

# An Exegetical Study of Disability, War, and Religion in The Bells of Nagasaki (1946)

After loss and grief shatter the foundations of human life, individuals often turn toward the divine in search of meaning and healing for their wounded souls. On 9 August 1945, the world witnessed an unprecedented catastrophe when a plutonium bomb named Fat Man was dropped by the United States aircraft Bockscar on the city of Nagasaki. With this devastating holocaust, humanity entered the ominous age of atomic warfare, where destruction extended beyond immediate death to long-term physical, psychological, and spiritual trauma. *The Bells of Nagasaki (1946)*, written by Dr. Takashi Nagai—an accomplished nuclear physicist and the Dean of Radiology at the University of Nagasaki—stands as one of the finest works of modern Japanese classical literature. The text offers a haunting first-person narrative of World War II, shaped by Nagai's unique positionality as a witness, a victim, a healer, a Samaritan, and ultimately a survivor of the nuclear catastrophe. His scientific knowledge, combined with profound personal loss and spiritual awakening, allows the narrative to transcend mere historical documentation and evolve into a deeply reflective meditation on human suffering, resilience, and faith.

The book powerfully foregrounds war as a recurring motif, particularly through its focus on the aftermath of the Fat Man bombing, where survival itself became a prolonged ordeal. Nagai meticulously records the physical and social consequences of radiation exposure, including leukemia, hemorrhage, burns, and chronic illnesses that transformed survivors into socially marginalized bodies marked by visible and invisible disabilities. These conditions did not merely afflict individuals medically but reshaped their social identities, rendering them vulnerable to exclusion, stigma, and prolonged suffering. Disability in this context emerges as a direct legacy of war, exposing how modern warfare extends its violence far beyond the battlefield and the moment of explosion. Nagai's account humanizes these sufferers by presenting them not as statistical casualties but as living embodiments of war's enduring cruelty. Through his compassionate gaze as a physician and fellow sufferer, disability becomes a lens through which the ethical failures of war and the fragility of human life are starkly revealed.

Simultaneously, *The Bells of Nagasaki* engages deeply with religious and theological dimensions, particularly through Dr. Nagai's funeral address delivered at the ruined Cathedral of Urakami. In this address, Nagai interprets the catastrophe through a Christian theological framework, presenting suffering as a form of sacrificial offering and collective atonement. Rather than portraying the atomic bombing solely as an act of human barbarity, he frames it as a moment demanding spiritual introspection, forgiveness, and reconciliation. This theological interpretation does not negate the horror of war but seeks to find redemptive meaning amid devastation. In doing so, Nagai intertwines disability, war, and religion into a complex moral discourse where faith becomes a means of enduring suffering and rebuilding shattered communities. The ringing of the bells, symbolic of both mourning and hope, encapsulates this intersection, suggesting that even in the aftermath of unparalleled destruction, spiritual resilience can offer solace and a path toward healing. Thus, the text ultimately unfolds the profound intersection of disability in war and religion, revealing how faith, suffering, and survival coexist within the human response to historical trauma.