On the Modern Interpretation of Shinto-Buddhist Syncretism in Japan

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Abstract

The present study is concerned with the problem of Shinto-Buddhist syncretism in modern Japan. During the long history of co-existence between Buddhism and the native Japanese religion, Shinto, the two were always connected closely but in some historical periods, their relationship became rather complicated. During the Heian period (794–1185) this Shinto-Buddhist syncretism was officially named in the general doctrine of shinbutsu shugo, which proclaimed the Shinto deities, Kami, as an embodiment of Buddhas and Boddhisattvas and established their positions within Buddhist religious system. After the Meiji restoration in 1868, the new government decided to separate Buddhist temples from the state and from Shinto (shinbutsu hanzen) in order to create a new state ideology. Also, as some scholars point out, that because the Meiji government couldn’t separate these two religions definitively, this attempt left a number of problems remaining in the heritage apparent in Japan’s militaristic past, which now modern society is now trying to solve.

Key words: Shinto-Buddhist syncretism, Shinbutsu shugo, Shinbutsu hanzen, Meiji restoration.

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I. The Problem of Attitude towards Buddhism in Modern Japan

The occurrence of a new religion inevitably involves its conflicting with pre-existing traditional beliefs. Whether this conflict is a consequence of resistance to an indigenous religion to new dogma (more often with religions of foreign conquerors) or, on the contrary, the result of universal introduction of a new faith, either religious traditions can never gain an upward hand over one another, definitively destroying it.

When both traditions perceive the most active and sound elements of each other, it gives them a chance to co-exist further, but already in a new form.

The relations between Buddhism and the local religious sects in the countries of Southern, Central Asia and the Far East more than once became the object of studies of the international buddhologist’s community.

The fact that this research is still proceeding, testifies to the absence of one settled point of view about it. Japan deserves this special attention because of the increasing interest in Buddhism there nowadays. It is connected with problems of self-identification and decline which are experienced now by the traditional Japanese Buddhism is now experiencing. After the Second World War, during the Showa period in connection with the popularity of Buddhism in the West, the Japanese scientific world had a tendency to study Indian Buddhism (*indogaku*). The special attention was given to early Buddhism, or Theravada, as initial “pure” Buddhism.

It has led to the occurrence of a new philosophical-religious direction which has proclaimed that true Buddhism is a philosophy or special outlook. The representatives of this direction criticized the traditional Buddhism, accusing it in conservatism and moral decay (*daraku bukkyo*). They declared, that, today, traditional Buddhism in Japan is in decline, and teachings of the doctrine of Buddha have degenerated into a formal carrying out of Buddhist funeral rituals and requiems, and Buddhist priests have turned in so-called “funeral businessmen.”

During the Meiji reforms in the middle of the 19th century, Buddhist