

## Religion and Political Order in Nichiren's Buddhism

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### INTRODUCTION

The following exploratory discussion is guided by two considerations:

1. Max Weber's discussion of religious rationalization is focused on an analysis of the "tension" that according to him arises inevitably as a consequence of this rationalization. His discussion of this tension is highly complex and sometimes unclear and I want to offer a modest attempt at clarifying the complexities in Weber's analysis.
2. "Tension" with the political order occupies an important place in the life and thought of the Kamakura Buddhist leader Nichiren (1222-1282). Because Nichiren also offers other parallels to Weber's discussion of religious "rationalization," I will examine the "tension" in Nichiren in order to explore the significance of Weber's observations.

Weber's discussion of religious rationalization and tension is developed in three main contexts.<sup>1</sup> First, Weber observes that religious rationalization involves the systematization of religious world view, and that this inevitably results in a tension between *what ought to be* and *what is* experienced in one's life. Weber's

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1. The key concepts of Weber's sociology of religion are formulated and discussed systematically in Weber 1964 (originally a chapter in his *Economy and Society*), and in two essays, "The social psychology of world religions," and "Religious rejections of the world and their directions," in Gerth and Mills 1958.

favorite example is the question, "if the creator is all-powerful, all-knowing, and good, how can there be evil in the world that he created himself?" The tension in this case arises from the problem of evil, and its resolution generally takes the form of articulating the meaning of evil ("theodicy") from the viewpoint of religious salvation. The meaning of the existence of evil in this world and of the undeserved suffering of the just is explained not in terms of this-worldly justice but in relation to other-worldly salvation.

Second, religious rationalization also gives rise to "tension" on the level of religious institutions. Weber gives considerable attention to the process through which religious rationalization gives rise to tension (or conflict) between the "prophet" and the existing "priestly" institutions. Such tension is slowly reduced through a complex series of compromises as the outcome of the rationalization becomes institutionalized. This development involves the struggle between the "prophet" and the "priests" to gain and maintain the support of lay groups.

Third, religious rationalization is also conceived as a development in which the sphere of specifically religious concerns ("other-worldly salvation") differentiates itself from other spheres (such as economic activities, politics, sexuality, aesthetics, and science. Weber describes this development as the emergence of tension between salvation religiosity and other spheres of life.

My suggestion is that the relationship among these three different contexts of "tension" is obscure in Weber's discussion and that, in fact, aspects of this relationship constitute important theoretical issues. Let me illustrate this suggestion with an example. Parsons maintained that the tension in Weber's discussion of religious rationalization was to be understood most fundamentally in terms of the ultimate impossibility of institutionalizing a truly radical religious stand (Parsons 1964, p. xlix). This interpretation over-emphasizes the second context of Weber's discussion of tension, where the focus is on social interaction, i.e., on conflicts and compromises that result in institutionalization. As a consequence of this over-emphasis, Parsons seriously underestimates the im-

portance of the analysis of internal and inherent “tension” in the “subjective meaning” of religious action which is highlighted in the first and third contexts of Weber’s discussion. The difference between Weber and Parsons’ interpretation of him here most probably reflects more fundamental differences in their assumptions concerning the place of the analysis of meaning in sociology as the general science of social action.

#### TENSION IN NICHIREN

Keeping these concerns in mind, let us now turn to Nichiren.<sup>2</sup>

Nichiren was born in 1222 in a fishing village not far from Tokyo. His first public preaching in 1253 attacking the Pure Land movement of Hōnen led to a conflict with local authorities. Seven years later Nichiren submitted the famous essay, *Risshōankokuron* [“The establishment of righteousness and the security of the country”], to Hōjō Tokiyori, the leader of the government, and the following year he was exiled to Izu. He returned from exile in 1263 and for the next several years engaged in many conflicts, with both secular and Buddhist authorities. A new phase begins in Nichiren’s life in 1271, when he was exiled to Sado. He was nearly executed at a place called Tatsu no Kuchi while en route to Sado.

Significant changes and deepening in Nichiren’s thought took place during his years at Sado (1271–1273), and major works such as *Kaimokushō* [“The awakening to the truth”] were composed at that time. The last years of Nichiren’s life, after his return from Sado and vain attempt to influence government leaders, were spent at Mt. Minobu, in seclusion.

My discussion of Nichiren’s writings will proceed in two steps: I will first examine *Risshōankokuron* in terms of the question of how the tension with political authorities that shaped Nichiren’s life and thought arose and was initially justified; then I will discuss his later writings in order to examine the changes that occurred as a

2. A recent and helpful presentation of Nichiren’s life and thought may be found in Nakamura 1972.

result of Nichiren's experience of being persecuted.

Nichiren's *Risshōankokuron* is presented in the form of a dialogue between a traveling guest and his host (see Nichiren 1964). The guest represents what Nichiren considers to be the viewpoint of those members of the ruling class sympathetic to the Buddhist cause. The host represents Nichiren's own views, and the dialogue proceeds in the form of a series of exchanges in which the guest is first offended by the host but eventually comes to be persuaded.

The conversation begins with the guest observing that in spite of the wide variety of Buddhist practices performed by different schools, in recent years the world has been filled with natural disasters, famines, epidemics and death. He then proceeds to ask for an explanation, and the host responds by offering one he claims is based on the scriptures: gods and sages have left the country because people have deviated from righteousness and followed evil; consequently, evil spirits have arrived and there have been disasters and calamities. The host offers a number of quotations from Mahayana scriptures describing the disasters that result when gods and sages desert the land because of a failure to support the correct teaching.<sup>3</sup> The exchange following these quotations reveals the distance between the positions of the guest and host.

The guest assumes and insists on a complete harmony between religion and politics. Since Buddhism arrived in China and Japan, he says, everyone from the ruler to the people in the very lowest classes have followed it through the building of temples, worshiping of images and reading of scriptures (Nichiren 1964, p. 198). He also says that the intelligent ruler who achieves cosmic transformations by means of heaven and earth and the sage who governs the world through insights into principles cooperate with each other, and that the monks of this world followed by the whole realm under heaven could not be at fault since intelligent rulers would not believe in evil monks, and that therefore charges against

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3. These are taken from the following sutras: *Kōnkōmyōkyō*, *Daishitsukyō*, *Ninnōkyō* and *Yakushikyō*.

such monks are a serious matter and should not be raised lightly (Nichiren 1964, p. 304). As the conversation proceeds, the implications of the guest's position are made more explicit. Everyone desires peace in the world and in the nation and the prosperity of the country depends on the correct teaching, while honoring of the teaching depends on the people of the country. If, however, there is neither country nor people, then the worship of Buddha and a belief in his teaching will not be possible, so one should first pray for the welfare of the country and then establish the Buddhist teaching. Finally, the guest quotes a passage from the Mahayana scripture *Daishitsukyō* in which the Buddha says that those who give offerings to monks, whether the monks are law abiding or not, are giving offerings to Buddha himself, and those who beat or humiliate monks are doing the same to Buddha himself. Therefore, the guest suggests, one should make offerings to monks without discussing their merits (Nichiren 1964, pp. 313–314).

The host insists that disasters in the country are the result of having followed the wrong teaching, and that peace would result if the correct teaching were followed. Nichiren here transposes a political concern with the peace and prosperity of the nation into the religious concern of distinguishing the correct from the incorrect teaching and behaving accordingly. The issue more clearly and explicitly becomes the problem of evil and is discussed in the concrete form of evil monks who are in fact slandering the correct teaching. This discussion develops on two levels: Nichiren again quotes scriptures (this time mainly from the Nirvana sutra) describing conflicts with slanderers of the teaching (Nichiren 1964, pp. 298–299, and pp. 308–310), and at the same time he makes pointed comments on the Japanese situation in the form of a critique of the Pure Land teaching of Hōnen.

In the passages quoted by the host the conflict is described in terms of dramatic confrontations (see Nichiren 1964, pp. 311–313). The upholder of the true teaching is reviled and physically attacked by those whose physical appearance is of that of a monk but who fail in fact to follow monastic rules, and are hence not really monks.

A lay protector of the teaching, e.g., a king, then comes to the defense and is wounded. The consequence of such confrontations is that the slanderers of the teaching are reborn in hell and those who uphold and defend it make remarkable progress in their paths to salvation.

Evil monks clearly embody evil in these passages. One should note here the pervasive preoccupation with the danger of rebirth in hell, which confirms the religious character of the discussion of evil. The paradoxical relationship between appearance (the monk vs. the layman or the king bearing a sword or stick) and substance (the reviling of the teaching vs. upholding and protecting it), and the resultant reversal of roles carry important implications. Obviously the message here is that one should not be deceived by appearance, but should be able to judge by substance, i.e., what matters from the truly religious viewpoint. This focus on the king as the true protector of the teaching suggests that the true test of kingship is not political but religious. At the same time, it also suggests somewhat paradoxically that the decisive religious struggle takes place in the realm of politics.

The host declares that the Pure Land movement of Hōnen constitutes the reviling of the correct teaching by evil monks (Nichiren 1964, pp. 300–303, p. 305, p. 313). He points out that Hōnen's teaching of Pure Land practices is based on a rejection of all other forms of Buddhist teaching as being ineffectual in the age of the decay of dharma (*mappō*), and argues that this amounts to reviling the teaching of Buddha. Observing that the Pure Land movement is widespread in Japan, he concludes that the disasters in the country are in fact the consequences of following this evil teaching that slanders the correct teaching. The point of this analysis is clear: the ruler should fight against the Pure Land movement just as the kings described in the scripture fought in order to protect the correct teaching.

Let me briefly recapitulate. The tension between religious concerns and political order is minimized in the guest's position. This tension emerges in the host's position, where a discussion of

good government is placed within a broader and explicitly religious discussion of evil and the correct teaching of salvation. A discussion of the meaning of recent disasters in the country leads to a criticism of the government from a self-consciously religious viewpoint. These themes appear to parallel Weber's discussion of "tension" and religious rationalization that highlights the problem of meaning, the rise of salvation religiosity and the relationship between the latter and other spheres of life.

#### KAIMOKUSHŌ AND LATER WORKS

In *Risshōankokuron* the assumption that perfect harmony between religion and politics is an easily realizable ideal is not questioned. Tension exists only to the extent that (1) the criticism of the government from a religious viewpoint is fully justifiable under certain circumstances, and (2) that there is an expectation that these circumstances will inevitably arise at some point in history. Nichiren's personal experiences, especially the two exiles and threats to his life during the years after the composition of *Risshōankokuron*, gave rise to a more radical viewpoint.

Soon after his arrival at Sado Nichiren wrote a major essay, *Kaimokushō* ["Awakening to truth"] (Nichiren 1964, pp. 328–420), that discusses the following question: if Nichiren is the true practitioner (*gyōja*) of the teaching of the Lotus sutra in the age of the decay of dharma, why have the gods deserted him and let him go through the sufferings caused by repeated persecutions? In this essay Nichiren insists that the details of the persecutions described in the scriptures match his own circumstances and that, since the world indeed entered the age of the decay of dharma recently, these descriptions must in fact be predictions about his own life (Nichiren 1964, pp. 403–404). His suffering is thus meaningful even if unjustified.

Nichiren further argues that his suffering is the consequence of evil he committed in a previous life. He was a king then and persecuted the followers of the Lotus sutra. This is why he now has to suffer from the same evil deeds (Nichiren 1964, p. 404).

He also suggests that the effect of the evil deeds committed in his previous lives may be removed through the suffering he is undergoing in this life (Nichiren 1964, p. 404). The emphasis in this discussion is not on the fact that Nichiren's suffering from persecution by political authorities is unjust, but rather on the fact that because it is unjust it has a positive religious significance. The principle of political justice is fundamentally contradicted in this consideration of religious significance. The tension between religion and politics is radicalized here compared to the earlier formulation.

The relationship between religion and political order is discussed somewhat differently in his minor writings *Shinkokuōgoshō* ["On deities, kings and country"] (Nichiren 1962, pp. 1349–1365) and *Kangyōhachimanshō* ["A warning to the god Hachiman"] (Nichiren 1970, pp. 352–369), both written after his return from exile in Sado. By this time Nichiren had given up his hope of influencing contemporary politics and was living in seclusion at Mt. Minobu, writing and advising his followers. The focus of his discussion in these essays shifts from the conflict with the actual government in power to the nature and place of Japanese deities within his teaching of salvation. Nichiren observes that the Buddha is "the teacher, the master, and the parent" of the deities and kings who appear in Buddhist scriptures and that, therefore, if they disobey Buddha even for a moment they will lose their status. The Japanese deities (*kami*) are the spirit of past emperors. They are the "parents, the master and the teachers" of the ruler and the people of the country. If people disobey these deities disorder in the country will follow, but if they worship them, disasters and calamities will disappear and people will enjoy health, long life and good rebirth in the life to come (Nichiren 1962, p. 1353). The parallel between the status of the Buddha and the *kami* is made more explicit in a passage where Nichiren states that the god Hachiman, the spirit of Ōjin, the sixteenth emperor, is the "trace" or incarnation of the "original substance" of Shakyamuni Buddha. Here Nichiren is following the widely used theory of *honji suijaku* ("original sub-



stance, manifest traces”), but with a special emphasis. What really counts is Buddha’s teaching, and if the wrong teaching prevails in the country the gods will also lose their power. Moreover, if the gods do not protect Nichiren, the true practitioner of the Lotus sutra, they too will be punished. In these essays Nichiren explains the meaning of such historical incidents as the defeat of the imperial forces in the Shōkyū War (1221) and the burning down of the Hachiman shrine in Kamakura (1280) from this perspective. Here, the relationship between religion and political order is conceived less in terms of tension, and more abstractly in terms of the hierarchical relationship between Buddha and the gods. One senses an emerging tendency toward systematization and institutionalization.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Let me offer a few general comments as a conclusion.

Weber’s discussion of “tension” and religious rationalization parallels at a number of points the material on Nichiren. In all of the examples examined here Nichiren’s discussion of religion and political order is formulated in reference to the central question of meaning. He focuses on a certain event, showing how it contradicts the basic assumptions of accepted views and offers his views in the form of a clarification of its meaning. His clarification, moreover, becomes a discussion of the problem of evil from the viewpoint of religious teaching of salvation. Such a clarification gives rise to tension between the teaching of salvation and the political order.

I referred earlier to the broad theoretical issue of the relationship between the analysis of meaning and analysis of social conflict as the major theoretical concern behind this discussion. I will now offer the following suggestion based on this discussion. We have seen how the description of tension in Nichiren makes use from the very beginning of the symbolic representation of social conflicts drawn from tradition. We also saw how Nichiren’s personal experience with repeated persecutions led him to radicalize

this tension and to trace its roots more deeply. The development of the theme of tension in Nichiren, which is in many ways quite similar to tension in Weber's discussion, is clearly related to both symbolic and literal experience of social conflict. At the same time, I think the case can be made in the example of Nichiren that the problem of meaning is more fundamental than this experience of social conflict. The theme of tension did not emerge in Nichiren's thought because his radical teaching of religious salvation met the opposition of the established authorities. Rather, Nichiren's teaching of salvation arises with the awareness of tension on the level of meaning. The experience of social conflict became important because it was interpreted within this broader context of his concerns. This interpretation, in turn, has the effect of modifying and deepening Nichiren's views on salvation. I would suggest that the problem of "tension" and religious rationalization may be better understood with a viewpoint that focuses primarily on an analysis of meaning rather than with a viewpoint such as that of Parsons, which focuses on social conflicts and institutionalization.

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