

## ARTICLE

# The archer and the arrow: Zen Buddhism and the politics of religion in Nazi Germany

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## Abstract

Zen may be most commonly associated with Japan, but the ‘art of Zen’ was made in Germany. This article reconstructs the reception of Zen Buddhism in Nazi Germany as an extension of the regime’s project to transform Christianity. Although Japanese reformers emphasized Zen’s universal qualities, in Nazi Germany it became associated instead with a combination of *völkisch* nationalism and spiritual mysticism mirroring Nazi aspirations for a ‘positive’ German form of Christianity. That project may have been discredited after 1945, but the image of Zen cultivated by Nazi ideologues transitioned more or less seamlessly into the post-war New Age movement. This phenomenon thus merits attention not only for what it reveals about the extent to which Germany remained engaged in global intellectual and cultural currents during the Nazi era but also in complicating our historical understanding of how Zen came to be part of the contemporary global vernacular.

**Keywords:** National Socialism (Nazism); Zen Buddhism; *Völkisch* movement; mysticism; New Age movement

There was also Fahringer, an aerodynamics man, who went out in the pinewoods at Peenemünde with his Zen bow and roll of pressed straw to practice breathing, draw and loosing, over and over . . . The Rocket for this Fahringer was a fat Japanese arrow. It was necessary in some way to become one with Rocket, trajectory and target—‘not to *will* it, but to surrender, to step out of the role of firer’.<sup>1</sup>

In summer 1944, as the war in Europe hurtled towards its bloody conclusion, the University of Erlangen’s Philosophy Department shipped the third issue of its Armed Services Dispatches. Each pamphlet contained lectures contributed by the department’s faculty and intended to provide their readers – current and former students serving in the German military – with an intellectual anchor to their civilian lives. Although the pamphlets were not explicitly political, they were undoubtedly chosen with an eye towards morale and ideological messaging. At first glance, the essay by Eugen Herrigel (1884–1955), the university’s new rector, on ‘The Ethos of the Samurai’ is less notable for its insights into Japanese culture than as somewhat clumsy propaganda.<sup>2</sup> The cynicism of this work, which explained in detail that personal honour in Japan was contingent on a soldier’s willingness to cheerfully die on behalf of his nation, reflects Nazi propaganda’s instrumentalization of Japanese culture during the latter years of the war. Far from being depicted merely as an acceptable ally, Japan was mobilized as an aspirational model of cheerful self-sacrifice, meant to bolster

<sup>1</sup>Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (London: Vintage Books, 2000), 479.

<sup>2</sup>Eugen Herrigel, ‘Das Ethos des Samurai’, *Feldpostbrief der Philosophischen Fakultät. Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen*, no. 3 (Summer 1944): 7–14.

flagging German morale and to confirm the viability of the National Socialist agenda in reconstructing the German nation as a *völkisch* counter-modernity.<sup>3</sup>

For Herrigel, the key to understanding the Japanese *Weltanschauung* was Zen Buddhism, which had ‘cured’ the samurai of their natural fear of death.<sup>4</sup> While this rhetoric would have been less remarkable in a Japanese context, its appearance in Nazi propaganda bears closer scrutiny, especially because this was not an isolated case. Indeed, Zen Buddhism appeared frequently in German media attempting to define the qualities of contemporary Japan that made it uniquely attractive as a prototypical *völkisch* state. While it might be tempting to explain the Nazi engagement with Zen Buddhism as a kind of absurdist exoticism – certainly that is one reading implied by Thomas Pynchon’s sketch in *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973) of a German expert in aerodynamics practicing Japanese archery (*kyūdō*) – what made Zen resonate was its perceived salience to the politics of religion in Nazi Germany. Zen was presented, not as an Orientalist fantasy or reconstruction but rather as a template for naturalizing a universalist world religion into a modern, ‘positive’ national faith. In short, Zen was mobilized as a model for how Nazis ideologues planned to transform Christianity as they grappled with the implications of constructing a *völkisch* faith in the land of Luther.

Nazi-era scholars’ engagement with Zen emerged out of the political and cultural rapprochement between Germany and Japan during the 1920s and 30s, resulting in the two countries’ alliance during the Second World War.<sup>5</sup> Certainly, that is the context in which it is most commonly addressed.<sup>6</sup> Like many other facets of the German–Japanese relationship, however, it evolved out of deeper intellectual and cultural currents in both Europe and Asia. In the case of Zen, its reception in Nazi Germany was principally mediated by two religious reform movements: the Japanese New Buddhist movement of the late nineteenth century and the Nazi project to ‘nationalize’ Christianity. Scholarship on the former has hitherto principally focused on this movement as a response by Japanese nationalists to Orientalist views on Buddhism, with the implication that Western audiences either did not see or else misinterpreted the political subtext of this discourse.<sup>7</sup> Hence Robert Sharf, in his analysis of the relationship between Zen and Japanese nationalism, argued that Western Zen enthusiasts, ‘systematically failed to recognize the national ideology underlying modern Japanese constructions of Zen’.<sup>8</sup> While this may have been true in other contexts, in Nazi Germany it was precisely the symbiotic relationship between Japanese nationalism and Zen that ideologues advocating for the transformation of Christianity found attractive.

Scholarship on the politics of religion in Nazi Germany has been long dominated by the spectacle of a vocal – not to mention politically well connected – minority of neo-paganists implacably hostile to Christianity. The disproportionate focus on Nazi neo-paganism by historians not only gave credence to the myth of Nazi anti-Christian persecution, it also obscured the extent to which many Christian theologians were eager to help construct a ‘positive Christianity’, a ‘new national religion’ that could unite all Germans under a single set of values.<sup>9</sup> Parallel to this, scholarship

<sup>3</sup>Sarah Panzer, ‘Death-Defying: Voluntary Death as Honorable Ideal in the German-Japanese Alliance’, *Central European History* 55, no. 2 (June 2022): 205–22.

<sup>4</sup>Herrigel, ‘Das Ethos des Samurai’, 7.

<sup>5</sup>Ricky W. Law, *Transnational Nazism: Ideology and Culture in German-Japanese Relations, 1919–1936* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

<sup>6</sup>See, Han-Joachim Bieber, *SS und Samurai. Deutsch-japanische Kulturbeziehungen, 1933–1945* (Munich: Iudicium Verlag, 2014), 640–9.

<sup>7</sup>Jason Ananda Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); James Edward Ketelaar, *Of Heretics and Martyrs in Meiji Japan: Buddhism and Its Persecution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990); Judith Snodgrass, *Presenting Japanese Buddhism to the West: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and the Columbian Exposition* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Notto R. Thelle, *Buddhism and Christianity in Japan: From Conflict to Dialogue, 1854–1899* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1987).

<sup>8</sup>Robert H. Sharf, ‘The Zen of Japanese Nationalism’, in *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism*, ed. D.S. Lopez, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 140.

<sup>9</sup>Richard Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919–1945* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 50. See also, Doris Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich*

analysing Nazi perceptions of non-Western religions has also tended to paint with a broad brush, framing them as elements of a singular discourse aimed at deconstructing and, ultimately, replacing Christianity.<sup>10</sup> With respect to Zen, however, it is more appropriate to understand its reception instead through the lens of an attempted transformation of Christianity into a specifically German religion compatible with a *völkisch* worldview.

This project to align Christianity with Nazism may have been thoroughly discredited after 1945, but the image of Zen cultivated by ideologues like Eugen Herrigel transitioned relatively seamlessly into the post-war era alongside the writings of Japanese authorities like D.T. Suzuki (1870–1966). The so-called post-war ‘Zen boom’, during which Western audiences craving an ‘authentic’ spiritual experience were introduced to the philosophy and aesthetics of Zen Buddhism by interlocutors of varying credentials – ranging from the thoughtful theological meditations of Thomas Merton (*Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, 1968) to the rather more dilettantish contributions of Alan Watts (*The Way of Zen*, 1957) – has been thoroughly documented and dissected, but its historical antecedents before 1945 have not received equal scrutiny.<sup>11</sup> In his otherwise thorough analysis of the German reception of Buddhist philosophy, for example, Eric S. Nelson presents interest in Zen as an exclusively post-war phenomenon, discussing the critiques by Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse on the ‘commodification’ of Zen and its integration into Western patterns of ‘spiritual materialism’, as well as more sympathetic readings by Martin Buber and Martin Heidegger, but not Herrigel or C.G. Jung.<sup>12</sup> Even scholarship that does engage earlier German writings on Zen is noticeably ahistorical, as in Christoph Gellner’s recent monograph on Asian religious motifs in the work of Hermann Hesse; in discussing Hesse’s post-war literary ‘conversion’ to Zen aesthetics, Gellner names several of the figures to be discussed below – namely Eugen Herrigel, Karlfried Graf von Dürckheim and Wilhelm Gundert – as among the most influential figures in popularizing Zen, but does not interrogate the political context in which these men were writing, not to mention the implications thereof.<sup>13</sup>

In reconstructing the complete and honest history of how Zen came to be a part of the global cultural vernacular, the central role played by figures openly associated with and sympathetic to Nazism must be acknowledged. While it certainly would be reasonable to attribute previous scholars’ failure to do so – with the notable exception of Shoji Yamada – to a desire to shield Zen, another significant factor was surely historians’ belated recognition of Nazi Germany’s engagement in global cultural and intellectual currents.<sup>14</sup> To paraphrase David Motadel, many historians of the Nazi era have remained wedded to the belief that Nazism was incompatible ideologically with meaningful engagement outside the projected borders of the ‘thousand-year Reich’, when in fact the reality was much more complicated.<sup>15</sup> Along with Motadel, a number of other scholars have recently increased our understanding of the ways in which Nazism defined and positioned itself on the global stage.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, a growing body of literature has introduced new approaches

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(Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

<sup>10</sup>Horst Junginger, ‘From Buddha to Adolf Hitler: Walter Wüst and the Aryan Tradition’, in *The Study of Religion under the Impact of Fascism*, ed. H. Junginger (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 105–78.

<sup>11</sup>Gregory P.A. Levine, *Long Strange Journey: On Modern Zen, Zen Art, and Other Predicaments* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 2017); Meghan Warner Mettler, *How to Reach Japan by Subway: America’s Fascination with Japanese Culture, 1945–1965* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2018).

<sup>12</sup>Eric S. Nelson, *Chinese and Buddhist Philosophy in Early Twentieth-Century German Thought* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 201–28.

<sup>13</sup>Christoph Gellner, *Hermann Hesse und die Spiritualität des Ostens* (Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 2005).

<sup>14</sup>Shoji Yamada, *Shots in the Dark: Japan, Zen, and the West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

<sup>15</sup>David Motadel, ‘The Global Authoritarian Moment and the Revolt against Empire’, *The American Historical Review* 124, no. 3 (June 2019): 843–4.

<sup>16</sup>Stefan Ihrig, *Atatürk in the Nazi Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Kris Manjapra, *Age of Entanglement: German and Indian Intellectuals across Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Brendan Simms, *Hitler: A Global Biography* (New York: Basic Books, 2019).

in analysing interwar fascism – in particular the ‘Axis empires’ of Germany, Japan and Italy – from a global perspective.<sup>17</sup> Among other insights, this scholarship has revealed that fascism was not simply a manifestation of domestic political and economic grievances, it was an ideological response to the perceived threat of globalization to the cultural integrity of the nation. Religion has been intimately entangled with the politics of globalization since the emergence of the ‘world religions’ Christianity and Buddhism millennia ago. In the contemporary world, globalization both enables the diffusion of new, non-traditional systems of spirituality and fuels the violent rejection of universalism via the rise of fundamentalist groups; in the case of Nazi Germany’s engagement with Zen Buddhism, these were two sides of the same coin.

### Ex Oriente Lux

Like most religious traditions, Europeans historically evaluated Buddhism on the basis of its resemblance to Christianity. Indeed, the notion of a singular religion identifiable as Buddhism is a nineteenth-century Western construct, premised on the assumption that all forms of ‘Buddhist’ belief and practice were derived from the teachings of a single foundational prophet or saviour, similar to the role of Jesus within Christianity.<sup>18</sup> Of the various religious traditions dissected by Europeans over the centuries, however, Buddhism occupied a singular position. Unlike Christianity’s Abrahamic cousins Judaism and Islam, it had emerged out of a radically foreign cultural context, and yet its universalist mission distinguished it from other non-Western religious traditions. Moreover, the geographic reach and social influence of the diverse regional schools that Europeans collectively designated as ‘Buddhist’ implied an analogous role for Buddhism in Asia that Christianity had historically played in Europe: the foundational epistemological core around which a socio-cultural system had coalesced, and thus the linchpin to understanding Asian values and mores.

In short, Buddhism was understood as Christianity’s non-Western doppelgänger, and an array of eighteenth-century intellectuals enlisted Buddhism in debates regarding the proper relationship between religious faith and social progress, as revealed through the dichotomy of the Buddhist concept of enlightenment – what appears in Pali and Sanskrit texts as *bodhi* and in Japanese Zen as *satori* – and the European *Aufklärung*.<sup>19</sup> If the Enlightenment provided the necessary context for Europeans’ initial attempts to apprehend Buddhist enlightenment, the subsequent Orientalist ‘discovery’ of Buddhism unleashed a torrent of scholarly interventions which only accelerated during the nineteenth century, preceding and later justifying Europe’s imperial projects throughout Asia.<sup>20</sup> Buddhism attracted the attention of a range of scholars, sceptics and aesthetes not merely because it was exotic, but because it was so widely understood as *the* antithesis of Christianity.<sup>21</sup> Some of these figures – like Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche – exploited the dichotomy of Christianity/Buddhism to argue positions on culture, aesthetics, race or death that would have been transgressive, if not perverse, from a Christian perspective.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>17</sup>Reto Hofmann and Daniel Hedinger, ‘Axis Empires: Towards a Global History of Fascist Imperialism’, (Special Issue) *Journal of Global History* 12, no. 2 (July 2017): 161–5. See also, Daniel Hedinger, *Die Achse. Berlin—Rom—Tokio, 1919–1946* (Munich: C. H. Beck Verlag, 2021).

<sup>18</sup>Philip C. Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Richard S. Cohen, *Beyond Enlightenment: Buddhism, Religion, Modernity* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>19</sup>See, Cohen, *Beyond Enlightenment*, esp. 1–34.

<sup>20</sup>Urs App, *The Birth of Orientalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010); Suzanne Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>21</sup>Heinrich Duloulin, ‘Buddhism and Nineteenth-Century German Philosophy’, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 42, no. 3 (July–September 1981): 457–70; Volker Zotz, *Auf den glückseligen Inseln. Buddhismus in der deutschen Kultur* (Berlin: Theseus Verlag, 2000).

<sup>22</sup>See, Stephen Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West: The Encounter of Buddhism and Western Culture* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1994), esp. 250–71; Benjamin A. Elmin, ‘Nietzsche and Buddhism’, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 44, no. 4 (October–December 1983): 671–86.

Others, like Edwin Arnold (*The Light of Asia*, 1879) and Paul Carus (*The Gospel of Buddha*, 1898), mobilized Buddhism in order to engage broader philosophical and spiritual questions circulating in Europe at the time.<sup>23</sup> Regardless of framing, one consistent theme in this literature was the belief that Buddhism could be productively instrumentalized in revealing or re-contextualizing contemporary Western socio-political issues because of its presumptive alterity vis-à-vis Christianity.

A second consistent trope in European representations of Buddhism was a narrative of decline, wherein Buddhism was imagined as having degenerated from a 'pure' system of philosophy into a popular – with all of the negative associations that word evoked – religion, suffocated under the weight of ritual, superstition and idolatry. This was as much a political claim as it was a scholarly judgement; in declaring that Asians had allowed their philosophical inheritance to degenerate into a 'pale imitation of its former glory,' Orientalists could assert the prerogative to define the essential and original 'truth' of Buddhism for themselves.<sup>24</sup> As an intellectual project, Orientalism and its various sub-fields claimed the ability to reconstruct Asian religious and philosophical traditions in their 'original' forms, with the implicit assumption that any subsequent additions or alterations represented a corruption that could only be properly identified and excised by European experts.<sup>25</sup>

Nineteenth-century scholarship on Buddhism thus focused almost exclusively on what European Orientalists named Southern (Theravada) Buddhism, which was understood to represent the spiritual birthplace of not only 'authentic' Buddhist philosophy, as revealed in the Pali texts, but also – not coincidentally – the Indo-Germanic race.<sup>26</sup> Northern (Mahayana) Buddhism, by contrast, was seen as a degenerate variant of popular Buddhism and more or less dismissed as irrelevant. For Max Müller, the Orientalist *par excellence* of the late nineteenth century, Mahayana was itself a 'corruption', and only useful as a tool in dating and reconstructing the original Buddhist canon. Thus, when Müller had the opportunity to work with Buddhist priests visiting from Japan, his perception of their value to his work was based not on their expertise on Japanese Buddhism but rather their proficiency with classical Chinese. In his assessment, which neatly encapsulates the overweening arrogance of European Orientalists, '[I]f the Japanese really mean to be Buddhists, they should return to the words of the Buddha as they are preserved to us in the old sutras'.<sup>27</sup>

The Orientalist critique of contemporary Buddhism resonated in few places as strongly as it did in Meiji Japan. Japanese Buddhism had aligned its interests with those of the Tokugawa Shogunate following its violent suppression of Christianity in the early seventeenth century, and the explosive growth of Buddhist institutional infrastructure during the Tokugawa era was as much a reflection of its importance to the daily lives of the Japanese as its official function as an instrument of state surveillance and demographic control.<sup>28</sup> By the eve of the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the association between the Tokugawa state and Buddhism was so deeply entrenched that condemnation of the former frequently implied critique of the latter. Japanese reformers attacking the decadence of institutional Buddhism in Japan did so as self-conscious nativists attempting to assert the legitimacy of autochthonous systems of beliefs, including what would eventually be formalized as State

<sup>23</sup>See, Snodgrass, *Presenting Japanese Buddhism to the West*, esp. 222–44.

<sup>24</sup>Jürgen Osterhammel, *Unfabling the East: The Enlightenment's Encounter with Asia*, trans. Robert Savage (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 499–501.

<sup>25</sup>Vishwa Adhuri and Joydeep Bagchee, *The Nay Science: A History of German Indology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). See also, Douglas T. McGetchin, *Indology, Indomania, and Orientalism: Ancient India's Rebirth in Modern India* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009).

<sup>26</sup>Dorothy M. Figueira, *Aryans, Jews, Brahmins: Theorizing Authority through Myths of Identity* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002).

<sup>27</sup>Snodgrass, *Presenting Japanese Buddhism to the West*, 110.

<sup>28</sup>George Elison, *Deus Destroyed: The Image of Christianity in Early Modern Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973); Nam-lin Hur, *Death and Social Order in Tokugawa Japan: Buddhism, Anti-Christianity, and the Danka System* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Duncan Ryūkan Williams, *The Other Side of Zen: A Social History of Sōtō Zen Buddhism in Tokugawa Japan* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005).

Shinto.<sup>29</sup> The fact of Buddhism's 'foreignness' was particularly inconvenient for Japanese nationalists representing their nation on the international stage. Thus, when Léon de Rosny concluded, in his lecture at the Congrès International des Orientalistes in Paris, that Buddhism was not a Japanese religion, none of his Japanese listeners objected.<sup>30</sup> The brief, violent campaign against Buddhism (*haibutsu kishaku*) during the early Meiji era emerged out of this intellectual climate and precipitated in turn a series of reforms within Japanese Buddhism specifically intended to construct a New Buddhism (*shin bukkyō*) capable of holding its own philosophically against its many critics, foreign and domestic.<sup>31</sup>

The New Buddhism movement owed its success to its ability to triangulate Japanese Buddhism as the modern, rational alternative to both continental Buddhism and Christianity. Like other branches of 'Buddhist modernism' emerging during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was fundamentally an attempt by Asian Buddhists to subvert negative Western representations of Buddhism by pre-emptively constructing a 'modern' system of Buddhist thought and practice.<sup>32</sup> Japanese reformers argued, most famously at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, that they had successfully synthesized the best elements of Eastern philosophy and Western science into a new spiritual system – Eastern Buddhism – capable of meeting the challenges of the modern era. While the anti-Christian subtext of this rhetoric remained implicit when presented to foreign audiences, Japanese Buddhists were less subtle domestically in positioning themselves as the 'scientific' alternative to Christianity, one example being their vocal support for evolutionary theory.<sup>33</sup> In framing Japanese Buddhism as modern and progressive, these reformers aligned Buddhism with the broader state project of modernizing Japan.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, their apparent success in having transcended the 'unmodern' elements of other religious systems – including, implicitly, their own – was interpreted for Western audiences as evidence that the Japanese could claim the exclusive right to be 'the preservers of Asian tradition and the future leaders of Asia'.<sup>35</sup> Buddhism's foreign origins, previously a liability, now became an invaluable tool in justifying Japan's imperial ambitions as a benevolent mission to protect the authentic essence of Asian spirituality from Western colonial exploitation.

This conviction that Japan was destined to 'redeem' Asia was reflected in the work of numerous Japanese scholars and intellectuals, including Masaharu Anesaki (1873–1949), frequently credited as one of the founders of religious studies in Japan. Initially a philosophy student at Tokyo Imperial University, Anesaki subsequently spent three years in Germany and Britain, where he worked with leading Orientalists.<sup>36</sup> One highlight of his first extended trip abroad was an excursion to India and the holy sites of Southern Buddhism; Anesaki was disillusioned, however, by India as he found it, and even more so by the Indians themselves, claiming that the 'Brahmin scholars just recite their texts: when it comes to money, many of them are very shrewd', and 'those in the lower castes are cunning and tell foolish lies'.<sup>37</sup> The Japanese, by contrast – or so Anesaki later claimed – 'were ever a virile people who knew how to make the most of native forces and foreign contributions'. Foremost among the latter was Buddhism, which the Japanese had received

<sup>29</sup>See, Ketelaar, *Of Heretics and Martyrs in Meiji Japan*, esp. 19–36.

<sup>30</sup>Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan*, 221–2.

<sup>31</sup>Sharf, 'The Zen of Japanese Nationalism', 109–11.

<sup>32</sup>David McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 20.

<sup>33</sup>G. Clinton Godart, *Darwin, Dharma, and the Divine: Evolutionary Theory and Religion in Modern Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017).

<sup>34</sup>Christopher Ives, *Imperial-Way Zen: Ichikawa Hakugen's Critique and Lingering Questions for Buddhist Ethics* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), 18.

<sup>35</sup>Snodgrass, *Presenting Japanese Buddhism to the West*, 221. See also, Thelle, *Buddhism and Christianity in Japan*, esp. 214–24.

<sup>36</sup>Tomonobu Ishibashi, 'Masaharu Anesaki. Ein kurzes Lebensbild', *Monumenta Nipponica* 6, no. 1/2 (1943): i–x.

<sup>37</sup>Masaharu Anesaki, *Teiunshū: Wandering Clouds*, trans. Susanna Fessler with an introduction and notes (Fukuoka, Japan: Kurodahan Press, 2014), 51.

‘with an open mind, tempering and refining . . . and stamping’ it ‘with the mark of the Japanese genius. The nation passed through the vicissitudes of its history not in blind submission to chance or fate but in an inspired enthusiasm and with keen insight’.<sup>38</sup> In short, the Japanese had adapted Buddhism to suit their own needs and in accordance with their national values, thus escaping the fate of other, less ‘virile’ nations.

Zen was central to this project from the start; not only could Japanese Zen claim some of the more effective advocates for Buddhism internationally, but it also benefited from historical associations that made it uniquely attractive for Western audiences. Not the least of these was Zen’s purported role in shaping the ethos of the samurai – bushido – which had already been introduced to non-Japanese audiences by Inazō Nitobe’s (1862–1933) *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* (1899).<sup>39</sup> Westerners’ fascination with bushido guaranteed a receptive audience for any Japanese authority on the subject, and Japanese nationalists across the political spectrum were not subtle in exploiting that fact.<sup>40</sup> Claims that bushido could be understood as a Japanese analogue for Western codes of chivalry or gentlemanly behaviour implicitly legitimized its broader religious and philosophical context, including Zen. Moreover, Zen seemed to offer precisely what many in the West had been searching for in Buddhism all along, namely an alternative to Christianity that was modern, humanistic and socially engaged.<sup>41</sup>

The first systematic analysis of Zen for Western audiences was D.T. Suzuki’s ‘The Zen Sect of Buddhism’, which appeared in the *Journal of the Pali Text Society*, an intentionally provocative move by the young scholar. Suzuki presented Zen Buddhism as a uniquely Japanese synthesis of national values and universal truths, and thus an ethical system that was both culturally specific and universally accessible.<sup>42</sup> Suzuki’s friend and colleague, Kaiten Nukariya (1867–1934), elaborated upon this understanding of Zen as simultaneously national and universal in his *The Religion of the Samurai: A Study of Zen Philosophy and Discipline in China and Japan* (1913). Nukariya was a credible authority several times over: an ordained priest in the Sōtō Zen sect, he was also a professor at Keio University in Tokyo and a former lecturer at Harvard.<sup>43</sup> He was thus an ideal intermediary in introducing Zen to the West, not as an Orientalist construct but rather as an integral element in understanding Japan’s successful modernization.

Nukariya confronted the Orientalist stereotype of contemporary Buddhism as intrinsically fatalistic, observing that ‘Buddhism, having been adopted by savage tribes as well as civilized nations, by quiet, enervated people as well as by warlike, sturdy hordes, during some twenty-five hundred years, has developed itself into beliefs widely divergent and even diametrically opposed’.<sup>44</sup> He chided European Orientalists for their efforts to ‘dig out the remains of Buddhist faith that existed twenty centuries ago’, rather than recognizing the ‘heart and soul’ of modern Buddhism.<sup>45</sup> For Nukariya, this was Zen, not just because of its supposed disdain for scriptural pedantry and idolatry but also for its practices of physical and mental training, principally meditation (*zazen*). Zen was ‘self-control . . . the subduing of such pernicious passions as anger, jealousy, hatred, and the like, and the awakening of noble emotions such as sympathy, mercy, generosity, and what not. It is a mode of Enlightenment . . . and at the same time it is the overcoming of egoism, the destroying of mean desires, the uplifting of the moral ideal,

<sup>38</sup>Masaharu Anesaki, *History of Japanese Religion, With Special Reference to the Social and Moral Life of the Nation* (Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1963), 1–2.

<sup>39</sup>Inazō Nitobe, *Bushido: The Samurai Code of Japan* (Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 2019), 64–5.

<sup>40</sup>Oleg Benesch, *Inventing the Way of the Samurai: Nationalism, Internationalism, and Bushidō in Modern Japan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>41</sup>Sharf, ‘Zen of Japanese Nationalism’, 111–16.

<sup>42</sup>D.T. Suzuki, ‘The Zen Sect of Buddhism’, *Journal of the Pali Text Society* 5 (1906–07): 8–43.

<sup>43</sup>Kaiten Nukariya, *The Religion of the Samurai: A Study of Zen Philosophy and Discipline in China and Japan* (London: Luzac & Co., 1913), ix–x.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, xviii.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, xix.

and the disclosing of inborn wisdom'.<sup>46</sup> A system of personal enlightenment that taught its followers self-discipline and moral rectitude but did not shackle them to dogma or superstition would have naturally been compelling to many disillusioned Western readers. Nukariya spoke to the values and prejudices of his audience fluently, using concepts familiar from Western philosophical and religious traditions in order to make Zen comprehensible, yet with just the slightest hint of the exotic to exploit Western curiosity about the spiritual 'mysteries' of the East.

For all of his efforts to universalize Zen, Nukariya's text was explicitly nationalist in its historicization of Zen as a necessary precondition for the development of bushido and, more broadly, the reproduction of typically Japanese virtues like self-sacrifice, asceticism, courage and manliness.<sup>47</sup> Anesaki echoed this claim, declaring that 'traditional Buddhism was too sentimental and effeminate, or too intricate and mysterious for the simple and sturdy minds of the warriors', while 'Shinto was too naïve and primitive, and Confucianism too formal to appeal to minds which had passed the crisis of imminent death more than once'. Zen, however, 'was simple enough to be practised even in camp life, and yet profound enough to inspire and invigorate the mind or to calm it amidst agitation, and to show it the right way through the perplexities of life'.<sup>48</sup>

For Nukariya and Anesaki, Zen was a uniquely Japanese – and prototypically modern – revelation of Buddhism as a system of heroic self-cultivation, a point emphasized by Nukariya in his reference to the resurgent interest in Zen after the Russo-Japanese War.<sup>49</sup> Like so many other Buddhists who could not resist the temptation to make themselves useful to the Japanese state, Nukariya and Anesaki promoted a version of Buddhist doctrine amenable to an imperial ideology premised on the valorization of warfare. It is therefore not surprising that their work was foundational in promoting a vision of Japanese religiosity compatible with the Nazi politics of religion. Yet whereas the central claim of the Japanese New Buddhist movement was that Japanese Buddhism was a universally accessible model of rational self-development, Nazi ideologues instead fixated on the nationalist elements of this rhetoric and reinterpreted Zen as evidence that a universal religion could be successfully re-appropriated as the prerogative of a racial-cultural elite.

## Race and Faith

In order to understand why Nazi scholars would have gravitated to Zen, one must first understand the *völkisch* movement, a culturally grounded critique of liberal modernity which claimed to have identified a specific German organic 'soul' that could be redeemed and purified of alien cultural elements.<sup>50</sup> Religion was a critical 'pivot point' of this project from the very beginning, yet there was always a significant difference of opinion within the *völkisch* movement as to what the reform of German religion would actually entail. Certain elements of the *völkisch* movement rejected Christianity as irredeemably 'alien' to the German *Volksgeist* and proposed discarding it in favour either of a form of neo-paganism or an 'Aryanised' version of Christianity.<sup>51</sup> Jakob Wilhelm Hauer's (1881–1962) German Faith Movement (*Deutsche Glaubensbewegung*), for example, took as its starting premise an Indo-Aryan theory of religion synthesizing elements of Hinduism and Buddhism with Germanic mysticism as a means of transcending Christianity.<sup>52</sup> As much attention as these groups have received by scholars enamoured by the spectacle of Nazi neo-paganism, they were always a distinct minority. Most Germans remained loyal to Christianity.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, xxi–xxii.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 35–40.

<sup>48</sup>Anesaki, *History of Japanese Religion*, 210.

<sup>49</sup>Nukariya, *Religion of the Samurai*, 50–1.

<sup>50</sup>Uwe Puschner, *Die völkische Bewegung im wilhelminischen Kaiserreich: Sprache – Rasse – Religion* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2001).

<sup>51</sup>Uwe Puschner and Clemens Vollnhals, eds., *Die völkisch-religiöse Bewegung im Nationalsozialismus. Eine Beziehungs- und Konfliktgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012); Stefanie Schnurbein, ed., *Völkische Religion und Krisen der Moderne. Entwürfe 'arteigener' Glaubenssysteme seit der Jahrhundertwende* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2001).

<sup>52</sup>Karla Poewe, *New Religions and the Nazis* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 84.



Many ideologues therefore identified their project instead as a matter of transforming Christianity from within, by pruning away any elements coded either implicitly or explicitly as Jewish, including the Old Testament, and foregrounding instead elements of Christianity compatible with a racialist worldview. The German Christian movement, with its project of reconstructing Christianity as a ‘soldierly, hard religion... free[d] from the confines of doctrine and Scripture’, was just the leading edge of a much broader movement.<sup>53</sup> As revealed by Susannah Heschel, ‘Nazism’s relationship to Christianity was not one of rejection, nor was it an effort to displace Christianity... rather, Nazi ideology was a... usurpation and colonization of Christian theology’. Concurrently, prominent theologians adopted and adapted ‘elements of Nazi racial ideology to bolster and redefine the Christian message’.<sup>54</sup> Although much of the scholarship on the relationship between Nazism and Christianity has focused on the internal schisms triggered by Christian leaders’ efforts to alternatively accommodate, redirect or rebuff the regime’s political agenda, the longstanding association between Christianity and Buddhism made it inevitable that these debates would also spill over into scholarship on Asian religions. Given that these reforms were ostensibly intended to ‘purify’ and transform Christianity into an authentically German faith, it is not hard to see why Japanese Buddhism in particular would have been intriguing.

It bears observing, echoing Volker Zotz, that ‘there was just as much a National Socialist position on Buddhism as there was a Buddhist attitude toward National Socialism’.<sup>55</sup> There were sharp divergences within the regime on the question of Buddhism, with some officials favouring an Orientalist position and others adopting a perspective more closely aligned with the New Buddhist reformers. At the risk of over-simplifying what was a crowded and contentious field, those in the former camp – which included individual scholars like Walther Wüst (1901–1993), as well as the sprawling bureaucracy of Heinrich Himmler’s pet research institute, the SS Ahnenerbe – identified the principal agenda of this scholarship as the attempted reconstruction of authentic Aryan culture and were openly dismissive of contemporary Asian practices and beliefs.<sup>56</sup> When these scholars did deign to engage with living Asian societies, for example, the 1938/39 Ahnenerbe-funded expedition to Tibet led by Ernst Schäfer, they were invariably disillusioned by what they experienced as cultures irredeemably corrupted by priestly dogma and superstition.<sup>57</sup> By the same token, the regime remained ambivalent towards the small community of Buddhists living in Germany, no matter how enthusiastically these groups parroted Nazi jargon.<sup>58</sup> In short, like the Orientalists of the nineteenth century, their interest in the eastern world was premised on a narrative of Asian cultural and racial decline, one in which the historical development of Buddhism was in turn invariably diagnosed as symptomatic of the waning of the Nordic ‘racial spirit’ in Central Asia and India.<sup>59</sup>

In contrast to the Orientalist strain of Nazism, which rejected contemporary Asian religious practices and beliefs in favour of a mythic lost ‘golden age’, advocates for Japanese Zen framed their analysis instead from a perspective that owed as much to the New Buddhist reform movement as it did to the German *völkisch* agenda. Because of its geopolitical subtext, it may be tempting to compare the reception of Zen Buddhism in Nazi Germany to the various projects by regime

<sup>53</sup>Bergen, *Twisted Cross*, 8.

<sup>54</sup>Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus*, 8.

<sup>55</sup>Volker Zotz, ‘Zum Verhältnis von Buddhismus und Nationalsozialismus’, *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* 25, no. 1 (2017): 7. Emphasis in original.

<sup>56</sup>Junginger, ‘From Buddha to Adolf Hitler.’

<sup>57</sup>Reinhard Greve, ‘Tibetforschung im SS Ahnenerbe’, in *Lebenslust durch Fremdenfurcht: Ethnologie im Dritten Reich*, ed. T. Hauschild (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995), 168–99; Birgit Zotz, ‘“So herrscht der Lama über die Menschen Tibets”’: Ernst Schäfer, Alfred Rosenberg und der katholische Lamaismus’, *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* 25, no. 1 (May 2017): 71–89.

<sup>58</sup>Bieber, *SS und Samurai*, 640–9.

<sup>59</sup>Hans F.K. Günther, *Die nordische Rasse bei den Indogermanen Asiens* (Munich: J.F. Lehmann, 1934), 52.

officials to construct an alliance with the Islamic world, and yet whereas the latter was principally ‘motivated by material interests and strategic concerns’, the German–Japanese relationship was animated more by ideology than by practical considerations.<sup>60</sup> More to the point, the Nazi interest in Zen emerged out of their conviction that it offered a useful model of a ‘nationalized’ modern religion, with the implication being that if Japan could successfully transform Buddhism into Zen, then so too could the Nazis re-make Christianity in their own image. Two notable advocates for this position were a pair of religious studies scholars who devoted their careers in the 1930s and 40s to the articulation of meaningful historical parallels between German Christianity and Japanese Buddhism. Wilhelm Gundert (1880–1971) and Junyū Kitayama (1902–1962) not only provided scholarly authority to the narratives around Japanese Buddhism coalescing in Germany, they allowed themselves to be recruited as propagandists on behalf of the Nazi state, promoting Zen Buddhism as an aspirational model for German Christians working to nationalize their own faith.

Wilhelm Gundert was the grandson – along with his better-known cousin Hermann Hesse (1877–1962) – of the respected missionary and Indologist Hermann Gundert.<sup>61</sup> Wilhelm studied theology at Tübingen and Halle before travelling to Japan as a missionary; while in Japan he also taught German language courses. He subsequently completed a doctorate in Japanese Studies (*Japanologie*) at the University of Hamburg under Karl Florenz, and in 1927 was appointed the German Chair of the Japanese-German Cultural Institute (*Japanisch-Deutsche Kulturinstitut*) in Tokyo. Gundert joined the NSDAP in 1934 and succeeded Florenz in Hamburg in 1936, holding his position until Germany’s surrender in 1945, as well as serving as the university’s rector 1938–1941.<sup>62</sup>

The most immediate challenge for Japan specialists in the 1930s was simply to justify yet another sub-field within the already crowded discipline of Oriental Studies. Gundert admitted as much in his 1935 monograph on Japanese religious history, in which he compared the sparse resources allocated to Japanese Studies to the abundance enjoyed by other, well-established fields like Egyptology and Assyriology. Although he initially pitched his work as an introduction to the field, claiming that he purposefully avoided engaging in contemporary scholarly debates in order to maintain the work’s objectivity, Gundert clearly envisioned a more substantive role for Japanese Studies, as betrayed in his offhand remark – on the question of the historical relationship between Japanese and continental Buddhism – that he had been tempted, ‘to take up arms in defence of Japanese Buddhism’.<sup>63</sup> Although he may not have conceded the point directly, Gundert positioned himself as an advocate not just for Japanese Buddhism but for an alliance between Germany and Japan on the basis of their presumptive shared religious values.

Over the next several years, Gundert distanced himself from his previous self-conscious objectivity and instead explicitly presented Japanese Buddhism as aligned with the values of National Socialism. As Hiroshi Kubota has argued, Gundert’s argument for the value of studying Japanese Buddhism emerged out of his belief that meaningful parallels could be identified between Japanese and German religious history, an assessment that in the 1930s was inherently political.<sup>64</sup> Beginning in 1937, Gundert published a series of articles identifying religion as a source of Japanese national

<sup>60</sup>David Motadel, *Islam and Nazi Germany’s War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 56.

<sup>61</sup>The cousins remained, despite political differences, correspondents until Hesse’s death in 1962. Later editions of Hesse’s *Siddhartha* were dedicated to his ‘Japanese cousin’, as well as Romain Rolland. See Gellner, *Hermann Hesse und die Spiritualität des Ostens*.

<sup>62</sup>Christine Nienaber, *Der Nachlaß Wilhelm Gundert in der Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg Carl von Ossietzky. Hausarbeit zur Diplomprüfung an der Fachhochschule Hamburg. Fachbereich Bibliothek und Information* (Hamburg: University of Hamburg, 1995).

<sup>63</sup>Wilhelm Gundert, *Japanische Religionsgeschichte* (Stuttgart: D. Gundert Verlag, 1943), III.

<sup>64</sup>Hiroshi Kubota, ‘Strategies in Representing “Japanese Religion” during the National Socialist Period: The Cases of Kitayama Junyū and Wilhelm Gundert’, in *The Study of Religion under the Impact of Fascism*, ed. H. Junginger (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008), 627.

strength and cultural integrity in periodicals targeting key demographics of politically engaged Germans. A common theme throughout these publications was the claim that nationally minded Germans and Japanese could recognize in each other the same essential cultural values: 'Our inborn German essence correlates to the original Japanese [*urjapanische*] being, our Germanic religion to their autochthonous cult of the national gods or *kami* . . .'.<sup>65</sup> In both cases, this primordial religious integrity was shattered by the introduction of foreign religio-cultural complexes – in the case of Germany, Greco-Roman thought and later Christianity, and for Japan Chinese Confucianism and Indian Buddhism. Unlike the scholars affiliated with the SS Ahnenerbe, however, Gundert was less interested in attempting to reconstruct that lost past than in mapping a productive path forward.

Although never as explicitly as some of his contemporaries, Gundert echoed Nazi rhetoric in expressing ambivalence about Christianity and Buddhism as foreign religions premised on an attempt to supersede culturally particularistic forms of spirituality with 'absolute truth'.<sup>66</sup> Although these universal religions had successfully colonized other nations, Gundert identified Japan as a historical outlier: 'Thus, even the foreign religion Buddhism could not alienate Japan from itself, indeed in the end it actually led to the intensification, consolidation, and amplification of its own national self-awareness'.<sup>67</sup> A recurring tension throughout this work was naturally the negative comparison with Germany that such claims implied: were the Japanese superior to the Germans in having already resolved the problem of foreign religion, or had they possessed some innate historical advantage which the Germans lacked? Gundert, like many of his contemporaries, favoured a geopolitical explanation, arguing that Japan's status as an island nation had provided a degree of protection against foreign invaders, both military and cultural, that Germany had been historically denied.<sup>68</sup> Nevertheless, he remained convinced that the similarities between the two nations were more meaningful than their differences, and that 'the tableau of religious development in Japan is more similar to that of Germany than that of China'.<sup>69</sup> In short, Gundert offered Japan – and Japanese Buddhism – as the natural analogue to the history of Christianity in Germany.

Yet this analogy alone was inadequate in explaining how the Japanese had successfully transformed continental Buddhism into a religion better suited to their national character; for Gundert, the answer to this riddle was Zen. Because of Zen's association with self-discipline, Gundert believed that it represented the 'heroic element of genuine Buddhism'. Within Gundert's theory of parallel historical trajectories between Germany and Japan, Zen corresponded to the values of the Germanic chivalric past:

The feeling cannot be suppressed, upon closer contact with this form of Zen Buddhism, that a piece of the true Nordic spirit has been remarkably propelled to the Far East across Aryan India, which may have taken curious forms of outer disguise, but that we nevertheless readily feel to be inwardly related and close to ourselves.<sup>70</sup>

Although Gundert never took an explicit position on the contemporary politics of religion in Germany, he did venture so far as to say that Japanese religion could ' . . . suggest to us a wealth of valuable suggestions and thereby help us to better understand our own position and its

<sup>65</sup>Wilhelm Gundert, 'Nationale und übernationale Religion in Japan', in *Die religiösen Kräfte Asiens* (Hamburg: Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1937), 6.

<sup>66</sup>Wilhelm Gundert, 'Quellen japanischer Kraft', *Deutschlands Erneuerung* 26, no. 5 (May 1942): 221–3.

<sup>67</sup>Wilhelm Gundert, 'Das Geheimnis des japanischen Nationalismus', *Wille und Macht* 5, no. 6 (March 1937): 5–6.

<sup>68</sup>Gundert, 'Das Geheimnis des japanischen Nationalismus', 3. For more on the significance of geopolitics to the German-Japanese relationship, see, Christian Spang, *Karl Haushofer and Japan. Rezeption seiner geopolitischen Theorien in der deutschen und japanischen Politik* (Munich: Iudicium Verlag, 2013).

<sup>69</sup>Wilhelm Gundert, 'Nationale und übernationale Religion in Japan', 6.

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, 16.

challenges'.<sup>71</sup> Gundert's interpretation of Japanese religious history was manifestly intended to offer useful lessons to Germans uncomfortable with Christian doctrine they perceived as incompatible with German *völkisch* values, with Zen presented as a practical model by which a universal religion previously derided as effeminate and fatalistic could be transformed into a heroic ethos of masculine honour.

One notable dynamic of the German–Japanese alliance was the visibility and efficacy of Japanese interlocutors, the latter due as much to their willingness to strategically exploit popular stereotypes about Japan as to their fluency in Nazi rhetoric. One Japanese national who proved particularly adaptable to the ideological terrain of Nazi Germany was the aforementioned Junyū Kitayama.<sup>72</sup> Like Gundert, Kitayama came from a religiously devout family. The son of a Pure Land monk who was himself ordained before leaving for Germany, Kitayama studied philosophy at the University of Heidelberg under Karl Jaspers and Heinrich Rickert. He completed his dissertation on the metaphysics of Mahayana Buddhism in 1931 and began teaching at the University of Frankfurt and the University of Marburg.<sup>73</sup> His doctoral thesis was published in 1934, in a book series edited by Jakob Wilhelm Hauer, and he quickly established himself as one of the most prolific advocates for Japanese culture in Germany.<sup>74</sup> During the 1930s and 40s, Kitayama was actively involved with both the Japan Institute (*Japan-Institut*) and German–Japanese Society (*Deutsch-Japanische Gesellschaft*, DJG) – the two chief organizations promoting the German–Japanese relationship – and he was duly recognized for his efforts with a series of increasingly high-profile promotions, culminating in an appointment as director of Japanese Studies at Prague's Charles University in 1944.<sup>75</sup>

Kitayama's earliest publications on Japanese religion, in which he argued that Japanese Buddhism had characteristics which differentiated it from continental Buddhism, betray the influence of figures like Anesaki and Nukariya.<sup>76</sup> In his understanding, it was those uniquely Japanese qualities that had transformed a 'doctrine . . . of isolation, self-abnegation, and alienation' into a worldview that was joyous and spiritually fulfilling. Moreover, for Kitayama – in delineating what he identified as parallels between Japanese Buddhism and Protestantism – the significance of the Buddha was not a matter of the past, or even the present, but rather of a promised future.<sup>77</sup> Beyond the resonance of this claim from a Christian perspective, Kitayama thus framed Japanese Buddhism's value as a model for the Nazi reform of Christianity around its association with the temporal rhythms of modernity, rather than an Orientalist preoccupation with origins.

More than anything else, it was the perceived translatability of Buddhism that enabled it to occupy the centre of Nazi rhetoric around Japanese religion. Although Shinto may seem a more obvious bridge between the ideological priorities of Nazi Germany and the politics of Showa-era Japan, its lack of an obvious German analogue – unless one took literally the claims of neo-paganists regarding pre-Christian Germanic religion – limited its propagandistic value. Even then, the lack of a textual canon comparable to the *Kojiki* or *Nihon Shiki* in either antiquity or sophistication left the neo-paganists at a distinct disadvantage vis-à-vis the Japanese. More to the point, Shinto proved difficult to classify: Was it a religion? A political ideology? Part of the

<sup>71</sup>*Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>72</sup>Erin Brightwell, 'Refracted Axis: Kitayama Jun'yū and writing a German Japan', *Japan Forum* 27, no. 4 (October 2015): 431–53.

<sup>73</sup>Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde [BArch], BDC-REM. Kitayama Junyū, fol. 0987.

<sup>74</sup>Junyū Kitayama, *Metaphysik des Buddhismus. Versuch einer philosophischen Interpretation der Lehre Vasubandhus und seiner Schule* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1934).

<sup>75</sup>BArch, BDC-REM. Kitayama Junyū, fol. 1084.

<sup>76</sup>Junyū Kitayama, 'Die japanische Urkultur und ihre Auseinandersetzung mit dem Buddhismus', *Ostasiatische Rundschau* 15, no. 18 (1934): 425.

<sup>77</sup>Junyū Kitayama, *West-Östliche Begegnung. Japans Kultur und Tradition* (Berlin: Verlag Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1941), 202–3.

institutional apparatus of the Japanese State.<sup>78</sup> Gundert alluded to this difficulty in his attempt to explain the historic relationship between Shinto and Buddhism as similar to that between ‘nationalism and Christianity’ in Germany.<sup>79</sup> To be sure, Shinto did appear in Nazi propaganda about Japan, but more often as an element of Japanese national culture than as a ‘national religion’.

That role was reserved for Buddhism, as encapsulated by Kitayama’s claim that Japan had ‘extracted only the greatest and best treasures’ from the ‘religious and philosophical treasure chamber’ of East Asia and had ‘reshaped them to better reflect its own disposition’.<sup>80</sup> Echoing Kitayama, Oskar Kressler from the University of Bonn presented the ‘pessimism of Buddhist philosophy’ as an objective fact, before declaring that such stereotypes were profoundly misleading in discussing Japanese Buddhism. In attempting to understand the Japanese ethos, he offered Zen and the tea ceremony – also frequently associated with Zen – both of which cultivated in their practitioners a ‘proper appreciation for living conditions that reflect, first and foremost, an obedience to higher ideals.’<sup>81</sup>

If Kitayama and Kressler allowed their readers to draw their own conclusions about the political implications of Buddhism as Japan’s national religion, Ernst Kriek, an ideologue who had successfully leveraged his party membership into a faculty position at the University of Frankfurt, made the political subtext of these claims explicit in arguing that Japan had transformed Buddhism from a ‘nihilistic method of salvation’ into the spiritual means by which Japan had become the ‘leading power of the Far East politically and technologically’.<sup>82</sup> It bears noting that Kriek was otherwise a harsh critic of Buddhism, yet he nevertheless drew an explicit connection between Japan’s successful ‘domestication’ of Buddhism and its success in securing its national interests against the pressures of globalization. Like Kitayama, Kriek was quite content to leave Buddhism’s past to the Orientalists and the Ahnenerbe; he was more interested in its future as the national religion of the ascendant Japanese empire.

Meanwhile in Japan, Karlfried Graf von Dürckheim (1896–1988) – a Foreign Ministry representative whose responsibilities included monitoring Japanese media and supplying pro-Nazi propaganda for publication – offered his own judgement on the question of national religion in his collection of essays on the ‘New Germany’ currently under construction:

Just as Buddhism made its way to Japan, Christianity came to Germany from the outside . . . Christianity is not the German worldview, nor is Buddhism the Japanese. The confrontation with these world religions that claim validity for the *whole of mankind* and relate to the *redemption of the individual* brought to Japan and Germany compulsory clarity in respect to the (*self-*) *awareness of the essence and the living wholeness of the Volk* and thus to the *völkisch* worldview.<sup>83</sup>

Although these essays were not published outside of Japan until after 1945, it is not difficult to trace the convergences between Dürckheim’s analysis and that of Gundert and Kitayama or, for that matter, Eugen Herrigel. For these men, Japanese Buddhism was uniquely instructive because it was the product of a universal religion transformed into a specifically national faith. Even

<sup>78</sup>This difficulty in defining Shinto is partly a result of its evolution from the early Meiji era, when it was briefly recognized as a state religion, to its transformation into a quasi-secular theory of politics, and finally its wartime radicalization as a fundamentalist religious ideology. For more, see: Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan*; Walter A. Skya, *Japan’s Holy War: The Ideology of Radical Shintō Ultrationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

<sup>79</sup>Gundert, *Japanische Religionsgeschichte*, V.

<sup>80</sup>Junyu Kitayama, *Heroisches Ethos. Das Heldische in Japan* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1944), 66.

<sup>81</sup>‘Buddhismus und japanische Geistigkeit.’ DJN. Nachrichten 9, no. 16 (23 April, 1942). BArch R 64IV/289, 114.

<sup>82</sup>Volker Zotz, ‘Zum Verhältnis von Buddhismus und Nationalsozialismus’, 26.

<sup>83</sup>Karlfried Graf von Dürckheim, *Neues Deutschland. Deutscher Geist—eine Sammlung von Aufsätzen*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Tokyo: Sanshusha, 1942), 3. Quoted in: Karl Baier, ‘The Formation and Principles of Count Dürckheim’s Nazi Worldview and His Interpretation of Japanese Spirit and Zen’, *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 11, Issue 48, no. 3 (December 2013): Article ID 4041.

without the constant references to German Christianity, the goal of this literature was not simply to demonstrate the ways in which Japanese and German religious history paralleled each other, but rather to affirm that Japanese Buddhism had practical lessons to impart in defining the proper relationship between religion and race. In so doing, however, the universalist elements of the New Buddhist movement were discarded in favour of a narrative representing Zen as the exclusive prerogative of the Japanese *Volk*.

### Awakening the Volk

Beyond championing Zen as a uniquely Japanese approach to religion, a second dominant theme in Nazi-era discourse presented Zen as a uniquely rigorous system of mysticism. Zen Buddhism was, of course, not the first Asian system of mysticism embraced by Westerners seeking an alternative to the spiritual ‘disenchantment’ of European industrial modernity. For one, Martin Buber (1878–1965) had analysed Chinese and Indian texts alongside Hasidic and medieval Christian traditions of mysticism in his *Ecstatic Confessions* (1909), though he took little interest in Buddhist mysticism until the post-war era.<sup>84</sup> In early twentieth-century German-speaking Europe it was Taoism, however, that monopolized interest, prompted by growing curiosity about China following the 1911 Revolution, as well as the influential scholarship of Richard Wilhelm (1873–1930).<sup>85</sup> A missionary-turned-Sinologist, Wilhelm completed a series of translations of Chinese classics, including Confucius’ *Analects* (1910) and the *I Ching* (1924), which fuelled a groundswell of literary and artistic activity after the First World War.

Amidst the political and cultural crises of the early interwar era, Taoism inspired a series of disillusioned intellectuals and authors, including Alfred Döblin, Thomas Mann, Bertolt Brecht and Hermann Graf von Keyserling.<sup>86</sup> Wilhelm Gundert’s cousin Hermann Hesse, who set his most famous work *Siddhartha* (1922) in India during the life of the Buddha, similarly incorporated Taoist elements into many of his works, most notably *The Glass Bead Game* (1943).<sup>87</sup> Mirroring the assumptions of nineteenth-century Orientalism, this literature was premised on the project of mourning a lost ‘golden age’; in this new context, however, it was European civilization that was implicitly understood as spiritually and morally corrupted. The pervasive sense of alienation which haunted Europe between the wars can potentially explain why Asian forms of mysticism – and Zen in particular – would have been compelling not just in Germany but in all societies searching for a resolution to the fracturing of sacred time associated with the advent of modernity.<sup>88</sup>

In contrast to the distinctly Orientalist reception of Taoism, Zen was presented in Nazi Germany instead as a bridge between a heroic past and a redemptive future, made possible by an esoteric system of spiritual training that both perfected and superseded the individual. One of the more influential proponents for this reading of Zen was Eugen Herrigel. Herrigel first encountered Zen at the University of Heidelberg, where he assisted Shūei Ōhasama (1883–1946) on a translation of Rinzai Zen texts. Published in 1925 as *Zen, the Living Buddhism in Japan*, this work made little impact except as a vehicle in advancing the careers of its two

<sup>84</sup>Sebastian Musch, *Jewish Encounters with Buddhism in German Culture: Between Moses and Buddha, 1890–1940* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 84–7.

<sup>85</sup>Ingrid Schuster, *China und Japan in der deutschen Literatur, 1890–1925* (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1977), 166–85.

<sup>86</sup>Suzanne Marchand, ‘Eastern Wisdom in an Era of Western Despair—Orientalism in 1920s Central Europe’, in *Weimar Thought: A Contested Legacy*, eds. P. Gordan and J. McCormick (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 341–60.

<sup>87</sup>Volker Wehdeking, ‘Weimar and the Advent of the Third Reich in the Writings of Hermann Hesse: Post-Romantic Yearnings for the “Limitless” and Collective Archetypes under the Influence of Chinese Thought’, in *Germany and China: Transnational Encounters since the Eighteenth Century*, eds. J. Miyang Cho and D. Crowe (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 151–75.

<sup>88</sup>Gustavo Benavides, ‘Giuseppe Tucci, or Buddhology in the Age of Fascism’, in *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 161–96.

German collaborators, Herrigel and August Faust.<sup>89</sup> Soon after assuming his teaching duties in Heidelberg, Herrigel was offered a position at Tohoku Imperial University in Sendai, which he held until 1929. While in Japan Herrigel explored various traditional Japanese disciplines, including Japanese archery (*kyūdō*), and upon returning to Germany in order to accept a position at the University of Erlangen, Herrigel began compiling his own impressions of Zen and its relationship to Japanese culture.<sup>90</sup> Herrigel and Kitayama – both alumni of Heidelberg’s Philosophy Department interested in Japanese religion – likely would have crossed paths during their respective careers, although I have not seen archival evidence of a personal relationship.

Herrigel presented his preliminary thoughts on Zen in his 1936 lecture ‘The Chivalric Art of Archery’, delivered at a meeting of the DJG in Berlin.<sup>91</sup> Responding to older Orientalist assessments of the Japanese as ‘bad Buddhists’, Herrigel turned the criticism on its head. Rather than challenging the critique of Buddhism as ambivalent toward the material world, he suggested that the Japanese had instead escaped the fatalism of continental Buddhism by adapting Zen to suit their national culture: ‘The Japanese are not so incredibly active because they are somehow poor or partial Buddhists, rather it is the ‘living’ Buddhism acting in their land that sanctions their activity’.<sup>92</sup> Whether or not he was conscious of this fact, Herrigel was thus echoing the claims made by the New Buddhist reformers decades earlier, that Japanese Buddhism represented the final synthesis of religion and philosophy. Herrigel, however, added an additional element to his argument in highlighting the supposedly unique mystical qualities of Zen.

In explaining why the Japanese considered archery a form of spiritual practice, rather than a sport, Herrigel offered an ambiguous metaphor: ‘Because the conflict of the archer consists in that he aims at himself—and yet not at himself—the occasion may arise where he strikes himself—and yet not strike himself—and consequently the supporting foundation of archery is fathomless, so to speak an abyss’.<sup>93</sup> The key word here is ‘*trifft/treffen*’, which carries multiple possible readings in German; as a regular verb it means ‘to strike’ and suggests the physical act of an archer’s arrow striking its intended target, but Herrigel uses it here as a reflexive verb, which is often used to describe a meeting between individuals. This passage thus evokes both the physical act of archery and the mystical act of self-discovery and transcendence that Herrigel understood as the true target of *kyūdō*. For Herrigel, Japanese archery was a practical translation of Zen’s philosophical concepts into the routine of everyday life: in short, a ‘philosophy of life’ (*Lebensphilosophie*).

Moreover, Herrigel claimed to have identified concrete points of convergence between Zen and German traditions of mysticism. He acknowledged the prevailing stereotypes of mysticism and Buddhism, yet denied their accuracy: ‘One always hears that mysticism, and especially Buddhism, leads to a passive, unworldly, escapist, fatalistic mentality... It is never remembered, however, that in German history there was a great mystic that preached, along with the loneliness of daily life, also its undeniable worth: Meister Eckhart’.<sup>94</sup> The reference to Meister Eckhart (1260–1328), whom Alfred Rosenberg discussed in his *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* (1930) as having discovered the German desire ‘to be at one with oneself’, established a frame of reference in which Japanese and German traditions of mysticism could recognize in each other the same fundamental project of holistically resolving the contradictions

<sup>89</sup>Ōhasama was a lay practitioner of Rinzai Zen, although he was connected through his own teacher to the great Rinzai abbot Shaku Sōen, who was D.T. Suzuki’s mentor and instructor. Shūei Ōhasama, *Zen. Der lebendige Buddhismus in Japan*, ed. A. Faust (Gotha/Stuttgart: Verlag Friedrich Andreas Perthes, 1925). Bieber, *SS und Samurai*, 135.

<sup>90</sup>Herrigel recalled that his acquaintances in Japan, upon learning of his interest in mysticism, cautioned him away from delving immediately into the more strenuous practice of meditation, suggesting that an aesthetic discipline like *kyūdō* or *ikebana* would be more ‘accessible’ to him as a European. Eugen Herrigel, ‘Die ritterliche Kunst des Bogenschießens’, *Nippon. Zeitschrift für Japanologie* 2, no. 4 (October 1936): 198.

<sup>91</sup>BArch R 64IV/66, 125.

<sup>92</sup>Herrigel, ‘Ritterliche Kunst des Bogenschießens’, 209.

<sup>93</sup>*Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>94</sup>*Ibid.*, 209.

of the modern world.<sup>95</sup> This, of course, echoes the myriad other currents of esotericism and occultism circulating in Germany at the time, from Anthroposophy and Theosophy to natural healing and vegetarianism, which collectively reflected a pattern of cultural critique which rejected both institutional religion and science and instead sought out ‘new forms of spirituality and novel explanations of the world’.<sup>96</sup> By the same token, it is also possible to detect in Herrigel’s re-contextualization of Zen an early version of the post-war New Age movement, a question I will revisit below.

Any discussion of Zen in the 1930s and 40s – regardless of national context – must necessarily engage with the legacy of D.T. Suzuki. Kitayama conceded as much, musing that many Westerners were seemingly unaware that other Buddhist schools had even played a significant role in Japan historically.<sup>97</sup> Suzuki came from the first generation of young, cosmopolitan Japanese scholars of religion; although a layman, Suzuki quickly established himself as the most credible authority on Japanese Buddhism – at least in the West – through a series of broadly accessible publications. Given Suzuki’s lasting influence in constructing a durable narrative of Japanese national identity, his relationship to the Japanese state during the 1930s and 40s has naturally come under scrutiny by scholars.<sup>98</sup> Leaving aside some of the more polemical accusations levelled against Suzuki, it is broadly accepted that his presentation of Zen aligned with the contemporaneous emergence of ever more radical theories of Japanese cultural nationalism.<sup>99</sup> Moreover, Suzuki’s understanding of Zen as fundamentally ‘intuitive’, as opposed to moralistic, in its engagement with the external world enabled supporters to justify war as compatible with Zen. As Suzuki famously argued:

Zen has no special doctrine or philosophy, no set of concepts or intellectual formulas, except that it tries to release one from the bondage of birth and death, by means of certain intuitive modes of understanding peculiar to itself. It is, therefore, extremely flexible in adapting itself to almost any philosophy and moral doctrine as long as its intuitive teaching is not interfered with. It may be found wedded to anarchism or fascism, communism or democracy, atheism or idealism, or any political or economic dogmatism.<sup>100</sup>

In short, Zen offers a system of radical self-cultivation external to the mundane realm of human ethics; it offers the promise of personal enlightenment as pure subjective experience, literally beyond ‘good and evil’.

Although specialists would have been familiar with Suzuki, the first major German translation of Suzuki’s work, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, was only published in 1939, with a new preface written by the Swiss psychiatrist – and long-time friend of Jakob Wilhelm Hauer – C.G. Jung

<sup>95</sup> Alfred Rosenberg, *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*, trans. Vivian Bird, Quoted in Eric Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 41–2.

<sup>96</sup> Eric Kurlander, *Hitler’s Monsters: A Supernatural History of the Third Reich* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), xi. See also, Peter Staudenmaier, *Between Occultism and Nazism* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2014); Corinna Treitel, *A Science for the Soul: Occultism and the Genesis of the German Modern* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

<sup>97</sup> Junyu Kitayama, *Heroisches Ethos*, 62.

<sup>98</sup> Much of the controversy on the question of Suzuki’s complicity with Japanese militarism has centred on the scholarship of Brian Victoria, who previously claimed that Suzuki was an active supporter of Japanese aggression in China and whose more recent scholarship focuses on Suzuki’s supposed sympathies for Nazism. See: Brian Daizen Victoria, *Zen at War*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006); ‘D.T. Suzuki, Zen and the Nazis’, *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 11.43, no. 4 (October 2013): Article ID 4019. <https://apjpf.org/2013/11/43/Brian-Victoria/4019/article.html> [Accessed October 30, 2021]. For a critical response to Victoria, see: Kemmyō Taira Satō and Robert Kirchner, ‘Brian Victoria and the Question of Scholarship’, *The Eastern Buddhist* 41, no. 2 (2010): 139–66.

<sup>99</sup> For a sympathetic reading of Suzuki, see: Victor Sōgen Hori, ‘D.T. Suzuki and the Invention of Tradition’, *The Eastern Buddhist* 47, no. 2 (2016): 41–81.

<sup>100</sup> D.T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (New York: MJF Books, 1959), 63.



(1871–1961).<sup>101</sup> This introduction, which did not appear in the original English-language version of the text, is now standard in most editions. Jung demonstrated a familiarity with the existing scholarship on Zen, both German and Japanese, although he was critical of attempts to apprehend Zen through the aperture of Western rationalism.<sup>102</sup> Instead, Jung linked the experience of Zen and its concept of *satori* (enlightenment) to German traditions of mysticism, invoking Meister Eckhart in explaining the concept of *satori* as the ‘release of the ego through the self’, whereby an enlightened individual could achieve a truly selfless state of being.<sup>103</sup> Jung understood *satori* as the destabilization of the psychological boundary between conscious will and unconscious being, the ‘final breakthrough of unconscious contents into the consciousness’.<sup>104</sup> In interpreting *satori* as a psychic breakthrough, Jung concluded that achieving *satori* through Zen meditation (*zazen*) was impractical for most Europeans, and that the closest approximation was the psychoanalytic relationship. Indeed, Jung believed that true enlightenment had been rather more the exception than the rule historically in the West: ‘It is only the spiritual tragedies of Goethe’s *Faust* and Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* that mark the first perceptible breakthrough of a total experience (*Ganzheitserlebnis*) in our Western hemisphere’.<sup>105</sup> In short, Jung believed that Europeans were simply not ready for the practice of Zen.

That did not mean, however, that they could not read about it. The German translation of Suzuki’s most famous work, *Zen und Japanese Culture*, was published in 1941. Otto Fischer, who contributed the introduction to the German translation, claimed that Suzuki’s work had identified Zen’s significance in shaping Japanese culture, the ‘endearing cheerfulness’ of the Japanese, their art and poetry and last but certainly not least ‘their self-sacrificing patriotism . . .’.<sup>106</sup> Simply put, Zen was the element of the Japanese cultural tradition which enabled its recognition by a German audience as admirable, and potentially even aspirational. This claim, that Suzuki’s work revealed patterns of cultural convergence between Germany and Japan, was elaborated upon in multiple articles published in 1942.<sup>107</sup> One early review of *Zen and Japanese Culture* made explicit what insights its readers meant to take from Suzuki, musing that Zen ‘is certainly reminiscent of the best ideas of medieval German mysticism, as well as of modern German philosophy’, and that it was impossible to read Suzuki’s work ‘without time and again finding a surprisingly obvious and real alignment between German and Japanese philosophy and worldviews’.<sup>108</sup>

It bears repeating that these so-called ‘German worldviews’ were those promoted by the Nazi state, foremost among them the spirit of willing self-sacrifice, and indeed German media had become increasingly saturated with images of Japanese self-sacrifice since the disaster of Stalingrad. For all of Herrigel’s emphasis on Zen as a system of mysticism, he was equally insistent that it was a ‘chivalrous art’ (*ritterliche Kunst*) – his post-war monograph on *kyūdō* and Zen noticeably dropped ‘chivalrous’ from the title – which in his analysis figured principally around the question of how best to die. For Herrigel, the true impact of Buddhism in Japan historically was its role in promoting a specific relationship to death: namely, that death was not an end but rather a fulfilment. As he argued in his 1944 essay, introduced above, for true believers ‘death

<sup>101</sup> Although Jung studiously maintained his distance from National Socialism, he was influenced by ideas taken from the *völkisch* movement. See, Petteri Pietkainen, ‘The Volk and Its Unconscious: Jung, Hauer, and the “German Revolution”’, *Journal of Contemporary History* 35, no. 4 (October 2000): 523–39.

<sup>102</sup> C.G. Jung, ‘Geleitwort’, in D.T. Suzuki, *Die große Befreiung. Einführung in den Zen-Buddhismus*, Heinrich Zimmer, trans. (Leipzig: Curt Weller & Co. Verlag, 1939), 12.

<sup>103</sup> Jung, ‘Geleitwort’, 16–7.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>106</sup> Otto Fischer, ‘Zur Einführung’, in *Zen und die Kultur Japans*, ed. D.T. Suzuki (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1941), 15.

<sup>107</sup> Zen und der Samurai, ‘Von der Todesbereitschaft des japanischen Kriegers’, *Völkischer Beobachter. Süddeutsche Ausgabe* no. 11 (11 January 1942), 2; Ernst Meunier, ‘Mitsuru Tōyama’, *Völkischer Beobachter. Süddeutsche Ausgabe* no. 16 (16 January 1942).

<sup>108</sup> ‘Japanische Kultur’, *Westfälische Landeszeitung* (22 June, 1941), BArch R 64IV/272, 123.

appears not as the enemy, which senselessly destroys life, but rather as life's ripest reward'.<sup>109</sup> This claim, 'that death was a reward for a life well lived, pivoted on Herrigel's framing of Japanese moral values, wherein loyalty was one's principle duty and personal honour was contingent on a willingness to sacrifice oneself 'for the Fatherland'.<sup>110</sup> Herrigel insisted that this ethos was just as vital and relevant in modern Japan as it had been for the samurai. Although the samurai had 'opened a path into the future . . . in which the primal Japanese [*urjapanische*] spirit could finally and completely break free', it was the soldiers of Japan's modern military whose sacrifice paved the way for the dawning of a brave new world.<sup>111</sup>

## A Stink of Nazism?

Like all university personnel in occupied Germany, Herrigel was required to submit to denazification proceedings; in the defence he submitted to the Erlangen denazification tribunal (*Spruchkammer*) in December 1947 attempting to justify his relationship to the former regime, Herrigel represented himself as an 'objective' academic who had eschewed Nazi ideology in both his teaching and his research.<sup>112</sup> Despite his best efforts to re-contextualize his past, the tribunal determined Herrigel to have been a 'fellow traveller' (*Mitläufer*) and declined to reinstate him to his former position, whereupon Herrigel retired to the Bavarian resort town of Garmisch-Partenkirchen.<sup>113</sup> As has been thoroughly documented, these tribunals – due chiefly to the increasing unpopularity of denazification – resisted identifying politically compromised professors as anything more serious than 'fellow travellers'.<sup>114</sup> The official legal judgement on Herrigel was therefore less an objective assessment of his true convictions and more a reflection of German society's eagerness to move on from its recent past as quickly as possible.

Even by the standards of the era, Eugen Herrigel's rehabilitation – publicly if not professionally – was rapid. In 1948, the same year that his denazification proceedings concluded, Herrigel published a short book that quickly became an international best-seller: *Zen in the Art of Archery*. This work, which has inspired both devoted fans and countless literary heirs and knock-offs – ranging from Robert Pirsig's New Age autobiographical *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974) and Ray Bradbury's *Zen in the Art of Writing* (1989) to kitschy self-help titles like *Zen and the Art of Knitting* (2002), *Zen and the Art of Dodgeball* (2006), or *Zen and the Art of Diabetes Maintenance* (2002) – has occupied a central position within popular narratives around Zen Buddhism since the 1950s, its influence as a foundational text second only to that of D.T. Suzuki's *Zen and Japanese Culture*.<sup>115</sup>

As compelling as Herrigel's work may have been for post-war readers, *Zen in the Art of Archery* was nevertheless an intellectual product of the Nazi era, specifically its evolving politics on religion. Regardless of the denazification tribunal's judgement, Herrigel did espouse a clear affinity for National Socialism in his writings – both published and unpublished – and actively participated in the creation and dissemination of propaganda supportive of the regime. Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), for one, was not amused by Herrigel's post-war trajectory from National Socialist to intellectual patron of the early New Age Movement. In a 1961 letter to the editors of the journal *Encounter*, the scholar of Jewish mysticism suggested that Herrigel's 'career as a convinced

<sup>109</sup>Herrigel, 'Das Ethos des Samurai', 7.

<sup>110</sup>*Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>111</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>112</sup>Herrigel, 'Entnazifizierung.' Unpublished typed manuscript (ca. 1947). Herrigel family history file. Universitätsarchiv Heidelberg.

<sup>113</sup>Yamada, *Shots in the Dark*, 99–101.

<sup>114</sup>See, Steven P. Remy, *The Heidelberg Myth: The Nazification and Denazification of a German University* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), esp. 177–217; Clemens Vollnhals, *Entnazifizierung. Politische Säuberung und Rehabilitierung in den vier Besatzungszonen, 1945–1949* (Munich: Deutsche Taschenbuch Verlag, 1991), esp. 259–338.

<sup>115</sup>Yamada, *Shots in the Dark*, 10–18.

Nazi' had been 'carefully hushed up by the circle of his admirers after the war'.<sup>116</sup> As compelling as conspiracy theories often are, in this case Herrigel's supporters more likely simply chose to ignore his politically compromised past. Shoji Yamada ascribes the 'erasure' of Herrigel's Nazi associations to an 'unspoken, shared desire' to make him conform to a certain model of enlightened spirituality, but for all of his clarity as to motives even Yamada gives far too much credence to Herrigel's claims of scholarly naivete.<sup>117</sup>

Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* was therefore an important, if irreverent, intervention into the silences surrounding the reception of Zen Buddhism in twentieth-century Europe. An earlier critique – less precisely aimed perhaps but no less wounding – came from Arthur Koestler (1905–1983). In his 1960 essay 'A Stink of Zen', published – like Scholem's critique of Herrigel the following year – in the journal *Encounter*, Koestler was forthright in his condemnation towards Japanese culture, but reserved particular ire for Zen as 'at best an existentialist hoax, at worst a web of solemn absurdities'.<sup>118</sup> Given Koestler's unrestrained animus against Asian cultures in general, his critique of Zen could be dismissed as a relic of mid-century Orientalism, and yet – seemingly by accident – Koestler did land a few blows relevant to the current conversation. For one, Koestler referenced Herrigel's *Zen and the Art of Archery*, which he described as having combined 'the more ponderous kind of Germanic mysticism with the more obvious kinds of Zen hocus-pocus', as one of the principle ways in which Western audiences had encountered Zen as a practice.<sup>119</sup> Later, in discussing an example of Zen's famous moral relativism, Koestler offered the revealing conjecture that the sentiment could have just as easily have been articulated by 'a philosophically-minded Nazi journalist, or . . . the Zen monks who became suicide pilots'.<sup>120</sup> And yet Koestler never made the obvious connection between these two images, suggesting that he was unaware of Herrigel's past ideological affiliations.

Even without a direct accusation, Koestler's attack on Zen demanded a response by one of its champions; a reply to Koestler's essay, composed by none other than D.T. Suzuki, was thus published in *Encounter* the following year. Suzuki's rebuttal to Koestler – in which he accused Koestler of having prejudged Zen from a Western epistemological perspective rather than engaging it on its own terms – did have one revealing moment at the very end, where Suzuki identified the 'Zen man' of action and intellectual creativity as the 'real "aristocrat" of Meister Eckhart'.<sup>121</sup> Although it is not in itself damning to invoke Alfred Rosenberg's favourite mystic in defence of Zen, it does reveal how thoroughly this discussion had already been de-politicized that this reference passed without comment. The editors of *Encounter* apparently had no qualms regarding the tone or content of Suzuki's contribution, their cheeky postscript evidence of where their sympathies lay:

Having presented Mr. Koestler (in his Tyrolean mountain retreat) with a copy of the above and an opportunity to reply, and having received as his final rejoinder a silence too deep for words, we take it in the true spirit of Zen that he has at last achieved satori. With this evidently happy outcome, the discussion is now closed.<sup>122</sup>

It bears noting that *Encounter* had, only eight months prior, published Gershom Scholem's letter identifying Eugen Herrigel as a Nazi; evidently this revelation had been inadequate in forcing the journal's editorial staff to re-assess their assumptions about the politics of Zen.

<sup>116</sup>Gershom Scholem, 'Zen-Nazism?' *Encounter* 16, no. 2 (February 1961): 96.

<sup>117</sup>Yamada, *Shots in the Dark*, 94–8.

<sup>118</sup>Arthur Koestler, 'A Stink of Zen: The Lotus and the Robot (II)', *Encounter* 15, no. 4 (October 1960): 16.

<sup>119</sup>*Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>120</sup>*Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>121</sup>D.T. Suzuki, 'A Reply', 58.

<sup>122</sup>*Ibid.*

## Conclusion

Zen is ubiquitous in the contemporary world, to the extent that simply referring to an object or image as ‘Zen’ is immediately evocative, and yet the idea of Zen prevalent in the West, even among its devoted practitioners, often bears little resemblance to its traditional institutional structures and practices. Certainly one reason for the divergence between institutional Zen and the ‘Zen’ of popular culture is the inherently paradoxical nature of Zen itself, with ‘its elegant juxtaposition of candor and conundrum, of spontaneity and discipline’, which enables – and indeed seemingly encourages – the curious to engage with Zen practices and concepts a la carte, to pick and choose which elements of Zen best fit their lifestyle and spiritual goals.<sup>123</sup> Equally as important from a historical perspective is that the ‘re-packaging’ of Zen for Western audiences has also evolved over time, from the rational universalism of the New Buddhist reformers to the *völkisch* mysticism of the Nazi era, and then again to the experimental anti-institutionalism of the New Age movement. The existence of these different discourses, which frequently overlapped and intersected with each other, gave Westerners license to pick and choose which version they preferred, to literally map their own route to enlightenment. And yet the central claim of these various representations of Zen was that it was uniquely positioned to provide the tools necessary – whether philosophical or ideological – in navigating the modern world.

To be clear, this article’s attempt to reconstruct the role that Nazi scholars and ideologues played in globalizing Zen is not intended to discredit a system of thought that has become deeply meaningful to many people across the globe. Neither is this an attempt to accuse contemporary Zen practitioners of ‘crypto-Nazism’, even if they did first encounter Zen via Herrigel or Dürckheim. Although there are clear philosophical continuities between Zen as it was represented in the Nazi era and Zen as it was embraced by the New Age movement, including a disillusionment with Western modernity and institutional Christianity more specifically, as well as a fascination with mysticism and esotericism, this convergence is less significant in what it says about the New Age movement and more in what it reveals about Nazism. Even as Nazism rejected the premise of universal values, Germany remained deeply engaged in global intellectual and cultural currents, even with respect to topics as deeply personal – and political – as religion.

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<sup>123</sup>David McMahan, ‘Repackaging Zen for the West’, in *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia*, eds. C. Prebish and M. Baumann (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 218.