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The Meiji Restoration’s Long-Lasting Impact on the Increasing number of Religions in Japan

Japan is often considered a fairly homogeneous country, with the vast majority of its citizens being of Japanese descent. However, this homogeneity ends when one begins to consider the presence of religion in the country. Traditionally, Japan’s religious body was represented by an interesting fusion of Shintoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. However, over the past 150 years, Japan has seen a sudden increase in the number of “new religions” present in the country, among them being Tenrikyo, Kurozumikyo, and Oomoto. A crucial question to consider is why the Japanese have seen this sudden increase in religion recently? Is it that the original religions became too boring for the Japanese problem, or is there a much more firmly rooted problem under the scenes? By looking closely at how government and religious politics during the Meiji period caused the Japanese people to become dissatisfied with the government, this essay will show how the Japanese government, itself, is responsible for the creation of these “new religions”.

First, we must look at the presence of religion in the Tokugawa period. At this time Western countries were seen as a threat to Japan and the foundation of its government, thus the Japanese government decided to rid the country of all remanences of Western influence, starting with Christianity. Despite the Tokugawa Shoguns having Confucian spirituality, the majority of the Japanese population under them could be considered Buddhist at the time and thus the government used Buddhist influences to condemn the maintenance of Christianity in Japan: “[Shoguns] were more or less Confucian in their spiritual and cultural heritage but they realized that the common people were more under Buddhist dominance. Thus, they utilized Buddhist priests and temples as instruments of the state in order to check and suppress Christianity” (Hideo and Howes 358). Next, during the Meiji period, the government established a connection between itself and Shintoism as a part of a multistep plan. First, the Japanse government established a list of religions that it would and would not accept: “In actual practice the government set up certain categories of religious bodies, which it was willing to recognize, and then required that all religion movements register and operate within one or another of these” (McFarland 38). There is a significant belief in Shintoism that the Emperor of Japan was a god-like figure, and the government of Japan intended to leverage this in order to further establish its influence over its people: “However, there was one aspect of Japan’s native religion which the government wanted to preserve and use for its own purpose − the old Shinto mythology about the divine descent of the emperor − for it was felt this would provide a firm and unique foundations for the state” (Hideo and Howes 359). The state took complete advantage of this aspect of Shintoism and would make proclamations as if it were a physical manifestation of these deities (Fukase-Indergaard and Indergaard 356). The government would then use this unification with Shintoism to disestablish Buddhism, despite its prominence among the Japanese people. This disregard for the consensus of the Japanese people was the first misstep that the Japanese government took on its way to solidifying its power and thus the first time that a large portion the Japanese population’s faith in the Japanese government began to waver. In its desperation to solidify power over its people, the Japanese government simultaneously inflicted pain upon itself. Ultimately the prohibition of Christianity was lifted in 1872 (Fukase-Indergaard and Indergaard 356).

Furthermore, the Japanese people’s expectations for the government were set high during the Meiji period as they were told the period would bring technological, educational, and agricultural advancements. However, according to Hideo and Howes the government was not completely successful in fulfilling these promises: “the common people… became disillusioned and disappointed by the failure of the government to fulfill its promises of better conditions” (Hideo and Howes 361). This disillusionment lead to a confusion among the people as they were forced through a multitude of different religious developments, and ultimately many Japanese people decided that it was time for a more concrete change. Leading to the inception of “new religions” of Japan. However, this disillusionment did not all happen at once, throughout all of Japan, it slowly developed independently in separate pockets of the country, which is why so many “new religions” have emerged.

In light of the fact that so many “new religions” have emerged, this essay will particularly look at the arguments made of this essay in relation to Tenrikyo, possibly the oldest of the “new religions”. According to McFarland, Tenrikyo was “founded among peasants in 1838 by Mrs. Nakayama Miki” (McFarland 39). We know from earlier in the essay, that throughout Japan’s religious development, the peasants have been used possibly more than any other group. The peasants took up the vast majority of the Japanese population, and thus when the government needed to make religious changes, it was important that it appealed to the masses (the peasant class). We saw this in particular with the government’s manipulation of Buddhist principles to denote Christianity, and then with the government’s attempt to rid the entire country of Buddhism and unify Japan under Shintoism. By forcing the peasants to go through these changes, the government leveraged the people at many points through its rise, thus giving the lower class people more reason than any other group to be disillusioned with the Japanese government. Nakayama Miki is believed to be a god on Earth by the Tenrikyo people (McFarland 39) and thus served as a savior for the peasants as she was able to guide them through the rough and confusing times that the Japanese government put them through. As Tenrikyo, itself, was founded under the confusion of the Meiji period, it also went through a number of changes as the Japanese government forced the religious body to categorize itself under Shinto. It is true that Tenrikyo is anti-Buddhist, but it is not necessarily Shinto in comparison: “An individual becomes a member of Tenrikyo simply by enrolling in one of the churches and making a financial contribution. His membership is then announced and he agrees to remove the Butsudan” (McFarland 41). This gave the peasants more reason to be disillusioned with the governing body of Japan and shows how the government unintentionally drove the people of Japan away from itself and into these “new religious bodies”.

Through Japan’s climb for power and fear of outside influence during the 19th century the country took many precautions to prevent the rise of any unwanted power. Because of this many citizen were forced to denounce their religious beliefs for the sake of Japan, thus leading to the disillusionment of many; specifically, the disillusionment of many members of the peasant class. This growing distaste for the Japanese government and forcing of people away from their prior religions lead to the creation of new religions in Japan, which the country would permit as long as the religion could be categorized as a sect one of few permitted religions. The people of Japan began their own religious movements and by doing so separated themselves from the traditional religious elements of Shintoism and Buddhism. By allowing this spark to ignite in the Meiji period, the Japanese people realized that they could create their own religions and with this ideology fueled, the creation of “new religions” has continued to spread and neither the people of Japan nor the Japanese government can do much to stop this growth.

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