

RELIGION AND MEMORY IN A TIME OF DANGER: THE ATOMIC BOMBS IN THE AGE OF FUKUSHIMA

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Observations of the 70th anniversary of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki come in the midst of controversy over U.S. intervention into Iran's nuclear capabilities and over a shift to the right in Japanese politics towards abandoning its postwar pacifist positioning (and active opposition in the streets of Japanese cities) as well as the passing on of those who directly experienced the bombs (the hibakusha). To what extent do their voices still gather concentrated as well as ritualized attention? What roles do religious leaders, movements, and institutions now play in this process, in a society that tends to define itself as areligious? Hiroshima has often been framed as a universal tragedy while memories of Nagasaki have often highlighted connections to Catholicism, including the "hidden Christians" the 150th anniversary of whose reemergence was celebrated earlier this year, but religious ideas, including the comforting of lost souls in Buddhist terms, are part of both sites. With Benjamin's thesis about grabbing hold of a memory in a moment of danger in mind, this paper asks what place history, alongside religion and politics, play as one generation does not remember what another repressed. This paper draws on fieldwork during the observations in August 2015 in both Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

INTRODUCTION

2015 has been a year of anniversaries. Beyond the 50th anniversary of the 1965 coup and subsequent massacres aimed at those accused of association with Communist Party, an anniversary that first seemed to be ignored and now, with incidents in Ubud and Salatiga, to be actively suppressed, 2015 has been notable for the 70th anniversaries of the events of the last year of World War II (or the Asia-Pacific War) and the advent of our still postwar world. Japan's surrender on August 15th, 1945, followed a series of heavy firebombings of Japanese cities, including Tokyo on March 10th; the fall of the German Reich in April; the invasion of Okinawa in April and its surrender in June, culminating in

mass, coerced suicides; the Potsdam Declaration promising “complete and utter destruction” in July; and then, on August 6th, and again on the 9th, the destruction in a flash of two Japanese cities. Because Indonesian independence was declared immediately after the collapse of the Japanese empire and because Americans were anticipating an invasion of the main islands as intensive as the one in Okinawa, the general perspective in both countries has been that the Atomic Bombs were somehow necessary, a perspective we can call “from above the mushroom cloud.” At the same time, to consider what happened “below the mushroom cloud” and even begin to recognize the sheer horror of the instantaneous destruction and annihilation also forbid us to think only from that perspective, as this events as two more in the long history of hostilities, but rather as unparalleled, as also outside history.

I went back to Hiroshima and Nagasaki this August. I went partly to grapple with what happened there and how it is remembered in the present and partly to try to see how religion and religious studies can be a helpful framework for examining the process of memory, which is at once deeply situated in political contexts and transcending such limits for the taste of existential destruction that happened there. In this paper, I attempt to ask about religion and memory after seventy years.

On August 6th 1945, 90% of Hiroshima was incinerated. Thousands in the immediate zone of the hypocenter disappeared, sometimes leaving a shadow of carbon on concrete or a bit of metal—a lunchbox, a watch, a tricycle. 140,000 were dead by the end of 1945 and as of this year a total of almost 300,000 victims—called in Japanese *hibakusha*-- have been entered into the memorial books. This was a city with military operations but it was a city and the victims were men, women, and children; Japanese citizens and Korean forced laborers, Southeast Asian students, European prisoners of war. A smaller city in the far southwest, Nagasaki was not the first target for the 9th but cloud cover over Kokura led the plane carrying the second atomic bomb to be redirected. Nagasaki has a long history as a trading port, the one place the Dutch were allowed to maintain a base during the 250 years during which the country was closed to the West, and a center for Catholics who just thirty years earlier had dedicated a cathedral barely a kilometer from where the bomb was detonated. 70,000 were dead by the end of 1945 and the memorial books now record close to 170,000. The average age of the survivors is now past 80 but it still possible to hear their testimonies directly, of the flash and the boom, of the blistering bewildering heat, of making their way home to discover who among their family and community was still alive, of health problems without end, of discrimination.

Memory can be understood in at least three interconnected senses here. First, memory as an operation of the human mind to store and recall the past in the present is paired with the two operations which disrupt that humanly fallible process: forgetting, on one hand, and trauma, on the other. Such memory is also at times set against history that is defined and seemingly supported through a documentary basis and bias. As in the case of the so-called comfort women or *jugun ianfu* whose memories of sexual enslavement by the Japanese military have challenged the documented and often male official narrative, it can be what the subaltern possesses in order to retrieve dignity and justice. Second, as famously explicated by Pierre Nora and his research team in their search for the *lieux de memoire* that define the French nation, memory can mean the explicitly political narration of a past that holds together a nation or other community. Two decades ago, a controversy over the exhibition of the B-52 called *Enola Gay*, from which the atomic bomb was detonated on Hiroshima, was reduced to simplistic terms and then reached the United States Senate which felt compelled to pass a resolution declaring the use of the A-bomb morally good and force the elimination of nuanced historical explanation, an indication of the moral ambivalence still pervading the U.S. Third, memory can mean remembrance, the obligation to the dead to hold onto and honor their existence until it too, with us, slips into oblivion. Memory is pursued through the activities of memorialization and commemoration, of holding rituals and erecting monuments. This is one of the tasks of religion, though one it often rejects.

DISCUSSION

To inquire into religion likewise means to take on two interconnected meanings. First, there are the ways that religious language and ritual patterns pervade memory and the ways of commemoration, particularly at sites and on occasions that are sanctified with reference to memory and the community—which remains, by design, not clearly designated. Second, there are the activities of specifically religious groups that extend beyond this occasion and which bring religious and inter-religious purposes to the project of memory. Though Robert Bellah reportedly described “civil religion” in response to questions from Shinto priests visiting Washington in the 1950s and asking how it could be that American nationalism was so full of God-talk while the American occupiers had banned the State Shinto of the prewar state, this is not quite his civil religion because it does not make clear who it defines—indeed it is generally, on one hand, a specific community of experience transposed onto a modern city, often at odds with the

national government, and, on the other, a “universalized” experience that could easily be the fate of any person anywhere, regardless of the specificities of culture or history. It does however retain the prophetic potential pointed to by Bellah to make demands from its own logic and sense of what is right

In the first category, I will point to four ways religious forms pervade these commemorations.

1. Prayer: In the official ceremonies, “prayer” occupies a prominent place in the name and function of the ceremony. Consider the very names of the official annual ceremonies held on the anniversaries of the two atomic bombings: the 広島市原爆死没者慰霊式並びに平和祈念式 Hiroshima City Atomic Bomb Dead Spirit Consolation Ceremony and Peace Prayer Ceremony and the 長崎原爆犠牲者慰霊平和祈念式典 Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Sacrificed Spirit Consolation Peace Prayer Ceremony. There is a homonym at work here as well: *ki'nen*, with one of two other characters pronounced *ki*, ones meaning to record, indicates memory in the sense of memorial: such a *ki'nen* appears in the names of the museum and park at Hiroshima though not at Nagasaki: the setting for transcendent memory is within secular memory.

Prayer, in the form of silent prayer (黙とう/黙禱, written with a no-longer standard character), also is at the heart of the official ceremonies which are timed such that the moment of the detonation of each bomb—8:15am, 11:01am—is one of silence and/or the tolling of a bell.

Wordless and led by no one, no direction is suggested for this prayer and it concludes as the moment of the detonation passes. In both locations, silence is immediately followed by speech act by the central event of the commemoration: the peace declaration read by the mayor. Beginning in 1947 and 1948, these declarations have issued annually without interruption since 1951. They are appeals to world leaders to enact and enforce treaties against nuclear weapons and to the Japanese government to provide adequately for the surviving *hibakusha*.

One might also see prayer in the practice of folding origami cranes and bringing strings of a thousand to lay before the children’s monument recalling the story of Sadako Sasaki, a girl who was exposed to radiation in the womb and died of leukemia.

2. The concept of witness is also key to the memory of the atomic bombs and of particular importance at this juncture of 70 years, for as was noted repeatedly the average age of the survivors has now passed 80. Because of instant annihilation of untold thousands followed by the agonized deaths from internal and external burns of thousands more, many beyond recognition (totalling, by the end of 1945, 140,000 in Hiroshima and 70,000 in Nagasaki), the physical presence of those who did survive has come to be of great importance. As Lisa Yoneyama has shown, the process of narrating memory as *kataribe* or testifiers is fraught with a kind of politics of recognition as survivors (for whom access to specialized health care was contingent on proving where one was at the moment of the blast or if one entered the city later) but at the same time it carries a kind of urgency on behalf of others who cannot speak and on behalf of a future peace in which nuclear weapons will not be used again.

3. A third way religious concepts are central to memory is in the hallowed ground of the memorial sites, the two Peace Parks and adjacent areas. In the delta of Hiroshima, the park was built between two branches of the river, below a T-shaped bridge said to have provided the target, and a central memorial was put in place in line with the ruins of one of the few structures to have survived the blast, the Prefectural Products Exhibition Hall now known as the A-Bomb Dome. It is now known that the architect Tange Kenzō's cenotaph is the repurposing, on a smaller scale, of an earlier design that was meant to align with Mt. Fuji and commemorate Japan's victory in Asia. Few other traces of the mostly wooden neighborhood remain in Hiroshima, though one of the many smaller ceremonies each year commemorates that neighborhood. Instead, a new park was built on the burned out grounds, centered on the museum and the cenotaph, but with space for a variety of monuments that met certain "universaling" gestures. Famously, the monument to Korean victims was constructed outside the park, on the facing river bank, and was moved into the grounds only in the late 1990s.

At Nagasaki, the Peace Park or grounds for the annual official ceremony face a statue of a seated man with arms and legs in different directions, echoing in that way a Buddha but looking more like a Greek god. (for years I

assumed it represented Prometheus who brought down fire from the heavens to the earth) This “sacred ground” is in fact the site of a prison, the foundations of which remain visible, in striking contrast to the structure that parallels most closely the A-bomb dome: the Urakami Cathedral which was reconstructed with only a few pieces of its previous existence preserved in statuary.

On the anniversaries, these grounds and the surrounding streets become the site of multiple commemorations as well as protests. Perhaps because of its more central location and its historical position, there were far more groups in Hiroshima, high school students with petitions, leftists with alternate publications, religious groups considered outside the mainstream, peace commemorators seeking out foreigners, and so on. Most moving were the *hibakusha* who came to speak without a platform other than their story. There were also government directed memorial activities in the twilight: the famous floating lanterns in Hiroshima echoed by wax candles at Nagasaki.

4. The language of “comforting souls” *irei* is present in the titles of the Hiroshima cenotaph and the memorial ceremonies in both cities.

One unique and moving addition to atomic bomb commemorations is water imagery, recalling how those who were badly burned but not killed instantly sought water to relieve their unquenchable thirst and cool their burned flesh. They were often heard crying “*mizu kure*” “give me water” but often their badly shocked systems could not accept the water they did find and they died immediately. When water is poured from individual containers—as in those carried by various religious leaders into their shared ceremony in Hiroshima or when, in the official ceremony in Nagasaki, brought from springs in various corners of the city—into one bowl, it can be a reminder of the collectivity of life itself.

The second is that the most material remains honored in these places is a set of books containing the names of the atomic bomb dead. These books have been and will be updated annually until the last *hibakusha* has died. This August, 5,359 names were added to bring the total to 297,684 (recorded in 109 books) in Hiroshima and 3,373 names were added in Nagasaki to bring the new total to 168,767 (recorded

in 170 books). Each city maintains an office to manage the books and to process applications for inclusion and the names of non-Japanese are also included. Curiously, the other place this act of memorializing through names handwritten in books is at the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo, where nearly 2.5 million war dead from Japan's modern wars from 1868 to 1945 are enshrined as kami. There are significant differences in that the Yasukuni Shrine is formerly part of a state civil religious apparatus and now technically a private religious organization that uses religious language a ritual, which, when patronized by government officials, potentially violates the Constitution's proscription against government use of religious activities. Moreover, there have been no new entries into enshrinement register since 1978, when the top-level officials executed as a class-A war criminals were added, ratcheting up the controversy over the lack of remorse the shrine represents to the countries in Asia Japan invaded. Still, the same question of how physical presence following the devastation of war, either through the advanced weaponry or through death in distant lands and oceans, is part of memorialization. These books, stored deep inside monuments, are also different from the Cornerstone of Peace in Okinawa, an extensive black granite monument carved with the names of combatants and civilians from all sides killed in the Battle of Okinawa (April to June 1945).

The second meaning of religion and memory is, of course, the activities of religious groups and surrounding the official ceremony in each place are both joint and specific memorial services and actions. At Hiroshima, this took the form of first a joint Buddhist-Shinto-Christian service early on the morning of the 6th, followed throughout the day by various sects of Buddhism as well as Catholicism and Protestantism. Not included are the so-called new religions which originated in Japan (some of which, like Tenri, date to the nineteenth century). These services face the *genbaku kūyōtō*, a mound-style grave containing unclaimed *hibakusha* remains, with a list nearby inviting families to take these ashes back to the family graves. *Kuyō* is Buddhist language.

At Nagasaki, the 43rd Genbaku Junnansha Ireisai (Festival to Console the Spirits of those who Suffered from the Atomic Bomb) was held on the night of the 8th in the park surrounding the hypocenter, at the base of the hill where the peace ceremony would be held the next day. While this service had many of the same elements as the public

ceremony, each was led by a different religious leader and member of the sponsoring organization which translates its name to English as the Fellowship of Religionists in Nagasaki for Dialogue. According to its roster, it is made up of clergy of Japan's religions including eleven Christians (among them the organization's advisor, the archbishop), eight Shinto priests, thirty-six Buddhist priests, and nine "miscellaneous," including Tenri which invited a Turkish Sufi to do whirling meditation. This category of religionist (*shūkyōsha*) was a new one for me, invoking a category as reified in law and academia as agama but one which most Japanese reject as requiring some kind of extreme doctrinal loyalty that takes them into dangerous territory, as with AUM Supreme Truth which launched apocalyptic terror in the subways in 1995: it seems to recognize that religion has a definite interest in certain issues, especially peace and the memory of atrocity (regardless of the religious identities of the victims) and it is always plural. The most prominent use of the terms is in the name of the global network Religions for Peace which was launched in Kyoto in 1970, but its Japanese branch dates to 1951 and a sense of the shared responsibility of religious organizations for the war, an opportunity for penitence (metanoetics).

In the weeks following this commemoration, from the perspective of many Japanese, the memory of the A-bomb victims was violated in two ways by the actions of the current Liberal Democratic Party-led government of Prime Minister Shinzō Abe. First, two days after the Nagasaki memorial, the Sendai Nuclear Power plant 100 miles to the south was restarted, the first nuclear power plant to go back into operation since all were taken offline in the wake of the triple disaster that hit northeast Japan on March 11th, 2011. In its wake, and in the fears of long-lasting radiation contamination over a wide area, Fukushima has become a third disaster in which a city name is written with phonetic syllabary. But this requires a redefinition of what happened at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, from technologically advanced atrocities that have not been repeated and serve as warning to the use of nuclear weapons and the need for disarmament to a broader warning against nuclear energy in all forms. While the Nagasaki Museum and the Nippon Myozan (Buddhist) peace marchers already included those exposed to radiation from nuclear weapons tests in the South Pacific and elsewhere (most famously the Japanese fishing boat Lucky Dragon #5, exposed in the Marshall Islands in 1955), Fukushima is something new and unresolved (and part of a history in which the U.S. foisted "atoms for peace" onto the same country it had used two atomic bombs on just years earlier.). Where the appeals remain directed against nuclear weapons and in support of the

non-proliferation treaties, the Religionist group fasted instead for “a 21st century without nuclear weapons or nuclear power.”

Second, as the commemorations were going on, Japan was being shaken by perhaps the most substantial public political demonstrations since Prime Minister Abe’s grandfather forced through a renewal of the U.S.-Japan Joint Security Treaty in 1960. The bill the government finally did push through the Diet in September re-interprets Article 9 of the 1947 Constitution, “forever renounc[ing] war as a sovereign right of the nation,” as allowing something called a “right of collective self-defense” through which Japan may enter, for example, U.S.-led military interventions. The movement against it, which took form in mass demonstrations in many cities as well as surrounding the Diet building, was quick to name it the “War Bill” and to see in it a dark turn in Japanese politics away from democracy and peace. Prime Ministers have spoken at both ceremonies for several decades and their remarks, which follow the “pledge for peace” (*heiwa he no chikai*) read by local children, are the one unscripted part of the program. Abe’s remarks at Hiroshima were criticized for mentioning neither Article 9 nor Japan’s so-called “Three Nuclear Principles” (not making, not possessing, not harboring nuclear weapons) and in Nagasaki he did make a gesture at the latter. Because the programs are timed so carefully around the exact moment of the detonation, demonstrators were able to intrude sonically on Abe as he spoke, reminding the assembled that he had not earned a sacralized atmosphere.

CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, I would like to go a little deeper into the work of religion in memory: to the concept of sacrifice. Recently, the secular philosopher Takahashi Tetsuya has named a sacrificial system which inculcates the belief that some part of the community must accept that it must be sacrificed for the whole: his examples are Okinawa, where American military bases are an obnoxious and destructive presence, and Fukushima, the cost of which is far from understood but the calculations were made long ago by politicians, electric company executives, compliant scientists and the public. Since I first visited Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the mid-1990s, the Japanese State has built its own memorial halls in each place (原爆死没者追悼平和祈念館 or Hall to Pray for Peace and Eulogize the Atomic Bomb Dead). Borrowing methods from Holocaust memorials, these halls seem set to counter the city-run museums which set the cities apart as universalized sacrifices (hence the slogans: no more Hiroshima, no more Nagasaki, to which is now added no more Fukushima) apart from the nation. Even so I was surprised by

the statement at the entrance in Hiroshima: in the official translation: “The National Peace Memorial Halls for the Atomic Bomb Victims in Hiroshima and Nagasaki are an effort by the Japanese national government to remember and mourn the sacred sacrifice of the atomic bomb victims. They are also an expression of Japan's desire for genuine and lasting peace.” Sacred sacrifice by whom, for what? Can we continue to allow there to be sacrifice without meaning? Is that a question religions and/or religionists should try to answer?