



Brian Daizen Victoria, *Zen Terror in Prewar Japan: Portrait of an Assassin*

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FOLLOWING *Zen at War* (Weatherhill, 1997; 2nd ed. Rowman & Littlefield, 2006) and *Zen War Stories* (Routledge, 2002), this book focuses on a single individual, Inoue Nisshō (1887–1967). Its cover, showing a monk in meditation and the red silhouette of a gun, promises a thrilling read. The sources are abundant: the 419-page biography *Ichinin issatsu* (One Person Kills One Person) published in 1953, as well as his own courtroom testimony (375 pages) and that of the thirteen members of his terrorist band (2,370 pages) (6).

Inoue was close to his father, a village doctor in Gunma Prefecture, but made a “decisive break” with his mother when he was six, when she (falsely) told him he was not really her child: “I found you abandoned on the side of the road... left in front of the statue of the Buddha” (23). A delinquent and arsonist, he intimidated his family and the villagers, but in middle school he began to ask existential questions: “Where do we come from and where do we go after death?” (25). These brought him to an unsatisfactory Christian period (he balked at the idea of God). He became skeptical about ethics and decided that “‘good’ would consist of whatever was convenient to him and nothing more” (26). Equally radical was his attitude to education. Teachers could not answer his questions such as “what made $1 + 1 = 2$ ” (27), so he lost all faith in them and their books and fell prey to suicidal thoughts. Studying English literature at Waseda University, he became a hard drinker and was a habitué of Yoshiwara until one of the prostitutes urged him to change his ways. Chinese studies were interrupted by further mishaps and he decided to commit suicide discreetly in Manchuria, but on arrival in Dalian in 1909 he got a job as a spy, infiltrating one of the Chinese uprisings (favored by Japan) against the failing Qing dynasty. This ended in the decapitation of its sixty members, a traumatic spectacle for Inoue.

I paused in my reading here to consider what balm Zen meditation might bring to this disturbed young man. A Sōtō Zen priest, Azuma Soshin (1883–1966), assigned him a koan on their first encounter, and he became the priest’s most zealous disciple: “For the first time in his life, Inoue found something and someone he could truly believe in” (37). Spying on Germans in the Tsingtao colony as part of Japan’s engagement in World War I, Inoue befriended the Japanese mistress of a German factory director, who in return for helping her get back

to Japan gave him a copy of a detailed map the German had in his safe (45). He dragooned a Shin priest for another spying mission, and to his delight the priest revealed that he too was a spy (46). After the fall of the German colony, he again worked with Japan-backed revolutionaries; they were timid about handling the poison gas Japan supplied, so he and his friends took on the dangerous task. Though discovering that the gas was not effective, with his usual resilience he “publicized far and wide just what a fearsome weapon the revolutionaries possessed” (52). It turns out that deep anxiety about the meaning of life underlay Inoue’s daring exploits: “His goal was to use physical pain as a method of overcoming his mental agony” (57).

One day Inoue heard a voice: “You are the savior of the world. For the sake of all sentient beings, get up!” (73). He became enthralled with Nichiren, so that he is “universally, though mistakenly, regarded by both Japanese and foreign scholars alike as either a ‘Nichiren priest’ or at least a lay adherent of Nichirenism” (77). After some unsuccessful rightwing activism, he undertook “post-enlightenment training” (80) at a Rinzai Zen temple. An invitation from Count Tanaka Mitsuaki, formerly a minister of Emperor Meiji, ended this happy interlude. He agreed to head a “patriotic training temple” in a seaside village sixty miles north of Tokyo, using Zen to train young men “dedicated to the reformation of Japan and endowed with a ‘do-or-die’ spirit” (87). His popularity as a faith healer disrupted this and he moved to Tokyo in 1930, becoming associated with the Young Officers’ Movement and involved in plotting a coup (with great misgivings). The coup was shelved but the linked “Manchurian incident” of 18 September 1931 became the pretext for Japan’s occupation of Manchuria. The plotters were publicly excused “on the basis of the patriotic zeal that had motivated them” (97). Then Inoue took part in a plan to assassinate twenty political and economic leaders, the Blood Oath Corps Incident, which took two lives: minister Inoue Junnosuke and business leader Dan Takuma. Coming under suspicion, “Inoue’s first thought was to reveal himself to the police and then cut down as many of them as he could” (103).

As the protagonist faces trial and imprisonment, I pause again to reflect on the connections between the two threads of the narrative. The religious thread is clear enough, but his path to being a political assassin is somewhat less so. To a prosecutor’s Nichiren-inspired question, “Is the law of the sovereign the law of the Buddha or is it not?” Inoue gave a Zen answer: “‘Is’ and ‘is not’ are One” (105). Asked by the judge how he combined “a mind of great compassion” with the act of killing, he drew on Nichiren’s *shakubuku* (break and subdue) and described himself as an *unsui*, one who has “actuated nonattachment in his life, the goal to which all Zen priests should strive” (113–114). In prison Inoue’s Zen experience made him a useful agent in persuading leftists to convert politically (*tenkō*).

Granted an “unprecedented special pardon” (135) in 1941, Inoue became live-in advisor to Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro (1891–1945), and urged him to overthrow “the despotic obstruction of the military cliques” (140). The remarkable reversal of fortune shows that Inoue was “an amazingly *well-connected* Outlaw” (185). If the emperor played a role in Konoe’s elevation of Inoue “it is now so well hidden that it will never be known” (189). The two men’s efforts to create peace between China and Japan were thwarted, and when they arranged to meet President Roosevelt to avoid war with the U.S., “powerful elements within both the Japanese military and American government” (146) blocked it. The wartime prime minister Tōjō Hideki (1884–1948) repeatedly sought Inoue’s help as well, but was rebuffed. Konoe and Inoue, knowing Japan would be defeated, worked quietly on postwar reform plans. But Inoue was no longer welcome in government circles after the war, and Konoe’s suicide left him unsupported when facing the International War Crimes Tribunal where his outspoken and brilliant answers angered but then won over his interrogators, one of whom acclaimed him as “an amazing genius” (165). Asked how he could answer so well given his poor academic record, he replied: “I had one personal experience after another until, finally, I intuitively understood the essence of things” (160). He continued to lecture on his Mahāyāna Buddhist vision and to agitate for social reforms until his death in 1967, aged eighty-one.

Victoria stresses the predominance of Zen in the “religious matrix” of Inoue’s career (201–220). Zen “emphasized ‘pure action’ based solely on intuition (allegedly transcending discursive thought, ethical considerations, and even history itself)” (201). Zen’s “slight regard for scripture” left it without means for “checking its ‘Buddhist’ quality from time to time” (quoting Winston King, 205), and it could easily be instrumentalized for amoral violence. But Buddhism more widely entertains the notion of compassionate killing: “If the *Upāyakauśalya Sūtra* is to be believed, even the two victims of Inoue’s terrorist band would be better off having been killed, for this sutra taught these allegedly wicked men would be ‘reborn in heaven’” (207). Victoria quotes his friend Damien Keown’s Theravāda critique of the role that the Mahāyāna gives to compassion (“a *Bodhisattva* who acts from compassion can do no wrong”) and to emptiness, which makes distinctions between good and evil or a belief that they really exist, “the sign of a deluded mind” (228). But Theravāda, Victoria insists, also has a history of using religion to promote violence (229). He quotes repetitively from D. T. Suzuki (1870–1966) to show that Inoue was not distorting Zen but was true to its unethical and irrational tradition. “Unfortunately for Zen partisans, Inoue’s enlightenment experience was verified... by one of the greatest Zen masters of his day—Yamamoto Gempo” (214), who “testified on behalf of terrorists in an attempt to justify their murderous actions” (216).

I recall the lavish approval of assassins and hunger-strikers by Irish churchmen who invoked Christ's sacrificial redemption. Very much like the IRA leaders, "while Inoue never expressed remorse for his and his band's terrorist acts, he nevertheless admitted that they had been 'bad'" (238). Victoria himself notes this parallel: "No religion is free of having committed terrorist acts or providing the doctrinal/ethical justification for terrorism. For example, we need only look at the Christian faith (both Roman Catholic and Protestant) of terrorists in Northern Ireland" (240). That Japanese Zen still "finds it impossible to criticize Zen masters like Gempō by name, or refute their violence-affirming teachings, reveals a profound sickness in this tradition, one that shows no prospects of being overcome anytime soon" (217).

The later pages of this volume open onto a very wide topic, which Victoria intends to tackle in his next book, "tentatively titled *Holy War Unmasked: The Universal Characteristics of Religious Violence*" (246). May I cast a vote against this project? The world is full of sweeping pacifist tracts, whereas studies like the present one are rare and shed precious light on the complex relations of religion and violence. The anchoring of the discussion in the close study of an individual life amid the political complexities of his time wards off predictable ideology and provides fascinating material for ongoing reflection, as if on a tormenting koan.

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