

JAPANESE RELIGION – Postclassical Period

Introduction Japanese culture was influenced extensively by Chinese and Korean civilization during the early years of its development. New ideas on technology, religion, language and more were well received by the ruling elites who were seeking normative structures for society. In particular, though Japan had its own religion known as Shintō, Confucianism and Buddhism found a receptive population and was widely adopted in antiquity. Ideas on statehood, law, taxation, social structures and gender were also embraced in the years before the Nara era (710-794). In spite of this, Japanese culture retained a very strong sense of identity separate from that found on the mainland. Its position as a series of islands on the edge of the vast Pacific Ocean allowed its leadership to pick and choose what elements of culture it wanted to adopt and what elements it wished to discard. Like Great Britain, the ocean protected Japanese society from the worst forms of imperialism originating on the mainland. Because of this, Japanese society shares a number of cultural markers with China and Korea, but has its own unique heritage, culture and civilization.

POST-CLASSICAL PERIOD (500 CE-1500 CE)

Shintō. The indigenous religion of Japan is called Shintō. Shintō means the “way of the gods” and is polytheistic. Rather than worshipping one single, all powerful God, as is the case in the religions from the Abrahamic traditions, adherents of Shintō venerate and worship many different gods (*kami*) which are reflected in the natural world. Natural wonders, old trees, waterfalls and the like are examples of objects to be venerated. Shintō has no sacred texts, no code of conduct, little concept of the afterlife and a poorly defined liturgy. Shintō provided a cosmology for Japan and introduced the sun goddess Amaterasu, the founding deity of Japan. It would be difficult to convert to Shintō if one were not Japanese. Shintō is often described as being a way of life for the Japanese, but it is not necessarily a philosophy. One can worship at a Shintō shrine or where ever objects in nature are found. Shintō is not exclusive. In fact, many Japanese are adherents of both Shintō and Buddhism.

Buddhism. Buddhism arrived in Japan in the 5th and 6th centuries (probably earlier—but documentary and archaeological evidence for this is lacking) and remains a vibrant part of the religious landscape of Japan today. There are many, many different sects of Buddhism in Japan, some of which have largely disappeared in places such as China and India—where Buddhism originated. The emerging Yamato rulers of the 7th and 8th centuries eagerly embraced Buddhism as a way to legitimize their own rule and provided funding for the building of temples and monasteries. The earliest temple complex constructed, of the Tōdaiji sect, can be found in the ancient capital city of Nara. It was the Emperor Shōmu (701-756) who is credited with the casting of the gigantic, 49ft tall statue of the Daibutsu (great Buddha) which now rests in the great hall in Nara. During this period, Buddhism was privileged in Japan, generously funded and protected by the Emperor. Temples were built all over Japan and Buddhism became institutionally linked to the throne. The Emperor Kanmu (737-806) also understood the importance of Buddhism in Japan and decided that the new capital city of Heian should have religious institutions of its own. He decided to become a patron of two new sects of Buddhism—Tendai and Shingon. Both of these organizations were later urged to ordain their own clergy (which further diminished the power of the Tōdaiji sect in Nara) and build complexes on the mountains near the city. Both of these sects are still prominent in Japan today. Buddhism is as important in the history of Japan as the Roman Catholic Church is to the history of Europe.

Zen Buddhism. In the absence of a strong central government, the Ashikaga period (1336-1477) is remembered for cultural and religious development. Buddhism, in particular, enjoyed a renaissance. This was, in part, because Ashikaga Takauji himself embraced Buddhism as he aged and patronized the religion by funding the building of monasteries and temples. It was the Ashikaga who illuminated the connection between the warrior ethic (*bushidō*) and Zen Buddhism. Zen (Chan in China) had a long presence in Japan, but it was (and still is) a very small sect. Zen stressed an austere lifestyle, the clearing of the mind and the total abandonment of ego. These characteristics, when internalized by soldiers, yielded a disciplined, unselfish warrior, free from worldly attachments and willing to sacrifice his life in service to his lord.

Readings

Richard Bowring, *The Religious Traditions of Japan 500-1600*, (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Paul Varley, *The Ōnin War: History of its Origins and Background. With a Selective Translation of the Chronicle of the Ōnin*, (Columbia University Press, 1967).