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War ethics in the Meiji era of Japan: Shaku Sōen, a war priest in the Russo–Japanese War

Masahiro NAKAGAWA

This paper explores Japanese war ethics, focusing specifically on Rinzai Zen Master Shaku Sōen (Kōgaku Sōen) from the Meiji era. He participated in the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago as one of the priests from the Japanese delegation. He was also the first to teach Zen philosophy in the United States. In spite of the significant advances made by Sōen and his lineage, serious research about him in Japan is almost nonexistent.

In following Sōen’s deeds and the religious and chauvinistic arguments he used to support the Russo–Japanese War, we can reveal his true nature and also the subjects that faced the Meiji Buddhists of that time. By separately analyzing each real act of war, we argue that the actual acts and arguments of war transcend the superficial limits of “good and evil” or “right and wrong.” According to Sōen, each real act of war is directed by “Daidō” where people pledge. In the western world this is depicted as humanitarian justice. In Japan it is referred to as “Kōdō,” or the Japanese national polity. They are the two sides of “Daidō” as a natural way of “Daiga”; the absolute unity with all living things in the world.

Section I presents a brief biography of Sōen. Section II surveys Sōen’s views on war, relying mainly on his beliefs outlined in *Senteiroku*. Here, we find a paradoxical figure, one seeking a peaceful religious world and the other supporting war. However, these two figures are bound within “Daiga.” Section III seeks to justify this understanding by focusing on Sōen as a typical Buddhist of Meiji era.