



Religious reforms and large-scale rebellions (via the case of the Honganji sect of the True Pure Land Buddhism)

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Abstract

The paper explores the economics behind two large-scale rebellions in Japan throughout 1532–1536 and 1570–1580, launched by a religious organization called Honganji. The paper argues that Honganji's large-scale rebellions took off primarily due to religious reforms, particularly, the creation of an after-life pardon doctrine, which enabled the functioning of more potent incentives that fostered participation. First, the doctrine raised the costs of not joining a rebellion by excluding the non-participants and consigning them to hell. This resulted in immediate spiritual, social and economic penalties, as condemned individuals were considered religiously corrupt and were expelled from the sect's temple towns and sect-dominated village communities. Second, the after-life pardon doctrine reduced the costs of rebellious participation by guaranteeing an instant rebirth in paradise after dying for the sect's cause. As many individuals at the time saw the world through the lens of religion and spirituality, the guarantee of paradise was an especially potent incentive to join a rebellion.

Keywords Honganji · Religious reforms · Paradise · Hell · Large-scale rebellions · Japan

JEL Classification D74 · N45 · Z12

1 Introduction

The Ōnin war of 1467–1477, which escalated from a regional dispute into a national civil war, caused Japan to fall into political disorder. With the weakening of the shogunate, and the emergence of Japanese warlords called *daimyo*, who tried to assert territorial and political control through military might, warfare in Japan became endemic for more than a century. Rebellions and conflicts flared up throughout most of the country over issues of political influence, territorial control, taxation and economic privileges.

Two particularly large-scale rebellions of 1532–1536 and 1570–1580, driven by persecution and material exploitation from powerful Japanese *daimyo* Hosokawa Harumoto and Oda Nobunaga, were led by a big religious organization, the *Jōdo Shinshū*, or the

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Honganji sect of True Pure Land Buddhism. Emerging in 1321, the sect existed as a small and financially limited organization for more than a century, without any ability to influence the political stage in Japan. However, starting from 1457, the sect began to develop substantially through the efforts of its eighth Patriarch, Rennyo, and in the rebellions of 1532–1536 and 1570–1580, Honganji mustered forces of more than 25,000 individuals, which “surprised and impressed observers” (Tsang, 2007: 169). Furthermore, unlike other religious organizations at the time that relied heavily on mercenaries or temple guards, these forces were comprised of the sect’s own members. While the strategic results of its large-scale rebellions were mixed and the sect was effectively demilitarized in 1580 and later weakened both politically and economically, Honganji delivered many unexpected defeats to such renowned warlords as Nobunaga (Sugiyama, 1994: 65–66).

It may be surprising that Honganji’s large-scale rebellions even took off, as according to Lichbach (1994b: 386), “cards seem stacked” against such activities. In making a choice to join a large rebellion or not, a rational agent will consider the costs and benefits of participation and weigh them against the costs and benefits of non-participation. Often, in such rebellious calculus, non-participation presents itself as the more rational choice.

The benefits side of participation is problematic, as any successful large-scale rebellion is likely to be a low-probability event (Lichbach, 1994b: 386), and with large populations, “the individual’s probabilistic influence on the revolt’s success is close to zero” (Leeson, 2010: 300). Large religious organizations also trade off commitment against high membership, and the corresponding economies of size (Iannaccone, 1992a, 1992b, 1994b, 1998; Olson, 2008; Dunaetz et al., 2018), thus further endangering participation in rebellious action. Individuals are also less likely to join a rebellion if they have no direct stake in it, or if “the benefits of a successful outcome are also independent” (Lichbach, 1994b: 386) from their participation. The cost side of participation also looks unfavorable, as “governments maim and murder their enemies” (Lichbach, 1994b: 387).

If we view religious organizations as clubs with voluntary membership and its associated costs and benefits, (Iannaccone, 1994a, 1998), such “clubs” can exclude the “uncommitted” (Iannaccone, 1992b: 289) members as punishment for non-participation in large-scale rebellions. This provides religious organizations with more tools to incentivize participation in rebellions compared to the pure public goods models, where “most dissident groups do not have sufficient resources” (Mueller & Opp, 1986: 472) to impose costs on citizens for non-participation. Even then, to incentivize participation, exclusion needs to be a threat that is credible on both spiritual and material levels, as spiritual costs may not work on weaker believers and vice versa.

As historical sources show, Honganji could not actually overcome the issues of organizing large-scale rebellions until 1532. Before 1532, the sect’s rebellions were small, local and uncoordinated by its leadership. This paper argues that to a large part, Honganji’s large-scale rebellions took off due to religious reforms which enabled the functioning of more potent incentives that fostered rebellious participation. Such reforms only became possible after a war within the sect in 1531, which consolidated the Honganji Patriarch’s power and crushed his opposition, that would have otherwise considered such religious changes as heretical. The religious reforms centered around the creation of the *goshō gomen*, or the after-life pardon doctrine, which had a two-fold effect on rebellious participation.

First, the doctrine raised the costs of not joining a rebellion by excluding the non-participants and consigning them to hell. Apart from the purely spiritual costs, there were immediate social and economic penalties of exclusion from the Honganji “club,” as condemned individuals were considered religiously corrupt and were expelled from the sect’s temple towns and sect-dominated village communities.

Second, the goshō gomen reduced the costs of rebellious participation for strong believers by guaranteeing them an instant rebirth in paradise after dying for the sect's cause. As many individuals at the time saw the world through the lens of religion and spirituality (Tsang, 2007: 37), the personal guarantee of paradise from the Honganji's spiritual leader was an especially potent incentive for strong believers to join the rebellion and fight with great zeal, as if "nothing daunted them" (Turnbull, 2003: 43).

My analysis covers the gap in the "public choice analysis of rebellious activities" as suggested by Kurrild-Klitgaard (2004: 405). It incorporates "public choice analysis into grander historical case studies," explains why rebellions sometimes become big, and explores the role of religious motivations in such circumstances. The case of the Honganji also provides a new case study for this broader goal of applying the public choice theory to rebellions. In following the religions-as-clubs approach of Iannaccone (1992a, 1992b, 1994a, 1994b, 1998), my paper analyzes the costs of non-participation, a dimension often neglected in discussions of rebellions. The paper also offers an important evolutionary perspective of irrational views undergoing rational change (Maltsev, 2022: 112–113), in other words, how Honganji's religious institutions shifted in accordance with economic logic in their accommodation of large-scale rebellions.

Finally, the paper's framework, or its parts, may be of interest in other applications. For instance, religious promises of paradise have been an important component stimulating participation in risky conflict activities. Vikings promised their most dedicated warriors an ascension to Valhalla, while the Islamic Order of the Assassins in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries guaranteed that their dead soldiers would go to heaven. Even in the contemporary world, where attempts to incentivize risky behaviors via religion may seem ridiculous, political figures and religious leaders still utilize them. For instance, Russian president Vladimir Putin promised individuals that in case of a nuclear conflict, "We will go to heaven as martyrs" (The Moscow Times, 2018), while the Russian Patriarch of the Orthodox Christian Church personally guaranteed that Russian soldiers who die in Ukraine will be cleansed of their sins and granted eternal life (RBC, 2021; Reuters, 2022).

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 briefly analyzes the history of Jōdo Shinshū and its rebellions. Section 3 analyzes the religious reforms which promoted Honganji's large-scale rebellions. Section 4 concludes.

2 Honganji's brief history and its rebellions

The Honganji, or the True Pure Land sect emerged with a priest called Shinran (1173–1262), who studied under the founder of the Pure Land teaching Hōnen (1133–1212) at the temple of Enryakuji. At that time, the traditional Buddhist schools proclaimed that the world entered the 10,000 year-long age of degeneration, or *mappō*, where the attainment of enlightenment for humans was no longer possible.

Hōnen entrepreneurially seized on this bleak outlook with his own Pure Land teaching that promised salvation and an auspicious rebirth in paradise through the exclusive worship of Buddha Amida (Dobbins, 1989: 146). This promise of salvation applied regardless of one's merit and included the individuals who could not observe the traditional Buddhist prescriptions against taking one's life, such as mercenaries and warriors (Matsumura, 2006: 65). Followers of the Pure Land were also encouraged to meditate, chant sutras and maintain celibacy.

Hōnen's teachings developed into many offshoots through his disciples. Shinran's own brand of Amida worship, the True Pure Land, stressed that only exclusive faith¹ in Amida could bring salvation (Weinstein, 1977: 351). Any reliance on priests and traditional religious practices was "useless," and even faith itself existed only as Amida's gift (Tsang, 1995: 4). Shinran disposed of various traditional religious practices, such as celibacy, as well as "reading and copying sutras, or paying for religious services" (Tsang, 2010: 94).

Capitalizing on such departures from the traditional Buddhist teachings should have set a fertile soil for a large following of the Honganji, to the extent that it reduced the cost of religious membership while promising coveted spiritual rewards. Yet, for two centuries the Honganji monastery, situated at the mausoleum site of Shinran in Higashiyama Otani, Kyoto fared poorly. The head temple was "deserted without a single visitor in sight" and its "people living ... very lonely lives" (Yasutomi, 2006: 19). The Honganji's state was "derelict" and "floundering in financial difficulties," with frequent "shortages of food and clothing" (Yasutomi, 2006: 20).

The story of the 8th Honganji Patriarch Rennyo (1415–1499), appointed in 1457, reveals the two barriers that usually prevented the rise of non-traditional Buddhist organizations. The first barrier was the fierce resistance from the powerful traditional Buddhist sects, that did not take well to religious competition, which undermined their own membership and dissipated their economic rents. The second barrier was informational in nature, as religious texts in Japan were normally written in classical Chinese and were inaccessible to the masses.

Upon taking the office of the Honganji Patriarch, Rennyo quickly encountered the first barrier. In the very first month of 1465, the Enryakuji temple experienced a reduction in its rents due to Rennyo's extensive preaching and called upon 150 warriors to punish the Honganji, whose temple guards numbered at around twenty men. As a result, the Otani Honganji temple was destroyed, and Rennyo had to settle the dispute with a cash payment (Weinstein, 1977: 348). From March of 1465, Enryakuji launched more attacks, and the conflict was settled with Honganji's acceptance of its nominal status as a branch temple of Enryakuji, which lasted until the 1530s (Rogers & Rogers, 1991: 65). However, the outbreak of the Ōnin war in 1467, which engulfed Kyoto and the countryside, allowed Rennyo to flee to Yoshizaki—a town on the border of Echizen and Kaga provinces, and at a safe distance of 150 miles away from Enryakuji (Rogers, 1981: 25).

To remove the second, informational barrier, Rennyo resorted to preaching through letters called *ofumi* that were written in common Japanese, using simple words, and were meant to be copied and read aloud (Dobbins, 1989: 147–149). This innovation significantly brought down the information searching and processing costs regarding the sect and its tenets for many individuals. The mass circulation of letters also removed another obstacle for Rennyo, namely, of other Amidist sects that could compete for members. By directly addressing the listeners in his letters, Rennyo "attacked other Amidist groups at their foundations, stripping them of their legitimacy with a religious authority that would have been hard for local priests or preachers to combat" (Tsang, 2007: 46). The main weapon of Rennyo in relation to his assertion of Honganji being the only true religion of Amida was the claim of a lineage that could be traced back to Shinran. While Shinran himself rejected the idea of having disciples to prevent the distortion of his teachings (Solomon, 1974: 406),

¹ The only other sect that also preached an exclusionary faith was the Nichiren sect (Stone 1994). However, the sect's influence greatly diminished after an attack by the temple of Enryakuji in 1536.

Rennyō claimed that blood *descendants* could transmit Shinran's religious ideas without committing heresy, while mere followers could not.

With the removal of barriers to Honganji membership, the number of new Honganji recruits "began to grow in leaps and bounds" (Tsang, 1995: 73). Honganji teachings were "widely received," and "became especially popular among people who were becoming objects of discrimination" (Yasutomi, 2006: 24). It is difficult to quantify Honganji's overall membership, but the sect was known for its sheer size (Blum, 2006: 4). Tsang (2007: 223) also provides a qualitative assessment of the sect's size as "enormous." The initial surge of sect members came from towns, but by the sixteenth century, the sect became dominant among the rural populace, and many of the Honganji adherents were part-time warriors.

Honganji offered its members a range of important spiritual goods, with promises of an auspicious rebirth, relatively cheap religious rituals, and religious bonds that worked as a powerful social glue in tumultuous times.

However, the sect also offered significant material benefits. The majority of these benefits stemmed from the construction of innovative Honganji-sponsored commercial towns called *jinaichō*. *Jinaichō* surrounded Honganji temples and were built along commercial routes, designed "specifically to attract merchants" (Tsang, 2007: 24),² and eventually becoming important economic centers for nearby villages as well. Honganji's temple towns were exempt from rents and taxes, with the exception of some taxes on holdings. Town residents paid dues to the temple for residency and/or performed services, for instance, organizing festivals or helping with the temple's construction projects. The Honganji temples also adjudicated disputes over property and trade, like many other Japanese temples (Adolphson & Ramseyer, 2009: 661), and "in most cases, the temple also investigated and punished criminal activity within the town" (Tsang, 2007: 25). *Jinaichō* were well-fortified and could even forbid entry to daimyo's warriors, thus offering at least some respite in the Sengoku period's ever-increasing political turmoil.

The success of the temple towns largely enabled the Honganji Patriarchs to control "a significant portion" (Tsang, 2007: 223) of Japan's economy, and later to finance the sect's large-scale rebellious activities.³ Rennyō's own, but perhaps overstated description of Yoshizaki, which grew into a powerful *jinaichō*, was that of a "mountain fortress teeming with hundreds of thousands of pilgrims" (Rogers, 1981: 25).

As Honganji grew in numbers, some of its members began to participate in local rebellions against daimyo, often over issues of policy, such as predatory tax increases or debt cancellations. For instance, in 1475 and 1488 Honganji sect members in Kaga participated in coalitions formed against the governor of the province Togashi Masachika, eventually toppling the daimyo (Solomon, 1972: 219–221; White, 1995: 126). In 1506 due to preceding years of crop failures, unfavorable weather for farming and resultant famine, rebellions and uprisings sprung up across Settsu, Kawachi, Echizen, Kaga, Noto, Etchū, Echigo, Mino, Owari, and Mikawa provinces (Solomon, 1978: 60).

Yet, these rebellions were small and local, with Honganji members comprising only a share of the rebellious participants (White, 1995: 126). In other words, at the time,

² In this way, *jinaichō* differed from another type of temple town called *monzenmachi*, which were built for the convenience of pilgrims and religious festival goers. However, *jinaichō*'s main purpose was to foster commerce and attract merchants (Tsang 2007: 24).

³ Sect members that did not reside in *jinaichō* sent donations to the Honganji, constituting another important source of revenue for the organization.

Honganji sectarians “continued to do what they had always done, even before they joined the sect: if they were cultivators, they resisted taxation they found excessive; if warriors, they supported other warriors in battle” (Tsang, 2007: 114).

However, starting from 1532, Honganji’s sectarians engaged in large-scale rebellions. The rebellion of 1532–1536, also known as the Tenbun war, began in July of 1532, when Honganji followers burnt down an ancient temple of Kofukuji in Nara (Sugiyama, 1994: 64). The deputy shogun Hosokawa Harumoto did not take lightly to the destruction of Kofukuji, and set to punish the entire Honganji sect, despite the attack not being orchestrated by its central temple (Tatsusaburō & Ellison, 1977: 32). Shōnyo did not accept Harumoto’s decision and began gathering forces for the sect’s first large-scale rebellion.

According to Tsang (1995: 163), at that time, Honganji could mobilize a force of more than 25,000 fighters, and “observers were surprised at the size of forces that the Honganji could command” (Tsang, 1995: 209). Throughout 1532, the fighting went back and forth, with Harumoto gathering a massive force of 30,000–40,000 men in August and burning the sect’s main temple of Yamashina Honganji to the east of Kyoto (Sugiyama, 1994: 64). In return, on the 28th of September, the Honganji defeated Harumoto’s force, pushing it back to the capital. In 1533, a lot of fighting took place near the city of Sakai, which became a battlefield of around 40,000 combatants (Tsang, 1995: 187–188). In 1534, Honganji won a series of battles from June up until the year’s end, but in 1535, the sect’s rebellion began to deteriorate. A particularly catastrophic defeat occurred on the 12th of June, where Honganji forces lost around 600 people in Settsu, though “within a week,” the sect replenished their losses via reinforcements from Kii province to the south, which numbered around 900 individuals (Tsang, 1995: 209). Throughout November and December of 1535, Honganji and Harumoto engaged in formal peace negotiations, and in 1536, the sect received an official pardon from the shogunate, on the condition that Honganji members were to be expelled from the Ōmi province, to which Shōnyo agreed.

The second large-scale rebellion of the sect occurred from 1570 to 1580. In 1570, Oda Nobunaga, in his campaign to unify Japan, levied a special tax of 125 *koku*⁴ on Honganji’s temple towns in Osaka, whereas before, the temple towns were exempt from taxation. As a result, Kenryo issued a call for all Honganji followers to take up arms and rebel. The rebellion against Nobunaga lasted for 10 years, an “exceptional” event in which the sect lasted a “considerably longer period” than any of Nobunaga’s enemies (Lamers, 2000: 164), and the fighting took place along multiple provinces.

Some historical documents list the casualties of the Honganji in a three-year long battle for Nagashima (1571–1574) at 40,000 (Tsang, 2007: 227). Throughout 1574 and 1575, Honganji also lost around 30,000 members in Echizen and Kaga (Sugiyama, 1994: 66).⁵ In June 1576, the Ishiyama Honganji stronghold was attacked by a force of 10,000 men, but the stronghold’s own force of 15,000 repelled the attack and killed Nobunaga’s vassal Harada Naomasa (Sugiyama, 1994: 66). Honganji’s rebellion lasted until the sect’s positions had substantially deteriorated, and the situation at the Ishiyama Honganji was “hopeless” (Sugiyama, 1994: 66). In March 1580, peace negotiations began, and in April 1580,

⁴ *Koku* is a Japanese unit of volume, usually considered to be a quantity of rice that is enough to feed a person for the entire year. One *koku* equals to about 150 kg.

⁵ However, not every casualty was a combatant, as Nobunaga pursued a policy of putting “every man and woman to the sword” (Akio & Starling 2013: 102). Even then, the numbers suggest that the Honganji devoted a significant number of forces in their resistance to Nobunaga.

Kennyō accepted the terms, which involved demilitarization and the abandonment of Ishiyama Hongnaji, but ensuring the sect's survival.

3 Honganji's large scale rebellions

3.1 Issues with large-scale rebellions

We can see that Honganji's large-scale rebellions picked up only in 1532. It could not have been an issue in membership, as the sect's numbers began to grow in "leaps and bounds" in the 1470 s, under Rennyō (Tsang, 1995: 73). Rather, it was an issue of incentivizing individuals to participate in these large-scale efforts.

In relation to small-scale rebellions, Honganji members participated when the probability of success seemed the highest. For instance, in 1488, the rebels acted when Kaga governor Masachika's overall force was weakened in strength and supplies after joining the shogun's expedition against the governor of Ōmi province in 1487. The rebellion struck at a time when Masachika could not call upon his allies from Echizen and Etchū provinces, which further incentivized participation, especially from the more militant warrior members of the sect. As such, in that rebellion, the collective dissent relied on the "increase the probability of winning strategy" (Lichbach, 1994a: 12–13). However, in large-scale rebellions, which involve big forces and a lot of uncertainty, the probability of winning drops significantly. This factor may have precluded the sectarians' desire to participate. At the same time, the cost of joining a large-scale rebellion was especially acute in Sengoku Japan, where violence was endemic, and almost any rebellion, especially a large one, could quickly turn into a bloody confrontation with a high likelihood of death (Tsang, 2007: 36).

Furthermore, Honganji Patriarchs could not credibly punish the members of their "club" for non-compliance. The sect had instituted punishment for disobedience in the form of excommunication (Solomon, 1974: 57), yet it was not costly enough for some members to perceive it as a credible threat, neither from a material, nor a spiritual side.

On the material side, expulsion from Honganji may have seemed somewhat costly. For many members, economic conditions within the sect, and especially within jinaichō were more preferable compared to the world outside, which was often defined by poorly protected property rights, high taxes, and abuses by the nobles and samurai (Birt, 1985). Excommunication meant a loss of tax privileges, public goods supplied by the Honganji, such as dispute adjudication, and the relative safety of the temple towns. Additionally, individuals whose livelihoods depended on the sect, such as priests, would have also been more responsive to exclusion. However, Honganji members that resided in villages, not in temple towns, and did not belong to the clergy might not have found exclusion as costly.

Even on a spiritual level, expulsion from Honganji was problematic, due to a particular nuance with the True Pure Land's religion. Recall that Honganji's teachings preached salvation when one placed one's faith wholly in Amida, and that there was no place for the True Pure Land's priests or Patriarchs to act as mediators in attaining salvation. The priesthood of the sect could only monitor the members and ensure that they stay true to Shinran's teachings and do not propagate heresy. In this sense, according to Tsang (2007: 71), the threat of expulsion would have been paradoxically beneficial to strong believers:

Expulsion from the sect might be conducive to true faith in that it could make one realize even more deeply that he or she has no possible way to reach salvation except by putting the whole process in Amida's hands.

The situation was further complicated by the fact that until the 1530 s, the Patriarchs could not reform religious institutions in order to tweak the costs and benefits of rebellious participation due to the *ikkeshū* system, which Rennyō developed in the 1470 s. The *ikkeshū* were temples constructed in regions with significant Honganji presence. The heads of *ikkeshū* temples were generally Rennyō's brothers and descendants, who wielded ample regional power and following, and were meant to maintain orthodoxy within the sect, as well as to form an advisory council for the Patriarch (Tsang, 1995: 77–78). While Rennyō placed a great value on securing the sect's orthodoxy, in practice, the *ikkeshū* system often opposed the Patriarchs both politically and doctrinally (Tsang, 2007: 127) and prevented the Honganji's leaders from tweaking the teachings in order to influence the sect members' behaviors.

We can thus see why Honganji members would not join large-scale rebellions at the time. The costs of participation outweighed benefits in the rebellion-based calculus, while non-participation was not costly enough. Moreover, the Patriarchs at the time could not easily reform their "club," in order to influence the decisions of their fellow sectarians. However, 1531 sparked an in-sect conflict called the *dai-shō ikki*, the aftermath of which allowed large-scale rebellions to take off.

3.2 Religious reforms and large-scale rebellions

The *dai-shō ikki* was a power struggle between the tenth Honganji Patriarch Shōnyō, and the "three temples" faction of the *ikkeshū* council (Tsang, 2005: 56). The spark for the conflict was a land dispute that arose due to the defeat of Hosokawa Takakuni, a warlord who took hold of the shogunate. However, in 1531, during a war against Hosokawa Harumoto and his ally Miyoshi Motonaga, Takakuni died on a battlefield, and his lands in Etchū province, which neighbored Kaga, became vacant. Some of the land in Etchū had large numbers of Honganji adherents, and Shōnyō's retainers Raijō, Jikken and Raishū from the so-called Echizen temples⁶ of Kaga seized this land before it could be allotted to Harumoto and Motonaga's allies (Tsang, 2005: 72).

However, *ikkeshū* council members from the three temples of Honsenji, Shōkōji, and Kōkyōji located in Kaga, opposed this move. In an attempt to exercise their regional power, the three temples attacked the Echizen temples in May of 1531, thus igniting a province-wide sect war. The conflict lasted for half a year and ended in the utter defeat of the three temples by the Patriarch's faction.

The outcome of the conflict was crucial for fostering Honganji's large-scale rebellions. Victory in the *dai-shō ikki* by Shōnyō's faction consolidated the power of the Patriarch, as the *ikkeshū* council lost the majority of its power, with dissenters either committing suicide or being expelled from the sect. Without the opposition from the *ikkeshū*, Shōnyō could now tweak the teachings in order to incentivize large-scale religious rebellions.

These incentives resulted from the development of the *goshō gomen*, or an after-life pardon doctrine, which allowed Shōnyō and his successors to *personally guarantee* Amida's paradise to their followers or condemn them to hell upon expulsion from the sect (Repp, 2020: 383). In Honganji's religious terms, the guarantee of spiritual salvation or

⁶ The Echizen temples were called so as they were originally constructed in Echizen. However, as the result of rebellions in 1506, the temples were destroyed, and their head priests moved to Kaga in order to reconstruct them.

condemnation from its Patriarchs was heresy, as Rennyō and his son, the ninth Honganji Patriarch Jitsunyo devoted themselves to only *guiding* their followers to Amida's salvation (Tsang, 1995: 15). However, with the recent increase in the power of the Patriarch, there was virtually no opposition in the sect toward such religious developments.

The *goshō gomen* significantly affected the costliness of excommunication from the Honganji. Apart from the sheer spiritual cost of being consigned to hell, due to the exclusionary nature of the Honganji faith, such condemnation meant that an ex-sectarian could find no hope for salvation outside the sect. For strong believers, such a prospect instilled "terrors" (Tsang, 2007: 71). The expulsion also took on a costlier material aspect for village residents, as Honganji-dominated rural communities began excluding the hell-condemned individuals after the development of the *goshō gomen*. Hell-condemned individuals were considered religiously corrupt, and "association with an excommunicated person was said to result in eternal damnation" (Solomon, 1974: 410). The costliness of exclusion from village communities was extreme, as in some cases "no one was willing to extend even fire for kindling to the outcast" (Solomon, 1974: 410), and in 1532, an insubordinate priest and his ten followers died from starvation after being condemned to hell and banished from their village (Tsang, 1995: 90). According to one of the priests in the temple of Hompukuji, "None who is excommunicated escapes hell. What is more, in this life he is shunned by mankind and dies of starvation" (Solomon, 1974: 410).

Utilizing this increased costliness of exclusion, the Patriarchs indeed threatened punishment for non-participation in rebellions, and under Shōnyō, the punishment applied "as swiftly as the flight of a three-feathered arrow" (Solomon, 1974: 410; Tsang, 2007: 171). Eleventh Patriarch Kenyō also did not shy away from threatening non-participants with expulsion, as evidenced by his sect-wide letter, which called for a rebellion against Nobunaga: "Anyone who does not respond [to the Patriarch's call] will not be a sect member" (Tsang, 2007: 223).

The *goshō gomen* doctrine also reduced the costs of rebellious participation for strong believers with its promises of attaining paradise, especially if one were to die for the sect's cause. Consider the following letter from the Patriarch Shōnyō, written to sect members in the village of Noda, near Osaka, during the large-scale rebellion of 1531–1536 (Tsang, 2007: 191):

Twenty-one people died in today's battle. This is necessarily a painful thing, but it is certainly [a] blessed [thing] to be called an ally of the saint Shinran. There is no doubt that the people who died in battle achieved rebirth in the Pure Land. More than ever, I ask your help. Please pass on this message to the relatives of those who died.

Likewise, the eleventh Patriarch Kenyō in the rebellion of 1570–1580, also assured his fellow sectarians through letters that "helping in battle would show that the member had a fundamental desire for rebirth in Amida's paradise" (Tsang, 2007: 230–231). The promise of paradise later crystallized into the famous phrase flown upon Honganji banners in the fight against Nobunaga, "Advance and be reborn in paradise; retreat and fall immediately into hell" (Tsang, 2010: 92).

While the promise of attaining paradise was purely spiritual in nature, it may have incentivized many members to participate. Religion permeated the Japanese world view at the time of Sengoku, as the world was thought to be filled with deities and spirits (Tsang, 2007: 37), and a guarantee of paradise, issued by the esteemed Patriarch himself, had "tremendous potential to motivate the believers" (Tsang, 1995: 207), up to the point where it is "difficult to think of a more powerful tool for the Honganji to have developed" (Tsang, 1995: 92). Consider, for instance, the notes of a European traveler from 1561 (Cooper,

1965: 319), who documented just how fervently some Honganji followers desired salvation, as they looked at their Patriarch with.

such ... veneration that even a glimpse of him moves them to tears as they beg him to absolve them from their sins. ... Every year a great festival is held in his honour, and so many people wait at the gate of the temple to enter that many die in the stampede which results when they open the gates.

Overall, Tsang (2007: 242) summarizes that “without the popular belief that they held the keys to paradise and hell,” the Honganji Patriarchs would have been unable to command their members on such a large scale. As a result, the religious reforms played a crucial role in the successful organization of Honganji’s large-scale rebellions.

4 Conclusion

In the end, despite successfully launching their large-scale rebellions, the sect would not pursue similar activities in the future. Nobunaga severely battered Honganji, and his successor in the effort of unifying Japan, Hideyoshi Toyotomi, delivered another blow to the sect’s rebellious capacity by pursuing the policy of “obliterating religion as a political force” (White, 1995: 116). Afterwards, the reigning Tokugawa clan itself “was established as an antireligious entity” (White, 1995: 116). The shogunate went to great lengths especially in regard to Honganji, weakening the sect by splitting it into two parts, the Higashi Honganji (Eastern Honganji), and the Nishi Honganji (Western Honganji). Additionally, the general policies of the Tokugawa shogunate in the seventeenth century were aimed at curbing the power of religious organizations and keeping the temples under the government’s control. The temples’ economic privileges were removed, and religious debate prohibited. The threat of large-scale rebellions from Honganji was stamped out, however, the sect ensured its survival and exists in Japan up to this day.

While my paper stresses the role that religious reforms played in fostering Honganji’s large-scale rebellions, there may be alternative and/or complementary arguments that explain the participation of sect members. In one sense, Honganji’s rebellion of 1532 was aided by the decision of Hosokawa Masamoto to punish the entire sect, thus restructuring the payoff from participating in large-scale rebellions from receiving a benefit to a loss prevention. Due to hysteresis effects and greater sensitivity to losses than gains (Quattrone & Tversky, 1988), “dissidents may ... devote more energy to preventing something bad from happening than to obtaining something good” (Lichbach, 1994a: 14–15). According to Tsang (1995: 206), members who might otherwise not be inclined to join a rebellion, “might well do so if it were to defend their religion, its seat and its leaders.” In regard to the rebellion against Nobunaga, Kennyō utilized a similar approach, by claiming that Nobunaga’s depredations threaten the “law of the Buddha” (Tsang, 2007: 228). Furthermore, in the rebellion of 1570–1580, technological developments may have also played a role, with the introduction of the arquebus, and such technology could raise the perception of a rebellious victory. As evidenced by Sugiyama (1994: 65–66), Honganji members had access to the weapon and utilized it quite liberally.

Honganji’s methods of incentivizing participation in large-scale rebellions were not perfect. Some temple towns refused to join the Honganji in their war against Nobunaga, and in one instance, the sectarians even “ended up attacking their own temple town, Kuboji.” (Tsang, 1995: 58) Perhaps these sectarians did not feel as strongly about the promise of

paradise or condemnation to hell, or perhaps Nobunaga was able to entice them with greater benefits by going against the Honganji. Yet, the rebellious accomplishments of the sect overall cannot be understated, even with these setbacks in mind.

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