**Japan’s Religious History**

Isaiah Hoffer

University of Colorado at Colorado Springs

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Dr. Yang Wei

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Religious reforms led Japan into 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-gatherers, which led to the slow development of civilization. However, in 300 BCE, more immigrants arrived in Japan, bringing with them farmers, which led to rapid agricultural growth and marked the beginning of the Yayoi period. The development of agriculture led to the emergence of civilization, and the inhabitants have since settled in somewhat permanent villages. The Yayoi people emerged further from the Jomon era with the advent of bronze technology. The rapid development of civilization led to cultural reforms, marking the beginning of Japan’s first formal governance system. The adaptation of foreign religion and governance led Japan to prosperity but eventually led the country to an economic standstill. Using the Shinto beliefs, Japan established its first hierocracy. Influenced by the Tang Dynasty, Japan created a legal system enforced by Buddhism. The influence of foreign beliefs compelled Japan to close itself off to 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 utilized two distinct clans to control the people; the Uji held political power and land, while the Be served the Uji. The uji lived within the Yamato Court and had more power than anyone else in the state, even the ruler, because they controlled important land and managed the workers. Additionally, the Uji 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 articulated, “ kami signifies, in the first place, the deities of Heaven and Earth that appear in the ancient records and the spirits of the shrines 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 created a legal system enforced by Buddhism. The influence of Buddhism in Japan began in 552 A.D., when Korea sent gifts to Yamato, Japan’s biggest state, in support of the Korean wars. However, this gift bore the image and writings of the Buddha, which made the Yamato rulers wary of accepting it, fearing it might offend their gods. The Yamato court was split, with an important uji family, the Soga, who voted to accept the gifts, and the uji in control of the powerful Mononobe and Nakatomi, who were fearful of their own gods’ wrath. The Yamato emperor compromised by giving the image of Buddha to the Soga clan to pray privately, and soon later, a deadly plague spread across Yamato. According to Mononobe and Nakatomi, the worship of Buddha was to blame, and soon after, the emperor threw away the gifts (Caiger 38).

However, the Soga did not stop fighting for Buddhism, and in 587 A.D., they won after defeating the Mononobe. Yamato, under the new emperor, Prince Shōtoku, began to shift towards a bureaucratic, centralized state that supported Buddhist ideology, drawing inspiration from China. 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 Shōtoku’s rule, he created Buddhist temples and established ranks within the court based on merit, not lineage. Later, after Shōtoku’s rule, in 645 A.D., another revolt occurred against the Soga, and with the death of the Soga leaders, the Taika reforms began. The Taika reforms were a turning point in strengthening imperial control. Thus, the victors, Naka no Ōe and Nakatomi Kamatari utilized Prince Shōtoku’s Chinese principles to establish the foundation of a centralized imperial state. The most significant 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 attempted to invade the main continent to establish a land presence across the sea; however, the invasion of Korea ended with Japan being defeated by the Tang Dynasty of China. The defeat prompted Japan to continue learning from China and further develop its country based on its 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 compelled Japan to close itself off from foreign influence. During the Tokugawa era, and more specifically in 1700, Japan faced a period of reformation due to increasing debt and moral and economic challenges. Almost a century of reforms under different emperors took place, but none could fully restore Japan to its golden era. The rulers were not the only ones in need of or wanting reform. Particularly, the rural upper class began to develop an interest in political and economic matters, extending far beyond their land. Eventually, the School of Nation Learning was created specifically for these intellectual farmers, and from this school, one farmer stood out. Motoori Norinaga believes that their own culture can help create the reform needed, but he noticed that past texts and other students around him seem to worship Chinese thoughts extensively (Gordon 43). In the desire to find pure Japanese culture, he found that the earliest Japanese had “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, used his idea of past Japanese culture as a base for his political ideas. These ideas demonstrated loyalty to Japan but went beyond the simple loyalty towards the daimyō 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 a change in rulership.

As time passed, more and more people changed their beliefs in the current domain, and eventually, this shift forced significant changes. Another prominent figure in changing the current domain was Aizawa Yasushi, who created the *New Theses* in 1825, a text that opposed Western views. The *New Theses* criticized the current rulers, stating that they lived in luxury, failed to protect their country from Western influence, kept other domains weak to maintain control, and thus allowed Japan to weaken. Aizawa’s main fear was how easily Christian influence from Europe could destroy Japan’s current hold on 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 Buddhist principles. However, because the emperor’s control stemmed from Buddhist beliefs, foreign influences threatened to undermine the emperor’s control and force Japan to block the import of foreign religions, culminating in the suppression of Christianity and the exclusion of foreign powers. As a result, Japan slowly weakened. Japan rose throughout the centuries using religion as a base for its control, but this same control almost forced Japan to settle in complete isolation from foreign affairs.

Works Cited

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