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'Greening Dharma': Contemporary Japanese Buddhism and Ecology

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Abstract

Buddhist environmentalism in Japan during the last few decades manifests through various discussions and forms of activism and is characterized by the use of popular Buddhist ideas, such as aversion to greed, interdependence, and the universality of buddhahood. This movement gained strength after the 2011 Fukushima nuclear power plant accident, when several Buddhist organizations publicly expressed their disapproval of nuclear energy. I argue that rather than a timeless 'green Dharma' inherently close to nature, contemporary Japanese Buddhism is a 'greening Dharma' that for different reasons is gradually becoming engaged in environmentalism. Although the presence of sincere religious concern and a doctrinal anchorage cannot be overlooked, a crucial role is played by Japanese Buddhism's need to reassert its presence in the public sphere, and by the involvement of this religious tradition in global dynamics related to residual problems, cultural flows, and glocalization.

Keywords

Japanese Buddhism, environmentalism, glocalization, public religion, residual problems

Introduction

Environmentalism is one of the powerful ideas circulating within the cultural flows during the present age of accelerated globalization. Since the 1960s the sense of a deep ecological crisis related to the shortcomings

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of modern society has progressively entered public discourse. International initiatives such as the creation of the World Wildlife Foundation (WWF 1961; later renamed the World Wildlife Fund), Greenpeace (1970), and the Conference on the Human Environment organized by the United Nations in Stockholm (1972) were accompanied by the development of new ways of thinking about the relationship between human beings and the natural environment, such as those found in the writings of Arne Naess, Ernst F. Schumacher, and James Lovelock. The first green political parties were also formed, starting in Western Europe in the 1970s, and in 1988 increasing concern about greenhouse gas emissions and global warming led to the establishment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), whose reports have been influential in creating the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which was signed by 154 nations at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro (1992), and the Kyoto Protocol (1997), which came into effect in 2005.

Environmental behavior has been forcefully related to religion in the global discourse at least since the late 1960s, upon the publication of Lynn White Jr.'s 1967 essay 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis'. In this text, which became a classic in environmentalist literature, the American historian claimed that the environmental crisis is related to fundamental attributes of the Judeo-Christian tradition—such as anthropocentrism and the dualism of humans and nature—not found in Asian religions and Zen Buddhism that paved the way to Western exploitation of nature (White 1967; see also Pedersen 1995). Another significant step in the development of global religious environmentalism was the Assisi Declarations on nature issued by representatives of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism on the occasion of the WWF's twenty-fifth anniversary in 1986. In turn, this led to the formation of the Alliance of Religion and Conservation in 1995, which was joined by Shintō in 2000.[1]

Other elements of Japanese religiosity have found their place in the global debate on environmentalism, as in the case of Zen Buddhism's influence on the deep ecology movement (Kalland 1995). Following the global trend, an increasing number of discussions and activities related to environmental issues and religion soon took place in Japan, dramatically increasing since the 1990s. In this period, there was a mushrooming of publications concerning religion and ecology in Japanese periodicals and magazines, a development that was accompanied by growing interest in these issues among a wide range of Japanese religious institutions.

1. On contemporary Shintō and ecology, see Dessì 2013: 48-52.

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In the following sections, I explore how the global discourse on ecology has found its way within various forms of Japanese Buddhism, thus providing the framework for institutional and local activism, including the most recent developments after the earthquake, tsunami, and subsequent accident at the nuclear power plant in Fukushima in March 2011. In my analysis I will approach this Buddhist environmentalism as a multilayer phenomenon. Although it is apparent that some doctrines lend themselves to the purpose of justifying environmental activism, I argue that Japanese Buddhism is not a timeless 'green Dharma'. Japanese Buddhism's gradual engagement in environmentalism seems rather to be related to wider trends taking place in global society, such as the deprivatization of religion, religions' focus on residual problems, cultural flows, glocalization (by which I mean the way global ideas are adapted in distinctive ways in different cultures), and its intersection with particularism.[2]

Environmentalism in Contemporary Japanese Buddhism

Environmental issues became popular topics in Japan as early as the 1970s, and at the local level some Buddhist priests of various denominations also became involved. Among the earliest examples was True Pure Land denomination (Jōdo Shinshū) priest Aoki Keisuke and his movement to protect Harima Bay, and Sōtō Zen denomination (Sōtōshū) priest Sugawara Shōei, who was among the promoters of a campaign to protect the forest at Senryūji temple (Williams 2010: 24-25, 18-20).[3] Pure Land denomination (Jōdoshū) priest Ōkōchi Hideto created a solar power plant at Jukōin temple as part of his religious vision of building a Pure Land on Earth (Williams 2010: 25-26), and Shingon Buddhist denomination (Shingonshū) priest Tanaka Shinchō was the leader of the anti-dam movement in Kyoto in the 1980s (Williams 2010: 28-30). Buddhist priests have also worked in a network with other religionists. At the time of the discussions for the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, for example, Buddhists joined the Stop Global Warming Religionists Gathering (*Asahi shinbun* 1997). In 2005, Buddhist priests of the Kinki Religious Confederation marched to celebrate the implementation of the Kyoto Protocol (*Asahi shinbun* 2005). In 2008, representatives of Japanese

2. The research and fieldwork (April–June 2012) conducted for this paper are part of a wider project, 'Japanese Religions within the Context of Globalization and Secularization', supported by the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG) at the Institute for the Study of Religion, University of Leipzig.

3. Japanese names are written according to Japanese practice (surname first).

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Buddhism were among the delegates at the Group of Eight (G8) Religious Leaders Summit who met in Osaka and Kyoto. The G8 Religious Leaders Summit issued a proposal to the G8 leaders arguing that 'the dharmic, pantheistic and ancestor traditions of Eastern societies remain a practical tool for mobilization in defence of the environment' (G8 Religious Leaders Summit 2008a). The summit honorary president was Matsunaga Yūkei, head priest of the Kōyasan Shingon denomination (Kōyasan Shingonshū) and then president of the Japan Buddhist Federation (Zen-nihon Bukkyōkai). In greetings to the delegates, Matsunaga emphasized the Japanese belief 'in the existence of life in the mountains and rivers, trees and flowers' and the idea that Buddhism 'holds that the life of all creatures is of equal value and advocates coexistence with all life-forms' (G8 Religious Leaders Summit 2008b).

The earliest and most structured attempt by institutional Buddhism in Japan to cope with the current environmental crisis was the Green Plan (*Gurīn puran*) promoted by the Sōtō Zen denomination in 1995. This plan was started amid growing awareness of the environmental crisis at the international level, and it promoted activities such as surveys on acid rain, the distribution of informative material, and a campaign to save water and energy in temples and private households (Williams 2010; Dessì 2013: 52-54). Sōtō Zen institutions also claimed that Zen Buddhism carries an inherent sensibility toward these issues, because the idea of a 'harmonious coexistence with nature' (*shizen to no tomoiki*) lies at the denomination's very foundations (Sōtōshū 1996). This idea has been presented as the original spirit of Sōtō Zen and used as evidence to claim Zen Buddhism's moral superiority within the international ecological movement (Sōtōshū 1996). In the guide to the Green Plan, a chapter was devoted to explaining the religious significance of environmental activism. Here, the concept of 'co-dependent origination' (*engi*) was used to argue for the interdependence of all things, Śākyamuni's teachings were introduced to explain that 'desire' (*yokubō*) is the cause of human suffering and the destruction of the environment, and founder Dōgen's (1200–1253) and 'second founder' Keizan's (1268–1325) love for nature was celebrated by citing various scriptural passages (Sōtōshū 1998a). Here, for example, the principle of 'not wasting water' was related to Dōgen's act of pouring into a stream the rest of the water he had not drunk (Sōtōshū 1998b). Another principle exhorted the religious community to 'coexist harmoniously with nature' (*shizen to tomo ni ikimashō*) and was related to Dōgen's and Keizan's identification of mountains and streams with the Buddha Śākyamuni (Sōtōshū 1998b).

In the Tendai denomination (Tendaishū), environmental activities have been promoted since the Light Up Your Corner Movement (Ichigū

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o Terasu Undō), which was launched in 1969. On the occasion of the movement's twenty-fifth anniversary, a Three Practices slogan was introduced, including 'life' (*inochi*), 'service' (*hōshi*), and 'living in harmony' (*kyōsei*) (Covell 2005: 50-51). The practice of living in harmony was related to ecology through the idea of *mottainai* ('What a waste!') and used to encourage members' families to save water and energy at home, to reduce the production of garbage, and to promote recycling (Ichigū o Terasu Undō 2006). This movement has also supported activities against desertification conducted in Inner Mongolia (Ichigū o Terasu Undō 2012). The religious justification for such environmental behavior has been provided by the practice of 'life'. This practice is based on gratitude for any form of 'life' (*inochi*), which is linked to the Buddhist precept of not killing and to the idea that 'mountains and rivers, plants and trees, all attain buddhahood' (*sansen sōmoku shikkai jōbutsu*). All things are identified with the Buddha as part of the same chain of causes and conditions, and therefore deserve the same respect (Ichigū o Terasu Undō 2006).

In 2011, the Honganji branch of the True Pure Land Buddhist denomination (Jōdo Shinshū Honganji-ha) listed promoting energy-saving and renewable energy in its denominational guidelines, together with the Honganji Forest network project, which has sought to foster respect for the environment through a national database of trees and forests (Jōdo Shinshū Honganji-ha 2011, 2012a). Protecting the environment has also been promoted through the nonprofit organization Jippō, founded in 2008, with activities such as the Amida [Buddha]'s Forest reforestation project in Inner Mongolia (Jippō 2009). Such engagement is intended to counter the exploitation of nature caused by a progressively anthropocentric and egocentric society. Meanwhile, reliance on Amida Buddha's grace encompassing all life and 'interdependence' (*engi*) has been presented as the religious resource for facing the present crisis (Jōdo Shinshū Honganji-ha 2011). Evidence that in True Pure Land Buddhism concern for the environment may be linked with cultural chauvinism can be seen in the *Joint Declaration for the Thirtieth Anniversary of the Foundation of the Shin Buddhist Federation*, which claims that global problems, including the environmental crisis, have resulted from Western anthropocentrism and that Buddhism is the only way to save humanity.[4]

Environmentalism can also be found in large new religious movements that have a background in Nichiren Buddhism, a traditional form of Japanese Buddhism focusing on the *Lotus Sūtra*. The new religious

4. Shinshū Kyōdan Rengō (2000). On the irony of this approach, see Dessì (2006, 2010). Shin Buddhism is another common appellation of True Pure Land Buddhism.

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movement Reiyūkai in 2009 issued its Environmental Policy, through which institutions commit themselves to implementing the ISO environmental management system and encouraging members to follow the rules of an eco-life in the name of the ideas of 'life' (*inochi*) and 'future' (*mirai*) (Reiyūkai 2009). Risshō Kōseikai in 2009 launched an Environmental Policy that takes its cue from discussions taking place within the organization at least since the 1990s. Following this official commitment, Risshō Kōseikai headquarters were certified in 2010 according to the ISO 14001 environmental management system (Risshō Kōseikai 2012a). Risshō Kōseikai has traced global warming and other environmental problems to the self, while contending that harmony between human beings and nature is based upon three main principles: (1) the dignity of all forms of life, related to the teaching of the infinity of the Buddha's lifetime embracing all beings (since they possess the buddha-nature) illustrated in the *Lotus Sūtra*; (2) the related teaching of the interdependence of all beings; and (3) a simple lifestyle based on 'being contented with few desires' (*shōyoku chisoku*). A behavioral code for implementing these ideas has also been formulated, including recycling, saving energy, and supporting the Donate-a-Meal Movement (Risshō Kōseikai 2009). That this approach to environmentalism may also embed elements of cultural chauvinism is indicated by claims that whereas Western civilization polarizes humankind and nature, 'Eastern philosophy' tends to regard all things 'as essentially united and interdependent', thus providing a unique contribution to solving the present environmental crisis (Niwano 1990: 143).

Ecology has also come to occupy a significant place in the institutional policies of Sōka Gakkai, which is also based on Nichiren Buddhism. Since the early 1990s, Sōka Gakkai has been promoting various activities focusing on the environment, especially through Soka Gakkai International (SGI), a non-governmental organization that has even worked closely with the United Nations. Most of these activities are educational, such as organizing exhibitions, lectures, and conferences, but local branches have also been involved in tree-planting projects, and since 1992 SGI Brazil has run the Amazon Ecological Conservation Center. Moreover, SGI collaborates with the Earth Charter Initiative, which was launched in 2000, and has been actively involved in proposing and adopting the resolution for the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (Soka Gakkai International 2011). Sōka Gakkai environmentalism has been mainly illustrated by honorary President (and SGI President) Ikeda Daisaku in his writings, and most notably in his peace and environmental proposals. According to Ikeda, legal measures are not sufficient to cope with the environmental crisis and should

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be accompanied by the development of a 'contributive way of life' based upon the Buddhist teaching of interdependence (Ikeda 2002). There are also indications that Sōka Gakkai has been seeking to carve out a special role for Eastern thought and Buddhism within global environmentalism.[5]

Buddhist Reactions to the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant Disaster

In the previous section, I reviewed how, especially since the 1990s, various forms of Japanese Buddhism became progressively interested in environmentalism. The tragic consequences of the Tōhoku earthquake that hit Japan on 11 March 2011 have represented for many Buddhist organizations an occasion for deeper involvement in these themes. This would probably not have been the case had the tsunami caused by the earthquake not caused a series of explosions at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, followed by radiation leaks and the meltdown of reactors. Consequently, a 20-kilometer evacuation zone was set up around the nuclear plant, but the management of the nuclear emergency by the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) and the Japanese government has been harshly criticized for its responses both internationally and in Japan. Neglect of safety measures and the large amount of radioactive substances released beyond the evacuation zone have convinced many people that nuclear power, far from being a green countermeasure to global warming, poses an unprecedented threat to human beings and the natural environment. Indeed, opposition to nuclear power generation reached unprecedented proportions in Japan after the Fukushima disaster, with tens of thousands of citizens joining demonstrations. Religionists, notably Christians and Buddhists, played an active role in this popular protest (Shimazono 2012; Watts 2012).

Buddhist priests of various denominations were involved in anti-nuclear protests well before the Fukushima nuclear plant disaster, individually and as part of a network with other religionists. Such is the case of the Inter Faith Forum for the Review of National Nuclear Policy, which was established in 1993 and currently counts about 800 members (Isa 2012). However, these anti-nuclear activists have customarily represented only a small minority of the Japanese Buddhist world, and Buddhist institutions showed little if any interest in these issues before the Fukushima nuclear plant disaster.[6] At that time, Buddhists reacted to

5. See, for example, Ikeda's emphasis on Asian culture as a 'culture of the forest' rooted in the idea of 'living in harmony' (Ikeda 2011: 380-82).

6. Among the few exceptions are Nipponzan Myōhōji (Watts 2012) and, to a lesser extent, the Ōtani branch of the True Pure Land denomination.

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the nuclear emergency in various ways, and some organizations felt more pressed than others to reconsider their attitudes toward the nuclear power business. It is significant, however, that on 1 December 2011 representatives of the major denominations of traditional Buddhism within the Japan Buddhist Federation reached consensus and issued an 'Appeal for a Lifestyle without Dependence on Nuclear Power' (see also Shimazono 2012; Watts 2012). The document stated:

> We, the Japan Buddhist Federation, will strive to reduce our dependence on such nuclear power that threatens 'life' (*inochi*) and to realize a society based on sustainable energy. We must choose a path in which personal happiness is harmonized with human welfare, instead of wishing for prosperity at the expense of others (Zen-nihon Bukkyōkai 2011a, 2012).

The tone of the appeal and the avoidance of the phrase 'anti-nuclear' in the text reveal a cautious attitude and possibly a fair amount of negotiation within the Federation. However, this official document represented a decisive step away from the disinterest previously shown by traditional Japanese Buddhism as a whole toward the nuclear energy problem. In religious terms, the Japan Buddhist Federation located the basic cause of the current emergency in individual behavior, specifically 'our desire for more comfortable and convenient lifestyles' and 'excessive materialistic greed'. The way out of the nuclear problem would be found, according to the Federation, only in a lifestyle centered on the Buddhist idea of 'knowing satisfaction', which lays the foundations for a society based on sustainable energy and protecting any form of life (Zen-nihon Bukkyōkai 2011b, 2012). The appeal had been anticipated in August of the same year by a statement of the then president (2010–12) of the Japan Buddhist Federation and head priest of the Myōshinji branch of Rinzai Zen Buddhism, Kōno Taitsū. In that statement, Kōno linked the Fukushima nuclear plant disaster with attachment to a convenient lifestyle (Zen-nihon Bukkyōkai 2011b).

Indeed, the Myōshinji branch (Rinzaishū Myōshinji-ha) was one of the first large Buddhist organizations to react to the nuclear emergency. On 29 September 2011, the organizational assembly issued a declaration for the 'Realization of a Society Not Dependent on Nuclear Power Generation' stressing the threat posed by the Fukushima accident to the lives (*inochi*) and rights of Japanese people. Furthermore, the declaration stated that the civil nuclear power program is ultimately beyond human control and argued that safe energy sources should be substituted as soon as possible. This move away from dependency on nuclear power was further justified on religious grounds, through reference to the Buddhist ideals of 'knowing satisfaction' (*chisoku*) and the creation of a 'harmonious society' (*kyōsei shakai*) (Rinzaishū Myōshinji-ha 2011).

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The Sōtō Zen denomination was another of the first religious organizations to make public its opinion on the Fukushima nuclear plant disaster. In an official statement issued on 1 November 2011 titled 'Sōtō Zen Buddhism's Opinion on Nuclear Power Generation', the denomination began by noting that the Fukushima accident produced a large release of radioactive material and that this shows that the nuclear power program cannot guarantee absolute safety. Moreover, the negative consequences of any accident can be severe, according to the Sōtō Zen institution:

> Taking into consideration Japan's high seismicity and the issue of the global environment at large, it is desirable that nuclear power plants are shut down quickly and that, in order to prevent such damage and destruction of the environment from ever happening again, a transition to renewable forms of energy is implemented (Sōtōshū 2011).

The document also argued, however, that in the present situation the immediate shutdown of all nuclear plants would not be possible. Carbon dioxide emissions would increase and local communities close to nuclear plants would suddenly suffer great economic damage. Amid these contradictions, the denomination maintained, the only viable way forward is a cautious transition in which an increased critical awareness of energy waste represents a crucial factor.[7] Interestingly, this official statement was almost devoid of religious tones; religious legitimation was provided through a cursory reference to the denominational slogan 'Human Rights, Peace, and Environment', whose religious principles were meant to provide the correct attitude for dealing with the nuclear problem (Sōtōshū 2011).

The Ōtani branch of True Pure Land Buddhism (Shinshū Ōtani-ha) had already manifested its critical attitude toward nuclear power in 1999 on the occasion of the second Tōkaimura nuclear accident in Ibaraki prefecture and later, in 2005, after Japan's Supreme Court upheld government approval of the controversial Monju reactor in Fukui prefecture (Shinshū Ōtani-ha 2005). In December 2011 the chief administrator issued an official statement advocating a rapid transition to a society without nuclear plants in the name of the idea of 'life' (*inochi*), which in the denominational slogan 'Now, Life Is Living You' (*Ima, inochi ga anata o ikite iru*) refers to the immeasurable life of Amida Buddha and his vow to save all beings (Shinshū Ōtani-ha 2011a, 2011b). A more radical approach to the nuclear emergency may be seen in a 'Resolution on the Realization of a Society Not Dependent on Nuclear Power Generation Through the Discontinuation and Decommissioning of the Operations of

7. Sōtō Zen Buddhism's moderate approach also emerges from a symposium held in November 2011 at the Eiheiji head temple (Izuta and Sato 2012).

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the Existing Power Plants', issued by the Ōtani branch Assembly in February 2012 (Shinshū Ōtani-ha 2012; see also Shimazono 2012). This was an appeal to shut down immediately and definitively all nuclear power plants in Japan and was particularly critical of two myths supporting the ideology of nuclear energy, namely, the myth of its safety (which has been exposed by the Fukushima accident and other accidents) and that of its necessity (which presents nuclear plants as the only way to maintain a stable supply of energy for Japanese consumerist society). Religious legitimation was conferred on the document through reference to Amida Buddha's vow embracing 'all forms of life' (*subete no inochi*) (Shinshū Ōtani-ha 2012).

Reactions to the Fukushima accident within the Honganji branch of the True Pure Land denomination revealed a more moderate attitude. Already on 16 January 2012, in an address to the religious community, the head priest of the Honganji branch, Ōtani Kōshin, made a cursory reference to the nuclear accident, which illustrated the link between the exaggerated desires of human beings and the disruption of the harmony of nature (Jōdo Shinshū Honganji-ha 2012b). The same topic was developed in another official document, the 'Peace Declaration', issued by the Honganji branch on 18 September 2012, which admitted that even for peaceful use 'nuclear power cannot be adequately controlled by human beings'. The Peace Declaration stated that the Fukushima accident ultimately shows that 'the exploitation of science and technology driven by unlimited desire (*aku koto naki yokubō*) has caused a fateful crisis for human beings'. A life of spiritual commitment that overcomes self-centeredness and that supports the awareness of the 'connection among all beings' (*subete no seimei no tsunagari*) was then presented as the antidote to the present crisis (Jōdo Shinshū Honganji-ha 2012c). As of mid-2013, the Pure Land denomination had not yet made an official statement on the nuclear disaster. However, when the Japan Buddhist Federation appeal on nuclear power was issued, the secretary general was Pure Land denomination representative Tomatsu Yoshiharu, who has been credited with playing a key role in the process that led to its statement (Nikoniko nyūsu 2012).

As for the Tendai denomination, in 2012 the head priest, Handa Kōjun, who was concurrently serving as president of the Japan Buddhist Federation, committed himself to taking over the spirit of the 'Appeal for a Lifestyle without Dependence on Nuclear Power' (*Asahi shinbun* 2012). In June 2012, the Tendai denomination joined hands with the Kōyasan Shingon denomination and the Association of Shintō Shrines (Jinja Honchō) to organize a symposium in Kyoto, 'Religion and the Environment: Living in Harmony with Nature'. The keynote speech was given

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by Yamamoto Ryōichi, president of the Life Cycle Assessment Society of Japan, who stressed the danger posed by the greenhouse gas effect and called for the creation of a new civilization based on scientific knowledge and Buddhism-based environmental ethics (*Yomiuri shinbun* 2012b). The symposium culminated in the presentation of a 'Common Proposal for the Protection of the Natural Environment' signed by the leaders of the three religious organizations, namely, the aforementioned Handa, Matsunaga Yūkei (Kōyasan Shingonshū), and Tanaka Tsunekiyo (Jinja Honchō). The proposal related the destruction of the environment and indirectly the Fukushima accident to the materialism and high level of consumption of natural resources that dominate contemporary societies. The text suggested that Japanese religion could strongly contribute to solving the environmental crisis, and the three organizations pledged to cooperate actively toward this end based on the idea of 'living in harmony' (*kyōsei* or *tomoiki*) with nature, which is underlain by the experience that 'mountains and rivers, plants and trees' (*sanzen sōmoku*) are filled by the divine presence (a variation of the idea that 'mountains and rivers, plants and trees, all attain buddhahood') (Kōyasan Shingonshū 2012). The theme of ecology and the Fukushima disaster also figured prominently during the 25th edition of the Religious Summit at Mt. Hiei (Hieizan Shūkyō Samitto), which was held in August 2012. The summit is an international event organized annually by the Tendai denomination and the Japan Conference of Religious Representatives (Nihon Shūkyō Daihyōsha Kaigi). The commemorative speech in 2012 was given by Umehara Takeshi, who focused on the idea that 'mountains and rivers, plants and trees, all attain buddhahood' and affirmed that nuclear power plants should not be used as sources of energy (Tendaishū 2012; see also *Yomiuri shinbun* 2012b).[8] Also during this summit a forum on the nuclear plants problem was held in which the panelists expressed their aversion to nuclear energy and support for green energy. Moreover, the customary message issued by the summit contended that 'continuing to operate nuclear power plants is religiously and ethically unacceptable' (Tendaishū 2012).

Various reactions to the nuclear plant disaster have also emerged from Japanese Nichiren Buddhism. The Nichiren denomination (Nichirenshū) issued on 9 March 2012 a concise general statement that religious institutions 'aim at the realization of a society based on sustainable energy and not dependent on nuclear power generation' (*Nichiren shinbun* 2012). Sōka Gakkai had long been engaged in campaigns against nuclear

8. Umehara is also one of the key exponents of the ideology claiming Japan's uniqueness (*nihonjinron*).

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weapons. In the 2012 'Peace Proposal' published by Ikeda in January, however, an entire section was dedicated to the issue of nuclear power generation (Ikeda 2012). In this proposal, Ikeda argued that the Fukushima accident calls seriously into question the reliability of the civil nuclear program, which is aggravated by the unsolved problem of how and where to store radioactive waste products. He urged 'a rapid transition to an energy policy that is not reliant on nuclear power', adding that this transition would be successful only if implemented at the global level. Japan should actively cooperate with other developed countries and support the introduction of alternative energy sources in developing countries, Ikeda continued, arguing further that it would be necessary to implement within Japan a reconversion of the local economies traditionally dependent on the nuclear power business (Ikeda 2012; see also Watts 2012). Risshō Kōseikai, in June of the same year, issued an official statement concerning nuclear energy. Here, the religious institution stated that after the incident at the Fukushima nuclear power plant, Japan must abandon nuclear power and develop renewable energy. To accomplish this task, the document insisted, people must change their living standards, reduce their consumption of energy, and cultivate the Buddhist spirit of 'being contented with few desires' (*shōyoku chisoku*) through a simple lifestyle. Such a transformation should be supported by the teaching of 'living in harmony' (*kyōsei*) with nature and an acknowledgment of the dignity of all beings (Risshō Kōseikai 2012b).

Japanese Buddhism and Ecology: A Multidimensional Approach

The overview in the previous sections shows that especially since the 1990s, Japanese Buddhism has become increasingly interested in ecology and that the accident at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant following the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake accelerated this trend. I am assuming here that this religious phenomenon reveals a significant complexity and can be approached from a multidimensional perspective that allows a certain degree of integration. At a very superficial level, Japanese Buddhist environmentalism may be understood as the application of traditional Buddhist ideas to a rapidly changing social context. In turn, following José Casanova's interpretation, this can be explained as an instance of the deprivatization of modern religion (Casanova 1994). It is interesting to note that this attempt by Japanese Buddhism to act as a public religion also makes sense as a case of systemic repositioning in the sense illustrated by Niklas Luhmann and Peter Beyer, in which religion addresses global problems left unsolved by politics and the economy (Luhmann 1977; Beyer 1994). Moreover, I contend that Japanese Buddhist

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environmentalism is relevant to globalization theory also from another important perspective, namely, the adaptation of ideas circulating in global cultural flows to the local Japanese religious context (glocalization). The main purpose of this level of interpretation is to shed light on why specific Buddhist ideas are selected from the tradition as ecological keywords and are made to resonate with the global idea of ecology, and on how they can be paradoxically used to promote particularism in a global context.

Starting from Japanese Buddhist environmentalism as the application of traditional Buddhist teachings to contemporary society, one religious element frequently found in these innovative Buddhist approaches to ecology is the admonition of 'being contented with few desires' (*shōyoku chisoku*). This idea, which is evidently appealing because of its practical implications, refers to the Pāli concept of *appicchatā* and appears in various texts of early Buddhism and later productions such as the *Yogācārabhūmi-śāstra*. Similarly to this prescription, a few basic Buddhist ideas are almost omnipresent in Japanese Buddhist environmentalism, although their use may change slightly due to different sectarian emphases. Among these ideas is the interdependence of all things (*engi*), referring to the teaching of co-dependent origination (Skt. *pratītya-samutpāda*)—also expressed through the concept of living in harmony (*kyōsei/tomoiki*)—that has been central to Buddhism since its inception and was later developed in Mahāyāna Buddhism. Another related element is the popular idea that 'mountains and rivers, plants and trees, all attain buddhahood' (*sansen sōmoku shikkai jōbutsu*). This concept was elaborated especially within Tendai Buddhism as early as the ninth century and ever since has become mainstream in Japanese Buddhism. In wartime Japan, this concept even found its way into the *Kokutai no hongi* (Fundamentals of National Policy 1937), through which the idea of Japan's 'immemorial harmony with nature' was officially embedded in State Shintō ideology (and subject to nationalist interpretations by Buddhist thinkers) (Fujimura 2010: 6; see also Thomas 2001: 187). The idea that all things can attain buddhahood, which is also meaningfully related to the doctrine of original awakening (*hongaku shisō*), was associated in Japan with environmental thought, especially through the work of the buddhologist Nakamura Hajime (Fujimura 2010: 6-7). The idea that all existence is interrelated (and part of the same ultimate Buddhist truth) has been presented in many forms of Buddhist environmentalism through the concept of life (*inochi*). Although in some Buddhist traditions this concept may be more explicitly related to specific doctrines concerning Amida Buddha or the *Lotus Sūtra*, life is most commonly used in contemporary Japanese Buddhism as a general term indicating

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the basic Buddhist view that all forms of life are inherently equal and deserve the same respect.[9] Such simplified usage is exemplified by the Japan Buddhist Federation's 'Appeal for a Lifestyle without Dependence on Nuclear Power'. Here, 'life' (*inochi*) appeared nine times in quotation marks but apart from a cursory reference to 'the spirit of Buddhism' (*Bukkyō no seishin*) that respects 'each and every "life"' (*hitori hitori no "inochi"*), the concept was illustrated nowhere in religious terms (Zennihon Bukkyōkai 2011b, 2012). Similarly, the choice of life as a key term for this appeal was explained by the Japan Buddhist Federation through a generic reference to 'the equality of human rights and the dignity of all forms of life', which was seen as one of Buddhism's guiding principles (Nikoniko nyūsu 2012).

It is apparent that many of the concepts used as rationales for Japanese Buddhist environmentalism, despite the different sectarian emphases, point to the same basic Buddhist doctrines. Moreover, they may significantly overlap. This is the case, for example, for the concepts of interdependence and living in harmony. The general idea of life, on the other hand, seems to hint at both the interconnectedness of all beings, the universal possession of buddha-nature, and not killing. In many cases, such as in the insistence on human desire as the sole cause of the environmental crisis, one cannot but notice a strong tendency toward oversimplification, and even a certain naiveté, given the lack of any reference to political and economic factors. Although their real effectiveness remains to be seen, the use of such popular Buddhist ideas and simplified language by Buddhist institutions has also likely presented a familiar and accessible approach to these pressing social issues on the Japanese public. Especially in the last few decades, Japanese Buddhist organizations have attempted to become more active in public life beyond performing traditional funerary rites.[10] Buddhist institutions and local temples have engaged in a wider spectrum of activities, such as those focusing on social welfare, spiritual care (especially through the Vihāra movement), peace, and bioethics. Environmentalism is certainly part of this larger trend.[11] According to the Japanese scholar Shimazono Susumu, Buddhism 'has begun to show its commitment to act as a public religion', and especially after the Fukushima disaster, its influence 'cannot be overlooked' (Shimazono 2012: 223; see also Nelson 2011). Indeed, public statements such as those from the Japan Buddhist Federation

9. On this topic, see Ueda 2006.

10. A recent analysis of the marginalization of Buddhism in contemporary Japan is provided in Nelson 2012.

11. On socially engaged Buddhism in Japan, see Sueki 2006.

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have been generally perceived by public opinion as exceptional and have generated significant media coverage, not the least because of the common perception of traditional Buddhism in Japan as outdated and almost exclusively concerned with death.

There is a certain belief in some sectors of the Japanese public that Buddhist values and ideas could correct the contradictions of modern society. The aforementioned call by Yamamoto Ryōichi to create a new green civilization based on science and Buddhist ethics is an example of such views. In addition, the symposium 'Religion and the Environment: Living in Harmony with Nature' was a large event attended by several hundred persons and jointly organized by the Tendai denomination, the Kōyasan Shingon denomination, and the Association of Shintō Shrines in collaboration with the Osaka edition of the *Yomiuri shinbun* (Japan's largest newspaper), which has a daily circulation of about two and a half million copies. This is not to say that Buddhism has been successful in countering marginalization and gaining a central role in the public sphere, since the emphasis on 'engaged Buddhism' often heard within the Japanese Buddhist world is, in not a few cases, more a matter of encouragement than of real strength. However, Buddhist engagement in ecology (and other social issues) is meaningful enough to allow an interpretation through José Casanova's tripartite scheme concerning the deprivatization of modern religion. In particular, the case of Japanese Buddhist environmentalism seems to match the first two forms of deprivatization postulated by Casanova, namely, (1) 'the religious mobilization in defense of the traditional lifeworld against any form of state or market penetration', and (2) the case in which 'religions enter the public sphere of modern societies to question and contest the claims of the two major societal subsystems, states and markets, to function according to their own intrinsic functionalist norms without regard to extrinsic traditional moral norms' (Casanova 1994: 228-29). As for the first point, especially through insistence on the concept of life, Buddhist environmentalism is pressing Japanese society to some extent to reflect upon society's 'normative structure', similar to other forms of religious intervention illustrated by Casanova (see also Casanova 1994: 228). Moreover, Buddhist environmentalism, similarly to Casanova's second form of deprivatization, is urging Japanese society as a whole to regulate the 'impersonal market mechanism' and its accountability in the area of ecology (see also Casanova 1994: 229).

From the viewpoint of social systems theory, these dynamics may be interpreted as a way by which Japanese Buddhism—as part of the global religious subsystem and similarly to other religions worldwide—tries to reposition itself in global society by addressing a specific residual

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problem, the environmental crisis. From this perspective, dominant global subsystems such as the economy and politics leave unsolved or actually create various residual problems (war, economic inequalities, the environmental crisis, etc.), and this offers religion a way to escape marginalization and strengthen its public image (see also Luhmann 1977: 54-58; Beyer 1994: 101-8). Similarly to the case of globally engaged Buddhism (Freiberger and Kleine 2011: 429-39), environmentalism in Japanese Buddhism makes sense as a local manifestation of such systemic repositioning (see, e.g., Dessì 2013: 129-41). Interestingly, this role of Buddhist environmentalism as a systemic stopgap is not necessarily accompanied by antagonism toward the dominant subsystems. This aspect emerges quite clearly in the cautious formulation that characterizes many of the official statements issued by Buddhist institutions after the Fukushima accident. Former Japan Buddhist Federation President Kōno, for example, revealed that the absence of strong anti-nuclear tones in the 'Appeal for a Lifestyle without Dependence on Nuclear Power' reflects careful deliberations designed to insure the 'political neutrality' of the document (Nikoniko nyūsu 2012).

The emergence of environmentalism in contemporary Japanese Buddhism may also be approached as a case of glocalization. Through the development of civil transportation and the new information media, cultural flows that characterize present-day globalization have become so pervasive that they can affect people's worldviews in an unprecedented way. Cultural homogenization is a possible outcome of these dynamics. This possibility is seriously undermined, however, by the way that globally circulating ideas tend to be adapted in distinctive ways in different local cultures. The apparent paradox is that while people increasingly perceive the world as a single place and think globally, globalization also shapes new glocal identities by local actors that attempt to reach some kind of conformity with global patterns.[12] As briefly mentioned, environmentalism is among the powerful ideas presently circulating in global cultural flows. The analysis of Japanese Buddhism's engagement in ecology in contemporary Japan certainly shows its growing awareness of the global debate on the environmental crisis. In this process lasting several decades, ecological themes have been made to resonate with traditional Buddhist doctrines, as is noticeable from various sources such as institutional guidelines, statements, proposals, and scholarly discussions. Doctrines such as the traditional Buddhist aversion to greed (as a sign of self-attachment) and those

12. On these themes see, e.g., Hannerz 1987; Appadurai 1990; Robertson 1995; and Nederveen Pieterse 2009.

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concerning the universal potential for buddhahood, the interdependence of all things, and the related idea of the dignity of all forms of life, have become the lenses through which Japanese Buddhism views the global issue of the destruction of the environment. To be sure, Buddhist ideas were incorporated in global environmentalism at an early stage, especially through the work of thinkers such as the American Buddhist scholar/activists Joanna Macy and Gary Snyder, and Zen Buddhism was highly valued in one of the earliest classic texts analyzing religion's relation to environment-related behavior, namely, in White's aforementioned essay 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis' (1967). However, the case of Buddhist environmentalism in contemporary Japan may be understood as a glocalization drawing especially on 'native' sources, because the debate on ecology circulating in global cultural flows seems to have stimulated the use of traditional Buddhist elements in ways that lead to the formation of local hybrids.[13] It is worth emphasizing that these processes imply a selective reading of the Buddhist tradition. Only specific sources are put in the foreground and presented as representative of Buddhism, while others, and the historical responsibilities of Buddhism as a social practice, are obscured. This selective reading is thus also a creative reading, which promotes a reconfiguration of Japanese Buddhism to meet the expectations of global society (Dessì 2013: 4-7, 40-54).

This selective and creative reading of the tradition may also be understood as a decontextualizing practice, through which the affinity of Japanese Buddhism with environmentalism is presented in an ahistorical way. Recent studies have illustrated that the idea of Buddhism as essentially concerned with nature is largely fallacious; approaches to Japanese Buddhism as a total social phenomenon, for example, show that this cultural myth has its roots in the politics of power and ideology of medieval Buddhism (Rambelli 2001), while another study demonstrated that Japanese religious institutions contributed to the past exploitation of Japanese forests (Howard 1999). Nevertheless, a certain tendency illustrated in Japanese Buddhism, which seeks to carve out a special place for itself within global environmentalism, is actually based on this idea of a timeless 'green Dharma', as well as on a belief that Japanese Buddhism (and more generally Eastern culture) is inherently closer to nature than Western religion and culture. This rhetoric is part of a wider inclusivist trend within the Japanese religious world, in which other religions (notably monotheistic) are conceived as inferior approximations of religious truth (Dessì 2011), a view in turn related to the

13. On a glocalization 'leaning to "native" sources', see Dessì (2013: 47-54).

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popular *nihonjinron* ideology advocating the uniqueness and superiority of Japanese culture/people. Thus, this implicit idea of a timeless 'green Dharma' remains largely unquestioned in Japan, and it is even reinforced by non-Japanese perceptions of this issue, which are often influenced by the orientalist pattern and involve the idealization of certain aspects of Japanese culture. This helps to understand why White's thesis about Western anthropocentrism was quickly accepted and well received in Japan (Fujimura 2010). This emphasis on the supposed moral superiority of Japanese Buddhism and Eastern culture also indicates how the glocalization of Japanese Buddhism through the ecological issue, a sign of global engagement *per se*, may actually be closely connected to the emergence of particularism and cultural chauvinism. This is only apparently paradoxical, for as this example shows, global players within the network of cultural flows may be inclined to emphasize the superiority of local culture (see also Dessì 2012).

Conclusion

The illustrated cases show how the discourse on ecology has been incorporated in the Japanese Buddhist world in the last few decades, manifesting through various discussions and forms of activism. Institutional policies focusing on ecology—such as those found in the Sōtō Zen's Green Plan, in the Tendai denomination's Light Up Your Corner Movement, and in Soka Gakkai International—are well representative of this trend. This interest in environmentalism seems to have gained strength after the tragic events following the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and the subsequent Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant disaster, which prompted Japanese Buddhists to express a wider range of responses to the environmental crisis, even leading several Buddhist organizations to plead for a future without nuclear power generation. Religious legitimation of these activities has been mostly conferred through ideas such as 'being contented with few desires', the interdependence and harmony of all things, and the universal potential for buddhahood (including 'mountains and rivers, plants and trees'). The use of these popular Buddhist ideas and generalizations such as 'life' (referring to the equal dignity of all beings) as key ecological concepts also presents to public opinion a familiar image of Buddhist environmentalism, which is one of the ways through which Japanese Buddhism is attempting to reassert its role in the public sphere. Moreover, Buddhist environmentalism is also shown to be meaningfully related to global trends, being dependent on ideas circulating within global cultural flows that elicit the selective choice of traditional Buddhist elements for shaping new glocal forms. Finally, I

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have illustrated how Japanese Buddhism's involvement in global dynamics through ecology may be accompanied by cultural exclusivism and the idea that Buddhism is a timeless 'green Dharma', a religion inherently close to nature, which could decisively contribute to resolving the environmental crisis. Such ideas are still embedded in Japanese cultural nationalism, as well as in the myth of 'the ecologically noble Other' found in Western cultures (see also Kalland 2005). As this article has argued, contemporary Japanese Buddhism should be rather understood as a 'greening Dharma' that, for a variety of reasons, some of which are unrelated to environmental concern, has gradually become engaged with environment issues. And, while the presence of sincere religious concern for these issues and a doctrinal anchorage cannot be overlooked, a crucial role is played here by Japanese Buddhism's need to counter social marginalization and by the involvement of this religious tradition in global dynamics related to residual problems, cultural flows, and glocalization.

Finally, it should be made clear that the actual impact of this Japanese Buddhist environmentalism has been so far quite limited. To be sure, some steps have been taken to implement eco-friendly policies by Buddhist institutions and even by some local temples, but the aim of the environmentalism discussed above remains at best largely educational, that is to say, a long-term endeavor. And given the disconnection existing especially in traditional Japanese Buddhism between lay members and denominational activities beyond the performance of funerals and memorial rites, it is likely that a large part of the membership still does not know about the environmentalism promoted by their religious institutions. For similar reasons, although official statements such as those following the Fukushima accident mark a significant shift in the attitude of Japanese Buddhism toward the nuclear power issue, there is always the risk that such expressions of this 'greening Dharma' remain only on paper. Moreover, after the return in power of the pro-nuclear Liberal Democratic Party in December 2012, it remains to be seen whether Buddhist institutions will be willing to take a confrontational attitude toward the Japanese government over this issue.

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