numerous mentions of interactions with Nichiren Buddhists, devotion to the *Lotus Sutra*, and the centrality of Shinto-inspired worship of the emperor. Rather than in the historical context of Japanese Buddhism or of its modern interpretations, the answer must be found in Victoria's purpose to offer a self-critical reflection on Zen and violence to a Western readership, whose views of Zen might be dominated by the orientalist stereotype of Buddhism as a peaceful religious tradition.

Victoria's aim to revise the image of Zen in the West informs his argument and the way he writes about Zen elements in Inoue's autobiography and interrogation reports. In much of his analysis, "Zen" becomes a reified and unified subject to which Inoue's statements can be associated. Rather than looking at Zen as an essential nucleus of ideas and practices that directly or indirectly provided justifications for Inoue's terrorist actions, it would be useful to look at the rhetorical nature of Inoue's use of concepts of intuition and personal experience to justify his actions and make them unexplainable to the "unenlightened" interrogator (chapter 9). Victoria's efforts to turn Zen into an active element in Inoue's decisions risks subtracting agency from Inoue himself and from his networks, and it might also be in contradiction with the author's own choice of a life history method to center the attention on the perspective of the terrorist as a human being, which is connected to my last, methodological, criticism of the book.

The tensions and contradictions that characterize Victoria's scholarship, which make it simultaneously problematic and thought-provoking, are already present in the methodological introduction of *Zen Terror*: he strongly claims an objective stance based on reporting the insider's account through primary sources without intervening on them (pp. 6–7), but then states that rather than an objective history, his book is a "spiritual history" (p. 9) because of the attention paid to the insider's perspective and motivations. Victoria's detailed summary of Inoue's autobiography offers a service to the readership that cannot access the Japanese original and constitutes a useful tool in undergraduate teaching, although at times his overview contains repetitions, and it might have benefited from more direct translations of important passages, which become more frequent in the final part of the account. However, his use of the primary sources needs further scrutiny. First, Victoria selects episodes that strengthen his later arguments, complementing them with additional evidence not present in the autobiography, such as when he mentions the *zazen* practice of Inoue's band (p. 111). Second, and more importantly, it is hard to consider Inoue's 1953 autobiography as historical evidence for events that happened during a period of over fifty years. The autobiography should be read as a retrospective interpretation of his own life and of the political history he was involved in, and it also contains many interesting elements that could be analyzed as a form of self-hagiography, such as when Inoue claims to have had reve-

5 Lincoln, *Holy Terrors*.
6 Rambelli, *Zen Anarchism*.
7 These have been explored in rich recent scholarship; see Shields, *Against Harmony*, and Curley, *Pure Land, Real World*.

latory dreams and to have foreseen later events. While Victoria's portrait of Inoue gives us a representation of a complex and fascinating historical agent within an extended network of connections with religious, political, and military figures, Victoria's later separation between historical and religious arguments and efforts to find potential justifications for violence in Buddhist doctrine or practice risk forgetting a useful observation shared by multiple presenters at a recent conference on Japanese Buddhism at the University of Chicago, and that also resonates with Victoria's own methodological statement: that, ultimately, Buddhism is made of people.

The problems inherent in the argumentation of *Zen Terror* make it a book that does not necessarily help a reader understand a specific period in the history of religion and politics in Japan, for which other Japanese scholarship would serve them better.[8] However, when read in light of Victoria's constructive purpose of inviting readers toward a more critical self-awareness, the book raises important ethical issues and has the merit of discarding orientalist stereotypes about Zen as being a peaceful and nonviolent religious tradition. In addition, the book places the specific cases of Inoue Nisshō and of the relation between religion and totalitarianism in Japan in dialogue with more recent examples of religiously justified violence in a way that does not essentialize the Japanese context and that could be of use in teaching global history. This makes *Zen Terror* an interesting read not only for scholars of Japan and Buddhism, but for anyone interested in reflecting on the role of the individual in totalitarian regimes, in the relation between religion and violence, and more broadly in politics and ethics. Finally, it sheds light on the personal and scholarly trajectory of Brian Victoria, who has had a significant, if not controversial, impact on the study of modern Buddhism and on the image of Zen in the West.

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8 Among others, see Ōtani, *Kindai bukkyō to iu shiza*; Ogawara, *Nihon no sensō to shūkyō, 1899–1945*; Niino, *Kōdō bukkyō to tairiku fukyō*; and Ishii et al., *Kindai no bukkyō shisō to Nihonshugi*.