

“Popes, Bishops and War Criminals: Reflections on Catholics and Yasukuni in Post-War Japan”

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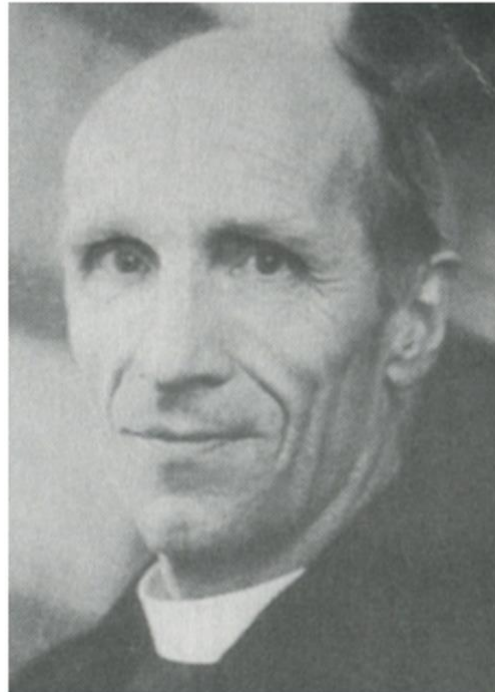
Among the many groups for which the Yasukuni Shrine raises important questions is Japan's Christian population. In 1988, for example, the Japanese Supreme Court rejected the claim of Nakaya Yasuko, the Christian widow of an officer in Japan's Self Defense Force, who objected on religious grounds to her husband's enshrinement as a Shinto deity at a shrine affiliated with Yasukuni. Yet, as John Breen's survey of Catholic responses to Yasukuni indicates, relations between Christian authorities and the shrine are often complex. At one level, of course, is a basic theological question: to what extent can Catholics participate in rituals associated with non-Christian religious traditions? Interestingly, the Vatican (in a continuation of policies set down when Yasukuni was an institution of State Shinto) affirmed that Catholics may, in fact, participate in such rituals, insofar as those rites serve as expressions of patriotism. At the same time, however, Yasukuni has raised criticism from the Catholic Bishops in Japan, especially regarding the threat posed by government support of the shrine to the constitutional separation of religion and state power. Catholic politicians and intellectuals, meanwhile, run the gamut from outright apologetics for the shrine to advocacy for a more secular memorial. In his concluding comments, Breen carefully outlines the various issues at stake, and suggests that no simple solution is likely to address them all.

Popes, Bishops and War Criminals: reflections on Catholics and Yasukuni in post-war Japan¹

John Breen

In November 1945, General McArthur invited two Catholic priests to GHQ to sound them out on a proposal he was poised to implement, namely the razing of Yasukuni, the Tokyo shrine dedicated to the Japanese war dead. The priests were Bruno Bitter, SJ, head of Sophia University, and Patrick Byrne, Maryknoll. Both men quickly declared their opposition. It was, they insisted, the right and duty of citizens everywhere to honour their war dead; Yasukuni was, moreover, a national monument to the war dead, which honoured men and women of all faiths equally, and not merely a Shinto shrine; finally, GHQ's plans to destroy Yasukuni would be so damaging as to imperil the entire Occupation endeavour. McArthur was persuaded by these arguments, and Yasukuni was spared. Yasukuni owes its survival, then, in post war Japan to the intercession of two Catholic priests. While this author has found no independent evidence to corroborate this intriguing story, Fr Shimura Tatsuya recounts it in his book *Kyōkai hiwa*, and he for one is persuaded.²

The Catholic-Yasukuni relationship in post-war Japan is but a minor plotline in Yasukuni's dynamic post war history, although it assumed some real importance for the brief duration of Asō Tarō's 麻生太郎 premiership (September 2008 to September 2009). After all, Asō was Japan's first Catholic premier and a staunch Yasukuni advocate. Here I offer some post-Asō reflections on the Catholic-Yasukuni relationship in the full knowledge that they are more revealing of the Catholic Church than they are of Yasukuni shrine.



Fr. Bruno Bitter

In what follows, I discuss first of all the contrary positions, by turns conciliatory and critical, of the Vatican and of Japanese Bishops on the 'Yasukuni problem.' This 'problem' hinges, of

course, on state patronage of the shrine, which is contentious on at least two counts: it is a ‘legal’ problem since the Constitution provides for the separation of religion and state; and a ‘symbolic’ one since Yasukuni enshrines Japan’s A-class war criminals. Against this institutional position, I set the views of some prominent Catholic intellectuals. What is striking is that, on the whole, these Catholics distance themselves from the critical stance of the Japanese bishops, and share with the Vatican, and indeed with former PM Asō, a broadly positive ‘take’ on Yasukuni. My method here is to introduce faithfully a selection of their views, and let the reader judge their merits. In the final section, the present author, who is also a Catholic, offers his own argument on Yasukuni and the challenges it poses in the 21st century.



Asō Tarō, Japan’s Catholic prime minister (2008-9)

The Vatican, the Bishops and War criminals

Sometime in 1975, Pope Paul VI granted an audience in the Vatican to a Japanese Buddhist monk called Nakata Junna 仲田順和. Nakata was the head-priest at the Honsenji 品川寺, a Shingon temple of the Daigoji 醍醐寺 lineage in Shinagawa, Tokyo. He was also an admirer of Pope Paul’s cultivation of dialogue with people of all faiths and people of none. His hope was that the pontiff might say a Mass for the repose of the souls of the 1,618 men condemned as Class A, B and C war criminals. In the tale as it is related by Nagoshi Futaranosuke 名越二荒之助, Pope Paul spoke of the Tokyo war crimes tribunal that condemned the Class A criminals as ‘an embarrassment,’ and he promised to say the Mass requested of him.³ Nakata Junna, incidentally, inherited his concern for the war criminals from his late father, Junkai 順海、 who had built a memorial hall (the Eireidō 英霊堂) in the grounds of the Honsenji temple. The hall commemorates not only Japan’s war criminals but the so-called *gakutohei* 学徒兵 students who were pulled out of the university and mobilized from 1943, ill-prepared for battle. Beneath the eaves of the Honsenji memorial hall, hangs a bell inscribed with the names of seven of the Class A war criminals. Pilgrims ring the bell and pray for the repose of their souls.⁴



The Honsenji temple in Shinagawa

Pope Paul VI died in 1978 before he was able to fulfil his promise, but in April 1980, a letter arrived at the Honsenji from the Vatican, explaining that Pope John Paul II intended to keep his predecessor's word. The Mass for 1,618 war criminals of Classes A, B and C would take place in St. Peter's on May 22nd of that year, and Nakata Junna was invited to attend. Junna duly did so in the company of the sculptor Hoshino Kōho 星野皓穂, who had spent the previous three years constructing a miniature replica of the Daigoji temple's 5-story pagoda, into which he placed the memorial tablets he had personally made for all 1,618 war criminals. This he took with him to Rome as a gift for the Pope. A contemporary photograph shows Pope John Paul II blessing the eight-foot high structure.⁵



Pope John Paul and Rev. Nakata Junna in St. Peter's Square, 22.5.80



Pope John Paul, Nakata Junna and the five-storied pagoda fashioned by Hoshino Kōho



The papal Mass in St. Peter's, 22.5.80

There is a context to the concern expressed by the two post-war pontiffs for the Japanese war criminals. The context is provided by a document styled *Pluries Instanterque*, issued by the Society for the Propagation of the Faith (*Propaganda Fide*) in 1951. Or rather, it was *re-issued* in 1951, for its origins go back to 1936. *Pluries Instanterque* was the Catholic Church's response to the prewar dilemma in which Catholics found themselves, when required by their university, say, to visit Yasukuni and other shrines, and makes acts of obeisance. The Catholic Church's position had been that Catholics' participation in shrine rites of any sort was unacceptable, and this in turn had led to the infamous Sophia University incident of 1932, the essential dynamic which is easily summarized: In May 1932, the University's military attaché took a party of students to Yasukuni, and ordered them to salute the war dead. Two, or perhaps three, students refused on the grounds that it compromised their beliefs. The Army Ministry responded to their refusal by withdrawing the military attaché from Sophia, thus doing irreparable harm to the university's reputation. The Archbishop of Tokyo, Jean Chambon, immediately sought the views of other bishops in Japan, and was persuaded that some flexibility was after all possible. In June, he informed the Army Ministry that Sophia students were now at liberty to salute the war dead. To prove the point, at least one hundred Sophia students participated fully in a Yasukuni rite to commemorate the first anniversary of the Manchurian incident in September 1932.

Subsequently, Sophia president Fr. Herman Hoffman himself paid a visit to Yasukuni to offer his respects. It was, anyway, to legitimate the new situation in Japan that the Propaganda Fide issues the document *Pluries Instanterque* four years later in 1936. As George Minamiki observes, *Pluries Instanterque* was a “liberating instruction”. It not only allowed Catholics to attend Shinto shrines; it positively encouraged them to attend. In so doing, it was informed by Education Ministry assurances that shrine practice had “only the significance of love of country”.⁶

The point to emphasise here is that in 1951 the Vatican reconfirmed its approval for Catholics’ participation in Yasukuni rites with the re-issue of *Pluries Instanterque*.⁷ Of course, there were in 1951 no Class A, or indeed Class B or C, war criminals enshrined in Yasukuni. The latter were enshrined in 1959 and the former in 1978 amid considerable secrecy.⁸ By the following year, however, the Class A war criminals’ enshrinement had become common knowledge. Pope John Paul celebrated his Mass in 1980. In light of the Church’s approach to Yasukuni and of the Papal Mass, it is not surprising that the Vatican has never problematised the shrine’s apotheosis of these men. What is striking, however, is that the Japanese Bishops have.

Such was not yet the case, however, in October 1981 when the Japanese Bishops issued a stern warning to PM Suzuki Zenkō 鈴木善幸 on Yasukuni. Their concern was uniquely with Japan’s post-war Constitution. They were galvanised by the latest in a series of LDP attempts to force a bill through the Diet for the nationalization of Yasukuni. The bill was a threat, argued the Bishops, to both the separation of religion and state, and to the freedom of religion, two principles at the ‘foundation of the Japanese Constitution.’⁹ To nationalize the shrine was to divest it of its post-war status as a religious corporation, and redefine it as a ‘special status, non-religious’ institution. The Bishops saw that the objective of the Suzuki administration was to clear the Constitutional way for Prime Ministers’ patronage of the shrine. After all, if the shrine were no longer ‘religious’ in law, no legal objection could be raised against Prime Ministers worshipping there. The Bishops also voiced their concerns that the proposed shift in Yasukuni’s status would enable the state to enforce citizens’ attendance at Yasukuni rites—just as had happened in pre-war Japan. As it turned out, the Bishops’ fears were groundless as the latest bill, like its predecessors, was rejected by the Diet.

The bishops made no reference to the war criminals here; nor did the Japanese Catholic Conference on Justice and Peace when it petitioned Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro 中曽根康弘 in 1985. The occasion was Nakasone’s historic pilgrimage to Yasukuni on August 15th of that year.¹⁰ The Conference demanded that Nakasone give ‘due acknowledgement’ to the principles of state-religion separation and religious freedom. The Conference was hardly reassured to learn that Nakasone’s act of worship there was so abbreviated that it incurred the wrath of the Yasukuni Chief priest.¹¹ In fact, Nakasone’s visit created such a diplomatic furor that he never returned, and it was to be another fifteen years before the Catholic Bishops had cause to speak out again on Yasukuni. Only now did they voice concerns about Yasukuni’s Class A war criminals. In August 2000, the Japanese bishops protested at official visits to Yasukuni by Prime Minister Mori Yoshirō 森喜朗 and Tokyo governor Ishihara Shintarō 石原慎太郎, and this was the argument they deployed:

Yasukuni today venerates Tōjō Hideki 東条英機 and other A class war criminals. At Yasukuni, all the men who engaged in killing on the Asiatic mainland and then died are venerated now as ‘glorious spirits’ (*eirei* 英霊).... The actions of Prime Minister [Mori] and his

cabinet are in no way different from the old association of militarism with state Shinto on the grounds that Shinto was ‘non-religious,’ an [association] which led Japan to wage aggressive war.

This was the first time the Bishops had cited the war criminals, and they were sufficiently concerned as to demand Prime Minister Mori’s immediate resignation.¹²

Twenty years later, the visit to Yasukuni of Prime Minister Koizumi Jun’ichirō 小泉純一郎 in October 2005 galvanized the Bishops once more. It did so principally because Koizumi’s visit came in the wake of two important court cases, one in the Fukuoka District Court in 2004 and another in the Osaka High Court in 2005. The judges in both cases dismissed the suits, which citizens groups had filed for damages. The judges found no evidence that the plaintiffs’ “legal interests” had been infringed. Both judges chose, however, to issue *obiter dicta* on the cases in question. *Obiter dicta* are not rulings but “expressions of opinion on matters of law”, and so “not of binding authority” (OED). It was the opinion of both men that Koizumi’s actions did indeed breach Article 20 of the Constitution.¹³ In their letter to Koizumi, the Japanese Bishops fully recognized the human desire to mourn the war dead and pray for the bereaved. They insisted, however, that his patronage of Yasukuni was altogether different. Yasukuni glorified war, and venerated Class A war criminals, and Koizumi’s presence there was a denial of Japan’s responsibility for war in Asia. His actions, they alleged, projected an image of Japan as a menace to its Asian neighbours.¹⁴ It is a matter of record that Koizumi was no more swayed by the Japanese Bishops than he was by the Fukuoka and Osaka judges. He returned boldly to Yasukuni in August 2006.

The most recent statement on Yasukuni by the Japanese Bishops dates from February 2007. The context was a growing concern within the Church, and in society at large, that the ruling LDP was retreating from the constitutional provision for state-religion separation. Evidence of retreat was there in the draft revision of the Constitution, which the LDP published in October 2005.¹⁵ The coincidence of this draft with other strident new Yasukuni proposals, not least by then-Foreign Minister Asō Tarō in 2006, was behind the Bishops’ statement. The Bishops found offensive the proposed revision to Article 20. The revised article, it is true, forbids ‘state involvement in religious education and religious practice,’ but it does so *only when* such practice ‘extends beyond the realm of social ritual and customary practices.’ In other words, practices that can be so defined are immune, and representatives of the state may engage in them with impunity. The Bishops were aware that this category was designed to accommodate state veneration of the war dead at Yasukuni. This was, of course, precisely the category of activity in which Yasukuni worship was located in the 1930s and 40s. The Bishops’ warning was stern: ‘The danger is ever present of [Japan] once again walking the path it walked before and during the war. [The LDP’s position] not only suggests their indifference to the principle of state-religion separation; [the revised Article 20] also constitutes a direct threat to the basic human right of religious freedom.’¹⁶

Catholic intellectuals

From the time of Mori Yoshirō’s premiership in 2000, then, the Catholic bishops of Japan began to take issue not only with the constitutional challenge posed by state patronage of Yasukuni, but also now with the ‘symbolic’ challenge of Yasukuni’s war criminal enshrinement. This position put them at odds with the Vatican and *Pluries Instanterque*. It is against this background that I

now shift my focus to the Yasukuni arguments of a select number of prominent Catholic intellectuals: Sono Ayako 曾野綾子, best selling Japanese novelist; her husband Miura Shumon 三浦朱門, himself a prize-winning novelist; Kevin Doak, an American historian of Japan, and Josef Pittau SJ, former president of Sophia University. Between them these intellectuals have constructed, through their publications in the popular press, the Catholic discourse on Yasukuni. All four are practicing Catholics, and discuss Yasukuni from a self-consciously Catholic perspective. Three of the four are 'pro-Yasukuni' so that their views are at odds with the position of the Japanese bishops and, at least Kevin Doak's, squarely in line with that of the Vatican. The fourth, Josef Pittau, is much more wary. All four are distinguished and authoritative voices, whose arguments merit our consideration.

Sono Ayako

Sono Ayako's identification with Yasukuni dates back to the early 1980s. She was one intellectual among several who contributed to a series of discussions on Yasukuni launched by then-PM Nakasone. The discussions began in 1984, and were styled *Kakuryō no Yasukuni jinja sanpai mondai ni kansuru kondankai* 閣僚の靖国神社参拝問題に関する懇談会 (or Yasukuni-kon 靖国懇, for short). The group, whose full title translates as 'Discussion group on problems relating to Cabinet worship at Yasukuni', was intended to clear the constitutional way for Nakasone's anniversary pilgrimage to Yasukuni in 1985. To assess Sono Ayako's contribution, we need to consider her own account, written nearly 20 years later.¹⁷ Sono's view of the Yasukuni problem in 1984, 'as a Christian and a Japanese citizen,' was that official prime ministerial visits posed a potential threat to religious freedom. Curiously, she was thinking here uniquely of prime ministers' religious freedom. That freedom would be infringed if, say, all PMs were obligated to worship at Yasukuni, and if a PM came to power whose religion prevented him from doing so. In such an extreme case, the PM's religious freedom would be infringed. Sono, unlike the LDP, stressed the fact of Yasukuni's religiosity, insisting no non-Japanese would accept the argument that Yasukuni rites were merely 'traditional, non-religious' practices. In fact, of course, she is here dismissing the position of the Catholic Church as articulated in *Pluries Instantantereque*.

Sono Ayako also believed, in 1984 at least, that prime ministerial visits to Yasukuni were 'unconstitutional'; this put her at odds with the majority view in Yasukuni kon. The solution, as she saw it, was for the state to create a new, European-style site for the war dead, with no linkage to any religion or religious group. Her criticisms of state patronage were, nonetheless, muted. Whether PMs attended Yasukuni; whether they went in an official car; and whether they paid for flowers out of public funds or their own pockets, were all matters for them to determine. These were 'minor issues' and, anyway, Sono for one saw no possibility of a 'revival of militarism'. Prime Ministers certainly should not feel obligated to respond to 'impotent' journalists' questions as to whether they headed to Yasukuni in a private or official capacity.

Such was Sono Ayako's position in the 1980s: a new site was ideal since Prime Ministerial patronage of Yasukuni was unconstitutional, but that patronage was understandable. There is no suggestion that Sono shared the concerns which the Japanese Bishops conveyed to Suzuki Zenkō, for example. And there is no reference, critical or otherwise, to the war criminals' presence in Yasukuni's pantheon. Sono's Yasukuni writings since then have not been voluminous, but she has turned her thoughts to Yasukuni in several different fora. In the 1990s, as a president of Nippon Zaidan 日本財団 (Nippon Foundation), she reiterated her 1985

position and, then, in 2005, in an article for the very right wing journal, *Shokun* 諸君 she abandoned that position. In the article, entitled ‘Yasukuni ni mairimasu’ (靖国に参ります I am heading to Yasukuni), she recalls her 1985 views, but she is now more understanding of Yasukuni and its post-war dilemma. Yasukuni had religiosity forced upon it by the Occupation, and its very survival depended on it restyling itself a religious juridical person. Sono clearly now understands Yasukuni as something other than a ‘religious’ site. In this article, she also relates a pivotal encounter with a war veteran. The unnamed man, ‘who had lost many classmates in the war’, heads to Yasukuni every year. He persuaded her [we are given to understand] that Yasukuni is ‘a place where men feel peace in their innermost being.’ Sono is quickly won over, and reflects with sorrow that so many of today’s youths prefer Disneyland or shopping in Shibuya to Yasukuni. Sono’s war veteran encounter explains why she was now broadcasting to *Shokun* readers that she and her husband, Miura Shumon, would both be heading to Yasukuni on 15 August, 2005.¹⁸

Absent from Sono’s essay is any suggestion that Yasukuni remains a ‘problem’ at all. Rather, she writes: ‘A nation that forgets to show gratitude to those who sacrificed themselves for the nation cannot survive... People cannot live without patriotism... Patriotism is not a high-level article of faith; it is an indispensable item, like a pot or a stove, without which life is unliveable.’ Yasukuni, it seems, has now become for Sono Ayako just such an indispensable item. There is, in this essay, no further reflection on the constitutional challenges posed by Yasukuni and once again no consideration of the war criminals’ controversial presence. Her views are aligned squarely with Yasukuni apologists, who insist Yasukuni worship is not religious but ‘a Japanese custom or practice.’ In an article she wrote for the *Sankei shinbun* 産経新聞 also in 2005, she argued, indeed, that ‘The meaning of Yasukuni in the post war has been transformed. It has become a site that transcends religion. It no longer glorifies war; it is a place where war and its tragedy are mourned.’¹⁹

Miura Shumon

Space here does not permit an in-depth appraisal of Miura Shumon’s Yasukuni views, but he is the author of a book on Yasukuni styled *Yasukuni jinja: tadashiku rikai suru tame ni* (靖国神社：正しく理解するために Yasukuni shrine: towards a correct understanding), and the key points of his argument bear brief elucidation.²⁰ Miura structures his defence of Yasukuni—for that is what it amounts to—around two fundamental points: 1) that Shinto stands in opposition to no creed anywhere; it is an extremely primitive religion (*taihen genshiteki na shūkyō* 大変原始的な宗教), rather, that worships ancestors, expresses awe before nature, abhors impurity, and strives for the purification of the spirit;²¹ and 2) that Yasukuni shrine is a Shinto site of mourning which, owing to the intrinsic nature of Shinto, ‘transcends religion.’ Naturally, then, Miura himself experiences no discomfort when receiving a Shinto purification or, indeed, when paying his respects at Yasukuni.²² ‘I intend to go there on pilgrimage on 15 August, the day of war’s end. My purpose is to reflect with sorrow on the many who sacrificed themselves to build today’s Japan, who died leaving behind all sorts of memories.’²³

On the war criminals, whose presence at Yasukuni greatly taxes the Japanese Bishops, Miura writes that they died ‘in connection with the Second world war’ and, in that sense, are ‘no different from the war dead.’²⁴ He grants that some of them ‘no doubt committed acts of violence on local people, and abused prisoners of war,’ but insists the war tribunal was itself ‘an act of

revenge.’ Anyway, once these men are dead they are, ‘according to the Japanese view of religion’, all Buddhas and kami.²⁵ Miura Shumon concludes his argument with a striking and challenging statement: ‘I do not recognize Shinto as a religion, and it is precisely this which enables me to recognize both the [Yasukuni] shrine and the kami venerated there.’²⁶

Kevin Doak

Kevin Doak, who teaches Japanese history at Georgetown University, is one of the most consistently interesting academic writers of his generation. His research focuses on Japan’s experience of nationalism and modernity. Doak’s thinking on Yasukuni has been published widely in the right-wing Japanese media such as the *Sankei* newspaper, and the journals *Voice* and *Shokun*. Only recently, however, has he made his views known in English in an important essay entitled ‘A religious perspective on the Yasukuni Shrine controversy.’

Doak’s position is that there is no constitutional impediment to Japanese Prime Ministers’ visiting Yasukuni; Prime Ministerial visits neither violate the separation of state-religion nor threaten the religious freedom of any Japanese citizen.²⁷ In adopting this position, he is informed by the afore-mentioned *Pluries Instanterque*, and its acceptance of the Japanese government’s definition of Yasukuni in the 1930s as a civic, patriotic site. As we have seen, it sanctioned Catholics’ visits there as ‘purely of civic value.’ Doak stresses the significance of the re-issue of this document in 1951, and sees it as a natural reflection of the Catholic Church’s tolerant theological thinking, and its broadminded approach to Shinto before, during and after the war.²⁸

Doak is clear there are things that no Catholic must do at Yasukuni: they must not, for example, pray to a dead soldier as a kami, nor must they leave the impression that they are so doing. Nonetheless, in line with *Pluries Instanterque*, he argues that Catholics’ displays of respect to the war dead at Yasukuni, acts of patriotism and prayers to Jesus Christ there are fine and, indeed, desirable.²⁹ Doak insists on Catholics’ moral obligation to pray for the dead, especially ‘notable sinners,’ and his position on the war criminals is distinctive. Like many historians of both liberal and conservative streaks, and indeed the Vatican itself, he regards the Tokyo war crimes tribunal as a travesty; he insists, anyway, that we have no right to stand God-like in judgment over the war criminals. He rejects as preposterous the argument that a Prime Minister’s veneration at Yasukuni amounts to his approval of the actions of Tōjō Hideki and others. For Doak, this is every bit as absurd as proposing that US presidents advocate slavery when they honour the war dead at Arlington, just because Confederates are buried there.³⁰ He refuses to allow that only the Japanese who waged war on the US and Asia are condemned as war criminals, while the American atomic bombing of Hiroshima 広島 and Nagasaki 長崎 and its firebombing of Tokyo are not recognised as criminal.³¹ Doak has no truck, therefore, with proposals of Sono Ayako and others back in the 1980s, for the creation of a new non-religious memorial site, untainted by war criminals’ spirits. It should be equally obvious how far his own *Pluries Instanterque*-informed position is from that now adopted by fellow Catholics Sono and Miura.

Doak welcomes Prime Ministerial visits to Yasukuni shrine, then, but the specific argument he deploys is striking. He sees Koizumi’s annual pilgrimages to Yasukuni as constituting a sequence of highly desirable ‘sacred acts’ in a dangerously secular world. Yasukuni’s value lies precisely in that it is a sacred site, and as such it offers a vital counter to secularism. This is the essence of Doak’s position:

I wish that [Koizumi] had abandoned his reserve and visited Yasukuni monthly or even weekly... to gain a greater familiarity with the sacred nature of the sacrifices that are commemorated there... Had he done so on the holy day of Sunday, and with much greater frequency, he could have made it clear to the world that his actions were not intended to glorify war or militarism, as is claimed by the Chinese, for example; rather that they were a spiritual response to issues of life and death. In order to pay one's respects to the war dead, prayers that transcend this world are necessary. And the sacred site of Yasukuni has a vital function in this regard for the Japanese people.³²

Josef Pittau

The three Catholic intellectuals discussed above share in common a distinctly positive take on Yasukuni and on the state's patronage of it, although they arrived by rather divergent paths. They may be exceptional Catholics, and it may well be true, as Fr. William Grimm asserts, that "most Catholics, like most Christians in Japan, tend to the left on the issue of Yasukuni, opposing visits by government officials and special status for the shrine".³³ There are, however, precious few Catholics, apart from the Japanese bishops, who put pen to paper to articulate an anti-Yasukuni position. One Catholic who bears mention in this context is Josef Pittau SJ. Pittau, erstwhile president of Sophia University (1968-1981) and esteemed historian, is a Jesuit priest and consecrated Archbishop. His views merit some consideration since they were actively sought by and published in the popular right-wing journal *Shokun* in 2006. Pittau's views have served to complicate the very well known Catholic position on Yasukuni as articulated by Sono, Miura and Doak.



Archbishop Joseph Pittau S.J.

Pittau, in his discussion with a Catholic *Shokun* reporter, affirms the right of Japanese Prime ministers to visit Yasukuni, but only if it is clear their actions do not compromise the separation of state and religion. "I believe it is extremely dangerous for Yasukuni to become *the* symbol of

Japan, to become its state religion. Are such concerns not strengthened by Koizumi visiting Yasukuni not as an individual, but as a prime minister representing the people of Japan?"³⁴ Pittau insists the Catholic Church does not problematise private visits to Yasukuni, and that he himself has visited and offered up prayers for the war dead there. However, he refutes the idea, championed by Sono and Miura, that Yasukuni is a supra-religious site to which the rules of separation of state and religion do not apply. "I cannot agree with the position that holds that Yasukuni is a special, state symbol that transcends religion". Such an idea, he notes,—apart from anything - else plays into the hands of the Chinese, enabling them to attack Japan for having revived state Shinto.³⁵ On the war and war crimes, Pittau says: "I believe it is a fact that the Japanese did terrible things in the war, beginning with Nanking." But "forgiveness is vital". The Chinese especially must learn to forgive. "[Without forgiveness], there will never be real peace in East Asia."³⁶ He does not criticise the enshrinement of the Class A war criminals, but he notes with regret that their presence at Yasukuni generated huge problems of a political character. It enables some to claim these men are innocents; such people, in making this claim, are using Yasukuni for their own political purposes. But so too, he insists, are the Chinese when they attack Japan for reviving militarism on account of its enshrinement of the war criminals.³⁷ For Pittau, Yasukuni is, indeed, a problem, but the problem lies uniquely in its intimacy with the state.

Yasukuni and the memory problem

The several views discussed above, along with the position of the Catholic bishops and, of course, the Vatican constitute the Catholic discourse on Yasukuni in the 21st century. But to this author, at least, they all miss several key points about Yasukuni in its present manifestation.³⁸ All sites to the war dead are sites of memory, but Yasukuni plays with the memory of past wars in a way that less encumbered sites, such as the Cenotaph in London and the Arlington national cemetery near Washington, cannot do. This has much to do with the fact that the Cenotaph and Arlington are not religious sites; but Yasukuni is. It is so in at least these senses: 1) it is defined in law as a religious corporation (*shūkyō hōjin*); 2) it is served by a dedicated, professional Shinto priesthood who perform recognizably Shinto rites of propitiation; 3) these Shinto rites take place in spaces that are readily identifiable, through their material symbols, as Shinto. The first and most important point about Yasukuni shrine is, indeed, that it exists for the performance of Shinto rites. The rites, which its priests perform for the war dead every morning and evening of every day of the year, are of two types: 'apotheosis' and 'propitiation.' During and immediately after the war, Yasukuni priests performed Shinto rites of apotheosis to render the war dead as Shinto *kami* or gods. Today, however, the vast majority of rites are acts of propitiation. They involve, that is, priests presenting offerings to these *kami* to pacify them and ensure they bestow their blessings on the living. The problem here is that Yasukuni propitiates all the Japanese war dead, without discrimination. Why is this a problem?

Yasukuni and its apologists often refer to the war dead as *eirei* or 'glorious/heroic spirits,' and there is no doubt that the pantheon includes men who exhibited extraordinary courage: men who willingly sacrificed their lives for their fellow men, for imperial Japan and for the emperor. However, the pantheon also includes others like the hundreds of thousands of men who died of starvation in, say, the New Guinea campaign. It includes, too, the commanders who botched the New Guinea campaign and many others besides, condemning young Japanese soldiers to the most humiliating and painful of deaths.³⁹ The consequence of Yasukuni's indiscriminate apotheosis and propitiation of these men is that the reality of Japanese military conduct in the

Pacific War is consigned to oblivion. Yasukuni rites dramatize the war uniquely as a noble undertaking of heroes and heroic action, and leave no scope for reflection on war's brutality and cruelty. There is no encouragement to reflect on the terrible suffering the Japanese inflicted across Asia, or indeed on the suffering that many Japanese, both soldiers and civilians, themselves underwent. The apotheosis and glorification of the war dead, understandable perhaps in wartime, serves after war's end to bury the trauma of suffering and to absolve the state of its responsibilities.⁴⁰

There is another vital point to make about Yasukuni, which concerns ethical values. Yasukuni, more than any other Shinto shrine with the exception of Ise 伊勢, is an imperial site. It is styled a *chokusaisha* 勅祭社 or 'shrine privileged to receive imperial offerings,' and every year at the autumn and spring festivals it receives a gift-bearing emissary dispatched from his palace by the emperor. Its rites are frequently patronized by imperial princes. Visually, too, it is unmistakably imperial: its buildings are draped with banners and lit with lanterns, all sporting the imperial sixteen-petaled chrysanthemum; its great wooden gate is embossed with a gold chrysanthemum. But above all, Yasukuni is imperial in that it celebrates the sacrifices of the war-dead on the emperor's behalf. Yasukuni venerates the war dead as paragons of those imperial values of loyalty, self-sacrifice and patriotism, and it holds those values up as the ideal. Yasukuni, its priests and apologists see these values as twenty-first century Japan's salvation; this is a most important point for understanding Yasukuni in the present.

Take for example Kobori Keiichirō 小堀圭一郎, emeritus professor of Tokyo University, and perhaps the most prolific of many such pro-Yasukuni intellectuals. For him, Yasukuni is about nothing so much as the ethical regeneration of post-war society. Kobori laments that today's youth have no sense of gratitude for having been born Japanese. If only they could witness the Prime Minister and the emperor worshipping the heroic war dead at Yasukuni, their attitude, he is persuaded, would be transformed.⁴¹ It is Yasukuni's ethical obsession that explains, in turn, why the shrine is today a magnet for ultra right-wing groups. These groups understand Yasukuni for what it is: the ultimate expression of those war-time imperial values that they laud. No one who visits Yasukuni today can fail to be struck by the anomaly between the shrine's claims to be a place of peace on the one hand and, on the other, the often intimidating and sometimes violent activities there of right-wing activists. Yasukuni and its apologists have effectively appropriated the war dead for their own narrow political purposes. They have turned a site of mourning into a place of propaganda. In the view of this author, it is here, in the related realms of memory and ethics, that the real Yasukuni problem lies.

Conclusion

In the post-war period, the Vatican has engaged with Yasukuni in two important ways: the re-issue of *Pluries Instante* in 1951 which confirmed that Japanese Catholics were at liberty to participate in Shinto rites; and the papal Mass for the war criminals in 1980, shortly after their enshrinement in Yasukuni. In contrast to the Vatican, the Japanese bishops have spoken out whenever they espied an imminent threat to the principles of state-religion separation and religious freedom. Latterly, they articulated new concerns about Yasukuni's enshrinement of war criminals. By contrast, Catholic intellectuals, at least the three of the four surveyed here, share an altogether more positive 'take' on Yasukuni. Sono, Miura and Doak do not share the concerns of the Catholic bishops; nor do they regard Yasukuni or its patronage by the state as constituting any sort of problem. Miura and Sono have arrived at a position that is indistinguishable from far-

right wing Yasukuni apologists. Doak's position is informed, rather, by the Church's *Pluries Instanteque*, and he has fashioned his own unique perspective on the value of Yasukuni to secular Japanese society. It is only Pittau who offers a contrasting and complicating perspective.

A concluding word is in order on Japan's Catholic Prime Minister for a year, Asō Tarō. Asō was keenly aware of Yasukuni as a problem, so much so that he refrained from visiting the shrine during his premiership. This was not, it is clear, on account of his Catholic beliefs, which have featured nowhere in his Yasukuni theorising; nor was it obviously for reasons diplomatic. For Asō, the problem is Constitutional and it arises because of Yasukuni's undeniable religiosity. Asō's solution involves redefining the shrine as 'non-religious'. This is the position he articulated in a position paper in 2006, which is still available on his website.⁴² Asō's concern is simply that state representatives must be able to mourn the war dead without breaching the Constitution. The shrine must, in his view, divest itself of its religious symbolism, and forego its legal status as a religious juridical person. It can then be nationalised and so 'return' to its 'non-religious' origins. This is a re-working of the Yasukuni bill idea that last reared its head in the premiership of Suzuki Zenkō. At least, this seems to be the case, but Asō fails to articulate what he means by 'religious symbolism' and, indeed, returning to 'non-religious origins'. It is striking, anyway, that he describes his 'ideal' Yasukuni in terms that are distinctly religious: Yasukuni should be a 'quiet, solemn place of prayer'; the state would 'venerate' the war dead there; the emperor would 'worship' there; its rites would be 'spirit-pacifying,' even as they were 'non-religious' and 'traditional.' Even the new (and very ungainly) name he has proposed has a distinctly religious ring to it: 'The Yasukuni shrine, a national site of mourning (spirit-summoning shrine).'⁴³

There is a fatal flaw in Asō's 'solution', however. For he fails to take account of the wishes of the 100 and more Yasukuni priests. The priests would certainly welcome a privileged relationship with the state, but not if it involves a stripping of the shrine's Shinto religious symbolism. They, after all, devote their lives to propitiating the Yasukuni kami in what are unmistakably Shinto rites. Asō's failure to consider their fate is just one reason why Japan's former Catholic Prime Minister, for all his enthusiasm, is unlikely to hold the key to the enduring problem that is Yasukuni.⁴⁴

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Notes

¹ This is a revised and updated version of an article that appeared in *Japan Mission Journal*, 63, 2 (2009) under the title "'The danger is ever present": Catholic critiques of Yasukuni shrine in post-war Japan'. The author wishes to thank Mark Selden for his insightful comments.

² Shimura, *Kyōkai hiwa*, pp. 203-6.

³ Nagoshi relates this story in several places, including Nagoshi, 'Shōwa junnansha' .pp.6-7

⁴ Nagoshi, 'Shōwa junnansha', p.6.

⁵ The photographs of Pope John Paul with Nakata Junna, of the pagoda and of the Mass in St. Peter's, are taken from Nagoshi ed., *Sekai ni hirakareta Shōwa no sensō kinenkan*, pp. 162-5.

⁶ See George Minamiki's discussion of *Pluries Instanterque* (*The Chinese rites controversy*, pp.154-8.). Minamiki locates his discussion of the dilemma faced by the Catholic Church in the broader context of the Chinese rites controversy.

⁷ Doak, 'A religious perspective on the Yasukuni Shrine controversy', pp. 49-51.

⁸ On the enshrinement of the Class A war criminals, see Breen, "Introduction: a Yasukuni genealogy". ,

⁹ 'Shinkyō no jiyū to seikyō bunri ni kansuru yōbō.' This document can be viewed online [here](#).

¹⁰ See the document *Yasukuni jinja kōshiki sanpai hantai yōbō sho* on line [here](#). On Nakasone's visit in its international context, see Rose, 'Stalemate'.

¹¹ On Nakasone's visit and the rage of Chief Priest Matsudaira, see Breen, 'Voices of rage'.

¹² Katorikku chūō kyōgi kai shuppan bu ed., *Katorikku kyōkai no shakai mondai*. p. 174. What in fact led to Mori's resignation was his infamous speech declaring Japan to be a land of the gods. On Mori and Shinto, see Breen and Teeuwen, *A new history of Shinto*, Chapter 6.

¹³ On the significance of these *obiter dicta*, see Breen, "Voices of rage".

¹⁴ The Bishops' letter can be viewed online [here](#). The bishops also drew Koizumi's attention here to their statement of August styled '[The non-violent path to peace](#)' (Hibōryoku ni yoru heiwa e no michi).

¹⁵ The draft can be viewed and down-loaded [here](#).

¹⁶ Nihon katorikku shikyō kyōgi kai, shakai shikyō iinkai ed., *Shinkyō no jiyū to seikyō bunri*, pp. 10-16.

¹⁷ Sono, 'Yasukuni ni mairimasu,' pp. 36-41 and Sono, 'Kakuryō no Yasukuni jinja sanpai mondai,' pp. 22-25.

¹⁸ Sono, 'Yasukuni ni mairimasu,' p.41. To understand Sono's shift in position, it is no doubt useful to note her denialist credentials. Especially notable in this regard is her writing on the Okinawan campaign, her denial that the military ordered citizens to commit mass suicide, and her dispute over historical facts with the Nobel prize winner Ōe Kenzaburō, the author of *Okinawa No-to* 沖縄ノート (岩波書店 1970). For a dispassionate overview of the issues at stake here, see Rabson, "Case dismissed".

¹⁹ Sono, *Sankei Shinbun*, 27 June 2005.

²⁰ Miura, *Yasukuni jinja*.

²¹ Miura, *Yasukuni jinja*, pp.63-4; p. 66; p. 78-80. Miura reiterates here the Shinto establishment's view of Shinto, which of course merits our attention. For a critical appraisal of just this understanding of Shinto, see Breen and Teeuwen, *A new history of Shinto*.

²² Miura, *Yasukuni jinja*, p. 70; 80.

²³ Miura, *Yasukuni jinja*, p. 80. On the war dead's role in the construction of post war Japan, see Breen, 'Yasukuni and the loss of historical memory,' pp. 155-8.

²⁴ Miura, *Yasukuni jinja*, p. 84.

²⁵ Miura, *Yasukuni jinja*, p. 85.

²⁶ Miura, *Yasukuni jinja*, p. 86. Note that Miura refers to Shinto on p.66 as a ‘primitive religion’ even though here he denies it is any sort of religion. Note, too, that Miura and Sono find space in their latest book, *Fūfu koron* [A couple’s arguments] to promote their views on Yasukuni. Yasukuni is one subject on which they do not argue.

²⁷ This position, it has to be said, is stated rather than argued in this essay. Doak, ‘A religious perspective,’ p. 52; p.58.

²⁸ Doak, ‘A religious perspective,’ p.51.

²⁹ Doak, ‘A religious perspective,’ p.65.

³⁰ *Ib.*, pp.55-6.

³¹ *Ib.*, pp. 61-2.

³² *Ib.*, 53-4.

³³ Grimm, “The Catholic Church and Yasukuni shrine”

³⁴ Pittau, “Katorikku daishikyō”, p. 53.

³⁵ Pittau, “Katorikku daishikyō”, p. 55.

³⁶ Pittau, “Katorikku daishikyō”, p. 58.

³⁷ Pittau, “Katorikku daishikyō”, p. 57.

³⁸ For a fuller and better documented version of these arguments, see Breen, ‘Yasukuni and the loss of historical memory.’

³⁹ On Yasukuni and the New Guinea campaign, see Breen, ‘Voices of rage’.

⁴⁰ Breen, ‘Yasukuni and the loss of historical memory,’ pp. 144-48. A fuller understanding of how Yasukuni invokes the memory of the past demands a consideration of Yasukuni’s Yūshūkan war museum. For diverse takes on the museum and its exhibits, see Nelson, “Social memory as ritual practice”; Breen, “Yasukuni and the loss of historical memory”, and Nitta, “And why shouldn’t the Prime Minister?”.

⁴¹ Breen, ‘Yasukuni and the loss of historical memory’, pp. 158-60.

⁴² ‘Yasukuni ni iyasaka are’ (Long live Yasukuni) can be viewed [here](#). Asō prefaces his comments by saying they constitute his private opinion, and have ‘nothing whatsoever’ to do with his role as Foreign minister.

⁴³ In Japanese, it is Kokuritsu tsuitō shisetsu Yasukuni sha (shōkonsha).

⁴⁴ For a very positive appraisal of his ideas, see Tōgō, *Rekishi to gaikō*, pp.58-9.

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