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Prayer for the Devil

Religion and the Regime of Oda Nobunaga

A common theme in the historiography related to Oda Nobunaga is his strong opposition to religious institutions. While Nobunaga's conflicts with several temples were brutal, this article argues that the image of Nobunaga as broadly anti-Buddhist is a result of an overreliance on the writings of the Jesuit Luís Fróis. Indeed, an analysis centered on documents issued by Nobunaga and his regime reveal that religious institutions served important roles in Nobunaga's regime, and that Nobunaga tended toward maintaining precedent in his relationship with religious institutions. This article provides a framework of the Oda regime's religious policies and the main aspects of it.

keywords: Oda Nobunaga—anti-Buddhism—Luís Fróis—Azuchi period—religious life

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Oda Nobunaga 織田信長 (1534–1582) lives large in the historical imagination. Remembered as the first of the three unifiers, he is by varying accounts remembered as a brute, a revolutionary, and a genius. Frequently the subject of academic and popular consideration, Nobunaga continues even now to be one of the best-known and most discussed figures in Japanese history. One particularly popular topic is that of Nobunaga's relationship with religion, with his violent destruction of Mt. Hiei and his brutal clashes with the Ikkō Ikki taking central stage. It would seem that Nobunaga, whether because of a general hostility toward religion or an opposition to any power center he did not control, was inclined to suppress or destroy religious institutions.

In this article, I provide a different view. I assert that the relationship that Oda Nobunaga and his regime had with religious institutions, while certainly varied, was largely cordial and conservative. For the most part, Nobunaga desired to maintain or increase the prestige of his own regime and its allies and to follow precedent. While political and especially military considerations could trump these concerns, it is clear from an examination of the documents issued by Nobunaga and his regime that religious institutions were a vital part of the social, political, and religious order that Nobunaga desired, and that this order was largely a continuation of what had come before. Thus, religious institutions cannot be seen merely as another outside political entity that Nobunaga needed to either destroy or dominate, but as a necessary part of his regime. Some of these institutions were integral to the Oda vassals before he took over, while others were brought in as Nobunaga became involved in and then master of Kyoto politics.

While no single factor overrode all others, I emphasize precedent as an important guiding principles of Nobunaga's relationship with religious institutions. Generally, Nobunaga did not make changes to practices on the ground. This is borne out in documents from Nobunaga and his regime, of which a large portion are confirmations of extant land holdings and privileges. Nobunaga's regime was primarily concerned with maintaining order and facilitating successful military campaigns, not with restructuring Japanese politics, society, or religion. I believe that Nobunaga's religious policies are, broadly speaking, in continuity with what came before. The issue is that "what came before" for Nobunaga varied: up until Ashikaga Yoshiaki 足利義昭 (1537–1597) fled Kyoto in 1574, Nobunaga's religious interests were those of a powerful daimyo who was engaged in Kyoto politics. After 1574, Nobunaga's interests were of someone trying to fill the void in the capital left by the shogun.

This argument may be surprising in light of previous work on Oda Nobunaga, much of which is focused on his opposition to religious institutions. While Nobunaga did act in opposition to religious institutions on numerous occasions, the emphasis on Nobunaga as a force opposed to religious institutions (for example in McMullin 1984; Lamers 2000) as well as the presentation of Nobunaga himself as openly atheistic are the result of an overreliance on the claims of the Jesuit missionary Luís Fróis (1532–1597). While Fróis's value as an observer of sixteenth-century Japan is immense, I argue that other sources, and especially documents of the Oda regime itself, should be given more weight. Indeed, other contemporaries of Nobunaga espoused a markedly different view of Nobunaga and his relationship to religious institutions and religion as a whole.

I demonstrate that Nobunaga was a frequent patron of special religious rites, especially at major temples in the capital and often as part of his military campaigns. These rites give us insight into what religious institutions Nobunaga saw as important. Largely, these are traditional Kyoto religious centers, befitting the regime of a man who was increasingly becoming the leading figure in the politics of the capital. I then analyze how Nobunaga and his regime interacted with specific religious groups. The Oda family had multigenerational and personal connections with several of these groups, especially with the Zen and Jōdo schools. I also examine Sōkenji 摠見寺, a mysterious temple that Nobunaga had built at Azuchi and was likely meant to become the ritual center of his regime. Finally, I discuss Nobunaga's relationship with Shinto shrines and his veneration of the emperor.

I should note that the purpose of this paper is not to refashion the image of Nobunaga into that of a monk. Nobunaga was positively engaged with religious institutions on numerous levels throughout his life without question, but I do not see any evidence that he was exceptional in this regard. After about 1574, he was more engaged in imperial, and thus Japan-wide politics, and his religious relationships changed to follow suit. The myth of a "rational atheist," anti-Buddhist Nobunaga should be challenged, but we gain nothing by jumping to the opposite extreme. It is likely that the two major religious influences on Nobunaga himself were Zen and (late in his life) Jōdo school, but certainly neither of these were overrepresented in his own documents. Neither the tendency toward precedent nor Nobunaga's own religious preferences overrode pragmatic concerns. This article is also not an attempt to downplay or ignore Nobunaga's brutality in general and toward Buddhist temples in particular. While I would argue that he was no more brutal toward temples than he was toward any other kind of opponent, he was by any metric brutal when he dealt with his enemies, especially if his prestige or safety was on the line. Perhaps Nobunaga was exceptional in this, but we should recall that the Sengoku daimyo 戦国大名 were a

brutal lot, and wholesale slaughter and destruction, while not the standard procedure, were in no way unheard of (Kanda 2014, 161–164).

Luís Fróis

A major source for views of Nobunaga's religious life are Jesuit sources, especially the writings of the Portuguese missionary Luís Fróis. Fróis's writings are indispensable as records of the so-called "Christian Century" in Japan. He wrote numerous missives full of detailed accounts, the *Historia de Iapam*—which recorded the history of the mission in Japan—and several other writings. Fróis wrote on many subjects in Japan, not surprisingly including religion, and is frequently cited in discussions of Nobunaga's relationship with Japanese religion. However, Fróis's use as a (and arguably *the*) main source on Nobunaga's attitudes has warped the discussion, not only because of insufficient criticism but also because of how widely he is cited. To demonstrate, I would point to this passage from Neil McMullin's *Buddhism and the State in Sixteenth-Century Japan*:

> In terms of his attitude toward the Buddhist temples and Buddhist sacred objects, Nobunaga was extremely irreverent. It is clear from his statements and actions that he cared little about those sacred places and objects that were traditionally venerated in Japan. Hirata Toshiharu provides a sharp contrast between Nobunaga's opinion of Mt. Hiei and Takeda Shingen's opinion: on hearing of Nobunaga's destruction of the sacred mountain, Shingen was shocked and he said of Nobunaga, "He is the ghost of the devil!" Nobunaga, on the other hand, said of the famous mountain, "In Japan it considers itself to be a living Kami or Buddha. Rocks and trees are not Kami." Hirata also tells us that Nobunaga made a characteristically irreverent response to Shingen's exclamation by signing a letter with the signature "Nobunaga, Anti-Buddhist Demon" (*Dairokuten no Mao Nobunaga)*. Nobunaga's lack of reverence for temples and Buddhist sacred objects was demonstrated on many occasions. For example, the Jesuit missionary Luis Frois describes Nobunaga's sacrilegious acts against a number of temples in Kyoto in 1569 when he was constructing the Nijō Palace. Materials for the palace were gathered from the temples by force: Nobunaga simply confiscated their works of art and precious treasures and used the sacred stone statues of the Buddha for building blocks. Frois relates how some statues were placed on carts in order to be transported to the construction site, and how others, when carts were in short supply or the statues too large, were dragged through the streets of Kyoto by ropes tied around their necks. Frois adds, needlessly, that the priests and all the residents of the capital were terrified of Nobunaga. (McMullin 1984, 85–86)

McMullin describes Nobunaga's "characteristic" irreverence and turns to two examples: a letter to Takeda Shingen 武田信玄 (1521–1573) and the destruction

of temples to build the shogun's palace. There are, fundamentally, four claims here: (1) Shingen calls Nobunaga "ghost of the devil" ("avatar of Mara" might be a preferable translation) in response to the burning of Enryakuji; (2) Nobunaga directly disagreed with the idea that Mt. Hiei was or could be a kami; (3) Nobunaga signed a response to Shingen with the "Demon King" signature; and (4) Nobunaga destroyed temples to construct the Nijō Palace. The first three are cited from HIRATA Toshiharu's (1965) *Sōhei to bushi*, and the fourth from Fróis explicitly. The problem is that with the exception of the first claim, which is from a document in the *Daigo Rishōin monjo* collection (SIT 3: 195–196), all the other claims are from Fróis's letters, with the second and third being from within a few paragraphs of each other in the same letter, written in 1573 to Francisco Cabral (*Yasokaishi Nihon tsūshin* 2: 256–257). The fourth claim is from another letter of 1569, this one to Belchior de Figueiredo in Kyushu (*Yasokaishi Nihon tsūshin* 1: 436–439).

Hirata's book to a great extent elides this. However, the result is that in reading both Hirata's book and McMullin's, the image of an irreverent and openly anti-Buddhist Nobunaga comes to the fore, because Fróis's claims are being checked against Fróis's claims. I should also note that by mixing in the *Daigo Rishōin monjo* document with the Fróis account, Hirata (and McMullin following him) misrepresents both sources: Takeda Shingen's letter declaring Nobunaga to be an avatar of Mara was not to Nobunaga, it was to a vassal of Ashikaga Yoshiaki, and so Nobunaga would not have responded to it, because he never received it. Furthermore, the section on Nobunaga's irreverent signature lacks an account of Shingen's own supposed games with his, which serves to hide what is an obviously false part of the account. At best, the extant Shingen letter is suggestive of the original story that somehow devolved into Fróis's account, but by making them part of a single narrative HIRATA (1965, 254–256) both smooths over problems in Fróis's claims that otherwise would be obvious and hides Fróis's role as sole reporter of the incident, serving to sever the claim from its source.

Fróis's ubiquity in this debate would be less problematic were his writings read more critically. One often quoted line is from the same 1569 letter to de Figueiredo above:

> He [Nobunaga] scorns the Kami and the Buddhas and their images, and he believes nothing of paganism [Buddhism and Shinto] or of such things as divination. Although he is nominally a member of the *Hokke* school, he states unequivocally that there is no creator, no immortality of the soul, and no life after death. (MCMULLIN 1984; COOPER 1995, 93; *Yasokaishi Nihon tsūshin* 1: 430–431)

This passage is seductive in its boldness and simplicity, but it presents us with several problems. While most scholars have focused on what Fróis says Nobunaga does not believe, very little attention is paid to what Fróis says Nobunaga

does believe: Nobunaga professed to be part of the Nichiren (*Hokke* 法華) school. To reiterate: Fróis, in the same sentence where he claims that Nobunaga is in no way a pagan, says that Nobunaga himself says that he is a pagan. It is important to note that it is only in Jesuit writings that Nobunaga professes such general disbelief. There is a similar passage in Fróis's *Historia*, but it instead notes that Nobunaga had been a believer in Zen in his youth (*Kan'yaku Furoisu Nihonshi* 2: 101).

What is often lost here is context: Fróis presents Nobunaga as anti-Buddhist at the same time that Nobunaga is protecting the Christians in his domain, notably Kyoto. It makes sense, then, for Fróis to show Nobunaga in the best possible light, or at least in a relatively good light, in his missives. However, Nobunaga had not converted, and thus in order to present the pagan Nobunaga in a good light in previous correspondence, Nobunaga was made into an unbeliever; he does not believe in God, but he has nothing in which he does believe. He is thus empty and capable of being filled with the true faith at some point.[1] It is possible that Nobunaga claimed to be a believer to everyone except for Fróis, but it is far more likely that Fróis is dissembling to make Nobunaga look better. I do not know whether Fróis was doing this cynically or if he really believed that conversion was likely for Nobunaga. It is abundantly clear, however, that he was twisting reality or fabricating it to advance this narrative. However, the above quote has been received as accurate by numerous scholars: McMullin (1984, 88), for example, says that it best captures "Nobunaga's attitude toward religion in general." An even more egregious example is the source for the above McMullin quote:

> There was an interesting happening before [Takeda] Shingen invaded Tōtomi and Mikawa. When he sent Nobunaga a letter, due to his conceitedness, he signed it "Tendaino zasuxamo Xinguem." This means that Shingen was naming himself as the highest person in the Tendai school.
>
> In response, Nobunaga signed his name "Duyrocu tenmauo Nobunaga."
>
> This means that Nobunaga was calling himself the demon king who is the enemy of all the schools [of Buddhism], and that just like Daiba hindered Shaka's propagation of his faith, so would Nobunaga hinder the veneration and worship of the various idols in Japan. (*Yasokaishi Nihon tsūshin* 2: 256–257)

"Tendaino zasuxamo Xinguem" is Fróis's attempt at rendering the terms *Tendai zasu* 天台座主 (the abbot of Enryakuji), *shamon* 沙門 (an initiate to the Buddhist path), and Shingen (Takeda Shingen). "Duyrocu tenmauo Nobunaga" is an attempt at rendering Dairokuten Maō 第六天魔王 (King Mara of the Sixth

1. This description by Christian missionaries of a relatively friendly but not converted ruler as basically atheists is not unique to Fróis. Later Jesuits in Qing China would more explicitly describe the Qing rulers as "leaning toward atheism" (Brockey 2007, 111).

Heaven of the Desire Realm, the entity who is worldliness incarnate and famously attempted to prevent the Buddha's enlightenment beneath the Bodhi tree).

This exchange is perhaps better known through its pop-culture references, but it has also been cited (largely uncritically) by a number of scholars, such as Hirata and McMullin above. This is unfortunate, as the story cannot stand up to any real scrutiny. Let us consider a number of points. First, we must consider when this could have occurred. While Shingen and Nobunaga are often remembered as enemies, there was a period between 1565 and 1572 when they had a formal alliance. This exchange of letters must have taken place in 1572, late enough for Shingen to be hostile to Nobunaga but before Fróis's report in 1573. A 1572 letter from Nobunaga to Shingen does exist, sent almost exactly as Shingen was beginning his initial attacks on Tokugawa and Oda territory (ONMK 3: 132). It does not in any way resemble the letters Fróis describes, and the contents are not irreverent but cordial. Nobunaga signed the letter "Nobunaga" with his cypher. Adding to the reverent nature of the letter, Nobunaga addressed it to Hōshōin 法性院, Shingen's religious title.

Fróis's story of this letter exchange comports neither with the diplomatic conventions at the time, nor with the examples that remain of Nobunaga or Shingen's correspondence. Even if we believe that Nobunaga was plagued by an irreverence such that he would sign in this way, what explains Shingen's actions? Fróis states that Shingen did so out of "conceitedness," but no matter how conceited he may or may not have been, this was a silly way of trying to impress Nobunaga, as Shingen was not the abbot and any casual observer of the situation would know this.[2] Further, such conceit was never shown in the large number of extant letters that Takeda Shingen wrote, which are, at least in terms of signature, largely unremarkable. Nobunaga's letters likewise are for the most part prim affairs in keeping with the diplomatic conventions of his time; even in cases where he jotted down quick missives to his son, he addressed him by the proper title (ONMK 2: 447). Neither of these men have in any other known case randomly assigned themselves a fanciful *nom de plume* in this way.

Further, one must keep in mind the logistics of such a letter. Such an exchange would have involved a chain of correspondence,[3] likely including several of his

2. There are popular histories claiming that the abbot, Kakujo 覚恕 (1522–1574) fled to be under the protection of Shingen, but court records and diaries (notably the *Oyudono no ue no nikki* 7: 61–157) mention him participating in various court activities until his death in 1574.

3. There are a number of cases where several of the letters in a chain are extant, even specifically in the case of Nobunaga. For example, see ONMK (1: 536–537) in which Nobunaga writes to Daitokuji and mentions that Matsui Yukan 松井友閑 (d.u.) would give further details, and ONMK (1: 537), which is the letter of Matsui Yukan that indeed notes as further messengers Ban Naomasa 塙直政 (d. 1576) and Kinoshita 木下 (later Toyotomi) Hideyoshi 豊臣秀吉 (1537–1598).

underlings who would serve as messengers and as his official representatives who would talk to Shingen in person. For Shingen or Nobunaga to cavalierly toss a joke like this into a letter would not only be a slight on the opposite party, it would be putting the reputations and the lives of his messengers at risk. The story is simply false.

Another example from the *Historia*, revolves around Nobunaga's actions in response to the death of his father Nobuhide 信秀 (1510–1551). As Nobuhide lay on his deathbed, Nobunaga asked monks to pray for his father's life. When Nobuhide then died a few days later, Nobunaga accused the monks of lying to him, locked them in their temple, and lit it on fire, mockingly telling them to pray harder for themselves than they had for Nobuhide (Lamers 2000, 24; *Kan'yaku Furoisu Nihonshi* 2: 101–102). This story too is remarkable, but is equally absurd when considered in the larger context of the sources we have. There is precious little on Nobuhide's death in the documentary record, but Nobunaga's biographer Ōta Gyūichi 太田牛一 (b. 1527) does report on Nobunaga in the aftermath of Nobuhide's death. Nobunaga behaves scandalously at Nobuhide's funeral, but the scandal is limited to Nobunaga being improperly dressed and throwing incense at the altar. These were breaches of decorum to be sure, but hardly mass murder (CLN, 60–61; SKK, 23–24).

While we can argue that both sources have flaws and must be used with care (I note my trepidation relating to Gyūichi's work below), there is no corroboration of Fróis's story anywhere, nor any sense of where Fróis could have gotten this information. The disagreement with Gyūichi could be explained as a case where Gyūichi wishes to protect Nobunaga's reputation, but then that is equally an explanation for why Fróis would either invent this story or report a baseless rumor. Further, Fróis would need to report this rumor without any native source, not even one hostile to Nobunaga, reporting it elsewhere. Nobunaga certainly had no particular compunction about burning monks to death in temples, as in the case of Erinji 恵林寺 in 1580 (CLN, 450; SKK, 400–401).[4] However, if this were the case, the monks of Banshōji 万松寺 would have been the ones to be murdered, as that was the temple directly tied to Nobuhide and where his funeral was held. No evidence suggests that Banshōji was destroyed in the sixteenth century. As with several of these cases, the details simply do not line up.

As to Fróis's claim that Nobunaga deified himself, I have little to add to Jeroen Lamers's (2000, 214–224) well-made argument that Fróis invented the story. But there are details that Lamers did not include that make his case stronger. Fróis wrote his annual report for 1582 (the one lacking mention of Nobunaga's death and the aftermath) on 31 October (*Iezusukai Nihon nenpō* 1: 165–204) in which

4. I should note that Gyūichi states that it was Nobunaga's son Nobutada 信忠 (1557–1582) who made the decision, but Nobunaga does not seem to have objected.

he claims that, because he did not have direct knowledge of the events near the capital, he based his report on letters he received dated 16 and 17 June (*Iezusukai Nihon nenpō* 1: 194).[5] However, later on he notes that Nobunaga's general Takigawa Kazumasu 滝川一益 (1525–1586) had received a whole province from Nobunaga in the seventh Japanese month (20 July–17 August), which is to say several weeks after the last of the reports Fróis is citing, as well as Nobunaga's death on 21 June (*Iezusukai Nihon nenpō* 1: 203). Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that the death of Nobunaga was known in the Kyushu area by the end of July of 1582. A letter from the future Toyotomi Hideyoshi to Nabeshima Naoshige 鍋島直茂 (1538–1618) dated to the eleventh day of the seventh month (30 July) of 1582 already notes that Hideyoshi had killed Akechi Mitsuhide 明智光秀 (1528–1582) (DNS 11.2: 41–42). The Nabeshima residence at Saga was within one hundred kilometers of Fróis's residence at Kuchinotsu 口之津, and it seems unlikely that knowledge of Nobunaga's death would have lagged even a few weeks behind, let alone the three and a half months between Hideyoshi's letter and Fróis's addendum letter of 5 November in which he details Nobunaga's death.

Nobunaga's death presented Fróis with a conundrum: that death needed to be justified, and so Nobunaga needed to deserve death at the hands of the Almighty Himself despite Nobunaga's support of the Jesuit mission. And so, when he started to write the annual report, he punted, simply putting it off. Perhaps he was waiting for more information; perhaps he was hoping that he could find some sense in the outcome; or, perhaps he simply could not think of a way to make sense of the story in his writings. In any case, by November he had concocted a satisfying explanation.

That said, as ASAMI Masakazu (2020, 76–88) has argued, it is likely that Fróis was planning all along to write an addendum to the annual report and that he based the addendum on a letter from the Jesuit Francisco Carrião (d.u.). The difference of a week between the two reports would have made no difference to those who received them outside of Japan, as in all likelihood these were received simultaneously. However, it is still suspicious that no attempt was made to note that an addendum was necessary, nor to begin the condemnation of Nobunaga in the annual report if the deification already had started before June. It must have started at least a year before, as Fróis claims that Sōkenji was built expressly for the purpose of self-veneration (COOPER 1995, 101; *Iezusukai Nihon nenpō* 1: 207). Sōkenji was already extant by 1581 and likely before, and presumably this means that Nobunaga's cult was already active. If not, then surely it was by the

5. Fróis, being a Jesuit writing to a European audience, used the Julian calendar in his reports. I am here including Julian dates to make clear exactly what dates he claimed for events in the narrative.

fifth month of 1582, as otherwise Nobunaga's monthly birthday celebration would not have been possible before his death.

Finally, any historian who relies on Luís Fróis's writings should be aware of several critiques of them, especially due to the fact that Fróis was not always thorough about confirming the details. Fróis's colleagues in the Society of Jesus noted in more than one case that Fróis was a somewhat credulous reporter: Father Melchior Nunes Barreto noted in 1561 that Fróis was "prone to gossip" (Loureiro 2010, 157); Fróis's eventual superior Alessandro Valignano complained that Fróis "rather lacks the necessary prudence and is prone to exaggeration" (Loureiro 2010, 164) and that he was "careless about checking whether or not everything he says is true" (Moran 1993, 35–36). Indeed, Valignano seems to have tried to prevent the publication of Fróis's opus, the *Historia de Iapam*, though whether this was because of inaccuracies, because the work was in need of editing, or because he was trying to eliminate competitors to his own history is unknown (Moran 1993, 40). While we do not need to believe Fróis's contemporaries, we must take into account these critiques, especially given the problems above.

If Fróis's writings are not the best source of historical information on Nobunaga's religious life, then what other sources are available? The two major Japanese biographies of Oda Nobunaga, Ōta Gyūichi's *Shinchō kōki* (SKK) and Oze Hoan's 小瀬甫庵 (1564–1640) *Shinchōki* are also problematic.[6] Gyūichi has similar bias problems to Fróis in that he is an avowed supporter of Nobunaga who attempts to paint Nobunaga, when possible, in a positive—if not hagiographic—light. Oze Hoan, on the other hand, was at best collating secondhand information about Nobunaga and had his own ideological biases. In my opinion, the central source in the study of the religious life of Oda Nobunaga should be Nobunaga's own documents. While these do not solve the issues above (and indeed introduce their own issues), we can at least be sure, for the most part, that they show us what Nobunaga himself wished to communicate to his contemporaries.

Nobunaga's Religious Life as Seen by Contemporaries

To be sure, Oda Nobunaga's relationship with Buddhist institutions was frequently violent. The destruction of Mt. Hiei in 1571 is perhaps his most infamous act in which several thousand people, overwhelmingly non-combatants, were killed. His battles with Honganji's affiliates occasioned frequent brutality, including the burning alive of thousands at Nagashima and the wanton slaughter of

6. Technically, the title of both books is Shinchōki, but Oze's book was published first and thus it has long been conventional to refer to Gyūichi's biography as the Shinchō kōki. Some recent Japanese scholarship has begun using the original title for Gyūichi's work as well, but in the interest of clarity I use Shinchō kōki.

Honganji partisans in Kaga and Echizen. Nobunaga was in the midst of preparing to attack Mt. Kōya at the time of his death, and had already begun killing the itinerant *Kōya nijiri* 高野聖 as part his preparations to the attack. These and other acts demonstrate that Nobunaga was not burdened with an overabundance of mercy when it came to religious institutions.

These violent and destructive acts and the image Fróis presents us with both raise the question of how Nobunaga's Japanese contemporaries saw him in relation to religion. We do know that Takeda Shingen declared him to be an avatar of Mara, though only after the two had become enemies. Kennyo Kōsa 顕如光佐 (1543–1592), abbot of Honganji, likewise said that opposition to Nobunaga was protecting the Buddhist law (ONMK 2: 21). Moreover, Honganji vassal Shimotsuma Rairyū 下間頼龍 (1552–1609) referred to Nobunaga as an "enemy of the dharma" (*hōteki* 法敵) (ONMK 2: 496). However, this was hardly a universal assessment among his contemporaries.

Several contemporary observers saw in Nobunaga a man uniquely blessed and very much concerned with the will of the gods and buddhas. Shortly before Nobunaga's death in 1582, Kōfukuji 興福寺 monk Tamon'in Eishun 多聞院英俊 (1518–1596) recounted in his diary a story passed along to him:

> Sengakubō[7] says that some years ago, perhaps even ten years ago, a monk called Kashin 可心 of Myōgenji 明眼寺[8] in Mikawa Province came to Hōryūji 法隆寺, and stayed for a year hearing talks on the life of [Shotoku] Taishi. His temple was founded by [Shōtoku] Taishi 聖徳太子, and had never been ransacked. This monk had received the patronage of [Tokugawa] Ieyasu 徳川家康 (1543–1616) of Okazaki. Some ten years ago, in a dream on the second day of the first month, [Shōtoku Taishi] had appeared before Kashin and said, "There are three men who may purify [pacify] the realm. [Asakura] Yoshikage 朝倉義景 (1533–1573) may desire it, but it is useless (I wonder, because of his abilities?)[9] and will not succeed. [Takeda] Shingen[10] may desire it, but even with his military skill, he is without mercy, and will not succeed. Only to Nobunaga should the realm submit. I gave [Minamoto no] Yoritomo a sword, *Hahikoru itten* 弥一天.[11] That sword is at the Atsuta no Sha 熱田ノ社. Quickly go and deliver it to Nobunaga." Hearing this, [Kashin] awoke. It was a wondrous thing! But thinking that it was just a dream, Kashin let time pass. In a dream on the night

7. Sengakubō Eijin 仙学房栄甚 (d.u.) was a scholar-monk of Hōryūji in Nara who appears frequently in Eishun's diary. He wrote a book about Shōtoku Taishi in 1568 and was one of the judges at the Azuchi Religious Debate in 1579.

8. Myōgenji likely refers to the Myōgenji 妙源寺 in modern Okazaki City.

9. This parenthetical represents smaller text in the original and seems to be Eishun's personal notes about the story.

10. Eishun misspells the name Shingen, using the character 源 instead of 玄.

11. The meaning of this name is unclear.

> of the fifteenth of the same month, [Shōtoku Taishi] appeared again and chastised him, saying, "Why have you not delivered the sword I told you about before?" Again, not knowing what to do, he let time pass, and in a dream on the fifth day of the second month, [Shōtoku] Taishi said, "I have said this several times, and you have not delivered the sword. If you do not heed my commands, you will be punished!" Hearing this, he rushed in a sorry state from Myōgenji three *ri* 里 to Atsuta, where he visited the shrine, found the sword, took it, and returned. He then met Murai Nagato no Kami [Sadakatsu] 村井長門守貞勝 (d. 1582)[12] and said that he wished to present it to Nobunaga, and told also Ieyasu. Soon, he brought the sword to Nobunaga, who said, "I too have seen dreams like your own. What an amazing joy!" And he promised that when the realm was under his control, he would rebuild the temples established by the Taishi. He also told Kashin to keep this story a deep secret. However, occasionally he has spoken to people about it. When I think about it now, how mysterious it is!
>
> (*Tamon'in nikki* 3: 212; Hayashi 1966, 41–44; Hori 2011, 271–276)

Two months earlier, another Kōfukuji monk, Shakain Kanson 釈迦院寛尊 (d.u.), reported this rumor in his journal:

> Someone said that last winter, Oda Shichibei (Nobuzumi 織田七兵 [信澄, d. 1582]) had asked for [control of] this province [of Yamato] and went directly [to Nobunaga] to put in his request. His highness [Nobunaga] said, "Yamato is a province of the gods, and the details have since long ago been as per the wishes of the people of the province." The pointless request was thus refused, and the matter was not raised again. (*Renjōin kiroku*, 244)

I am not arguing that the stories above were true. The diarists reported them as rumors. They did not, however, note that the rumors seemed baseless or absurd. Konoe Sakihisa 近衛前久 (1536–1612), a courtier who had initially opposed Nobunaga but then became a close ally, wrote several months after Nobunaga's death that he had likewise discussed the worship of Shōtoku Taishi with Nobunaga (Hayashi 1966, 44). In the eyes of some, the image related by Fróis could be turned completely over: a friend of Buddhism, Nobunaga acted in keeping with the will of the gods and thus received their blessings or avoided their opprobrium, respectively.

Praying for Victory

A common practice among warriors in Sengoku Japan was to request that temples or shrines pray on their behalf. These could be for no particular purpose

12. Murai was Nobunaga's deputy (*tenka shoshidai* 天下所司代) in Kyoto and an important part of his regime (Taniguchi 2009).

beyond the building of merit but were often done as explicit prayers for victory in battle. Sengoku daimyo throughout Japan would commission rites for this purpose, and this left a paper trail. When a patron would commission a rite (sutra reading, dharani chanting, and so on), the standard practice was for the temple to send the patron a *kanju* 巻数 (literally, "a count of scrolls"), which detailed the commissioned rite. This was delivered with some pomp to the patron and was sometimes accompanied with food and gifts. Often it was delivered tied around a stick.

While no *kanju* issued to Nobunaga are extant, we know that they were issued. This is because the common practice upon receiving a *kanju* was to send a letter of thanks in response. And happily, several of these responses by Nobunaga are extant in various collections (see TABLE 1).

These documents represent some of the cases where prayers were held on Nobunaga's behalf at major temples and shrines, but not all of them. In some cases, prayers on Nobunaga's behalf were commissioned by others; the emperor would commission prayers for Nobunaga's victory on several occasions from the 1570s onwards (DNS 10.1: 355–357). While it is not clear how many of the above were commissioned by Nobunaga and how many were gifted by the religious institution or by a third party, the letters themselves demonstrate a respect by Nobunaga for the power of such rites.

Obviously, we have to be careful in using this small set of documents to make broad statements, but a few conclusions can be drawn. For one, with few exceptions, these are for major temples and shrines in the capital. These rites were thus likely expensive affairs, and commissioning one was probably a complex undertaking. This shows us that for Nobunaga these rites were important. To be sure, his belief that they are important does not prove a belief in their efficacy, but certainly does suggest the possibility. It is possible that the rites were meant to have propagandistic value, but there is no evidence that the commissioners of these rites were publicized, and indeed I have seen nothing from any of the available court diaries or later chronicles that suggests that courtiers (who had close connections with these institutions) were even aware of these or any commissioned rites.

Further, of those that can be dated with any sort of specificity, several are on the eve of important battles. These included enemies that Nobunaga had particular difficulties with. For example, ITEM 3 in TABLE 1 was sent on the eve of the final attacks on the Nagashima Ikkō Ikki 長島一向一揆, a force which had occupied Nobunaga's attention since 1572 and cost him dearly in men and treasure. Items 6 and 7 were issued when Nobunaga was moving against the rebellion of Araki Murashige 荒木村重 (1535–1586), which LAMERS (2000, 156) refers to as "the most dangerous of all the revolts he faced during his career," excluding the one in which he was killed. ITEMS 9, 10, 11, and 12 were all issued during the final

TABLE 1: Nobunaga's letters of thanks for *kanju*, modified from KANDA (2015, 51–55) and revised with dates suggested in KANEKO (2018, 27–30)

ITEM NO.	DAY. MONTH. YEAR	SITE OF RITE	OBJECT RECEIVED	OCCASION	SOURCE
1	7.9.1573	Daikakuji 大覚寺	2 *kanju*	campaign against Rokkaku family	ONMK 1: 688–689
2	9.4.1574	Matsuo Taisha 松尾大社	*kanju*, fruit basket		ONMK 1: 748–749
3	28.7.1574	Fudōin 不動院	*kanju*, *goō* 牛王, *fuda* 札, *mamori* 守	campaign against Nagashima Ikkō Ikki	ONMK 1: 768–769
4	18.4.1575	Ninnaji 仁和寺	*kanju*	campaign against Osaka Honganji	ONMK 2: 20–21
5	3.9.1575	Shōren'in 青蓮院	*kanju*, archery gloves	campaign against Echizen Ikkō Ikki	ONMK 2: 74–74
6	20.3.1580	Kamigamo Jinja 上賀茂神社	*kanju*, archery gloves, horse trappings	probably campaign against Araki Murashige three weeks earlier	ONMK 2: 276
7	25.9.1579	Kamigamo Jinja	*kanju*, *shijira* じしら	campaign against Araki Murashige	ONMK 2: 377–378
8	14.2.1576	Kamigamo Jinja	*kanju*, cloth	New Year's celebrations	ONMK 2: 419–420
9	25.3.1582	Kamigamo Jinja	*kanju*, tasseled crupper	on his final campaign against the Takeda	ONMK 2: 427
10	4.4.1582	Rishōin 理性院	*kanju*, archery gloves	on the way to final campaign against the Takeda	ONMK 2: 719–720
11	10.4.1582	Sanzen'in 三千院	*kanju*, "two kinds" of unidentified object	final campaign against the Takeda	ONMK 2: 726–727
12	15.4.1582	Keikōin 慶光院	*harai no taima* (Ise equivalent to a *kanju*), dried abalone	final campaign against the Takeda	ONMK 2: 729–730
13	7.1.1580	Kamigamo Jinja	*kanju*, *shijira*	New Year's celebration	ONMK 2: 777–778

ITEM NO.	DAY. MONTH. YEAR	SITE OF RITE	OBJECT RECEIVED	OCCASION	SOURCE
14	20.1	Ise Jingū 伊勢神宮	*harai no taima*, fresh abalone	New Year's celebration	ONMK 2: 778
15	15.10	Ota Tsurugi Jinja	*kanju*, cloth		ONMK 2: 815
16	4.12	Sanbōin 三宝院	*kanju*	"in my camp"	KANDA (2015, 53–54); *Kokuhō Daigoji no subete* (187)
17	27.2	Daigoji	*kanju*, *hitoori*	"in my camp"	KANDA (2015, 54); *Daigoji monjo* (16: 133)
18	9.6.1575	Kamigamo Jinja	*kanju*	Nagashino campaign (Takeda)	ONMK 2: 35–36
19	19.9	Atsuta Jingū 熱田神宮	*kanju*, customary prayers, 500 dried abalone		ONMK 2: 814

assault on the Takeda of Kai, who had begun to fight Nobunaga nearly a decade before. There are several others that are harder to date referring to Nobunaga receiving the *kanju* during a campaign. These sorts of rites, then, seem to have been a part of Nobunaga's preparations for important campaigns.

Also clear from the documents is that there does not seem to have been favoritism toward any particular sect or school. This is hardly surprising, as this ecumenicism was common of both powerful warriors and high courtiers, both descriptions that depict Nobunaga in the last decade of his life. The temples, for the most part, are what we could term traditional power centers, in other words primarily the same sorts of temples that had dominated the Japanese religious scene for centuries. The major outlier is Tsurugi Jinja 剣神社 in Echizen, though that shrine had a different connection to Nobunaga.

Enryakuji and the Tendai School

Two temples listed in TABLE 1 call for additional comment: Shōren'in (ITEM 5) and Sanzen'in (ITEM 11). These stand out because they are two of the so-called three *monzeki* 門跡 (noble cloisters) of Enryakuji, with the other being Myōhōin 妙法院.[13] These three cloisters, while part of Enryakuji, were physically in Kyoto, and their abbots tended to be princes or the scions of the Fujiwara regency line. Most of the abbots of Enryakuji were also the abbots of one of these three cloisters. Both of these letters are from after the burning of Mt. Hiei.

In 1571, Nobunaga had destroyed Mt. Hiei atop which sat Enryakuji and at the foot of which sat the city of Sakamoto and Hiesha 日吉社. The previous year, an army led by Asakura Yoshikage of Echizen and Asai Nagamasa 浅井長政 (1545–1573) of northern Ōmi had occupied Mt. Hiei as part of their battles against Nobunaga. This siege led to major food shortages in Kyoto and seriously threatened Nobunaga's communication with his home base in Gifu. According to several sources, near the end of the siege, Nobunaga sent the monks of Mt. Hiei an ultimatum, stating that if they did not either join forces with him or declare neutrality, he would burn the whole mountain down. The monks of Mt. Hiei gave no response (CLN, 155–156; SKK, 117). Nobunaga did eventually accept an embarrassing peace with the Asai and the Asakura and withdraw to Gifu, but when he returned to the area in the fall of 1571 he made good on his promise, destroying Sakamoto and Mt. Hiei and massacring thousands.

And yet the Enryakuji *monzeki* and Nobunaga maintained a relationship that was, while perhaps not friendly, certainly not murderous, and in fact cordial. While we do not have a *kanju* from the third of the three great *monzeki* (Myōhōin), Nobunaga donated land to that cloister in 1575 (ONMK 3: 177). This

13. I should note that these are not the only three monzeki that were part of Enryakuji, but these were the most powerful.

suggests that our understanding of Nobunaga's relationship with Enryakuji and perhaps even of Enryakuji itself may be in need of revision. There is no question that after the attack Mt. Hiei was devoid of activity, regardless of the scale of the damage. In contrast, the *monzeki*, which were not on Mt. Hiei, continued to operate. This begs the question of whether the *monzeki* (who included the abbot), were considered part of the same entity as the monks of Mt. Hiei, and thus the extent to which Enryakuji was seen as a unit. It seems likely Nobunaga saw a clear division between the *monzeki* and the clergy on Mt Hiei. This is borne out in that Nobunaga mercilessly massacred the one group and was commissioning rites and donating to the other. It is also apparent in Nobunaga's other documents. For example, in the last item of his "Regulations for the Shogunal Residence" in 1569, Nobunaga ordered, "The retainers of the *monzeki* (*monzeki no bōkan* 門跡坊官), the assembled clergy of Mt. Hiei (*sanmon shuto* 山門衆徒),[14] physicians, fortunetellers, etc., should not be allowed free access to the shogun" (ONMK 1: 239–243; LAMERS 2000, 63–64), where he could simply have banned the monks of Enryakuji. Further, when given the opportunity to weaken the political and economic power of the *monzeki*, Nobunaga seems to have not done so: during a dispute over the control of Kuramadera 鞍馬寺 and all land on Mt. Kurama, Nobunaga's regime affirmed that the temple was both politically and economically under the control of the Shōren'in (ONMK 2: 502–503). This is not a sign of enmity.

In contrast, Nobunaga's relationship with the clergy on Mt. Hiei was consistently negative more or less from the time of his arrival in the home provinces; complaints to the court from Mt. Hiei that Nobunaga's men where encroaching on temple land had begun by 1569 (*Oyudono no ue no nikki* 6: 531). This was probably a factor in the decision of the monks of Mt. Hiei to side with the Asai and Asakura against Nobunaga in 1571, which in turn led to their destruction in 1572.

Other Tendai temples had a relationship with Nobunaga that may best be described as uneven. In 1568 Nobunaga declared Hyakusaiji 百済寺, an Enryakuji-affiliated temple in Ōmi, one of his dedicated prayer temples (*kigansho* 祈願所), and gave it special privileges (ONMK 1: 182–184). However, Hyakusaiji later supported the Rokkaku clan, one of Nobunaga's more stubborn enemies, and Nobunaga razed Hyakusaiji while he was attacking the Rokkaku at Namazue in 1573 (CLN, 185; SKK, 148). This rather extreme shift was unusual; the majority of the

14. I should note here that Lamers translates *sanmon shuto* 山門衆徒 as "the warrior monks of Mt. Hiei," and MCMULLIN (1984, 69) uses "sōhei." I believe these translations are in error: while in some contexts the word *shuto* has military implications, in the case of Enryakuji this refers to the senior clergy who had decision-making power on the mountain. These could (and certainly did) include those with military skills, but the term does not specifically refer to "warrior monks." The proscription here is political and not military.

Oda regime's documented interaction with Tendai temples was land confirmations, with a few temples receiving donations. Broadly speaking, there was no school-specific policy for Tendai temples, rather the more common attempt to balance precedent and order we see overall.

Teian and the Jōdo School

In the last decade of his life, Oda Nobunaga became increasingly involved with the Jōdo school of Buddhism. In a chronicle of Chion'in 知恩院, arguably the capital's most import Jōdo school temple, are documents from the Oda regime dated 1573 detailing Nobunaga's donations to Chion'in in thanks for victory in battle (*Kachōshiyō*, 44–45; Imahori 2018, 155). I use these sources with caution, as the original letters are no longer extant and several of the documents in this chronicle relating to this event have obvious errors. However, stronger evidence of links to the Jōdo school (and Chion'in specifically) does exist.

For example, in 1572, Nobunaga wrote a missive (ONMK 1: 544–545) to the monk Seigyoku 清玉 (d.u.), pledging that each person in his domain would donate a coin per month to Seigyoku's fundraiser to rebuild the Great Buddha Hall at Tōdaiji 東大寺. Seigyoku was a monk of the Kyoto Jōdo temple Amidaji 阿弥陀寺. This is the only known example of Nobunaga participating in such a fundraiser, and that he wrote a personal letter to Seigyoku instead of having a delegate write it is itself telling. It is possible, of course, that Nobunaga's connection to the Chion'in and to the Tōdaiji fundraiser was connected to his increasing closeness to the imperial court, as the Tōdaiji fundraiser had imperial support as well, and Chion'in was closely connected to the reigning Emperor Ōgimachi 正親町 (1517–1593) (Imahori 2018, 153–173). But even if this imperial connection was the main reason for Nobunaga's increasing connection to the Jōdo school, the connection became increasingly important.

Further, in constructing his castle town in Azuchi, Nobunaga had several Jōdo temples moved there from nearby, including Jōgon'in 浄厳院, which was the site of the Azuchi Religious Debate (*Azuchi shūron* 安土宗論) (Ikawa 1972, 3). It was also one of the major Jōdo temples in the province, boasting numerous branch temples in the provinces of Ōmi and Iga. The other major Jōdo temple in Azuchi, Saikōji 西光寺, was headed by the monk Teian 貞安 (1539–1615).[15] Teian was a monk of some renown, originally from the Kanto region. Even before coming to Azuchi he had received honors from the emperor (*Kyoto Jōdoshū jiin monjo*, 206–207). Teian and Nobunaga seem to have been close, as Nobunaga

15. Lamers (2000, 182) and McMullin (1984, 206) both read this name as Jōan. This would be an acceptable reading of the characters in his name, but all Japanese references I have seen use Teian, as does Elisonas and Lamers's *Chronicle of Lord Nobunaga*. Therefore, I use Teian throughout.

likely made a large donation to Chion'in at Teian's request a few months before the Azuchi Religious Debate (ONMK 3: 203).

The Azuchi Religious Debate itself is a sign of Nobunaga's increasing connection to the Jōdo school. The debate occurred in the fifth month of 1579 when the representatives of the Jōdo school and the Nichiren school met at Jōgon'in to argue about the efficacy of nenbutsu practice. The result of the debate was a disastrous loss for the Nichiren sect. Nobunaga not only judged them the losers; he broadly publicized the loss in Kyoto, and severely punished those he saw as responsible for the debate, executing two Nichiren laymen and the monk they patronized (LAMERS 2000, 179–187). Leaving aside debates over whether Nobunaga cheated to ensure the result, he certainly rewarded the Jōdo representatives after their victory; Gyūichi notes that Teian and Gyokunen Reiyo 玉念霊誉 (d. 1586) received fans from Nobunaga on the day, along with significant payments of silver later in the year (SKK, 274, 280; CLN, 318, 324). Teian reported in a letter sent a few days after the debate that Nobunaga had given a "donation" (*gokonshi* 御懇志) to Teian and Gyokunen (*Nobunaga to shūkyō seiryoku*, 55, 97). Teian also received several books taken from the executed Nichiren monks after the debate (*Nobunaga to shūkyō seiryoku*, 55, 97).

Was Nobunaga a Pure Land Buddhist? Certainly not exclusively, and certainly not to the extent that anyone recorded him as being particularly active on that front. We have no evidence that he, for example, held nenbutsu chanting sessions or used Pure Land symbols on his battle standards. However, it is likely that Nobunaga did show the school favor and that Teian was particularly close to Nobunaga.

Zen

Nobunaga had longstanding relationships with Zen monks. This is a case where we see the influence of his father Oda Nobuhide, who was very interested in Zen and who founded the temple Banshōji as his *bodaiji* 菩提寺 (a temple founded to pray for the salvation of a specific family) (TANIGUCHI 2017, 107–108). Nobunaga's own documents include numerous missives to Zen temples throughout his career, mostly land confirmations. Fróis likewise noted in the *Historia* that Nobunaga had once been a believer in Zen (*Kanyaku Furoisu Nihonshi* 2: 101).

The Azuchi Religious Debate also demonstrates the role Zen monks served in his regime. While the debate was held between Jōdo and Nichiren monks, Nobunaga (somewhat unusually) empaneled four judges. Excluding one (Sengakubō), all had Zen affiliations. Tessō Keishū 鉄叟景秀 (1496–1580), who led the judges, was the abbot of Nanzenji 南禅寺 and had been the abbot of Kenninji 建仁寺. Another, Inga Koji 因果居士 (1525–1617), was a layman but a Zen scholar.

This suggests that at the very least Nobunaga felt that others would see them as legitimate arbiters of such debates.

Nobunaga also had a hand in founding the Rinzai temple Seishūji 政秀寺, which was founded around 1553. The temple is named after Hirate Masahide 平手政秀 (1496–1553), an important vassal of Oda Nobuhide who had been, among other things, Nobunaga's guardian. Masahide had committed suicide in 1553 as means of admonishing Nobunaga for his behavior (SKK, 25; CLN, 61; *Seishūji koki*, 349–350). Nobunaga had founded Seishūji as temple for the express purpose of praying for his mentor's salvation. The founding abbot, Takugen Sōon 沢彦宗恩 (d. 1587), was a former abbot of Myōshinji 妙心寺 in Kyoto. According to Seishūji's temple records written in the early Edo period, Takugen was a major player in Nobunaga's life even before the founding of the temple; he was the one who recommended to Nobuhide the name "Nobunaga." The same record also states that Takugen suggested to Nobunaga to name his residence in Mino "Gifu" (which is still the name of the modern prefecture) and that he suggested to Nobunaga the famous *tenka fubu* 天下布武 seal (*Seishūji koki*, 352–353). While this record should be viewed with some skepticism (as Takugen accurately predicts to Nobuhide the age at which Nobunaga will die), Nobunaga's connection to the temple seems well established.

Again, this evidence does not suggest that there was a particular policy toward specific lineages of Zen or Zen in general. Rather, Nobunaga had a connection to specific temples and monks. However, Nobunaga did seem to have a particular interest in the scholarly accomplishments of Zen monks.

Nichiren

Oda Nobunaga showed clear hostility to the Nichiren sect in the Azuchi Religious Debate. However, some evidence does suggest that Nobunaga (again, possibly following his father) was at times a patron of the Nichiren sect. One intriguing piece of evidence is Oda Nobunaga's battle standard. It is well-known and attested to that Nobunaga's battle standard was yellow with the image of a coin minted by the Chinese Yongle emperor (*Eirakusen* 永楽銭) on it. Several Edo-period sources, including Oze Hoan's *Shinchōki* (145) and several of the extant Nagashino battle screens,[16] note that attached to the battle standards were smaller streamers, called a *maneki* 麾 bearing the Daimoku 題目, the exhortation to the *Lotus Sūtra* that Nichiren's followers chanted. These sources are certainly problematic, but they suggest that Nobunaga had some faith in the efficacy of Nichiren practice.

16. Notably the screen in the Inuyama Castle collection, which is considered one of the older extant screens (KANDA 2015, 54–56).

Further, Nobunaga had a close if nebulous relationship with the temples Hokkeji 法華寺 in Gifu and Nagoya.[17] This is made clear in the aftermath of the Azuchi Religious Debate of 1579. Hokkeji's own records suggest that the abbot, Nichiyō 日陽 (d. 1598), rode to Azuchi after the debate and convinced Nobunaga not to destroy the Nichiren sect, citing Nobuhide's and Nobunaga's own long links to the sect (Tsuji 1983, 124). This temple record has long been seen as unreliable (and seems to be lost), but it is likely that Hokkeji did in some way sway Nobunaga. Roughly two months after the Azuchi Religious Debate, the abbot of Kyoto Nichiren powerhouse Honkokuji 本圀寺 (of which Hokkeji was a branch) wrote a letter to Nichiyō, crediting "Nobunaga's great friendship" with the temple for the sect's survival and declaring that all branch temples in the provinces of Mino and Owari should "revere" Hokkeji (ONMK 2: 446). This could represent the Oda regime tightening its control on the sect in the provinces by having the Honkokuji branch temples in the Oda homelands fall under the control of a temple with close ties to Nobunaga himself. This would imply that Nobunaga was perhaps attempting to weaken the influence of the Kyoto temples in the provinces, or at least in his provinces. The exact nature of this relationship requires more study.

Azuchi Sōkenji

An important temple in Nobunaga's later years was Sōkenji, located on the grounds of Azuchi Castle. Today a Myōshinji-affiliated Rinzai Zen temple, Sōkenji records indicate that in Nobunaga's lifetime the abbot was a Shingon monk named Gyōshō 堯照 (d. 1586) who had served as the head monk of the temple that managed Kameo Tennōsha 亀尾天王社 (today, Nagoya Jinja 那古野神社) (*Azuchi chōshi shiryōhen* 1: 554). Sōkenji was an important cultural center in Azuchi, and several sources note that Nobunaga often used it as part of his larger gatherings. For example, in 1581 Nobunaga held a massive Obon celebration at Azuchi in which the keep and Sōkenji were illuminated by means of numerous lanterns (CLN, 406; SKK, 358). Likewise, on the first day of 1582, Nobunaga invited numerous warriors to present themselves at Azuchi Castle, where they were given a tour of the grounds. The very first stop was the Bishamondō 毘沙門堂 of Sōkenji, where Nobunaga had built a stage (CLN, 421; SKK, 373). A few months later, after returning from his tour of the recently conquered Takeda holdings, Nobunaga held a series of performances on that stage, with such luminaries in the crowd as Konoe Sakihisa and Tokugawa Ieyasu (CLN, 465; SKK, 413; *Tamon'in nikki* 3: 222). Ieyasu and Anayama Baisetsu 穴山梅雪 (1541–1582) also lodged at the temple, and Tamon'in Eishun notes that Nobunaga had spared no

17. The original was in Nagoya, but one was built in Gifu after Nobunaga moved there. The same monk appears to have been the abbot at both.

expense on amusements for his guests there and decorated it with treasures from Japan and China for a truly stunning display (*Tamon'in nikki* 3: 222).

Fróis clearly sensed the importance of the temple. While neither he nor the other Jesuit observers mentioned the temple by name when they previously wrote about Azuchi, when he invented Nobunaga's self-deification cult to himself, Fróis made "Soquenji" its headquarters. He also noted that a stone called the "*Bonção*" (pronounced near enough to *bonsan* 盆山) was the main item of worship in the cult and was placed on a platform at the highest point inside Sōkenji above the various other idols (Asami 2020, 211). Gyūichi also notes an important *bonsan*, a miniature mountain scape, at Azuchi, though it was not in the temple and is ascribed no particular divine potency (CLN, 254; SKK, 213). Likely Fróis had heard about the *objet* from one of the Jesuits in Azuchi and thought it appropriately menacing-sounding.[18]

Unfortunately, specifics on the temple and its role in Nobunaga's time are elusive in the records, and most of the temple burned down in 1854. There have been attempts to reconstruct the temple as it existed in Nobunaga's day, but these have leaned most heavily on Fróis's description (Okagaki and Asakawa, 2010). However, we can speculate. First, the connection to Gozu Tennō 牛頭天王 shrines is possibly deliberate. We can see with the examples of Hokkeji and Saikōji that Nobunaga surrounded himself with temples that had many branches. This policy both served to demonstrate his own power and to give him leverage over a larger group of institutions. In this particular case, as Gozu Tennō worship had major centers in his old province of Owari, Nobunaga may have been attempting to keep some of Owari with him in his far-off residence in Ōmi. This action would likely have been significant to his higher-level vassals, most of whom were originally from Owari. Likewise, the temple had an onsite shrine to the Atsuta deity, which may have served a similar purpose.

Several of Sōkenji's buildings seem to have been appropriated from nearby temples and shrines. Temple records state that the (still extant) three-story pagoda, the Niōmon 仁王門, and the onsite shrines (to the Atsuta deity and to Benzaiten), were older buildings taken to Azuchi, almost all from nearby Kōga (*Azuchi chōshi shiryōhen* 1: 555–556, 567–568.). This may have been an attempt to save on construction costs, but I believe that just as the temple was trying to keep some of Owari in Ōmi, this may have been an attempt to bring Ōmi's religious centers into Nobunaga's temple and thus his control.

From the evidence available it is clear that Nobunaga intended Sōkenji to be the central temple of Azuchi Castle and likely the temple most closely tied to

18. I should note that Cooper's (1995, 102) translation of Fróis's account claims that "Bonção" was the name not of the rock but of the man who provided it. However, I follow Asami who (along with earlier translators) notes that it refers to the rock.

his own reign as the master of central Japan. Had it survived or records of its construction and use at the time been as detailed as those of the Azuchi keep, we would have further insights into Nobunaga's religious life and policies far beyond what is currently available. Nonetheless, the temple represents the closest we have to Nobunaga building a *bōdaiji* and likely was expected to be the ritual center of the Oda regime, perhaps even into the generation of Nobutada and beyond.

The Gods

The Oda family's name derived from an estate called Ota no Shō 織田荘 in Echizen Province (modern Fukui Prefecture). Within this estate was Tsurugi Jinja, and it is from the lineage of the priests of this shrine that the Oda of Owari claimed descent. It is unsurprising, then, that Shinto shrines were heavily involved in the Oda regime. And indeed, we see close relations to a number of shrines throughout Japan and Nobunaga's career.

Within Owari were several major shrines, notably Atsuta Jingū 熱田神宮 and Tsushima Jinja 津島神社. Atsuta Jingū was connected closely to the imperial institution and supposedly houses the sword *Kusanagi no tsurugi* 草薙の剣, one of the three pieces of the imperial regalia. Nobunaga's earliest known document is a sign sent to Atsuta Jingū, listing rules and exemptions (ONMK 1: 14), and Nobunaga sent numerous documents to Atsuta early on, which were largely confirmations of previous rights and holdings (For example, ONMK, no. 3, 19, 21, 22, 31, and so on). Gyūichi says that Nobunaga stopped at Atsuta before the Battle of Okehazama (Okehazama no Tatakai 桶狭間の戦い) (CLN, 87; SKK, 53), and while he does not state specifically that Nobunaga worshiped there, he does later suggest that the Atsuta deity was joining the battle on Nobunaga's side (CLN, 89; SKK, 55). And as discussed, Nobunaga received *kanju* from the shrine at least once, though probably not for a rite he commissioned. Furthermore, at least three successive head priests (*daigūji* 大宮司) of Atsuta Jingū (all from the Senshū 千秋 family) served the Oda as warriors; two, Suemitsu 季光 (d. 1534) and Suetada 季忠 (1534–1560), died in combat under Nobuhide and Nobunaga, and a third, Suenobu 季信 (1560–1612), served in Nobunaga's Horse Guards (Uma Mawari 馬廻) (TANIGUCHI 2017, 75; 1995, 221–222).

Tsushima Jinja was, like Gion in Kyoto, a center of Gozu Tennō worship. Tsushima Jinja and the Oda family both used the *Oda mokkō* 織田木瓜 crest, though it is unclear which of the two appropriated the crest from the other, if at all.[19] Nobunaga's relationship here is less well defined, but it is clear that the Tsushima area was an important economic and political base for his father Nobuhide

19. The crest seems to be common among centers of Gozu Tennō worship, including the Gion (now Yasaka) shrine in Kyoto.

(Taniguchi 2017, 83–85), and both father and son were heavily concerned with the shrine's well-being. Nobunaga would send numerous missives to Tsushima, including putting his imprimatur on the shrine monk's succession in 1552 (ONMK 1: 22–23); approving a province-wide fundraiser in Owari, probably around 1573 (ONMK 3: 81); and voiding the debts of the *sukune* 宿祢 and the *kannushi* 神主 (the two highest ranking Shinto officials at the shrine) in 1553 following a similar precedent from the time of Nobuhide (ONMK 1: 31–32, 34–35). Tsushima Jinja officials seem to have been somewhat profligate, as Nobunaga also had to restructure the debts of the *kannushi* in 1571 such that he only had to pay back the principle and had ten years to do so (ONMK 1: 496–497). Further, like with the case of Atsuta Jingū, the *sukune* family of Tsushima Jinja would also serve the Oda family in a military capacity from before the time of Nobuhide (Taniguchi 2017, 85).

Ise Jingū, which was most closely bound to the emperor and also relatively near the Oda home base in Owari, likewise interacted with Nobunaga on several occasions. Important to us here is that Nobunaga funded the rebuilding of the inner and outer shrines in 1582, which customarily happened every twenty years but had not been done since 1462 at the inner shrine (*naikū* 内宮) and 1563 at the outer (*gekū* 外宮). According to Gyūichi, the priests of the outer shrine estimated that the reconstruction would cost one thousand strings of cash (*kanmon* 貫文; each "string" being a thousand coins), but Nobunaga, knowing that such budgets were often optimistic, sent three thousand (SKK, 377; CLN, 425). Nobunaga's instructions to the shrine to prepare the rebuilding are still extant (ONMK 2: 666–669), and the amount is in fact borne out by a letter to Nobutada asking him to send the money (ONMK 2: 670–672). And again, we see here the echoes of Oda Nobuhide, who donated to the outer shrine in 1540, hoping that they would begin rebuilding (Taniguchi 2017, 92–93).

Nobunaga likewise had several interactions with Iwashimizu Hachimangū 岩清水八幡宮 in Kyoto. During a conflict between the shrine officials and the managing temple, Zenpōji 善法寺, Nobunaga's regime seems to have been involved in arranging a settlement and urged that the parties follow precedent (ONMK 2: 465–466). Iwashimizu also benefited from Nobunaga's largess. Nobunaga funded the reconstruction of the shrine in 1579 (ONMK 2: 501–502). Gyūichi says that Nobunaga was particularly active in this, sending deputies to ensure that the project was finished on time and under budget (SKK, 295–296, 324; CLN, 339–340, 369–370). Gyūichi paid particular attention to the installation of a bronze gutter between the inner and outer sanctuaries, which Nobunaga had installed to replace a wooden one. That gutter survives to this day (CLN, 369).

And finally, we should return to the birthplace of the Oda family, Ota Tsurugi Jinja. While there is little to connect Nobunaga to the shrine before he conquered Echizen in 1573, he very quickly made clear that the shrine and attached temples

were to receive special protection. In a letter of 1573 to another vassal on the matter of encroachment on Tsurugi Jinja's holdings, Nobunaga's vassal Kinoshita Sukehisa 木下祐久 (d. 1584) wrote that the shrine was "our lord's ancestral deity, so special attention is required" (ONMK 3: 38–39). Later documents indicate that the shrine's upkeep was a concern for the regime, as in 1575 several of Nobunaga's representatives in Echizen wrote to the shrine and nearby temples after a land survey in the area, noting problems with the upkeep of the shrine halls despite an increase in the shrine's holdings (ONMK 2: 76–77). The very same day, the same agents wrote to the shrine effectively canceling the shrine's debts to ensure that shrine rites could continue without budgetary pressure (ONMK 2: 77–78). Less than a month later, Nobunaga sent a letter to two vassals who had responsibility over the area containing the shrine and ordered them to confiscate all temple and shrine holdings in the area with the exception of the holdings of Tsurugi Jinja, which being his "ancestor" was a different matter and totally exempt from confiscation (ONMK 2: 85–86). It seems straightforward, then, that Ota Tsurugi Jinja was important to Nobunaga and potentially was meant to serve an important role in his regime.

There does seem to be a fairly consistent policy as relates to shrines, which is to ensure that they are in good working order and able to continue with their rites. This seems equally true both before Nobunaga arrived in Kyoto and after, as we see a similar approach toward Atsuta as we do toward Iwashimizu. While there are still differences among the cases, Nobunaga, like many warrior leaders before him, saw the maintenance of important shrines as part of his role as a leader and pursued this with some vigor.

The Emperor

For many in Japan in this period, the emperor had a religious significance. This is not to suggest that Nobunaga or other warriors worshiped the emperor per se, but rather that the imperial court was a site of worship. Whether or not the warrior class believed that the emperor could bless or curse people in the manner of a deity is unclear. However, protecting, clothing, feeding, and funding the emperor and ensuring that his court was able to function was imbued with a sort of ritual significance.

The veneration of the emperor in this period was obvious even to outside observers. Fróis, for example, notes that the emperor was venerated among the Japanese in the manner of "other idols." Fróis also attributed to the emperor "control over the church," and analogizes him to the pope in Europe (KANDA 2010, 20). While these analogies are certainly limited in their usefulness for understanding the sixteenth-century religious and political landscape, they are based in the emperor's religious roles, both in terms of his ability to provide monks and

temples with special designations and ranks and in terms of his own unique relationship with the divine. This is visible also in native sources: there exists copies of an exchange of letters between the monk Yūzan 融山 (d. 1563) of the Hakone Gongen 箱根権現 shrine complex and the daimyo Hōjō Ujiyasu 北条氏康 (1515–1571) in 1561, wherein Yūzan explains how Ujiyasu might receive divine help in his endeavors. Yūzan suggests that Ujiyasu maintain temples and shrines and be merciful to the people, but first and foremost he advises making sure that the emperor's needs are met (Yokota 1996, 7; *Kanagawa kenshi*, 434–435). Furthermore, the emperor's traditional role as priest to the gods of Japan was innately useful to daimyo whose holdings grew larger. For the most part, people in sixteenth-century Japan were concerned with local temples and shrines, but once a daimyo had control of a large enough area each of these would only be relevant to a small part of the vassals and subjects in his holdings. As the center of worship of all the deities in Japan, as well as having control over the Buddhist clergy, the emperor could serve as a way to bring all of the gods and buddhas in a daimyo's domain (and their worshipers) under a single umbrella (Hori 2011, 274).

Nobunaga demonstrated a reverence toward the emperor in his actions. He was a major benefactor of the imperial court. He was making repairs to the Imperial Palace almost immediately upon his arrival in Kyoto in 1568, and these would continue until 1577. Furthermore, he confirmed the landholdings of the emperor and numerous court officials, and his confirmations seemed to actually guarantee income. He also established an ultimately unsuccessful system of rice-seed lending intended to grant the court income and feed the emperor in 1571 (Butler 2002, 144–148). He canceled all debts by the nobility in 1575, and went on a donation spree in that year, giving several thousand *koku* 石 (approximately one hundred and eighty liters, the standard measurement of rice production) of land to various court figures, including the emperor (onmk 1: 129–150).

In this we see again the influence of Nobunaga's father Nobuhide, who in 1543 gave one thousand strings of cash to the court to pay for repairs of the palace walls (Taniguchi 2017, 94–95; *Oyudono no ue no nikki* 4: 467). We can get a sense of how much this is by comparing the amount to other Sengoku daimyo: Nobuhide at the time controlled not even all of the single province of Owari. His longtime enemy Imagawa Yoshimoto 今川義元 (1519–1560), who controlled the three provinces of Suruga, Tōtōmi, and Mikawa, donated five hundred strings of cash (Taniguchi 2017, 95; *Oyudono no ue no nikki* 4: 478). Tamon'in Eishun stated in his diary that he had heard that Nobuhide had paid four thousand strings of cash (*Tamon'in nikki* 1: 306). One thousand seems more reasonable, but it is a princely sum in either case, and that an upstart daimyo who controlled not even a whole province was showing up one of the most accomplished and powerful warriors of his age suggests that Nobuhide was deeply concerned with imperial politics. In thanks, Nobuhide received gifts and an imperial order,

delivered by Tani Sōboku 谷宗牧 (d. 1545), the leading renga poet of the time. Nobunaga, while too young to have been involved in the donation in any meaningful sense, was surely aware of the pomp and ceremony surrounding the donation and the receipt of thanks from the court the next year and likely desired to maintain such a relationship with the court himself.

Furthermore, we can see in Nobunaga's writings a major concern for the legitimacy of the court. Nobunaga on several occasions interceded in court decisions. Two notable cases are the debate over the wearing of *ken'e* 絹衣 silk robes between the Shingon and Tendai monks of Mutsu Province, and the debate over the appointment of the *bettō* 別当 of Kōfukuji in 1574. In both cases, Nobunaga advises the court in his documents that its procedures needed to be normalized and transparent, so as to prevent the perception that the court was corrupt or incompetent (Kaneko 2015, 260–352). To be sure, Nobunaga's concerns here were in no small way self-serving, as he noted in a letter that if the court loses face, so too will he (ONMK 3: 183–184). But he also speaks to the importance of the court's own reputation, which is needed if the court will be seen as a legitimate arbiter of such matters.

There is also the matter of the piece of incense known as Ranjatai 蘭奢待, held at the Shōsōin 正倉院 storehouse at Tōdaiji. Ranjatai was brought to Japan from China and kept at the Shōsōin repository from the Nara period. It has only been verifiably cut a few times, though examinations suggest that around thirty-five cuts have been made. It is kept at Tōdaiji and today is managed by the Imperial Household Agency. Prior to Nobunaga, only Ashikaga Yoshimitsu and Yoshimasa are certain to have received cuttings. After much court maneuvering, Nobunaga received a piece of Ranjatai in 1574 and sent half to the emperor. There have been numerous interpretations of the political and symbolic meaning of the event in recent decades, with some scholars, such as Fujiki Hisashi and George Ellison (1981, 175), seeing it as a deliberate attempt to undermine the emperor's power and impose his own. Others, notably Kaneko Hiraku (2015, 214–250), disagree, noting that the only major objection from the court was that Nobunaga's main court contact in the process was the regent, which was improper as Ranjatai was a treasure of the imperial family.

I propose that the whole business of cutting Ranjatai, while clearly tied to Nobunaga's attempt to position himself as the successor to the Ashikaga, was born out of reverence for the imperial house. The Shōsōin is Emperor Shōmu's 聖武 (701–756) personal treasure house, and the items there are inherently tied to the glory of the throne. This was not lost on later rulers, including the Meiji Emperor, who received a piece of Ranjatai himself in 1868. Gyūichi certainly described the event as tinged with reverence, noting that even a glimpse of Ranjatai was a generational treasure (SKK, 167–168; CLN, 206–207). While Gyūichi was certainly prone to exaggeration, the cutting of Ranjatai is not treated in any source as the

acquisition of a simple (if rare) collectible. Rather, every source acknowledges that the event is special and that it must be carried out in a ritually correct and respectful manner, and, critically, that it was indeed properly carried out. By acquiring one of the emperor's treasures he was portraying himself as among the highest of the emperor's servants, giving his regime additional legitimacy.

Nobunaga used the religious dimensions of the imperial court to his advantage in other ways. In the third month of 1582, Tamon'in Eishun recorded that the court had exiled the gods of the lands of Nobunaga's enemies (*Tamon'in nikki* 3: 212). Furthermore, the court seems to have taken a particular interest in Nobunaga's attack on the Takeda, which was going on at the time, as it ordered prayers for Nobunaga in the same month at several temples and shrines, including Kōfukuji, as Nobunaga was on his way to Kai (*Tamon'in nikki* 3: 209).

While the political implications of the above cannot be denied, I believe it is important to emphasize that in the Sengoku political sphere, the emperor was not merely another political figure, and interactions with the emperor and his court should be seen as different than interactions between mere humans. While there were certainly those who neither paid the court any particular heed nor gave it support, many, Nobunaga included, saw in the court a unique sort of religious connection, a connection that they would seek to protect and exploit.

Conclusion

So, what does this study show us about the religious life and policies of Oda Nobunaga? First and foremost, while Nobunaga was without question atypical in many ways, his regime's relationship with religious institutions and figures was not particularly outside the norm for powerful warriors in Sengoku Japan, especially powerful warriors with connections to the shogun and the emperor. To the extent that Nobunaga was innovative, it was when the traditional power structure either failed or was working against him.

It is also clear that Nobunaga's religious policy was secondary to more worldly interests, especially those relating to his prestige and stability. I believe that this was both to the benefit and the detriment of religious interests depending on circumstance. This is perhaps most visible in the treatment of Enryakuji; the Mt. Hiei monks were a threat to stability, had harmed Nobunaga's prestige, and were destroyed. The *monzeki* were part of the court society Nobunaga wished to support and were given land grants. This also explains why Nobunaga's most favored religious institution seems to have shifted many times in a short period, as his hasty ascent meant that his priorities were fluid. Support of Hyakusaiji, for example, makes sense in 1568 when control of southern Ōmi was vital to maintaining a link to the capital, but by 1574 priorities had changed, leaving Nobunaga no reason to spare the temple when it betrayed him. Support of

Chion'in is reasonable in the context of Nobunaga increasingly taking leadership positions in the court. Finally, the focus on Sōkenji makes sense as Nobunaga, now leader of the court and master of the home provinces, sought to cement his own legacy and create a ritual center for his regime and those of his successors.

I should also note that this article is in no way a comprehensive look at all aspects of Nobunaga's religious life and policies. There are several likely fruitful avenues of inquiry that I did not explore here. For example, several cases in Gyūichi's biography suggests that Nobunaga was very concerned with religious conmen, as in the case of the mysterious Muhen 無辺 (d. 1580) and the Nichiren priest Fuden'in Nichimon 普伝院日門 (d. 1579). The relationship between Nobunaga and various Jōdoshin lineages, including Honganji, was in no way an affair of simple bloodthirsty hostility, and the documents relating to the various truces and the surrender of Osaka Honganji are fascinating on their own. The religious imagery in Gyūichi's description of Azuchi Castle likewise could possibly yield interesting results if closely examined. I have also deliberately avoided including a discussion of Christianity here, given my trepidation relating to the Jesuit sources and my desire to focus attention elsewhere. And I have not looked at the religious lives of the Oda vassals, who certainly had an impact on Nobunaga's religious policies. My hope is that this article inspires further explorations of the religious policies of both Sengoku daimyo and the unifiers, with an eye toward not only seeing how Tokugawa policies show continuities or breaks with earlier policies but also the ways in which such policies shaped and were shaped by the various players, including monks, shogunal officials, daimyo, vassals, and so on.

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DNS *Dai Nihon shiryō* 大日本史料. vols. 10–11. Ed. Tōkyō Daigaku Shiryō Hensanjo 東京大学史料編纂所. Tōkyō Daigaku Shuppankai, 1927–.

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