Outline Lecture Seventeen—Buddhism and State Formation in Nara Japan

Today’s Key Focus:
1) Formation of the Japanese State—evolution of an insular, embryonic entity, where the effect of every change is as magnified as it is profound
2) How Japan became a Buddhist nation, but also how Buddhism became a Japanese religion

I) Introduction of Buddhism to Japan

   a) Top→Down or Bottom→Up?
      i) Traditional assumption vs. Holcombe’s maritime/immigrant thesis
   b) A Maritime Transmission of Faith
      i) Cult of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara (Guanyin or Kannon)
      ii) Merchant crews usually a very international group
      iii) Buddhism, for better or worse, symbolized internationalism to the extreme
   c) Religion of an Immigrant Community
      i) “Hata” people in Japan
      ii) Worship of Buddhism
         (1) Shiba Tatto around 522
         (2) Soga clan’s ties to this immigrant community

II) Conditions for the Formation of a Centralized Yamato State

   a) Crisis in the early 7th century
      i) Geopolitical Changes
      ii) Domestic Vulnerabilities:
         (1) Tenuous authority of Yamato state vs. autonomy of provincial clans
         (2) Intense rivalry between competing clans in the court
   b) Introduction of Buddhism to Japanese Court
      i) Arrival of monk from Paekche round mid-6th century
      ii) Soga clan’s adoption of the Buddha as its clan kami
      iii) Turning Point for the Soga in 587
         (1) Ascension of Empress Suiko and Prince Shotoku (573-621), her nephew
   c) Institutional legacy of Shotoku in 7th century
      i) Centralized infrastructure modeled after China
         (1) Reorganization of court ranks—well-defined hierarchy
         (2) Diplomatic relations with China
      ii) Seventeen Article Constitution (604)
         (1) Moral injunctions rather than an actual “constitution”
      iii) Embryonic stage of state formation
         (1) Adoption of Confucianism as state ideology and Buddhism as state religion

III) Experiment with Buddhism as State Religion in Nara

   a) Nara Period Capital 710
      i) Miniature Chang’an
      ii) Bureaucracy focused more on court matters than on provincial administration
b) Key Differences from Chinese System of Government
   i) Principle of Imperial Divine Descent vs. Mandate of Heaven
   ii) Emperors often served as ceremonial figureheads

c) Formal Establishment of State Religion
   i) Construction of Todaiji in 728 under Emperor Shomu
      (1) Daibatsu-Buddha—Vairocana in Sanskrit—cosmic, universal Buddha
      (2) Functioned like a “national cathedral”
   ii) Decree of 741
      (1) “So entire land may be joined with us in the fellowship of Buddhism”
      (2) Why not Shinto for this role?
   iii) Buddhism’s monopoly over common rituals

d) Anxiety towards Buddhism’s Power
   i) 623, Empress Suiko’s punishment of monks and nuns
   ii) Growing wealth and prestige of the monasteries and temples
      (1) The Case of Dokyo

Zen Masters