**Japan’s Religious History**

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Religious reforms led Japan into in an era of prosperity but caused the country to become almost independent and isolated from foreign countries. In 11,000 BCE, the first nomads came to Japan and so began the Jomon Period. These nomads were primarily hunter-gathers, leading to slow civilization development. However, in 300 BCE, more immigrants came to Japan and with them came farmers and so led to a rapid growth in agriculture beginning the Yayoi period. The development of agriculture led to the development of civilization and now the inhabitants have settled in villages. The Yayoi people moved further from the Jomon era with the beginning of bronze technology. The rapid development of civilization led to culture reforms and began Japan’s first form of governance. The adaptation of foreign religion and governance led Japan to prosperity but eventually led to country into an economic standstill. Using the Shinto beliefs, Japan establish its first hierocracy. Influenced by the Tang Dynasty, Japan creates a legal system enforced by Buddhism. The influence of foreign beliefs forced Japan to close off any foreign influence.

Using the Shinto beliefs, Japan established its first hierocracy. During the Yayoi era, Japan developed its first sense of centralized authority by creating two different clans, the uji, nobility, and the be, commoners. This sense of government was most prominent in the Yamato state where Queen Himiko ruled with spiritual authority. Himiko used the power that came from Shinto to form Yamato’s government. The government used the two different clans to control the people, uji held political power and land and the be served the uji. The uji lived within the Yamato Court and held more power than anyone else in the state, even the ruler. This is because the uji controlled important land and controlled the workers they are and the uji also chose one family member of the ruling family to become the next ruler (Caiger 31). This form of government used the belief of kami, which according to the great scholar Motoori Norinaga simply said “ kami signifies, in the first place, the deities of Heaven and Earth that appear in the ancient records and the spirits of the shines where they are worshiped… it is needless to say that among the human beings who are called kami the successive generations of sacred emperors are all included,” to enforce the credibility the imperial family (Caiger 33).

Influenced by the Tang Dynasty, Japan creates a legal system enforced by Buddhism. The influence of Buddhism in Japan began in 552 A.D. with Korea sending Yamato gifts for support in Korea wars. However, this gift bared the image and writings of Buddha, which made the Yamato ruler wary of accepting for fear of their own gods. The Yamato court was split, with an important uji family, the Soga, voted to accept the gifts and the uji in control of the powerful Mononobe and Nakatomi were fearful of their own gods’ wrath. The Yamato emperor compromised with giving the image of Buddha to the Soga clan to pray privately, and soon later a deadly plague spread across Yamato and according to Mononobe and Nakatomi the worshipping of Buddha was to blame and soon after the emperor through away the gifts (Caiger 38).

However, the Soga did not stop fighting for Buddhism and in 587 A.D. won after defeating the Mononobe. Yamato, under the new emperor, Prince Shtoku, started to sift towards a bureaucratic, centralized state that supported the Buddhist ideology using China as an outline. The Prince was a decedent of the Soga and imperial family and was given succession by the Soga clan after they usurped the throne. During Prince Shotoku’s rule, he created Buddhist temples and established ranks within the court based on merit, not lineage. Later after Shtoku’s rule, in 645 A.D., another revolt happened against the Soga, and with the death of the Soga leaders, began the Taika reforms. The Taika reforms were a turning point in strengthening imperial control and so the victors, Naka no e and Nakatomi Kamatari, used Prince Shotoku’s Chinese principles to create the beginning a centralized imperial state. The biggest change was the New Year’s Day 646 A.D. law, where now the imperial family had some sense of control over all be and uji. In 663 A.D., Yamato tried to invade the main continent, to hold land across the sea: however, the invasion of Korea, ended with Japan defeated by the Tang Dynasty, China. The defeat prompted Japan to continue to learn from China and further develop their country based on their principles. “Japan had for centuries been in contact with the civilization centered on China, but only from Prince Shtoku’s time did the Japanese court consciously and habitually borrow from the continent the knowledge that could be used to heighten its power and glory” (Caiger 52).

The influence of foreign beliefs forced Japan to close off any foreign influence. During the Tokugawa era, and more particularly in 1700, Japan was faced with reformation because of increasing dept and moral and economic predicaments. Almost a century of reforms for different emperors took place, but none could fully bring Japan back to the golden era. The rulers were not the only ones in need or want of reform, particularly the rural upper class started to develop interest in political and economic matters and went far beyond their own land. Eventually, the School of Nation Learning was created specifically for these intellectual farmers and from this school one student stood out. Motoori Norinaga believes their own culture can help create the reform needed but noticed that past text and other students around him seem to extensively worship Chinese thoughts (Gordon 43). In the desire to find pure Japanese culture, he found that the earliest Japanese were “a sympathetic, emotional understanding of others and the intuitive ability to distinguish good and evil without complex rationalization” and found their previous religion “Shinto as a tradition of thought that posited a gradual continuum from humans to gods. The latter inhabited a mysterious realm only just beyond human reach, not radically transcendent” (Gordon 43). Later, one of Norinaga’s students, Hirata Atsutane, use his idea of past Japanese culture as a base for his political ideas. These ideas showed loyalty to Japan but went past the simple loyaly towards the daimy and his domain, which in the Tokugawa era, was what people considered to be the country’s political identity. Hirata wanted Japan to be seen as the gods’ land, like it was in the Yayoi era and used any sign of distress to argue for change in rulership. As time passed, more and more people changed their belief in the current domain, and eventually this belief forced major change. Another major person in changing the current domain was Aizawa Yasushi, who created the *New Theses* in 1825, a text that was against western views. The *New Theses* criticized the current rulers; it said the rulers live in luxury, failed to protect their country from western influence, kept other domains weak to keep themselves in control and thus allowed Japan to weaken. Aizawa main fear was how easily Christian influence from Europe could destroy Japan’s current hold over religion and authority. Since the influence of Christianity, Japan has blocked imports of the bible or any Christian works but allowed any other form of knowledge.

In shaping its early state, Japan strategically embraced foreign cultural and religious influences to build political legitimacy and strengthen its institutions. Japan, first, used beliefs rooted in Shinto to give authority to the rulers and allow slight control of the uji and be. Then Japan turned to the Chinese system reinforced through Buddhism to create a centralized state based on Buddhism. However, because the emperor’s control came from the belief of Buddhism, foreign influences threated to harm the emperor control and so force Japan to block of import of foreign religion, culminating in the suppression of Christianity and thus exclusion of foreign powers and so Japan slowly weakened. Japan rose up throughout the centuries using religion as a base for their control, but this same control almost forced Japan to settle in complete isolation from foreign affairs.

Works Sited

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