

# Religion in Japan

Ryoichi Imai  
Kyushu University

# 神道 The Shintoism

- According to the ancient myths compiled to the 古事記 Kojiki and the 日本書紀 Nihon-Shoki, Japan was created by the god and the goddess (*Izanagi* and *Izanami*).
- The heaven was ruled by Amaterasu the goddess. She sent her nephew *Ninigi* as the ruler of the Japanese islands.
- Ninigi marked his first steps to Japan at the peak of 高千穂峰 Mt. Takachiho-no-mine in the Miyagi prefecture.
- Ninigi and his family was believed to be the ancestors of Japan's imperial family.
- The Shinto gods are almost the gods described by the chronicles mythology.

# 伊勢神宮 Great Shrine of Ise



- The shrine is located in the Mie prefecture, and is the most holy shrine in the Japanese Shintoism.
- In the shrine, believers worship the goddess Amaterasu, the ruler of the Heaven.
- PM Abe held a G7 summit 2016 meeting in the Ise city and invited the western leaders to the shrine.
- The main hall is the sacred place where nobody is allowed to take photographs.



# 宇佐八幡宮 Usa Hachiman shrine



- The shrine was built in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, and is ranked at the top of all the Hachiman shrines in Japan.
- Its shintaku (oracle) was so strong to affect the decisions in the imperial court (Dokyo incident).
- The shrine was one of the leaders of the Shinto syncretism (immersion with Buddhism).
- The center of the Shugendo emerging in the Kunisaki Peninsula.

# 出雲大社 Great Shrine of Izumo



- In the ancient time, there was a country ruled by King Ohkuninushi in the San-in region, the northern coast of the western Japan.
- The kingdom was conquered by the Yamato dynasty.
- The king Ohkuninush is now worshiped as the god of marriage and good harvest.

# Origin of Buddhism in Japan

- Buddhism was brought from China through Korean peninsula in the 7<sup>th</sup> century.
- The Soga clan and Prince Shotoku established Buddhism as the state religion.
- The Japanese envoys to the Tang Dynasty China brought many Buddhist scriptures and monks to Japan.
- Prince Shotoku built the Horyuju temple (法隆寺) at Asuka (飛鳥) in Nara prefecture.
- In Nara era, Emperor Shomu built a Giant Buddha statue at the Todaiji temple (東大寺).

# Buddha as the protector of the state

- The absorption of Buddhist knowledge was carried over to the Heian period.
- Saicho (最澄・伝教大師) and Kukai (空海・弘法大師), who went to Tang Dynasty China during the reign of Emperor Kanmu, studied esoteric Buddhism (密教) and founded the Tendai (天台) and Shingon (真言) sects, respectively.
- In ancient times, the role of Buddhism was regarded as a protective state, and it received state patronage, but the faith did not spread among the people.

# Decadent-age theory, Amidism, and the Syncretism

- In the late Heian period, the idea of 末法思想 Mappo (pessimism due to decadent-age theory) spread.
- The belief in Amida (阿弥陀信仰), which taught that you would be reborn in the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss (極樂浄土) in the next life, became popular.
- Fujiwara Yorimichi built the magnificent Byodoin Phoenix Hall (平等院鳳凰堂) based on the Amida beliefs.
- During the Insei (Cloister Rule) period, shrine worship based on the syncretism of the Shinto and Buddhist (神仏習合) traditions became popular.
- The Kumano Three Shrines (熊野三山) were visited very often by the current and retired emperors.



# 熊野那智大社 Kumano Nachi Taisha Shrine



- The shrine is located at the southern coast of the Wakayama prefecture.
- The shrine is one of the three shrines (Nachi Taisha, Hongu Taisha, and Hayatama Taisha) located at the goal of the Kumano Pilgrimage Road.
- The shrine is a leading temple of the Shinto-Buddhism syncretism.

# 鎌倉仏教 Kamakura Buddhism

- Towards the end of the twelfth century, young Buddhist monks were creating a new Buddhism.
- During this period, Enryakuji Temple (延暦寺) of the Tendai served as a Buddhist college.
- The young monks who studied at Enryakuji started new schools one after another.
- Most of the Buddhist sects practiced by modern Japanese were founded in the Kamakura period.
- The state-protecting Buddhism was transformed into popular religions by the founders of Kamakura Buddhism.

# The Jodo sects

- It was the Jodo sect (浄土宗) and the Jodo Shinshu sect (浄土真宗) that popularized the Amida faith.
- Honen (法然), who founded the Jodo sect, built Chion-in temple (知恩院) in Kyoto.
- Shinran (親鸞), who learned from Honen, founded the Jodo Shinshu sect.
- Jodo Shinshu was spread throughout Japan by Rennyo (蓮如) in the late Muromachi period, and became the leading religion of the revolt of peasants.
- The Tokugawa shogunate feared the political power of Jodo Shinshu and divided the head temple in Kyoto into the East Honganji (東本願寺) and the West Honganji (西本願寺).

# 禅宗 Zen Buddhism



- Zen Buddhism was founded by Master Daruma (達磨大師) of ancient China.
- In the early Kamakura period, Eisai (栄西) and Dogen (道元) traveled to the Song dynasty China to study Zen Buddhism and founded the Rinzai (臨済宗) and Soto (曹洞宗) schools, respectively.
- The Rinzai school was exclusively under the patronage of the Kamakura and Muromachi shogunates, and founded a number of large temples in Kamakura and Kyoto. The Rinzai sect mainly attracted the faith of the samurai.
- In contrast, Dogen built Eihei-ji Temple (永平寺) in Echizen (越前、福井県) and distanced himself from political power.
- However, Eihei-ji was soon regarded as the most prestigious Zen Buddhist temple in Japan.
- The popularity of Zen Buddhism in Europe and the United States was fueled by the zealous efforts of the Soto school to spread its teachings abroad.



# 永平寺 Eihei-ji Temple Fukui



- The temple was founded by a famous Zen Priest Dogen in the early Kamakura era.
- The Soto Zen brought by Priest Dogen from China to Japan is the largest Zen Buddhism sect in Japan today.
- Eihei-ji Temple, surrounded by a deep forest, is one of Japan's leading Zen training centers.



# 法華宗 Lotus Sutra Sects

- Nichiren (日蓮), who studied under the Tendai school of Buddhism, came to believe that the Lotus Sutra (法華經) was the most important Buddhist scripture and tried to spread it among the people.
- Nichiren severely criticized the politics of the Kamakura shogunate and warned the people against the Mongol invasion as a form of punishment for their unbelief (不信心).
- Although his sect was severely suppressed, Nichiren Buddhism is one of the most followed Buddhism in Japan today.
- Minobu-san Kuonji Temple (身延山久遠寺), which was founded by Nichiren, is still one of the headquarters of the Nichiren sect today.

# Minobu-san Fukuoka Temple 身延山福岡別院



- A giant Nichiren statue stands near the center of Fukuoka city.
- A Hokekyo priest, *Nichiren*, alarmed at people about the invasion of Mongolia in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.
- He was heavily persecuted by the Kamakura bakufu for having confused people.
- Later his Buddhist believers have formed the Nichiren-shu 日蓮宗, which is one of the largest Buddhist sects in Japan.

# 創価学会 the Soka Gakkai

- The sect has been repeatedly split and confronted with each other, and today it is divided into Nichirenschu (日蓮宗), Nichiren Shoshu (日蓮正宗), and the Soka Gakkai (創価学会).
- The Soka Gakkai was an association of followers of Nichiren Shoshu, and now is independent of the sect temples.
- The Soka Gakkai had a significant influence on Japanese politics through its political division, the Komei Party (公明党).

# The Return of Shintoism

- Since Prince Shotoku, the imperial family has been adherents of Buddhism, and funerals and other rituals have been held mainly in accordance with Buddhism.
- Before the Meiji Restoration, the family temple was Sennyu-ji Temple (泉涌寺) in Kyoto.
- However, after the Meiji Restoration, when the emperor returned to power as a politician, the religion of the imperial family was made Shinto.
- The imperial family was converted by force to Shintoism.
- The Meiji government banned Shinto-Buddhist syncretism and promoted the separation of Buddhism from Shinto.
- (廃仏毀釈 haibutsu-kishaku) Much of the Buddhist heritage was destroyed by the abolition of Buddhism.

# Christianity

- Christianity was brought to Japan by Portuguese and Spanish missionaries during the Sengoku period.
- Christianity spread in Kyushu and other parts of Japan, especially in western Japan.
- Not only the common people but also the feudal lords were converted to Christianity (Kirishitan daimyo).
- However, sensing Spanish intentions to conquer Japan, Toyotomi Hideyoshi banned Christianity and crucified the missionaries.
- The Edo shogunate restricts trade with Europe to the Netherlands and designates Nagasaki as the only international port.



# Hidden Christians

- (島原の乱、The Shimabara Rebellion) A major Christian uprising occurred in Kyushu in the early Edo period, but it was quickly put down.
- (隠れキリシタン、Hidden Christians) Christian beliefs were strictly forbidden, but in some parts of Nagasaki Prefecture, Christian beliefs posing as Buddhists continued in secret.
- After the Meiji Restoration, the Christian faith was legalized.
- Today, there are a variety of Christians, including Roman Catholics and Protestants.

# 大浦天主堂 Ohura Cathedral Nagasaki



- The church was built at the end of Edo era (1862), and is the oldest catholic church in Japan, remaining today.
- A French Priest Putitjean found the local hidden Christians, who continued praying for Jesus more than 250 years informally, pretending to be Buddhists.