The Religious Traditions of Japan 500-1600

Richard Bowring

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Richard Bowring : The Religious Traditions of Japan 500-1600 before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Religious Traditions of Japan 500-1600:

6 of 9 people found the following review helpful. Good survey of Buddhism in japanBy P. NagyThe Religious Traditions of Japan 500-1600 by Richard Bowring (Cambridge University Press) The first English-language overview of the interaction of Buddhism and Shint in Japanese culture.Richard Bowring describes in outline the development of

Japanese religious thought and practice from the introduction of writing to the point at which medieval attitudes gave way to a distinctive pre-modern culture, a change that brought an end to the dominance of religious institutions. A wide range of approaches using the resources of art, history, social and intellectual history, as well as doctrine, is brought to bear on the subject. It attempts to give as full a picture as possible of the richness of the Japanese tradition as it succeeded in holding together, on the one hand, Buddhism, with its sophisticated intellectual structures, and, on the other hand, the disparate local cults that eventually achieved a kind of unity under the rubric of Shinto. An understanding of this process of constant and at times difficult interaction is essential to a deeper appreciation of Japan's history and its cultural achievements.Excerpt: 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 bureaucratize the localized, 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' (Mahayana) and had developed doctrines and practices that were quite distinct from the southern Theravada tradition based on the Pali scriptures and found today in Sri Lanka. Buena 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 manyvarieties.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 to light 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 Honen, the exclusive right of members of the sangha to salvation was challenged. The possibility that salvation might be made available to everyone, no matter what their status, was now made explicit. The sangha 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, Amitabha, and partly by the invention of simple formulae for expressing devotion. Sermonizing 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 1 100 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 Amitabha triad at Zenkdji, for example, and unofficial holy men became the self-appointed guardians of these cults. There was also, of course, an economic imperative behind such developments. There emerged mendicant orders, and three devotional sects, Jodoshu, Jodo Shinshu and Nichirenshu, 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 naturalize 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.

Richard Bowring traces the development of Japanese religious thought and practice from the introduction of writing to the point at which medieval attitudes gave way to a distinctive pre-modern culture, a change that brought an end to the dominance of religious institutions. A wide range of approaches using the resources of art, history, social and intellectual history, as well as doctrine is brought to bear on the subject in order to give as full a picture as possible of the richness of the Japanese tradition and an overview of how Buddhism and Shint interacted in Japanese culture.

By incorporating recent scholarship into this book, Bowring has filled a significant gap in the study of Japanese religion in general. Written with nonspecialists in mind, this book, with its historical detail, Japanese terminology, and kanji, will also interest those with a more specialized background in things Japanese. Choice"...it is an engrossing, fascinating, and exhaustive study. The author has succeeded in almost mimetically reproducing the ongoing and dynamic quality of the history of Japanase religion: topoi such as kami veneration appear and reappear as historical actors appropriate such themes--from their discursive toolbox--in a series of different contexts in the premodern Japanese isles." - Brian O. Ruppert, University of Illinois,