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by Umehara Takeshi

The issue of Primer Ministerial visits to Yasukuni Shrine honoring Japan's war dead has reverberated in Japan's domestic and international politics since the first such visit nearly two decades ago. The criticism of Prime Minister Koizumi's several Yasukuni visits by the Kyoto philosopher Umehara Takeshi makes clear not only the breadth of political opposition to such visits, but the ways in which the issues intersect with century-long conflicts over the relationship between the Japanese state and religion, both Buddhist and Shinto. This essay likewise raises important questions about who should be enshrined in war and peace memorials: should they respect only the dead of one's own nation, as in the case of Yasukuni and Washington's Vietnam Memorial, or should all who died in war on all sides of the conflict, as in the Okinawa Memorial?

I recently read the entire text of the decision handed down by the Fukuoka District Court with regard to the "Yasukuni Problem." At issue in this case was an official visit to Yasukuni Shrine by Prime Minister Koizumi, in response to which the plaintiffs brought suit seeking compensation for damages they claimed to have suffered as a result of having their freedoms of belief and personal religious rights violated. In its ruling, the Fukuoka Court declared that the Prime Minister's visit to Yasukuni was indeed an unconstitutional act but rejected the plaintiffs' charge that their freedoms were thereby violated. At the end of the ruling, one finds the following assertion: "The matter at the heart of this case (the Prime Minister's visit) was undertaken without adequate discussion of the constitutionality of official visits to Yasukuni Shrine. In view of these circumstances, it is the considered opinion of this court that should a judgment regarding the unconstitutionality of such visits be evaded at this time, there is a high probability of those acts being repeated. With that in mind, the court concluded it had a responsibility to render such a judgment, and it does so in the manner set forth here."

We find here a highly temperate manifestation of judicial conscience attempting to hold in check political excesses, and I would therefore like to express my respect for the reasoning and courage of judges who have confronted a constitutional problem that has hitherto been avoided.

This calls to mind the creation in 1984 of an investigative body attached to his office by then Chief Cabinet Secretary Fujinami Takao called the "Yasukuni discussion group," which was charged with the task of considering the constitutionality of official visits to the shrine by the nation's prime minister. The leading constitutional authority among its members, Ashibe Shinkichi, sternly insisted that official visits to Yasukuni Shrine by the prime minister are in violation of the Constitution, and I, too, raised the following two points in opposition.

First, within traditional Shinto, as set forth in the Kojiki and Nihonshoki, it is believed that instead of enshrining the souls of our allies, we should enshrine those of enemies who have been destroyed by them. But in Yasukuni Shinto, only the souls of those who have sacrificed themselves for our country are enshrined, not those of our enemies. What this reveals is that the form of Shinto observed at Yasukuni is a new one that has largely cast off the spirit of our traditions on account of the influences of European and American nationalism.

Second, official visits to Yasukuni Shrine by the prime minister create obstacles to amicable relations between Japan and the various countries of East Asia such as China or Korea. Accordingly, they do considerable harm to Japan's national interests.

My views in this regard were supported by the dean of Buddhology, Nakamura Hajime, as well as by other committee members representing religious circles. Ultimately, on condition that minority views would be indicated, a majority report was drawn up accepting Yasukuni Shrine visits by the prime minister. Prime Minister Nakasone then made a visit to Yasukuni, drawing protests from China and Korea. He never repeated the act, in part, no doubt, because he paid heed to the views of us experts.

By contrast, Prime Minister Koizumi, unwilling to read or to listen to the views of experts, asked what could be wrong with worshiping at Yasukuni, and forcefully proceeded with another official visit. But in reaction to protests from China and Korea, he adopted a makeshift plan to visit Yasukuni on a different date, publicly stating that he visited the shrine in order to pledge never to make war again. Prime Minister Tojo is also enshrined in Yasukuni. If he were to hear these words from Prime Minister Koizumi, his spirit would surely roar, "Weakling! The US and Britain are our enemies. Fight them as often as necessary!"

This is now giving rise to vexing problems. Due to growing anger on the part of China and Korea, officially scheduled visits between the leaders of Japan and China have been suspended, and problems with North Korea, where China exerts powerful influence, cannot be solved. This also seems to be creating most unfortunate impediments to Japan's participating in China's planning for its construction of high speed railways. Prime Minister Koizumi's visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, in short, must be described as severely damaging Japan's national interests.

With regard to the first point made above, let me add the following. At present I think that Yasukuni Shinto and the anti-Buddhist movement of the Meiji Period deeply connected to it not only killed the buddhas but the gods as well. The movement not only negated the buddhas, but restricted the gods to the emperor and his ancestors. Yet even the emperor, Japan's one remaining god, stepped down from that exalted throne after the war with his declaration of humanity. And we are now paying the bill for the killing of the buddhas and the gods in the form of irreligiosity and amorality among the Japanese people.

In the wake of that anti-Buddhist movement, the Meiji government adopted a policy to bring Buddhism firmly under the control of State Shinto, and as a result, the so-called "Daikyoin" was established. Its headquarters were located in Zojoji Temple, in Minato-ku, Tokyo, a leading temple of the Jodo sect, and the image of the Amida Buddha, to whom the temple was dedicated, was replaced by that of Amaterasu Omikami. Shimaji Mokurai, a priest of the Honganji Sect, who had gone to England as a student and observed Western European religious life, strongly claimed that in the West government and religion were separate. As a result of his criticism of the Meiji government's mixing of the two, the East and West Honganji Temples, the two Kyoto headquarters of the Pure Land Sect, left the Daikyoin. Thus, the system disintegrated, but I would argue that in spirit, at least, the Daikyoin continued through the war.

After the war, Suzuki Daisetsu, disgusted by how the word "spirit" (seishin) had been thoroughly defiled by nationalism, used "spirituality" (reisei) in its place. Only by eradicating the influence of state Shinto could what he called Japanese spirituality reawaken. In his sharp criticism of disciples such as Watsuji Tetsuro, he was surely reinvoking the claims of Shimaji.

I think the Prime Minister's official visits to Yasukuni Shrine are intended to resurrect the ghosts of the Daikyoin. The prime minister of a country should at the very least possess enough good sense to listen to the opinions of its experts and to reflect seriously upon his own biases. If our current prime minister decides to keep making official visits to Yasukuni, ignoring the opinions of authoritative scholars in the fields of constitutional law and religion, without regard

for the demands of diplomacy, and now, even rejecting the judgment of the judiciary, it is inevitable that at some point reason will have its revenge. It is deplorable that Prime Minister Koizumi seems bent on repeating the example of Prime Minister Tojo, a man devoid of reason, who with no small amount of bravado launched a reckless war and refused to end it even after defeat had become all but certain, bringing untold suffering upon the Japanese people.

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Translation for Japan Focus by Steven Platzer. Steven Platzer is completing a study of the Education Ministry's 1966 document, "The Image of a Desired Human Being," and its origins in prewar and wartime discourse among Kyoto School philosophers who played important roles in post-Occupation "reform" of democratic education carried out by Japan's conservative leaders.

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