

The Interaction Between Japanese Buddhism and Christianity in the Meiji Period

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Abstract: Although initially fraught with tension, spanning roughly two decades, Buddhists employed various strategies to combat the spread of Christianity and uphold their traditional values. As the 1890s dawned, a new wave of Buddhists emerged, spearheading the reconstruction of Japanese Buddhism through processes of secularization and westernization in alignment with the currents of the Meiji Restoration. This paper delves into the intricate relationship between Buddhism and Christianity in Japan following the Perry Expedition. By scrutinizing the writings and orations of numerous Buddhist leaders spanning the period from the 1860s to the 1890s, this paper elucidates the multifaceted conflicts and interactions between Japanese Buddhism and Christianity. A nuanced analysis of their endeavors, reveals the evolving dynamics and strategies employed by both religions in navigating their coexistence in Japan's religious landscape, where both involuntarily made corresponding relative changes to be involved in social trends and Japanese traditions. This paper also discusses the cooperation and potential union between the two religions at the beginning of the 19th century, when New Buddhists received education in Western philosophy and examined Christianity. In short, the Buddhist-Christian relationship underwent a conversion from opponents to equal religion, even collaboratively enforcing social justice and care.

Keywords: Japanese Buddhism, Christianity, Meiji.

1. Introduction

Christianity experienced a revival in Japan as Commodore Perry's fleet knocked open its market. While both Commodore Perry and President Fillmore emphasized the lack of interest in spreading Christianity, "the Constitution and laws of the United States forbid any interference with the religious or political concerns of other nations," the President emphasized in his letter to the Japanese Emperor, "Commodore Perry in particular has been commanded by me to refrain from any action that would jeopardize the peace of your Imperial Majesty's rule. [1]," the Japanese government was still highly aware of Christianity's potential threat, which any forms and terms associated with it during the negotiation with western countries were avoided. On July 29, 1858, Japan could continue to withstand America's pressure and signed the final treaty, in which Americans were offered the right to legally worship their religion but must not be disrespectful or disdainful to Japanese religious ceremonies. However, just as Abe Yoshiya surmised, the Japanese ruling class never anticipated that these agreements would facilitate the dissemination of Christianity throughout the country [2]. Christianity was intentionally and unintentionally exposed to Japanese people through Christian worship services

and funeral ceremonies, as in the following Meiji Period when Western cultures and traditions were adopted in Japan and those domestic ones were abandoned.

Buddhism in Japan did not experience a prosperous time after Perry's expedition as it did in the past 200 years. As Japanese scholars exchanged and learned Western philosophy and religion, they began to regard Buddhism as the major obstacle blocking Japan's modernization. Under the trend of various social issues, intellectuals started to question the traditional Buddhist position in Japan, known as the Danka system, compulsorily bonding Japanese citizens to their local temples and monks. In the Meiji Period, the Japanese government abolished the Danka system which had lasted for more than 200 years in April 1871; later, the government continued depriving Buddhism's privilege power. Additionally, the "Haibutsu Kishaku" movement prevailed in Japanese society, aiming to destroy temples and force monks to return to secular life. The movement was enormous: "For a time, Kyoto, Nara, Ise, Sado, Toyama, Matsumoto, and other feudal lords forced Buddhist temples to "apply for cancellation on their own." The Satsuma Domain, which was popular in Shinto, ordered the abandonment of 1,066 temples and 2,964 monks to return to secular life; the Toyama Domain also once implemented banning temples. One sect only retains the "one sect, one temple system" of two temples, reducing the original 1,630 temples to seven. The only remaining temples were in decline, with incense and incense desolate, and Buddhists found it difficult to make a living. Buddhism even became extinct in remote areas [3]." In the following years, when Buddhists were eager to alter their original beliefs and thoughts to hold their remaining followers, Christians connected themselves to the working class by offering social welfare and benefits, as a figure of savior both physically and mentally. Two religions inevitably had conflicts for a long period: Buddhism regarded Christianity as an exotic invading religion while Christianity defamed the former as a religion too outdated to catch the current social development. Indeed both religions had obstacles to winning every Japanese's support, urging them to make relative imitations, and eventually, collaborate with one and another. This paper will discuss the procedure of the two religions, including their initial mutual aviation, strives openly and secretly, reformation over time, and their final collaboration.

2. Buddhists' boycott against Christianity

2.1. Buddhists concern about Christianity

Buddhism priests soon became aware of the reviving Christianity, as they frequently delivered speeches to Japanese people stressing the importance of Buddhism, also denouncing Christianity as an "evil religion". For most priests, their concerns mainly encompassed ambitious and contemptuous feelings towards foreigners, as they called barbarians: from their points of view, foreigners from whatever country were all barbarians because of their common religion, "evil teaching" (jakyō). Despite the Japanese government and bureaucrats controlling and restricting the spread of Christianity, Japanese Buddhists still regard the defense against Christianity as their duty, meanwhile seeing it as a method to strengthen Buddhist status in Japan. When talking about the history of Christianity in Japan in the 16th century, Honganji priest Gesshō claimed Buddhism was the only way to eradicate delusion by its roots. To accomplish that, he declared, "To do so, public officials should deliberate [on this matter], and, because Buddhism, in its Uprightness and Greatness, can put an end to heresy, [they should] command the priests of the eight sects and have all people in the nation follow them. Through the privilege of sectarian registry, the authorities had [priests] enlighten those who were mistakenly attached to the heretical teachings, and turned them back into people of the Land of the Gods (shinshū no tami) [4]." Representing most Japanese priests at the time, he was doubtful and aware of the potential threat of Christianity; aiming to thwart it from further expansion, he urged the government to enforce actions, while the Buddhists should carry out all their support to protect the nation. This is to say that Buddhists, in the early Meiji era, were bounding the religion to

the country. According to Kleine when looking back into the Buddhists' interdependence, believes that the Buddhists developed a more sophisticated version of filial piety by emphasizing the redemption of one's parents rather than just their material well-being. Moreover, since shelter, food, and housing are necessities for practitioners of the Buddhist path, which can only be guaranteed by an effectively operated state, it is only natural that the Buddha propagates the law to protect the country [5].

Moved to the Meiji period, Buddhism experienced the "Haibutsu Kishaku" from domestic power and Christianity threat from outside the country, and therefore the main concerns shifted from unfamiliar exotic culture to specific doctrines that Christianity differed from traditional Japanese values. Throughout centuries, Japanese people had praised and highlighted the importance of serving families and the emperor, while the Bible told his believers to show their loyalty and faithfulness in God, contrary to Japanese nature. In the voice of all Japanese people, Kiyū Dōjin, a vigorous agitator and opponent of Christianity in the early Meiji Period, reminded the Japanese people about their felicitous tradition of showing respect toward their ruler and parents and fiercely blamed the Christians' deviant teaching that one must give up serving the previous ruler and birth parents to turn to the Christian God. To raise doubt toward Christianity among Japanese people, Kiyū Dōjin employed polemics to question Christian doctrines in his speech: he started by introducing the "Original Sin" believed in Christianity and explained that the sin could be cleansed "through the spilling of blood and the tearing of flesh." Then, Kiyū Dōjin questioned, "If Original Sin adheres in our nature, even if we were to smash our bones and burn our flesh, how could we ever erase that sin? In this way, using various absurd remarks, they try to do away with the three teachings. Is this something that should be tolerated?" As the environment for Buddhism became more and more severe in the 1870s, and as Western logistics was introduced into Japan, Buddhists abandoned their moderate, less powerful method to demonstrate concerns over Christianity, rather using intact, fine logic to attack its core doctrines.

2.2. Buddhists defenses against Christianity

Buddhists found themselves under unprecedented circumstances over 200 years after the Meiji government officially deprived their privileges. For a long period, Buddhists had put their efforts into strengthening and solidifying their social status, while ignoring the importance of creativity, and living in high-quality live supported by the Japanese Government and its supporters. An oral saying satirizing the priests in the late Tokugawa period chanted that they are all stupid; they confuse the people; they waste national resources and counterpart morality." Another historian Tsuji Zennosuke, who studied Japanese Buddhism and the wane of its in the Tokugawa period, concluded that a distinct social notion orientated from the sects that had originated among common people to become biased; priests grew more and more aristocratic, Buddhism got estranged from the people, and anti-Buddhist ideas emerged in an overwhelming trend. He described a fixed, strict class system widely spread among priests and temples, as moral and material corruption as well as spiritual incompetence took root in the religion for the past 200 years of effortless peace and privilege.

In 1872, the Three Articles was published; although Buddhists helped the Ministry of Instruction to draft out, the articles were however not facing Buddhists but Shintoists:

Art. 1: To embody reverence for the deities and love of the country.

Art. 2: To clarify the principles of heaven and the way of humanity.

Art. 3: To revere and assist the emperor and obey the will of the court.

Higuchi Ryūon expresses his concerns about defending dharma after eight months of the Three Articles' establishment, where he states the necessity of making people rely on religion, by his means, Buddhism, to govern the states.

Failing already in the fight against Shintoists, Buddhists started to proceed with religious reformation. Compared to the following Buddhist reformists and their leading reform movements, the impact of Christianity on the Reformation was small and insignificant. The presence of Christianity sparked negative reactions and brought attention to defensive measures: the foreign religion should be destroyed, rather than encouraging reform. [6] In the following decades, the Buddhists had been trying to reestablish their dominant status and reputation in the nation as they did before the Meiji Reformation. They expressed their opinions against the Christians by exhibiting strong anti-Christian tendencies that enabled them to side with xenophobic sentiment while at the same time, offering a chance to make their point that Japanese culture was impossible without Buddhism because it was rooted in its language and customs for a long time [7].

The strong anti-Christianism trend did not diminish with the decline of Buddhism's influence. Criticism toward Christianity had been discovered in every published work after the opening of Japan. Buddhists regarded the rejection of Christianity as its first and foremost obligation, remaining their major concern until the enforcement of mixed residence in 1899. During the long period of time, prominent Buddhist priests asserted that the Buddhists focused on defending against Christianity, while the populace was preoccupied with coastal defenses. Regarding their extreme aversion toward Christianity, Buddhists held a traditional exclusive attitude toward it, and additionally, the old, Chinese anti-Christianity literature was discovered to impede Christianity from spreading. For instance, Ugai Tetsujo (1814–1891), a well-known Pure Land Buddhist, published two collections: *Hekija kankenroku* [A personal writings of refutations of the evil religion] in 1861, which included both Chinese and Japanese writings, and *Hekijashu* [A collection of disagreements against Christianity] in 1860, contained Chinese treatises.

This defense was not successful, since traditional priests were arguing conservative family values, while many of the young men had already turned to Western learning at Tokyo, refuting the Japanese cultures, which in their minds, were off the trail of modernization. However, Buddhists found themselves more professionalized in studying Christianity as they frequently examined it aiming to find its weakness and make an issue in it. The more they tried to defame it, the more attention and effort they put into studying it. Even some Buddhists claimed they have looked through the Bible from the first page to the last page: speeches from that time often included the Old Testament, Adam and Eve and the Fall, Noah and the Flood, and the Ten Commandments.

As a result of touching Western thoughts and techniques, Japanese Buddhists added them to the fight against Christianity. After the exposition to the Western world, Japan officially and privately sent numerous students abroad to the Western world, including Buddhists sending their people as well in order to push Buddhism reformation. Buddhists' move was quick: as they soon sniffed the divergence between Western religion (Christianity) and Western science. In the 1870s, Christianity found a new trend of thoughts, western thoughts, were blocking their expansion. "Our worst heathenism in Japan is not Confucianism, not Buddhism, nor Shintooism, but infidelity imported from Christian lands," a missionary wrote in 1875. Books full of arguments for Christianity, some of which were really blasphemous in nature, were prepared and sent across the nation before any part of the Bible—aside from the three Gospels—was published. Buddhists seized this weakness and exaggerated the point, quoting Western scientists such as Darwin, Huxley, Spencer, and Mill at the time, saying "science has laid the Christian religion captive at its feet", and that it "striven to shake this horrible religion" was the work of those scientists.

Buddhist logicians also joined the anti-Christian movement and tried to apply *inmyō* into society as a defense to the widespread Westernizing thoughts. The group of Buddhist logicians claimed that many of their arguments sought to establish their ideologies, the correctness of the traditional Japanese worldview, or the morality of Buddhism, whether Confucian or Shinto, in Japan, while criticizing the problems with Christianity (the dissident nature of Christians, missionary activities

leading to later colonization, etc.) [8]. The leading person was Kira Kōyō. Together with Ōnishi Hajime and Murakami Senshō, they initiated multiple inferences against Christian disciplines logistically, mainly focused on the topic of the Creator, God, and Jesus, by making analogies between them and normal people. The analogies incorporate the inference for oneself, the inference for others, and the inference for both. Murakami Senshō made a simple inference for both: “Thesis: Jesus is a general human. Reason: Because [his body] is not different from general people’s bodies. Example: Like us [9].” While the former two kinds of inference were separately aimed to persuade proponents and opponents, an inference for both could be gradually accepted by any individual. Despite Inmyō’s failure to gain popularity in 19th century Japan and modern Japan, its ideas should not be ignored since it had been an intellectual refutation of western modernization, especially against Christianity.

3. Buddhism’s reformation

3.1. New Buddhism

New Buddhism and New Buddhists emerged in the 1890s, as a great number of Buddhists noticed that their previous vision of captivating people or destroying Christianity was impractical and useless. Soon, they learned a lesson from blindly pursuing traditional values and actions, and seek for approaches to contribute to social change, including inspiration from Christianity. New Buddhists drew a clear distinction between the Old Buddhists for their outdated, arrogant values, accusing that the old Buddhists only knew “how to worship wooden statues and sutras, how to stand before monks at a temple, and how to listen to the sermons. ...” New Buddhists argued that these so-called priests had already deserted the life of faith, while the “old Buddhism” had been struggling on the verge of death [10]. Not only did the New Buddhists accuse the Old Buddhists lacked vigorousness and were desperate for renovation, but also blamed them for their lagging effects in the Japanese Modernization process: vehemently opposing Old Buddhism, the New Buddhists were convinced that they supported the conservative forces that had therefore inhibited progress in Japan, particularly in education and ethics fields [11]. What New Buddhists were trying to achieve was a religion containing both religious activities and the rationality of modern concepts.

In this decade, as Buddhists still recognized Christians as opponents, they regarded them as models in the reform movement. In the book *The Ruin of Buddhism*, the author Koji Tajima Shoji praised Christian activities to contrast and blame the spiritual corruption and condescending among the Buddhist priests. When some Buddhists discussed the dilemma of Buddhism at the point and its solution, they tended to unintentionally include generic humanism with Christian colors. Hanseikai zasshi, who was praised as the “pioneer of Buddhist reform in the decade after it starts in 1886” according to the journal *Bukkyō*, mentioned the need for humanism in one of his speeches, saying, “During this short interval between life and death, our hearts traverse the road that encompasses both illusion and awakening. Directing our gaze toward social realities while reflecting on our own selves, we will correct our faults with humility [12].”

Almost at the same time, the Buddhists started to accept Westernization in areas of culture, family, and law. While Christians established girls’ schools in the late 1880s, some Buddhist reformists supported it: they emphasized the necessity of women's education and the indispensable role women played in current Japanese society. One of the leading priests in the movement was Shimaji Mokurai. Noted in his article, he claimed that the advantage or harm to society was dependent on the acquisition or absence of knowledge, and was considerable if one aspires to support the advancement of society via the effect of women's and girls' education [13]. Moreover, he refuted the traditional social structure at the time, claiming that no difference in rights should be if men and women were taking exact duties, which differed from the current situation. In most of his works, he demonstrated his strong care and concern for women's status and social rights, but not in a progressive way which he

still supported for traditional family values. Despite the try of some Buddhists, this movement was not eventually well accepted in the Buddhist world.

As a whole, the New Buddhists, as stated to regard a sound Buddhist belief (*kenzen naru shinkō* 健全なる信仰) as their major principle, they also resolved to destroy superstition and promoted free investigation in Buddhism as well as other religions.

3.2. Cooperation

As Christians had gradually taken place in areas of social issues, New Buddhists felt social engagement was necessary. The leader of the Buddhist reformation, Furukawa Rosen, acknowledged the success while urging his people to take corresponding actions. He considered it important for Buddhists to employ Christian teachings with the standards of rationality, also incorporating philosophical and scientific knowledge [19]. Also, different from Old Buddhists, Furukawa showed his tolerance of Christianity, advising his followers to adopt a longer-term outlook in their social interactions and to be more tolerant of and receptive to indigenous faiths and their adherents. Another Buddhist leading reformist, Sakaino Koyo, demonstrated a positive attitude toward Christianity. With a clear cut-off to the Old Buddhists, denouncing them as “corrupted, formalistic, and superstitious,” he reinforced the manifesto of New Buddhists that, “The unification of Buddhism and Christianity is also one of our [New Buddhists] ideals, one of our hopes [14].” Later, he went to Sendai to visit a Catholic school, where he formed close relationships with several Christians there. During his career, Furukawa established multiple magazines to free Buddhism from conservative and superstitious constraints, to meet its religious and social duties in the modern-day world. These essays refuted the traditional Buddhist dogmatic requirement, trying to reshape the religion from a more historical perspective [15].

After Furukawa’s death, Katō Genchi continued to lead New Buddhists; he suggested a potential union between New Buddhists and Christians in 1901. Unprecedentedly connecting Unitarians and Buddhist Puritans intellectually and morally, he created a future union based on the similarity and proximity between the above two groups of people. As an example, on April 7, 1901, Sugimura Jūō, Sakaino Kōyō, Katō Genchi, Tōru Dōgen, and others went to the Unitarian assembly building Yuiitsukan to learn Sunday lectures and to offer a special issue of *Shinbukkyō*. This indicates that the Union did begin communicating and working together. They also seized the chance to discuss their different opinions on religion with the Unitarians, deciding to organize a combined conference for the fall of the next year. Nevertheless, the plan was never carried out [16].

Besides conversions between the two religions, Buddhists and Christians in Japan collaborated extensively on social welfare initiatives aimed at addressing the pressing needs of the population. Recognizing the profound social inequalities and challenges faced by many people, both religious communities saw the importance of providing support and assistance to those in need. One significant aspect of their collaboration was the establishment of social welfare institutions such as orphanages, hospitals, and schools. These institutions served as vital resources for marginalized and vulnerable groups, offering shelter, medical care, education, and vocational training. By working together to fund, manage, and staff these facilities, Buddhists and Christians demonstrated their shared commitment to alleviating suffering and improving the quality of life for all members of society. The Japanese Christians aimed, through education, to cultivate the nation’s interest in moral and scientific interests in Western education. Seeing the importance of an individual’s moral conscience and rational thinking as an independent person, one of the leading Japanese Christians hoped to educate students whom “his conscience was a weapon.” The founder of Christian education in Japan, Nijima Jo, who established the Christian Doshisha University in Kyoto, emphasized the necessity of building “its [the Japanese society] spiritual and moral basis”, while “encouraging the importance of Western science and knowledge. [17]” As one of the students who went abroad to the United States to study

during the Reformation, he was inevitably influenced and moved by the “free, democratic, and Christian America of the time.” When he first returned to Japan, he sought the destiny of the American values as an impulse to the undergoing Japanese modernization, “adding Christian training to the purity of a [traditional] Japanese samurai. [18]” The founding of Doshisha University converted Christianity from an individual to a religion holding strong ties to Buddhism, combining Western civilization while maintaining traditional Japanese values, and promoting intellectual development alongside moral and spiritual growth. While Dōshisha University was founded under Christian principles, it still incorporated Buddhist teachings and values into its compulsory curriculum, reflecting the current social environment of promoting Western thoughts and keeping traditional values at the same time [19].

The tension between Buddhists and Christians was alleviated in the following years both doctrinally and realistically. Numerous religious conferences were held in the 20th century, as well as the establishment of social welfare structures providing space for both religions to have dialogue and collaboration.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the relationship and interaction between Buddhism and Christianity in Japan after the Perry Expedition underwent significant shifts, evolving from initial tension and competition to eventual cooperation and collaboration. Initially, Buddhism viewed the revival of Christianity with suspicion and sought to defend against its perceived threats to traditional Japanese values, denouncing it as an “evil religion” and emphasizing the importance of Buddhism in preserving Japanese culture and identity. However, as Japan entered the Meiji era and underwent rapid modernization, both religions faced similar challenges and began to find common ground. The occurrence of New Buddhism in the late 19th century marked a turning point in the relationship between the two religions. New Buddhists recognized the need to adapt to the changing social and cultural landscape of Japan and advocated for a reformation of Japanese Buddhism. Influenced by Western ideas and values, New Buddhists sought to secularize and modernize Buddhism while also engaging in social welfare initiatives. This period saw increased cooperation between Buddhists and Christians on various social welfare projects aimed at addressing the pressing needs of the population. Furthermore, Buddhist and Christian leaders engaged in dialogue and mutual respect, recognizing the importance of addressing societal issues together. While doctrinal differences remained, both religious communities found ways to work together to promote education, social welfare, and moral values. Through their collaborative efforts, Buddhists and Christians in Japan were able to navigate the challenges of modernization while preserving their respective religious traditions. Overall, the post-Perry Expedition era witnessed a transformation in the relationship between Buddhism and Christianity in Japan. From initial suspicion and competition to eventual cooperation and collaboration, both religions found common ground in addressing the needs of Japanese society. By working together, Buddhists and Christians were able to contribute to the social and cultural development of Japan while preserving their unique religious identities.

This paper still incorporates limitations, including pointing out a clear, representative, and formal event as a starting point for Japanese Buddhism and Christianity collaboration. Also, it is vague to define the role Buddhism played in certain Christian social events. By only asserting that there was a transformation in relationships among the two above religions does not indicate the deepness and extensiveness of the cooperation. Future studies need more direct evidence at the beginning of 20th century Japan to examine that. In addition, the effort and achievements done by inmyō are often ignored for their obscurity. The group of inmyō intellectuals should be regarded as an important proportion of the defense of Japanese traditional values. Looking ahead, future research in this field can develop in the new field of investigating the evolving role of Buddhism and Christianity in

modern Japan, particularly in the context of globalization and increasing religious pluralism. Studies could examine how these religions continue to influence social and cultural norms, as well as their responses to contemporary issues such as secularization, technological advancement, and interfaith dialogue that arousing in the young generation. By building on the findings of this paper and addressing its limitations, scholars can contribute to a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the intricate dynamics between Buddhism and Christianity in Japan and their implications for the broader study of religion and society.

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