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978-0-521-85119- 0 - The Religious Traditions of Japan, 500–1600
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Introduction

Terminology

The decision to start this history in 500 (or 538 to be precise) and to end in 1582 was based largely on the fact that these two dates mark major events: the official arrival of Buddhism from Paekche, and the utter destruction of the monasteries on Hieizan by Oda Nobunaga. We do have some limited knowledge of the tradition prior to the sixth century, but the lion's share is archaeological rather than textual, and since I am no archaeologist and since ninety per cent of the information still lies shamefully untouched in the huge tomb mounds of the Yamato plain, I have decided not to speculate. After all, it is bad enough trying to deal with the sixth and seventh centuries, when one's earliest textual sources date from the early eighth century and when these sources were designed for the specific purpose of producing a series of masterly smokescreens.

Comparisons may be odious, but they can also be useful to help highlight characteristics that might otherwise be hidden from view. As luck will have it, another country on the other side of the globe experienced similar events at roughly the same time. The traditional date for the landing of St Columba on Iona is 563, and the dissolution of the monasteries, which caused far more damage than Nobunaga ever contemplated, happened between 1535 and 1540. This relative closeness of dates is, of course, entirely an accident, but both ends of the story help to throw the Japanese example into relief. At one end, compare the nature of Japanese Buddhism and the way it interacted with local cults with what happened in Britain as Christianity took hold. British paganism took some time to die, but die it did, overwhelmed by the new arrival that simply subsumed what it could not destroy. The local worship of gods and spirits in Japan, however, did survive, long enough and strong enough indeed to form the bedrock of a new state ideology in the nineteenth century. Why and how this happened in the case of Japan is a source of considerable interest. Undoubtedly, the flexible nature of Buddhism with its concept of multiple realities and the philosophical breathing space it gave

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conventional as opposed to absolute truth had a large part to play. There is good evidence to suggest that Buddhism in fact created the ground on which Shintō later flourished. It is this subtle interplay that makes this history of Japanese religious traditions so difficult to write. And at the other end of the story? Well, let us just say that what are usually interpreted as the actions of a megalomaniac in the 1580s in Japan can be given a useful perspective if looked at through the prism of the dissolution of the monasteries in sixteenth-century Britain. Problems of church and state are universal.

Mention of the word 'church' brings us to the tricky matter of terminology. One answer would be not to attempt translation at all but simply to use the romanised form of Japanese names of institutions and titles; but this might well make the text unreadable for all but the specialist. The number of Japanese characters sprinkled throughout the text is already bad enough. On the other hand, one must also avoid using equivalents that mislead. In the field of religion the most natural English equivalents are so redolent of Christianity that one hesitates to use them. It is instructive that the Japanese themselves deal with Christian ranks and titles not simply by using Buddhist equivalents, but by inventing new words: a Catholic archbishop, for example, is Daishikyō 大司教 and an Anglican archbishop Daishukyō 大主教. When in doubt, I have followed their example, not by inventing an entirely new word, but by choosing as neutral a term as possible. For example, it would have been very useful to have been able to use the term 'Buddhist Church' to refer to Buddhist institutions as a group, but this would have produced the impression that there was such a thing, when in fact the lack of unity was precisely the distinguishing characteristic of Buddhism in Japan. In one sense, yes, everyone knew that all 'Buddhisms' were connected, but there was no Buddhist 'pope', no overall authority, no one god, no sense of unity, and different institutions haggled and fought more between themselves than ever against a common enemy. Any sense of fragmentation one might find in the Catholic Church in Europe pales in comparison. At the heart of this lack of cohesion lay one of the central tenets of Buddhism, namely the acceptance of, and sometimes the encouragement of, multiple truths, which inevitably led to a plethora of doctrinal differences. Since there could be no single path to enlightenment and/or salvation, each institution could have its own ideas as to what constituted the true path. It is this that lies behind one of the more curious (for the outsider) occupations of Buddhist scholar-monks, their obsession with categorising, classifying and ranking various teachings. In such a context, to use the word 'Church', even in inverted commas, would be to lay down expectations of an underlying unity that are never going to be

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fulfilled and that will inevitably lead to misunderstandings. Where necessary, I have resorted to the rather clumsy 'Buddhist institutions' or even just 'Buddhism', which is unforgivably vague but has the advantage of not being 'Church'.

The same goes, *mutatis mutandis*, for the individuals involved. The lines between lay and non-lay are at times extremely difficult to draw. It is tempting to use the term 'clergy' to distinguish the professionals from lay believers and supporters, but in the Japanese context this must include 'monks', a category which in the Western context is normally set in opposition to 'clergy'. Titles raise similar questions. Distinctions are made in Japanese that are not made in English and vice versa, so one has to come to some sort of compromise. Another title that causes difficulty is *tennō* 天皇, which is usually translated as 'emperor'. This Chinese term that originally referred to the divinity who appears as the Pole Star 北斗 was adopted as a title by Japanese rulers in the early years of the eighth century. Piggott (1997) uses the translation 'heavenly sovereign', which is a little unwieldy but better than 'emperor', which suggests to the modern ear an empire that never existed. 'King' would be better still but might give the erroneous impression of someone who ruled directly and personally, which was certainly not the case. When it occurs as a personal title, I have left it untranslated as *Tennō*. When it occurs as a generic term, I have preferred 'sovereign' or 'monarch', with 'royal' as the adjective. This may ruffle a few feathers.

A short glossary of Buddhist terms that are used in this book without further explanation will be found on page xiv.

Shintō

As will become clear in due course, part of the object of this book is to problematise the term 'Shintō' and the reader will find that it appears relatively late in the narrative. In the earlier sections I have preferred to use such circumlocutions as 'local cults' or 'native deities' (*jingi* 神祇), although even the word 'native' can be misleading here, since the question of what is or is not 'native' is open to much debate. I have used the word 'shrine' to translate the term *yashiro* 社 or *jinja* 神社, and 'priest' (*shinshoku* 神職) to refer to those people connected to shrines, the majority of whom were ritualists or assisted in rituals. The Council for Affairs of the Deities of Heaven and Earth (Jingikan 神祇官), as one of the earliest government agencies, had its own titles, but these are rarely mentioned in what follows.

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During most of the period that we are dealing with, Shintō ranks refer not to a rank within a national system but to positions within individual shrines:

gūji, *kannushi*	宮司、神主	head priest
gon-gūji	權宮司	assistant head priest
negi	禰宜	senior priest(s)
gon-negi	權禰宜	assistant senior priest(s)
shuten	主典	priests
miko	巫女、神子	shrine maidens
jinin	神人	shrine servant

Buddhism

This is more complicated. The generic term for a Buddhist establishment is *tera* or *-ji*, both written 寺, a word that makes no distinction as to size or function. Early establishments in Japan were clearly temples in that their prime purpose was not to house celibate men dedicated to a contemplative life and cut off from normal society but to house priests whose duty it was to perform rituals for the peace and stability of the state. It took some time for what we would recognise as monasteries to emerge. The same building or compound might change its usage many times. Some *tera* were clearly monastic institutions first and temples second. In other cases the reverse might be the case, and in yet others there would be no sign of monasticism at all. Some were vast complexes, others were single, small buildings. At the risk of some slight confusion, it seems sensible to allow a degree of flexibility, although I have given preference to the term 'temple', since at least it suggests something non-Christian and has a wider remit than 'monastery'. Later reformist sects that began by challenging the whole significance of ordination used an entirely different term for their buildings, *dōjō* 道場. One occasionally finds this translated as 'chapel', but I have preferred the more neutral 'meeting house'.

So much for the buildings. But what about the people in them? The generic Japanese word is *sō* (Ch. *seng* 僧), which is usually translated as 'monk', although it comes to mean this via a rather circuitous route. The Sanskrit term is *bhikṣu* (Pāli: *bhikkhu*), which means a mendicant. The Chinese *seng* is in fact a short form of *sengqie* 僧伽, which transliterates the Sanskrit *saṅgha*, meaning the 'assembly [of ordained monks]'. The term then became used for a single 'member of the saṅgha'. Here, too, the reader must allow for a degree of flexibility, because many of these members of the saṅgha or

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'monks' in the Japanese context were not what we would normally term 'monks' at all. Some were primarily scholars, others mainly administrators. Some had priestly functions, some were simply eccentrics who lived outside the system altogether, and at a later stage some could best be described as having a pastoral role, being leaders of congregations. The same man might act as a monk in one scenario and a ritualist in another, so I have used a variety of terms on the principle that to court occasional confusion is better than to cause constant misunderstanding. As far as women are concerned, the study of women and Buddhism in Japan is still in its infancy.[1] Although in the Nara period they seem to have had an equal role with men as ritualists, this situation did not last for long and one has fewer qualms in calling female members of the saṅgha 'nuns'. Even here, however, we are not without problems. The Japanese term *ama* 尼 is flexible and was often used with respect to women who had simply decided to 'retire', from either official court duties or sometimes just household life. It does not always refer to an officially ordained female.

The question of nomenclature arises again with respect to those official Buddhist titles which were given to members of the government office whose duty it was to oversee all Buddhist establishments, the Saṅgha Office (*sōgō* 僧綱). There were three main ranks: *sōjō* 僧正, *sōzu* 僧都, and *risshi* 律師. The first two are often translated as archbishop and bishop, but I have chosen the following slightly odd-sounding equivalents, for the very reason that they reveal difference rather than suggest a misplaced familiarity:

sōjō saṅgha prefect
sōzu saṅgha administrator
risshi preceptor

In addition to these official ranks bestowed by the state, each monastery/temple had its own organisation. Here we run into the problem from the opposite angle. The fragmented nature of Buddhist institutions is mirrored in the nomenclature. A tree chart for one temple might be roughly equivalent to another, but the ranks would have completely different names. This reinforces the impression of a lack of uniformity, but to avoid a plethora of Japanese titles, the only answer is to use one English equivalent, hence the following titles, referring to the highest position in a monastery, will all be translated 'abbot': *zasu* 座主 at Enryakuji, Kongōbuji, Daigoji; *chōri* 長吏 at

[1] This is true both in Japan and abroad, although the situation is improving rapidly. See Ruch 2002 and Horton 2004 for recent work in English.

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Onjōji; *jūji* 住持 at Zen monasteries; *chōja* 長者 at Tōji; and *bettō* 別當 at Tōdaiji, Kōfukuji, etc. For the reformist sects, with their anti-monastic bias and their predominantly lay organisations, one has the choice of 'priest', 'pastor' or 'minister', depending on the exact relationship between lay members and their leader, although all these could also run into the familiarity trap. For the Jishū order one is even tempted to use the term 'friar', were that not so specific in a Western context.

Preview

It may be helpful at this point to give a synopsis of what follows. This history begins with the arrival of Buddhism. The Buddha is first interpreted as a strong foreign deity, whose magical powers are well worth appropriating. His cult is therefore introduced top-down and kept firmly in the hands of the ruling clans. Initially there is a certain amount of tension between the proponents and opponents of the new arrival, but a *modus vivendi* is soon found, Buddhism being simply added to the number of cults whose main duty it was to protect the ruler and maintain the status quo. There are signs here of an incipient state religion. Moves are made to bureaucratise the localised, disparate cults that had existed before the arrival of Buddhism into a hierarchical system and from that point on they always remained indissolubly linked to questions of sovereignty. In sharp contrast to events in Britain at roughly the same time, the survival and indeed growth of local cults is helped by Buddhism's willingness to accommodate rather than confront.

It should be borne in mind that Buddhism arrived in Japan after a very long journey from north India, through Kashmir and Afghanistan, along the Silk Route north and south of the Taklamakan Desert, and then through the whole of China and Korea. It called itself the 'Greater Vehicle' (*Mahāyāna*) and had developed doctrines and practices that were quite distinct from the southern Theravāda tradition based on the Pāli scriptures and found today in Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand. The encounter with Chinese culture was decisive, and it is important to remember that to the Japanese the canonical language of Buddhism was classical Chinese, not Sanskrit or any of its many varieties.

From the mid-sixth century to the tenth, new schools of Buddhist thought and practice were developing in China and as contact between Japan and China increased, these new traditions found a secure haven in Japan, far more secure, as things turned out, than in China itself, where Buddhism often had

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to fight to hold its own. Each new tradition had its champions, who competed with each other for various forms of Japanese state support and patronage. There was no 'Buddhist Church' as such, merely a collection of traditions, each with its own political ambitions. Rivalry between institutions could be intense. Although it is often tempting to think of a Buddhist establishment as a simple power block, it was nothing of the sort. In fact, temples were more often than not the sowers of discord and they never managed to create a mechanism for mediating conflict. Buddhism remained in the hands of the elite until the twelfth century, and during that period it became more and more involved in the production of this-worldly benefits and protection via the manipulation of spells, magical images and gestures for which I have used the term 'tantric'. It was, to all intents and purposes, the preserve of the aristocracy.

Things began to change around 1100. With the advent of men like Hōnen, the exclusive right of members of the saṅgha to salvation was challenged. The possibility that salvation might be made available to everyone, no matter what their status, was now made explicit. The saṅgha did not disappear, of course, but they no longer had a monopoly. Some remained within the traditional structures of power and continued their role as priests acting on behalf of those who ruled, but we begin to see the emergence of many who preferred a pastoral, ministering role. The practice of faith was made easier partly by narrowing the choice of devotional object to a single Buddha, usually, but by no means exclusively, Amitābha, and partly by the invention of simple formulae for expressing devotion. Sermonising became common and Buddhist art expanded its reach into the didactic, into the production of illustrated scrolls for use by preachers. It should be stressed that these changes can be seen across the board, not only in the new non-monastic movements. Given that Buddhism had been introduced from the top, it is only to be expected that this kind of reformist movement would emerge; indeed it is slightly surprising that it did not take off earlier. There are obvious parallels here to the Reformation movement in Europe, with its questioning of the role of a clergy and its championing of the individual's right to have unmediated access to the deity, but the end result of such changes was to be quite different.

The 'opening out' of Buddhism that we find from 1100 manifested itself in a number of different ways. There was a growth in cults directed towards not just one Buddha but one specific image. Certain images in certain temples became the object of popular devotion, the Amitābha triad at Zenkōji 善光寺, for example, and unofficial holy men became the self-appointed guardians of

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these cults. There was also, of course, an economic imperative behind such developments. There emerged mendicant orders, and three devotional sects, Jōdoshū 淨土宗, Jōdo Shinshū 淨土眞宗 and Nichirenshū 日蓮宗, each of which had a charismatic founder. What distinguishes these sects was their insistence that they and only they had the correct message, an intransigence that clashed with Buddhism's more usual elasticity. It is not surprising that they were subject to considerable persecution and oppression, and in fact only gained real influence in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, at which point they became a magnet for those who were interested in fomenting large-scale social unrest.

There is, however, a danger in concentrating too much on these sects; and to do so is to obscure the fact that the more established, official institutions continued to dominate. Reform movements, such as a drive to revive proper observance of the monastic precepts which had fallen into disuse, also emerged from within. They were joined in the thirteenth century by the Zen monasteries, which were the last significant religious import from China until the seventeenth century.

All these developments need to be considered in relation to local cults. The attempt to impose a system in the eighth century was not sustainable and fell apart, but the cults as discrete entities survived and prospered by coming to an accommodation with Buddhism, which easily explained them as manifestations of an underlying unity and which needed them to naturalise itself fully. Tantric Buddhism, in particular, became involved in the quasi-nationalist enterprise of proving that Japan, as the land of the gods, was not at the end of a long developmental line but was in fact the original home of the buddhas. From here it is not far to insisting on the primacy of native deities. It is in essence the history of a long slow Japanese battle for self-justification, legitimation and self-respect in the face of the frightening debt that they owed to Chinese culture and Buddhist thought.

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Part I

The arrival of Buddhism and its effects (*c*.538–800)

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Plate 1 Head of Yakushi Nyorai.

Bronze head of Yakushi, the Medicine Master, *c*.685. Height 1.07 m. Kōfukuji Museum. This strikingly handsome head was discovered in 1937 while repairs were being made to the Eastern Golden Hall (Higashi Kondō) of Kōfukuji. It was found under the main dais on top of a wooden box that contained a number of other parts of Buddhist images that had obviously been melted by intense heat. There are traces of gilt on the face and red on the lips. Most of the back of the head is missing. It is thought to be the central figure of a Yakushi triad originally installed in the Yamadadera in 685. It turned up at Kōfukuji in 1187. Kōfukuji was badly damaged by the forces of Taira no Shigehira in 1180 and although the Eastern Golden Hall was rebuilt by 1185, they had considerable difficulty in obtaining a suitable image. The monks eventually solved the problem by simply removing the triad from the Yamadadera. It survived one fire in 1369, but was destroyed in a lightning strike in 1411.

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