

Race and Zen: Julius Evola, Fascism, and D. T. Suzuki¹

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The present paper focuses on Julius Evola's representation of Japan and Zen Buddhism, a representation that is strongly connected to his racial theorizations as well as his religious and spiritual views. A multifaceted figure of the Italian far right, Evola often wrote about Asian cultures and religions, producing several works strongly marked by his political ideas. I will try to show how Evola's racism and esotericism lie at the core of his views about Japan and Zen, first by contextualizing his early discourse on Japan within the political context of Italian fascism, and then by clarifying how his initial interest in themes like Zen, Samurais and Japanese Empire fit within a greater programme of fascist propaganda aimed at legitimizing Japan as fascist Italy's ally – a task which will require a careful consideration of Italian racial laws. Following this, I will present Evola's discourse on Zen, focusing on the orientalist themes he adopted. Here, I will critically analyze

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Evola's use of Daisetsu Teitarō Suzuki's sources in his writings (hereafter D. T. Suzuki), showing how Evola confronted their Japanese nationalist/nativist elements, as well as their responses to Japan's encounter with Euro-American colonialism. It is my overarching assertion that a critical analysis of Evola's narrative – its sources and presumptions – demonstrates how religious studies can contribute to problematizing political narratives rooted in the intersection of racism and spirituality. As Evola's ideas on religion and race are still alive within the far-right,² such work is more relevant now than ever.

Evola's Racism and Japan

Julius Evola was a singular figure within Italian fascism. The great Italian intellectual Umberto Eco has defined him as “one of the most respected fascists gurus” and “the most important theoretical source of the Italian political right.”³ Furio Jesi, in his 1993 book *Cultura di destra* (Right-wing culture), denounces Evola as “a racist so dirty that it is repugnant to touch him with one's own fingers.”⁴ Evola was born in Rome in 1889.⁵ In his early years, he

2. See, for example, Chetan Bhatt's discussion of the influence of Evola's thought on contemporary far-right culture in “White Extinction: Metaphysical Elements of Contemporary Western Fascism,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 38 no. 1 (2021): 27–52. The influence of Evola's thinking on contemporary far-right movements will be further discussed in the conclusion.

3. Umberto Eco, *Il fascismo eterno* (Milan: La Nave di Teseo, 2019), 33, 35. Translation by author. Note that all translations are the author's unless otherwise noted.

4. Furio Jesi, *Cultura di destra* (Roma: Garzanti, 1993), 91.

5. The following biographical information about Evola is taken from Hans T. Hakl, “Julius Evola and Tradition,” in *Key Thinkers of the Radical Right: behind the New Threat to Liberal Democracy*, ed. Mark Sedgwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 54–73.

became interested in philosophy and literature, reading authors such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Otto Weininger and Carlo Michelstaedter. In his autobiography, he reports that after his experience in the First World War he thought about committing suicide. Reading the Buddhist Pali Canon, however, helped him overcome his existential crisis, and, subsequently, cultivate his lifelong interest in transcendence⁶ even though he never considered himself to be a Buddhist practitioner.⁷ He was then involved in the artistic movements of Futurism and Dadaism before definitively concluding his artistic period in 1922.⁸ Between 1923 and 1927 he developed his philosophical thought and published his first writings while also deepening his studies in Asian religions. In 1927 he founded the “Ur Group” with Arturo Reghini, who would influence the development of Evola’s esotericism in the following years.⁹ Although the group was initially supportive of Mussolini, they broke with Italian fascism after its concordat with the Catholic Church in 1929.¹⁰

Following this break Evola became increasingly critical of Italian fascism, as he considered it to be populistic and lacking in any spirituality. He thus became interested in political movements such as Romania’s Iron Guard and Germany’s SS. During the 1930s and early 1940s, Evola developed his theory of “spiritual racism,” which received recognition from Mussolini and came to be seen as

6. Hakl, “Julius Evola and Tradition,” 56.

7. Julius Evola, *La dottrina del risveglio* (Roma: Edizioni Mediterranee, 2008), 7–8.

8. Hakl, “Julius Evola and Tradition,” 57.

9. The Ur Group was a “loose organization” that performed esoteric practices and rituals and wrote articles about magical and spiritual topics for the journals *UR* and *KRUR*. See Hans T. Hakl, “Julius Evola and the UR Group,” *ARIES* 12 no.1 (2012): 53–90.

10. Hakl, “Julius Evola and Tradition,” 58.

an alternative to the “biological racisms” developed in other countries (especially in Germany). Despite his criticism of both Mussolini and Hitler,¹¹ Evola’s relationship with fascism and national socialism lasted until the end of the Second World War. Around the time of Italy’s armistice in 1943 – which would eventually lead to Mussolini’s arrest – Evola stayed at Hitler’s headquarters in Rastenburg alongside several other fascist hierarchs (and Mussolini himself after he was rescued by the German Army). He then moved to Vienna, where he kept in contact with fascist and National-Socialist figures. In 1945, an allied bombing gave him a spinal injury that left him wheelchair bound. After the war he continued publishing his writings and translations. In 1951 he was accused of instigating neofascist terrorist groups but was eventually cleared of this charge. Until his death in 1975¹² he maintained his views and beliefs as a far right intellectual.¹³

During the various phases of his life, Evola produced an extensive amount of writing that dealt with various topics such as art, philosophy, Asian religions, theorizations upon sexuality, and, above all, esoterism and racial theories. Evola’s most famous work is probably *Rivolta contro il mondo moderno* (*Revolt Against the Modern World*). Originally published in 1934, the book was subsequently reprinted in Italy and translated and printed in a number of other countries.¹⁴ In this book, heavily influenced by the work of the famous French occultist René Guénon, Evola outlines the characteristics of his idea of “integral tradition” (hereafter Tradition): a primordial, universal and ahistorical wisdom, the well-

11. Hakl, “Julius Evola and Tradition,” 62–63.

12. Hakl, “Julius Evola and Tradition,” 64.

13. Hakl, “Julius Evola and Tradition,” 67.

14. Julius Evola, *Rivolta contro il mondo moderno* (Roma: Edizioni Mediterranee, 1998).

spring from which the myths of every major religious and spiritual tradition derived, particularly the ones Evola considered most esoteric in nature.¹⁵ According to Evola, the Tradition should also be understood as being the source of certain values, including the ideal political order a society should have: a hierarchy with sacred features.¹⁶ This idea is strongly tied with distinctive racial beliefs, since he claims that the Tradition has its origins in a group of mythical divine Nordic people, the original inhabitants of the hyperborean regions.¹⁷ From this legendary hyperborean race Evola also traces the origin of the “Aryan races.”¹⁸ According to this mythical historical narrative, the Aryan races were forced to move south, colonizing Eurasia and encountering the “racially inferior” southern peoples. In Evola’s telling, this narration of primordial times is connected to a cyclical conception of history, vaguely inspired by the concept of cosmic cycles (*yuga*) taken from sacred Hindu texts.¹⁹ Evola’s historical perspective implies a continuous degeneration of the original spirituality; a progressive forgetfulness of the principles of the Tradition until the end of the cycle. The historical period starting with the Renaissance and going through to the French Revolution and into Evola’s own time is considered to be the maximal point of degeneration and materialism, the period precipitating the beginning of a whole new cycle and a restored spiritual era.²⁰

15. Hakl, “Julius Evola and Tradition,” 59.

16. Hakl, “Julius Evola and Tradition,” 59.

17. The hyperborean region refers to a mythical region located in the North Pole.

18. Julius Evola, *Sintesi di dottrina della razza* (Padova: Edizioni di Ar, 1978), 64–73.

19. Hakl, “Julius Evola and Tradition,” 60.

20. Hakl, “Julius Evola and Tradition,” 60.

Evola's thought is strongly anti-materialistic and his reflections upon race are no exception, as is evident by his theorization of a "spiritual conception of race."²¹ Evola translated the division of body, mind, and soul into three corresponding grades of race: the physical, the psychological/intellectual, and the spiritual.²² By doing so, Evola was able to praise people who were not "biologically Aryan," provided they presented "Aryan" spiritual values.²³ "Spiritual racism," then, is highly critical of the materialist reductionism of the concept of race operative in biological racism,²⁴ and instead adopts spiritual metrics of judgement. However, it is important to note that Evola did not deny the biological aspects of racism: he merely subordinated these aspects to a "spiritualistic" way of conceiving the human being. A quote from 1941's *Sintesi di dottrina della razza* (*Synthesis of the Doctrine of Race*) states:

The character of the doctrine of race also depends on the way the human being is considered. If [the human being] is considered in material terms, this materialism will be transmitted to the concept of race; if it is considered in spiritual terms, the doctrine of race will also be spiritualistic, because *even when considering what in the human being is material and conditioned by the law of the matter*, it [the spiritual consideration of the human being] will never forget the hierarchical locus and functional dependency that this [biological] part has in the human being as a whole.²⁵

21. Aaron Gillette, *Racial Theories in Fascist Italy* (London: Routledge, 2002), 154–176.

22. Evola, *Sintesi di dottrina della razza*, 44.

23. See Michele Monserrati, "Fascist Samurais," 69.

24. Evola, *Sintesi di dottrina della razza*, 44.

25. Evola, *Sintesi di dottrina della razza*, 44–45. Emphasis mine.

As already noted by other scholars,²⁶ the relationship between Italy and Japan in the years before the Second World War posed somewhat of a problem for Italian racial theorists who adhered to a biological racism, since the racial hierarchy established in Italy's racial laws of 1938 was predicated on preserving "biologically Aryan" principles. However, the racialized discourse from this period is not wholly biological: while Italian fascist propaganda did argue that the Japanese were racially inferior in a biological sense (as expressed, for example, in fascist racist journals which classified the Japanese as "yellow race"²⁷), it also made serious efforts to ennoble their new Japanese ally via references to their similar "Aryan" ideals and cultural and spiritual traits.²⁸ Evola also considered the Japanese to belong to the "coloured races," but thought they were "one of the best races out of them" in virtue of the "special qualities" that supposedly characterized their race.²⁹

However, an overview of Evola's writings shows mixed feelings toward the Japanese empire. In an article published in 1933,³⁰ Evola discusses his views about Orient and Occident.³¹ He states that Occident is just a "synonym for the modern civilization

26. See Toshio Miyake, "Il Giappone *made in Italy*: civiltà, nazione, razza nell'orientalismo italiano," in *Orizzonti giapponesi: ricerche, idee, prospettive* ed. Matteo Cestari, Gianluca Coci, Daniela Moro, and Anna Specchio (Roma: Aracne, 2018), 607–628, and Michele Monserrati, "Fascist Samurais: The Japanese Race in the Italian Imaginary During the Second World War and Beyond," *Modern Italy* 25, no. 1 (February 2020): 63–77.

27. Miyake, "Il Giappone *made in Italy*," 622.

28. Miyake, "Il Giappone *made in Italy*," 622–623.

29. Julius Evola, *Indirizzi per una educazione razziale* (Florence: Edizioni di Ar, 1979), 123.

30. Julius Evola, "Oriente e Occidente" in *Fascismo Giappone Zen*, ed. Riccardo Rosati (Roma: Pagine editor/I libri del Borghese, 2016), 43–47.

31. Significantly, the article is inspired by a public speech by Mussolini himself.

of materialism” – for “the decadence, the deviation, the emasculation of the true Occident”³² – and thus can only be seen as barbaric by the Asian-oriental civilizations the Occident invades, civilizations which Evola saw as more faithful to the Tradition.³³ The East is thus seen by Evola as a victim of the modern West, as it is gradually adopting the “perverted” ideologies of its invader,³⁴ to the point that Asian countries are, in his thought, slowly transforming themselves into “threatening new powers organized the European way.”³⁵ The only solution, according to Evola, is to be found in a rediscovery of the Tradition common to both the Orient and the Occident but ultimately lost by the latter; after this, a new agreement between East and West could finally become possible.³⁶ However, Evola maintains that the opposition between the Orient and Occident is meaningless, as he believes that the only real opposition is between spirituality and degeneration.³⁷

While the Italian fascist regime seemed to have dampened its “yellow peril” rhetoric after the new alliance with the Japanese empire³⁸ (as significantly shown by the case of Mario Appellius³⁹), Evola reiterates this topos in his 1941 work *Indirizzi per una educa-*

32. Evola, “Oriente e Occidente,” 43–44.

33. Evola, “Oriente e Occidente,” 43–44.

34. Evola, “Oriente e Occidente,” 45.

35. Evola, “Oriente e Occidente,” 46.

36. Evola, “Oriente e Occidente,” 46.

37. Evola, “Oriente e Occidente,” 42.

38. Miyake, “Il Giappone *made in Italy*,” 617–621.

39. In a move aimed to praise Japan as an ally, Mario Appellius criticized the “yellow peril” idea, arguing that it was a product of the allied forces efforts to pursue their own political interests. See Linetto Basilone, “Through East Asia to the Sound of ‘Giovinezza’: Italian Travel Literature on China, Korea and Japan During the Fascist *Ventennio*,” *Modern Italy* 24, no. 4 (September 2019): 463.

zione razziale (*The Elements of Racial Education*). Towards the end of this book, Evola states that the superiority of the white race is merely materialistic in nature, with no effective superiority when considering the spiritual domain.⁴⁰ However, Evola fears that the West's material superiority is at risk: according to him, the Japanese empire managed to master "western" technology; by doing so, the Orient is seen by Evola as a serious threat to the "white man's" supremacy.⁴¹ He writes:

The Orient rises as a possible adversary for the Occident only when it undergoes the most deteriorating and perverted ideologies of the latter, abandoning the true traditions of its race. It should be understood that after the first western invasion, the material one, a second has occurred, an ideological invasion, and only this one is creating favourable space for the danger of an emancipation, if not even of a counter-attack, of coloured races.⁴²

Evola then provides the reader with an exhaustive list of the "perverted ideologies" that the Orient, influenced by the West, is slowly accepting: capitalism, liberalism, scientism, nationalism (meant as anticolonialism), democracy, social justice, Bolshevik communism and anarchism.⁴³ Evola then presents his solution to the decline of the West: Fascist Italy should serve as a guiding force in the world, re-establishing "white race's" supremacy.⁴⁴

An article Evola published in the journal *Asiatica*⁴⁵ a year earlier, however, show different tones. The article, with the import-

40. Evola, *Indirizzi per una educazione razziale*, 125.

41. Evola, *Indirizzi per una educazione razziale*, 123.

42. Evola, *Indirizzi per una educazione razziale*, 127. Shortly after, Evola once again quotes Mussolini's words to support his thesis.

43. Evola, *Indirizzi per una educazione razziale*, 120–130.

44. Evola, *Indirizzi per una educazione razziale*, 130.

45. Evola, "Basi spirituali dell'idea imperiale nipponica," in *Oriente e Occidente* (Roma: Edizioni Mediterranee, 2001), 159–66.

ant title “Basi spirituali dell’idea imperiale nipponica” (“The spiritual basis of Japanese imperial idea”), draws inspiration from the 1936 Anti-Comintern pact and the more recent Tripartite Pact, and depicts Japan as an ideal ally for Italy. Japan, to him, represents a modern state which managed to unify the national idea with the racial and religious spheres, in virtue of the divine basis that lies at the core of its empire.⁴⁶ National Shintō is particularly important to Evola since he sees it as the reconciliation of politics and religion,⁴⁷ something he strongly advocates for. The values which, from Evola’s perspective, the Japanese empire is defending, are the very same “traditional” values the Occident has lost and that can finally be rediscovered through the new political alliance,⁴⁸ values which he thinks fascism and national socialism are bringing back.⁴⁹ The worship of the Emperor in particular is seen by Evola as the emblem of the fight against Communism, being the antithesis of it.⁵⁰ The article remarks on the racial difference between the Japanese people and the “Aryan races,”⁵¹ even though they are united by the principles of Tradition. By mentioning the Germanic Ghibellines, the Holy Grail, King Arthur and even the Gospels,⁵² Evola tries to draw spiritual similarities between the Japanese empire and Europe. Ancient Rome constitutes the predominant touchstone in this

46. Evola, “Basi spirituali dell’idea imperiale nipponica,” 160.

47. Evola, “Basi spirituali dell’idea imperiale nipponica,” 160.

48. Evola, “Basi spirituali dell’idea imperiale nipponica,” 160.

49. Evola, “Basi spirituali dell’idea imperiale nipponica,” 161.

50. Evola, “Basi spirituali dell’idea imperiale nipponica,” 163.

51. Evola, “Basi spirituali dell’idea imperiale nipponica,” 160 and 166.

52. Evola’s relationship with Christianity is complex and cannot be discussed here, and the same goes for his antisemitism. However, it is still important to note that he considers Japanese spirituality to be different from the “Semite” approach to spirituality. See Evola, “Basi spirituali dell’idea imperiale nipponica,” 162.

article: the Japanese people's loyalty to the emperor reflects the Latin notions of *fides* (loyalty) and *pietas* (devotion), and the empire is built according to the Roman principle of the *gens* (a community of people with a common ancestry and common ritual practices).⁵³ In contrast from the articles discussed above, here there is neither any mention of the Orient being a potential threat for the Occident nor any hint about its incoming modernization: Japan is described as the highest example of a traditional and spiritual society, an ideal adversary of Soviet Communism and Anglo-French modernity.⁵⁴

A post-war article still depicts Japan as a country where loyalty means respect for one's own parents, for the hierarchical relationship between genders, for work and school ethics, for the defence of the Japanese race, and, most importantly, for the Emperor.⁵⁵ However, according to Evola, the outcome of the Second World War brought about degeneration in Japan too, making it more and more "westernized," forcing the Japanese to invest all the energy of their "race" in the economic sphere.⁵⁶ In another article published in 1950,⁵⁷ Evola shows how every hope he put in fascist Italy and the Japanese empire has faded away. This article is very similar to the 1933 publication discussed above: Evola talks about how the "white races" were living a deep crisis and how this crisis caused the rise of the Orient, which, as a nemesis born within the "western degeneration," was preparing itself for its future role of global ruler.

53. Julius Evola, "Basi spirituali dell'idea imperiale nipponica," 166.

54. Cf. Toshio Miyake, "Il Giappone *made in Italy*," 620.

55. Julius Evola, "The Way of the Samurai," in *Zen: The Religion of the Samurai*, trans. Guido Stucco (Sequim: Holmes Pub Group, 2009), 13–14.

56. Evola, "The Way of the Samurai," 17.

57. Julius Evola, "Ora tocca all'Asia: il tramonto dell'Oriente," in *Fascismo Giappone Zen*, ed. Riccardo Rosati (Roma: Pagine editor/I libri del Borghese, 2016), 103–108.

According to Evola this situation is all “white men’s” fault,⁵⁸ and he finally wishes for a new historical cycle that will restore the dominance of the “white race.”⁵⁹

Evola and Zen

While in the aforementioned articles importance was given to national Shintō, Evola also dedicated several works to Zen,⁶⁰ and claims to have been one of the first to treat this matter in Italy.⁶¹ Evola started writing on this Buddhist school in the early 1940s, when Japan was receiving attention in Italy due to their new political alliance.⁶² His first article mentioning Zen is “La Religione del Samurai” (“The Religion of the Samurai”), which appeared in 1942 on the journal *Augustea*.⁶³ The article was strongly influenced by Kaiten Nukariya’s 1913 book *Religion of the Samurai: A Study of Zen Philosophy and Discipline in China and Japan*, in which Zen is described as being as old as Buddhism itself and is largely interpreted according to militaristic and Bushidō war ethics.⁶⁴ In

58. Evola, “Ora tocca all’Asia,” 103.

59. Evola, “Ora tocca all’Asia,” 108.

60. An overview of Evola’s writings on Zen can be found in Silvio Vita, “L’Oriente di Julius Evola e la fortuna dello Zen in Occidente,” in *Studi Evoliani 1999*, ed. Gianfranco de Turrís/Fondazione Julius Evola (Roma: Europa Libreria Editrice, 2001), 93–109. *Studi Evoliani* is the yearbook of the Fondazione Julius Evola (Julius Evola Foundation), whose aims are to collect Evola’s works and spread his thought.

61. Vita, “L’Oriente di Julius Evola e la fortuna dello Zen in Occidente,” 96.

62. Vita mentions that Zen was starting to be introduced to the Italian public by Giuseppe Tucci, see “L’Oriente di Julius Evola e la fortuna dello Zen in Occidente,” 101.

63. Julius Evola, “La religione del Samurai,” in *Fascismo Giappone Zen*, ed. Riccardo Rosati (Roma: Pagine editor/I libri del Borghese, 2016), 93–102.

64. See Kaiten Nukariya, *The Religion of The Samurai: A Study of Zen Philosophy and Discipline in China and Japan* (London: Luzac & co., 1913).

1943 Evola published the first edition of *La dottrina del Risveglio* (*The Doctrine of Awakening*),⁶⁵ wholly dedicated to Buddhism, including one chapter on Zen. After 1945 he studied the post-war writings of Eugen Herrigel, Karlfried von Dürckheim,⁶⁶ and D. T. Suzuki,⁶⁷ producing in the following years several articles for the journal *East and West*.⁶⁸ In 1956 he published “Che cosa è lo Zen” (“What is Zen?”) in the newspaper *Roma*,⁶⁹ and in the early 1970s he wrote two articles concerning Zen in the journal *Vie della Tradizione*: “La via del samurai” (“The Way of the Samurai”) and

Bushidō is the Samurai code of conduct, and, according to Nukariya, Zen shares the Bushidō values of loyalty, bravery, self-confidence and self-sacrifice. Nukariya’s warrior-like and militaristic representation of Zen, which greatly emphasized its ties with the Samurai class, is critically discussed in Robert Sharf, “The Zen of Japanese Nationalism,” *History of Religions* 33, no. 1 (1993): 9–13.

65. Evola, *La dottrina del risveglio*.

66. Herrigel’s book is discussed in Shoji Yamada, “The Myth of Zen in the Art of Archery,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 28, no. 1/2 (2001): 1–30, and Robert Sharf, “Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience,” *Numen* 42, no. 3, (1995): 233–235. It should be noted that figures like Herrigel and Karlfried von Dürckheim were both close to the National Socialist Party. For an overview of these figures and their relationship to D. T. Suzuki, see: Brian Victoria, “D. T. Suzuki, Zen and the Nazis,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Pacific Focus* 11, no. 43 (October 2013): 1–22; Karl Baier, “The Formation and Principles of Count Dürckheim’s Nazi Worldview and his interpretation of Japanese Spirit and Zen,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Pacific Focus* 11, no. 48 (December, 2013): 1–34; Brian Victoria, “A Zen Nazi in Wartime Japan: Count Dürckheim and his Sources—D. T. Suzuki, Yasutani Haku’un and Eugen Herrigel,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Pacific Focus* 12, no. 3 (January 2014): 1–52.

67. Vita, “L’Oriente di Julius Evola e la fortuna dello Zen in Occidente,” 103.

68. They are collected in Julius Evola, *Oriente e Occidente* (Roma: Edizioni Mediterranee, 2001).

69. Julius Evola, “What is Zen?” in *Zen: The Religion of the Samurai*, trans. Guido Stucco (Sequim: Holmes Pub Group Llc, 2009), 11–12.

“Senso e clima dello Zen” (“The Meaning and Context of Zen”).⁷⁰ The latter was subsequently modified and used as the introduction to D. T. Suzuki’s three volumes of *Saggi sul Buddhismo Zen (Essays on Zen Buddhism)*, translated into Italian by Evola himself and published after his death.⁷¹ Although Evola’s interpretation of Zen started during the war and continued until his death in 1975 – constituting a discourse on Zen that lasted for more than thirty years – his opinions on it remained consistent; there are no significant changes throughout the years, and articles written decades apart echo each other.

I argue that Zen played a key role in Evola’s process of ennobling the Japanese, plausibly more than any other aspect of Japanese culture, politics, or religiosity. In Evola’s writings the maximum point of proximity between the Japanese “yellow race” and the European “white race” is given by Zen spirituality, which, being a Buddhist school, Evola considers to be a form of “Aryan spirituality”:

It should be kept in mind that the primordial unity of blood and spirit that characterizes the white races, the ones who created the civilizations of the Orient and the Occident [i.e., the Iranian, Hindu, Hellenic, Roman, and Germanic civilizations] [...] is a reality. *Buddhism has every right in claiming itself as Aryan*, both because it reflects to a high degree the spirit of [those] common origins, and because it preserved consistent parts of a heritage

70. Julius Evola, “The Way of the Samurai,” in *Zen: The Religion of the Samurai*, trans. Guido Stucco (Sequim: Holmes Publishing Group LLC, 2009), 13–18, and “The Meaning and Context of Zen,” in *Zen: The Religion of the Samurai*, trans. Guido Stucco (Sequim: Holmes Publishing Group LLC, 2009), 19–23.

71. Julius Evola, “Introduction,” in D. T. Suzuki’s *Saggi sul Buddhismo Zen Vol. 1*, trans. Julius Evola (Roma: Edizioni Mediterranee, 1992), 7–17.

which, as we have already said, the Westerners have progressively forgotten. [...] Insisting on the antithesis of the Orient and Occident is frivolous. The real opposition is, in the first place, between modern conceptions and traditional conceptions, whether they may be eastern or western: in the second place, the real opposition is the one that exists between the frank creations of an Aryan spirit and the creations that, on the contrary, both in Orient and in Occident resent of non-Aryan influences.⁷²

Relying heavily on Kaiten Nukariya's work, Evola presents Zen as a resumption of the earliest form of Buddhism⁷³ with distinctive esoteric and elitist traits,⁷⁴ far from doctrinal speculations and scriptural debates.⁷⁵ According to Evola, the Samurai warrior caste – defenders of the Tradition⁷⁶ – adopted Zen Buddhism as a tool for expressing their loyalty towards the emperor.⁷⁷ The Samurai's virile and heroic character, informed by Zen spirituality, is continuously remarked on by Evola:⁷⁸

Zen, an esoteric form of the Buddhist doctrine, has been called, in its different forms, the 'religion of the Samurai,' the Japanese warrior aristocracy. [...] According to traditional Japanese ethics, if a man is a real man and not a beast, he can only be a 'Samurai': brave, straightforward, loyal, virile, dignified, ready even for an active sacrifice.⁷⁹

72. Evola, *La dottrina del risveglio*, 30.

73. Evola, "Introduction," 8.

74. Evola, "The Meaning and Context of Zen," 23.

75. Evola, "The Way of the Samurai," 15.

76. See Evola, "La religione del Samurai," 94, and Julius Evola, "Dal Buddhismo fino allo Zen," in *Fascismo Giappone Zen*, ed. Riccardo Rosati (Roma: Pagine editor/I libri del Borghese, 2016), 130.

77. Evola, "The Way of the Samurai," 17.

78. Evola, *La dottrina del risveglio*, 258.

79. Evola, *La dottrina del risveglio*, 258.

Evola reports that this virile character presents itself in Zen's influence on martial arts,⁸⁰ as well as in the violent exercises that the Zen novices would have to endure in their spiritual training.⁸¹ Evola also asserts that Zen shaped the Japanese Imperial Army's soldiers during the Russo-Japanese War⁸² and the Second World War, and here several mentions are specifically dedicated to the Japanese Kamikaze.⁸³ It is Evola's contention that Zen can, in fact, be seen to inform all aspects of Japanese society; that the influence of Zen is so relevant in modern Japan that it can be found even in the general education of the Japanese people,⁸⁴ and, notably, in the education provided to the Army's high officials, where Zen forms an essential part of their training curriculum.⁸⁵ In sum, Evola interprets Zen as playing a pivotal role in the Japanese empire and fitting within the broader context of Shintō's imperial rituals.⁸⁶ Japan is seen as a place where temporal and spiritual powers were unified,⁸⁷ and where imperial traditions and modernity coexisted.⁸⁸

Following the war, Evola drew much information about Zen spirituality from D. T. Suzuki (1870–1966).⁸⁹ However, Suzuki is occasionally criticized by Evola⁹⁰ for adopting terms and references

80. Evola, *La dottrina del risveglio*, 259.

81. Evola, "La religione del Samurai," 99.

82. Evola, "La religione del Samurai," 96.

83. Evola, "The Way of the Samurai," 16. Other mentions of the Kamikaze can be found in Evola, "The Meaning and Context of Zen," 23 and in Evola,

84. Evola, "La religione del Samurai," 95.

85. Evola, "The Way of the Samurai," 14.

86. Evola, "La religione del Samurai," 101.

87. Evola, "La religione del Samurai," 93.

88. Evola, "La religione del Samurai," 102.

89. Cf. Evola, *La dottrina del risveglio*, 214n, 248n, 260; Julius Evola, "Lo Zen e l'Occidente," in *Oriente e Occidente* (Roma: Edizioni Mediterranee, 2001), 70, 72, 74; Evola, "The Meaning and Context of Zen," 19, 21.

90. Further criticisms that fall out of this paper regard the nature of enlighten-

linked to western philosophy.⁹¹ In Evola's words, Suzuki is "an Oriental who knows too much about western culture."⁹² He also accuses Suzuki of presenting a "democratized,"⁹³ domesticated, and moralized form of Zen so as to make it more appealing to westerners interested in spirituality⁹⁴ (who represented the vast majority of Suzuki's readers).

With respect to western practitioners of Zen, Evola is most critical of those who reflect an existentialist, nihilistic and quasi-anarchic interpretation of it. Evola views such interpretations as showing contempt for strictly disciplined spiritual paths – such as the one taught by the historical Buddha – and believes they are based on a fundamental misunderstanding of Zen's concept of immediate enlightenment.⁹⁵ According to Evola, this approach to Zen does not reflect the idea of Tradition, and instead frames Zen in materialistic and nihilistic terms.⁹⁶ He attributes the same error in those who interpret Zen artistically – linking it to surrealism⁹⁷ – or psychoanalytically.⁹⁸ With respect to the latter – psychoanalytic interpretations of Zen – Jung is specifically attacked, for, according

ment. See Julius Evola, "The Meaning and Context of Zen," 21, 23; Evola, *Saggi sul Buddhismo Zen Vol. 1*, 14; Julius Evola, "Yoga, immortalità e libertà," in *Oriente e Occidente* (Roma: Edizioni Mediterranee, 2001), 81.

91. Evola, *Saggi sul Buddhismo Zen Vol. 1*, 8.

92. Evola, *Saggi sul Buddhismo Zen Vol. 1*, 15.

93. Evola, *Saggi sul Buddhismo Zen Vol. 1*, 23.

94. Evola, *Saggi sul Buddhismo Zen Vol. 1*, 14; Evola, "Lo Zen e l'Occidente," 72.

95. Evola, *La dottrina del risveglio*, 260. Significantly, D. T. Suzuki – who Evola cites in his discussion of this theme – also criticizes the antinomian or nonconformist interpretation of Zen. See Bernard Faure, *Chan Insights and Oversights: An Epistemological Critique of the Chan Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University press, 1993), 58–59.

96. Evola, "Lo Zen e l'Occidente," 72.

97. Evola, "Lo Zen e l'Occidente," 70.

98. Evola, "Lo Zen e l'Occidente," 73–74.

to Evola, his interpretations of Zen are “ludicrous”⁹⁹ and “a joke.”¹⁰⁰ More specifically, while Jung considers the unconscious and the Buddhist awakening to be comparable, Evola considers them to be completely different¹⁰¹ – for him, psychoanalysis has nothing to do with Tradition.¹⁰²

Broadly speaking, Evola thinks that it is difficult for westerners to fully understand Zen because of their mentality; however, he does maintain that it is possible – even for someone who lives in the degenerate Occident – to grasp the deeper meaning of Zen if they approach it carefully.¹⁰³ The reason for this, Evola asserts, lies in the fact that those values were once known to the West as well, despite the “racial differences”:

Several aspects of this form of spirituality will appear strange to the *western mind*. However, this is not only due to a *racial and psychic difference*. The modern European, in fact, perceives many features of this ideology as strange only because *he has made himself stranger to the traditional forms*, which once he knew as well [...] It would be enough to remember the ascetic ideal of the great Knight’s Orders of the Middle Ages, the Roman-Germanic ethic of *fides*, the transcendental justification of the very same imperial idea of the Ghibellines. From this perspective, it becomes possible to acknowledge that Japan has managed to cherish to this day [...] a spiritual level and heritage that, through seculari-

99. Evola, “The Meaning and Context of Zen,” 23.

100. Evola, *Saggi sul Buddhismo Zen Vol. 1*, 13.

101. Evola, *Saggi sul Buddhismo Zen Vol. 1*, 13.

102. Julius Evola, “Lo Zen e l’Occidente,” 74. It is interesting to notice that Jung, strongly criticized by Evola, was a collaborator of Suzuki. See Jørn Borup, “Zen and the Art of Inverting Orientalism,” in *New Approaches to the Study of Religion. Vol 1: Regional, Critical and Historical Approaches*, ed. Peter Antes, Armin W. Geertz, Randi R. Warne (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2004), 472.

103. Evola, “Lo Zen e l’Occidente,” 76.

zation's process of civilization and [...] the political and aristocratic idea, we [westerners] have largely lost.¹⁰⁴

This idea is also stressed in other works, where Zen values are described by Evola as consonant with the values of pre-modern western civilization.¹⁰⁵ Here, in a similar fashion to what has already been presented, Evola draw parallels between Japanese Zen and figures such as Sallust,¹⁰⁶ the Stoics,¹⁰⁷ and (again) the Ghibellines.¹⁰⁸

Evola: A Critical Look

Before beginning my critical analysis of Evola's work, it will first be necessary to contextualize it within the period's wider fascist discourse on Japan. As already noted, Evola's racial theorizations of the 1930s and 1940s harmonized with Italy's racial laws, and his proposal of a "spiritual racism" represents one of the many endeavours that Italy's fascist government undertook in order to promote and legitimize its new alliance with Japan.¹⁰⁹ Moreover, Evola's constant remarks about warrior ethics and Bushidō fall squarely into the period's fascist propaganda about Japan: the supposed traditional warrior nature of the Japanese people was a classic theme in fascist journals.¹¹⁰ The assumed similarities be-

104. Evola, "La religione del Samurai," 101. Emphasis mine.

105. Evola, "The Way of the Samurai," 14.

106. Evola, "The Way of the Samurai," 14.

107. Evola, "The Way of the Samurai," 14.

108. Evola, "The Way of the Samurai," 14.

109. Miyake, "Il Giappone *made in Italy*," 607–628, and Michele Monserrati, "Fascist Samurais," *Modern Italy* 25, no. 1 (2020): 63–77, <https://doi.org/10.1017/mit.2019.78>.

110. Sergio Raimondo, Valentina de Fortuna, and Giulia Ceccarelli, "Bushido

tween the Japanese empire and the ancient Roman world were a recurring *topos* as well, as we can see in Roberto Suster's works – where the Japanese empire is considered to be the bearer of Roman values to Asia¹¹¹ – or in the writing of Raffaele Calzini, where the colonialist expansion of Japan was seen as similar to the Punic wars.¹¹² What sets Evola apart is, undoubtedly, the spiritual and esoteric feature of his thought, expressed to the highest degree in his reflections upon Zen. However, he was not the only thinker who made this link; another important figure within the fascist world who was interested both in esoteric spirituality and racism was Massimo Scaligero, director of the journal *East and West* where Evola published several times. In 1941, for example, we see Scaligero promoting the idea that, although the Japanese were not racially “Aryan,” they were nevertheless spiritually “Aryan” thanks to Zen and Samurai values – a view identical to Evola's.¹¹³

Evola's writing often asserts that no real opposition exists between East and West, but rather between Tradition and modernity. However, his reading of the “East” is filled classic orientalist tropes¹¹⁴ – tropes which do place “East” and “West” into opposition

Allied: The Japanese Warrior in the Cultural Production of Fascist Italy (1940–1943),” in *Revista de Artes Marciales Asiáticas* 12, no. 2 (July-December 2017): 82–100.

111. Basilone, “Through East Asia,” 462.

112. Basilone, “Through East Asia,” 463.

113. Miyake, “Il Giappone *made in Italy*,” 622. Other similarities between Evola's and Scaligero's thought can be detected in Scaligero's critique of psychoanalytical interpretation of Zen in Massimo Scaligero, “Zen e psicanalisi,” in *Il Giappone* 5 (1965): 145–160.

114. My argument is different from Vita's perspective in, “L'Oriente di Julius Evola e la fortuna dello Zen” in *Occidente*, 95, where Evola's focus on the opposition between Tradition and modernity, rather than between East and West, is considered to be somehow similar in spirit to the later scholarly critiques of orientalism.

with one another – and this tension forces him to frame Japan as simultaneously discrete from, yet proximate to, the Aryan Tradition that he is interested in championing. On the one hand, Evola adheres to the orientalist trope that constructs the Occident as modern, scientific, rational, and universal, in opposition to the Orient, which is constructed as traditional, irrational, intuitive and particularistic.¹¹⁵ On the other hand, Evola must diminish this difference in order to legitimize his admiration of the Japanese empire and Zen spirituality, and, in certain works, to help Italy legitimize its alliance with Japan.

Accordingly, as noted above, Evola frames western modernity as degenerative – as something which has eroded the West’s “true Aryan identity” – and eastern traditionalism (particularly Zen and the Samurai warrior ethic) as restorative, as something closer to the Aryan Tradition that represents the wellspring of the “true” identity of both Italy and Japan. Evola’s writings thus contain a confusing mix of reverence for,¹¹⁶ and fear of, the East: although it is spiritually superior in its proximity to Tradition¹¹⁷ – a cause for reverence – this spiritual superiority is simultaneously something to be feared, as this superiority risks

115. Toshio Miyake, *Mostri del Giappone* (Venice: Ca’ Foscari University press, 2014), 32.

116. Cf. Miyake, *Mostri del Giappone*, 121: “in the specific case of Japan, this license of *orientality* has been gradually elaborated over the last two centuries thanks to the strategic accumulation of a vast repertoire of familiar icons that have been consolidated in Euro-American cultural history: *geisha*, *samurai*, *zen*, Mount Fuji, cherry blossoms, etc., all articulated preferably in an a-temporal or archaic way, outside of time and space. Japan is thus defined explicitly (*marked*) as *hyper-tradition*, indicating the selection and one-sided emphasis of the Euro-American gaze on its traditional or past aspects, articulated by often implicit contrast (*unmarked*) with its own ‘Western’ modernity.”

117. Evola, “Lo Zen e l’Occidente,” 76.

enabling a future invasion of Europe. I argue that these contrasting views are not only a consequence of the mutating political context of fascism, but also a sign of hard-to-reconcile contradictions in Evola's own thought.

As stated above, despite Evola's criticisms of Suzuki, he is nevertheless one of Evola's main sources on Zen. It is therefore necessary to examine some of the extensive critical literature on Suzuki. According to Bernard Faure, Suzuki, through a "militant comparativism," reworked orientalist images – which depicted the "Orient" and Buddhism as something to be "looked down upon,"¹¹⁸ – to reframe Zen as both superior to other forms of spirituality and as the source of all mystical experience.¹¹⁹ Suzuki (and others such as Nishida Kitarō) thus proposed what Faure defines as a "secondary orientalism," or a "positive modality" of orientalist discourse.¹²⁰

Robert Sharf argues that Suzuki should be counted among those Japanese figures who condemned the West's "crass materialism, [its] inauthenticity brought about by the technologies of mass production, the crude democratization and vulgarization of aesthetic taste and value, [...] the pervasive mood of spiritual alienation,"¹²¹ as well as the imposing power represented by its technology and military prowess. However, the aforementioned figures – Suzuki included – didn't simply condemn these aspects of the West: they reappropriated orientalist tropes to construct an essentialized and ahistorical Japanese character as its perfect

118. Faure, *Chan Insights and Oversights*, 53.

119. Faure, *Chan Insights and Oversights*, 64.

120. Faure, *Chan Insights and Oversights*, 53–54.

121. Sharf, "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism," 37.

antithesis.¹²² For Suzuki specifically, it can be said that “if the West excelled materially, the East excelled spiritually,”¹²³ with Zen being the heart of Asian and Japanese spirituality.¹²⁴

According to Sharf, Suzuki’s image of Zen should also be contextualized within the New Buddhist movement that arose during the Meiji era, when Buddhist representatives tried to recast Zen as compatible with Japan’s endeavour to modernize itself,¹²⁵ thus proposing a new form of Zen that could respond to western enlightenment critiques and situate itself as a world religion.¹²⁶ Like this movement – which responded to modernity by modernizing in a way that preserved tradition – Sharf sees Suzuki mobilizing modernist notions of nationalism to articulate the Japanese nativism¹²⁷ we see underpinning his notion of traditional Zen:

As traditional allegiances collapse, nationalist alternatives arise, promising to preserve or restore native political, social, and moral norms in the face of the threat of foreign cultural hegemony. Ironically, nationalist discourse cannot escape the ground from which it grew: nationalism is very much the product of modernity and the modernist episteme.¹²⁸

122. Sharf, “The Zen of Japanese Nationalism,” 37–38, and Faure, *Chan Insights and Oversights*, 64.

123. Sharf, “Experience,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. by Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 103.

124. Sharf, “The Zen of Japanese Nationalism,” 6.

125. See also Faure, *Chan Insights and Oversights*, 54.

126. Sharf, “The Zen of Japanese Nationalism,” 4–5.

127. Suzuki’s views increased during the wars. See Faure, *Chan Insights and Oversights*, 66.

128. See also Robert Sharf, “Whose Zen? Zen Nationalism Revisited” in *Rude Awakenings: Zen, the Kyoto School and the Question of Nationalism*, ed. James Heisig and John Maraldo (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1994), 47.

Within Suzuki's ahistorical formulation, Zen can also be described as a form of pure and unmediated experience. Sharf criticizes this idea,¹²⁹ as he does not consider the idea of pure experience to be a product of the Zen tradition. He asserts that we cannot find any traditional Zen source mentioning "experience,"¹³⁰ and, moreover, that "traditional Chan and Zen practice was oriented not towards engendering 'enlightenment' experiences, but rather to perfecting the ritual performance of Buddhahood."¹³¹ Accordingly, Sharf believes this experiential framing of Zen is Suzuki's own invention, derived from his Euro-American influences¹³² and the philosopher Nishida Kitarō.¹³³ Sharf further notes that Zen's supposed "universality" does not imply that it is accessible to everyone: despite his long stays overseas, Suzuki declared that he never met any enlightened or promising western disciple, and – although he never stated this explicitly – seemed to believe that it was virtually impossible for "westerners" to fully comprehend Zen.¹³⁴ A final critique that must be mentioned because of its importance for the field is the one brought by Brian Victoria, who, especially in his work *Zen at War* (1997), argues that Suzuki strongly supported Japanese militarism (especially through his writings on Bushidō) and Japan's invasion of China.¹³⁵

129. Given the focus of this paper, I will not discuss many of the problematics linked to the concept of "pure experience" (i.e., whether it is possible or not). For more on this, see: Robert Sharf, "Experience," 94–116.

130. Sharf, "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism," 21–22.

131. Sharf, "Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience," 243.

132. Especially William James. See Sharf, "Experience," 101, and Sharf, "Whose Zen?," 45.

133. Sharf, "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism," 20.

134. Sharf, "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism," 28.

135. Brian Victoria, *Zen at War* (New York: Weatherhill, 1997).

However, several scholars have raised arguments against these interpretations of Suzuki. Victor Sōgen Hori, for example, contends against Sharf's thesis that Suzuki's Zen is an "invented tradition."¹³⁶ Differentiating between rituality as a process and spiritual insight as immediate,¹³⁷ Hori philologically detects in traditional Chan and Zen sources hundreds of episodes that he argues narrate a sudden enlightenment. In other words, he argues that the idea of unmediated experience is not peculiar to Suzuki, and is in fact detectable throughout the entire history of Zen and Chan.¹³⁸ Hori acknowledges that the category of experience can be employed for ideological ends, but argues that this possibility does not justify Sharf's ideological reductionism.¹³⁹ According to Hori, Suzuki "did use the concept of satori [enlightenment] as a protective strategy to claim for himself privileged access to authentic Buddhism, but in doing so he was 'reflecting' a stance taken by the Orientalist scholars a generation before him,"¹⁴⁰ scholars who had adopted this "protective strategy" so as to claim authority over Buddhist studies.¹⁴¹ The field of Buddhist studies at this time utilized a modern, scientific, and Protestant-influenced set of criterion to define what could be considered "authentic religion," a lens which emphasized the importance of scriptures and privileged the Pali Canon on this basis.

In response to this, Suzuki claimed that a full understanding of Buddhism was possible only for those who experienced Satori

136. Victor S. Hori, "D. T. Suzuki and the Invention of Tradition," *The Eastern Buddhist* 47, no. 2 (2016): 55–57.

137. Hori, "The Invention of Tradition," 49.

138. Hori, "The Invention of Tradition," 41–81.

139. Hori, "The Invention of Tradition," 62.

140. Hori, "The Invention of Tradition," 63.

141. Hori, "The Invention of Tradition," 66.

and re-evaluated Mahāyāna.¹⁴² Considering Suzuki's historical context, Hori thinks that "in claiming superiority for Japanese culture, he [Suzuki] was 'reflecting' the Western powers' assumption of the racial superiority of Europe over Asia."¹⁴³ Hori thus links Suzuki's work to a wider Japanese discourse aimed at defending Japan from the Euro-American assertion that it is was a "barbaric country."¹⁴⁴ Stephan Kigensan Licha also argues against Sharf's thesis, asserting that the idea of experience was not brought to Zen by Suzuki, but emerged in nineteenth century Japan as a result of both influences from overseas and creative indigenous thinkers who confronted science, as the case of the Sōtō Zen monk Hara Tanzan shows.¹⁴⁵

Kemmyō Taira Satō criticizes Victoria's depiction of Suzuki as a strong supporter of Japanese militarism in *Zen at War*, a depiction he thinks was dictated more by the author's desire to portray Suzuki in a bad light than by a desire to clarifying Suzuki's

142. Hori, "The Invention of Tradition," 66–68.

143. Hori, "The Invention of Tradition," 78.

144. Hori, "The Invention of Tradition," 73. Significantly, Hori quotes the Chicago Parliament of Religions of 1893, writing that in that occasion Hirai Kinzō "connected the unequal treaties, religion, and racial discrimination. [...] Japan constantly sought to be accepted into the group of "civilized" nations but was never granted actual acceptance. In its relationship with the West, Japan always suffered from this Western-based racism institutionalized in the unequal treaties and expressed in the international politics of the day. D. T. Suzuki [...] grew up in the new Japan which was struggling to create a modern Japanese national identity for itself."

145. See Stephan Kigensan Licha, "Hara Tanzan and the Japanese Buddhist discovery of 'Experience,'" *Journal of Religion in Japan* 10, no.1 (2021): 1–30. Another example of a nineteenth century Buddhist interpreter who emphasized personal experience is Kiyozawa Manshi. See Melissa Anne-Mary Curley, "Kiyozawa Manshi and the Spirit of the Meiji," *Journal of Religion in Japan* 7, no. 3 (2019): 250–275.

thought.¹⁴⁶ Satō highlights a number of different occasions where he feels Victoria mischaracterized Suzuki's position, for example when he mistakes a comment about defensive war to be a comment on offensive war – Satō argues that it would be hard to consider Suzuki favourable to invading China¹⁴⁷ – or when he fails to acknowledge that, although Suzuki was undoubtedly patriotic, a thorough consideration of his writings on Bushidō reveals no evident references to the ongoing war, making Victoria's argument linking these writings to contemporary Japanese militarism suspect.¹⁴⁸ Satō argues that Suzuki expressed his opposition to war and militarism as much as he could living under a totalitarian regime,¹⁴⁹ and presents passages where Suzuki speaks of a Japanese spiritual revival in contrast to the disastrous events of the Second World War.¹⁵⁰ It is Satō's overall assessment that Victoria often proposes arguments that are “based entirely on guilt by association,” and selectively chooses quotations that can be misconstrued to link Suzuki to militarism and nationalism.¹⁵¹

146. Kemmyō Taira Satō, “D. T. Suzuki and the Question of War,” *The Eastern Buddhist* 39, no. 1, (2008): 62.

147. Satō, “The Question of War,” 105.

148. Satō, “The Question of War,” 90–93.

149. Satō, “The Question of War,” 100. Similarly, John Maraldo identifies a “camouflaged” wartime critique in Suzuki's writings. See John Maraldo, “Questioning Nationalism Now and Then: A Critical Approach to Zen and the Kyoto School,” in *Rude Awakenings: Zen, the Kyoto School and the Question of Nationalism*, ed. James Heisig and John Maraldo (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994), 340.

150. See Satō, “The Question of War,” 112–114, and also John Maraldo, “Questioning Nationalism Now and Then,” 140. Although they approach the topic in different ways, both Satō and Maraldo argue that Suzuki's account of Japanese spirituality was not sympathetic with militarism, but actually opposed it and provided an alternative.

151. Satō, “The Question of War,” 76, 90–93.

In response to Satō's critique, Victoria argues that although Suzuki may have been personally against the war, he did not share this sentiment publicly for fear of repercussions,¹⁵² and, moreover, maintains that Suzuki's writings on Bushidō, along with certain relationships he had,¹⁵³ seem to reflect nationalist and militaristic views¹⁵⁴ – views he asserts reflect a long-established tradition within Zen.¹⁵⁵ Satō replies to this by once again reiterating his critique of Victoria's use of sources, maintaining that he selectively choose quotations that supported his thesis, translated them according to his aims, and did not properly contextualize them.¹⁵⁶ He ends by asserting that Victoria's critiques seem to be based mostly on Victoria's own personal ethical standards – standards which Suzuki did not meet¹⁵⁷ – and, moreover, seem to be directed more towards the Zen tradition Suzuki was associated with than towards Suzuki himself.

Takashi Ogawa's stance on the question of Suzuki's nationalism and militarism will also be interesting to consider, as these have, to my knowledge, not been widely discussed in English-language discussions.¹⁵⁸ While Ogawa does acknowledge that nationalist and orientalist themes can be found in Suzuki's thought,

152. Brian Victoria, "The 'Negative Side' of D. T. Suzuki's Relationship to War," *The Eastern Buddhist* 41, no. 2 (2010): 112, 137.

153. Victoria, "The 'Negative Side,'" 101–103, 115–119, 131–132.

154. Victoria, "The 'Negative Side,'" 104–106.

155. In other words, while Victoria acknowledges that neither Suzuki nor his contemporaries can be held accountable for formulating Zen in militaristic terms – i.e., this formulation predates them – they nevertheless do reflect this formulation in their writings. See Victoria, "The 'Negative Side,'" 123 and 131.

156. Kemmyō Taira Satō, "Brian Victoria and the Question of Scholarship," *The Eastern Buddhist* 41, no. 2 (2010): 139–166.

157. Satō, "The Question of Scholarship," 153–158.

158. Takashi Ogawa, *Goroku no shisō-shi* (Tōkyō: Iwanami shoten, 2011).

he argues that Suzuki's nationalism should not be over-simplified and cast as merely expansionist, but rather carefully read within the context of Japan's own nationalism, which was constantly shifting between a self-assertion from foreign powers and aspirations of colonialist expansion in Asia. While Faure, mentioned above, discusses Suzuki's writings dealing with Japan's nationalism as if they were a unified block, Ogawa suggests that they are not unified, and that both of the aforementioned expressions of nationalism can be detected in Suzuki's writings depending on the period in which they were written.¹⁵⁹ In response to Faure's argument about Suzuki's Zen being a product of orientalism, Ogawa contends that this view does not account for the actual positionality of Suzuki and other Asian intellectuals during this period, who may have been using orientalism as a tool in order to make Japan's culture known outside of its borders.¹⁶⁰

When evaluating Suzuki's thought, I think that all of this scholarship must be taken into account. While I believe that the critiques of orientalism and nationalism in Suzuki's works provide an important take on Suzuki's writings and their reception – and open avenues for future research – I also believe that we do not have to make the error of looking at Suzuki as if he were a falsifier of some abstract “authentic Zen tradition.” As Hori writes, “Who is the judge of what counts as authentic Buddhism? The argument continues today. D. T. Suzuki represents the side of the committed practitioner of Zen. Representing the side of rational objectivity is the scholarship of modern-day academic religious studies.”¹⁶¹ For his part, Jørn Borup's argues that Suzuki did reformulate the orient-

159. Ogawa, *Goroku no shisō-shi*, 407–408.

160. Ogawa, *Goroku no shisō-shi*, 408–409.

161. Hori, “The Invention of Tradition,” 75.

alist categories of the Orient and Occident with the ulterior motive of producing a mystification and mythologization of Zen, but thinks that Suzuki should be seen as a creative thinker and an “emic voice” advocating for an idealized form of Buddhism – not as a scholar of Zen.¹⁶² Similarly, Stefan Grace clarifies that every “Zen” is inevitably going to be product of its time, and Suzuki should therefore be read, not as a perverter of tradition, but as an original thinker of the twentieth century; not as an historian, but as a voice of the Meiji New Buddhism.¹⁶³ Even if Suzuki’s thought relies heavily on religious experience,¹⁶⁴ and even if Suzuki speaks of Zen as transcending space and time, Ogawa reminds us that his thought must be understood within its historical context, as with any other thinker:

If we do not simplistically identify D. T. Suzuki's discourse with ‘Zen’ itself, but we rather relativize it as a phase in the history of Zen thought, and if we consider its internal understanding alongside with the reality of modern Japanese history, I think that the critical analysis of D. T. Suzuki will become more faceted and profound.¹⁶⁵

Returning to Evola, we can say that Suzuki’s writings played an important function for him: he could turn to them to confirm his *a priori* beliefs and criticize *ad hoc* any of Suzuki’s points he disagreed with. Suzuki’s idea of pure experience, for example, squares perfectly with Evola’s esoteric belief in a

162. Jørn, Borup, “Zen and the Art of Inverting Orientalism,” 481.

163. Grace, *Suzuki Daisetsu no kenkyū*, 9–12.

164. Suemura, *Suzuki Daisetsu no shisō ni okeru shūkyō keiken to sono gendaiteki igi*, 2.

165. Ogawa, *Goroku no shisō-shi*, 409.

universal and original Tradition,¹⁶⁶ and both ideas constitute their attempt to assert their own authoritative and normative discourses on Zen and religion in the face of modernity. Sharf explains this well:

Japanese nativists' discomfort with the seeming triumph of scientific reason, and their yearnings for a spiritual solution to the problems of modernity, mirrored our ["we westerners"] own. The notion of "pure Zen"—a pan-cultural religious experience unsullied by institutional, social, and historical contingencies—would be attractive precisely because it held out the possibility of an alternative to the godless and indifferent anomic universe bequeathed by the Western Enlightenment, yet demanded neither blind faith nor institutional allegiance. This reconstructed Zen offered an intellectually reputable escape from the epistemological anxiety of historicism and pluralism.¹⁶⁷

However, Evola failed to recognize how Suzuki's Zen and his idea of Tradition were both a product of what they were supposed to contrast: modernity. Furthermore, although Evola criticized Suzuki whenever the latter tried to approach the West using references to European culture – as if by doing so Suzuki was failing to uphold the role of "traditional representative of the true East" – this criticism was misguided from the start, as Suzuki's Zen was always "a product of a mixed marriage" between "East and West."¹⁶⁸ Finally, Suzuki's nativist themes were reiterated by Evola, who

166. Cf. Robert Sharf, "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism," 43. As Sharf states, "Western investigators were ever encouraged to find their own romanticized notion of true or essential religion mirrored back to them by their Asian proteges."

167. Robert Sharf, "Whose Zen?" 49–50.

168. Borup, "Zen and the Art of Inverting Orientalism," 453.

depicted Japan as an ideal traditional country, extolled monastic Zen practices and framed them as influencing all aspects Japanese culture, and asserted Asia's spiritual superiority against Euro-American's mere materialist power.

As these comments indicate, Suzuki's Zen was easily appropriated to fit within Evola's political agenda, and democratic aspects of Suzuki's thinking that were dissonant with this agenda were opportunely criticized. Suzuki's attitude is well-explained through Toshio Miyake's words,

The dilemma of Japanese modernity is conditioned precisely by the constant oscillation between such cumbersome vectors of identity as 'West' and 'East,' with different outcomes and solutions, all aimed at avoiding its inevitably inferiorising aspects: from a more defensive solution achieved through the unilateral accentuation of one's own orientality as a traditional identity that is so irrational, emotional and semi-mystical as to make it incomprehensible, indefinable and therefore uncontrollable by modern 'western' reason.¹⁶⁹

Evola and Suzuki, then, both presented reformulated forms of orientalism: they participated in mirror games where the essentialist identity of each was constructed and confirmed by building off the other,¹⁷⁰ and, by doing so, they mobilized these identities towards their aims. Even if Evola and Suzuki were both confronting "Anglo-American modernity," one cannot help but wonder how much compatibility truly existed between Evola's "Aryan Tradition" and Suzuki's "Japanese spirituality."

169. Miyake, *Mostri del Giappone*, 36.

170. Miyake, *Mostri del Giappone*, 129.

Conclusions

In concluding, it is necessary to remark how relevant a critical study of Evola's views is for the present day. Evola's thought had a strong influence on neofascist Italian terrorists during the Years of Lead,¹⁷¹ and while this influence is well-studied, far less attention has been paid to several still-active associations, politically oriented, that arose in Italy in 1970s (and continue to be active today) with the aim of spreading Evola's thought and works,¹⁷² including his ideas about Zen and Japan.¹⁷³ More recently – as shown by the *New York Times*' Jason Horowitz – Evola has found an audience in the American alt-right: not only has Evola been enthusiastically received by Richard Spencer and Milo Yiannopoulos (the foremost figures of the American alt-right), he was also quoted publicly by Steve Bannon, the former Whitehouse Chief Strategist for President Donald Trump. As Horowitz argues, this is a disturbing trend that can also be seen in Europe: Greece's far-right political party Golden Dawn has made reference to Evola,

171. Michele Monserrati, "Fascist Samurais," 71–73, and Mark Sedgwick: *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 179–189.

172. For example, see: Rigenerazione Evola's website <https://www.rigenerazionevola.it/> (accessed June 6th, 2021); Raido's website <http://www.raido.it/> (accessed June 6th, 2021); Azione Tradizionale's website <https://www.azione-tradizionale.com/> (accessed June 6th, 2021).

173. See Julius Evola's article "L'esempio giapponese" on Rigenerazione Evola's website: <https://www.rigenerazionevola.it/leempio-giapponese/> (accessed June 6th, 2021), and Julius Evola's article "Senso e clima dello Zen" posted by Centro studi la runa's website: <http://www.centrostudilaruna.it/sensoeclimadellozen.html> (accessed June 6th, 2021).

as has the Hungarian far-right group Jobbik.¹⁷⁴ Significantly, Bannon and Spencer have also praised Japan, participating in a phenomenon that has been described as a “love story” between white supremacists and Japan,¹⁷⁵ a country they view as an ideal “ethno-state” and an example of “racial homogeneity.”¹⁷⁶

Exploring Evola’s current influence through an exploration of contemporary fascism’s metaphysical, political, and theological concepts, Chetan Bhatt has argued that the common thread linking the otherwise varied contemporary fascist scene in Europe and the US¹⁷⁷ is the theme of “white extinction.”¹⁷⁸ Bhatt individuates several distinct topics that characterize the contemporary far-right and can be easily found in Evola’s discourse: the critique of liberal modernity,¹⁷⁹ the decline of race and civilization,¹⁸⁰ and the rhetoric of warrior values and occultist natural laws.¹⁸¹ The idea of an ancestral metaphysical knowledge, or Evola’s Tradition, is discussed by Bhatt as an eternal occult intuition that underlies the current culture of the far-right.¹⁸² Significantly, even the utopian (or dystopian) solutions that the new fascist culture proposes are both

174. Jason Horowitz, “Steve Bannon Cited Italian Thinker Who Inspired Fascists,” *The New York Times*, February 2nd, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/10/world/europe/bannon-vatican-julius-evola-fascism.html>.

175. Debito Arudou, “White Supremacists and Japan: A Love Story,” *The Japan Times*, March 7th, 2018, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/community/2018/03/07/issues/white-supremacists-japan-love-story/>.

176. Carmen Gabriela Lupu, “Why is the Japan the Ideal Country According to the Alt-Right Movement,” *Diggit Magazine*, May 28th, 2018, <https://www.diggitmagazine.com/articles/-japan-alt-right>.

177. Bhatt, “White Extinction,” 27–52.

178. Bhatt, “White Extinction,” 28, 31.

179. Bhatt, “White Extinction,” 29.

180. Bhatt, “White Extinction,” 45.

181. Bhatt, “White Extinction,” 46.

182. Bhatt, “White Extinction,” 37.

intrinsically racist and, somehow, “spiritual”: for example, discourses of “whitopia” – “the quest for a racial, social and political order governed by an ancestral racial elite”¹⁸³ – and narrations concerning lifestyles based on traditionalism and paganism.¹⁸⁴

Religious studies can help in weakening such openly racist propaganda by undermining it at its roots; by showing its claims of “spiritually rooted” originality to be arbitrary assumptions. While a Japanologist can point out the many historical fallacies Evola and his sources committed regarding Zen (something that falls outside the scope of the present work), the type of discourse analysis undertaken here shows more efficacy in revealing this discourse’s racist, political, and orientalist nature. My hope is that this work contributes to broadening the critical research on Suzuki’s reception and influence, for instance, in contexts like Nazi Germany with authors like Eugen Herrigel and Karlfried von Dürckheim thanks to Brian Victoria and Karl Baier.¹⁸⁵ Further comparative work could consider Suzuki’s influence on the American Zen of Alan Watts and the Beat Generation – where a discourse different from Evola’s emerged – to show how different interpretations of the same religious fact can lead in opposite directions. By doing so, the attempted normative and authoritative claims of reactionary and racist narratives upon religion, which justify themselves on an unprovable *a priori* “spiritual” basis, can be attacked at their core by showing their inconsistency and manipulative nature, thus opening the door for more intercultural and inclusive perspectives.

183. Bhatt, “White Extinction,” 39.

184. Bhatt, “White Extinction,” 47.

185. Victoria, “D. T. Suzuki, Zen and the Nazis,” 1–22; Baier, “Formation and Principles,” 1–52; Victoria, “A Zen Nazi in Wartime Japan,” 1–52.