Nichiren's Nationalism: A Buddhist Rhetoric of a Shinto Teaching

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NICHIREN'S NATIONALISM:
A BUDDHIST RHETORIC OF A SHINTO TEACHING

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At this time the heavenly deities, all with one command, said to the two deities Izanagi-nō-Mikötö and Izanami-nō-Mikötö: "Complete and solidify this drifting land!" Giving them the Heavenly Jeweled Spear, they entrusted the mission to them. Thereupon, the two deities stood on the Heavenly Floating Bridge and lowering the jeweled spear, stirred with it. They stirred the brine with a churning-churning sound; and when they lifted up [the spear] again, the brine dripping down from the tip of the spear piled up and became an island.

-Kojiki, Book One, Chapter Three.
PREFACE

The cosmogonic mythology of Japan has provided a divine ethno-spiritual nationalism for its inhabitants since its inception. In the introduction to his translated work of the Kojiki, Donald L. Philippi writes:

Very often the beginnings of a nation's history involve tensions, contradictions, and difficulties which continue to operate, overtly or latently, for many centuries. Even if the external forms of life undergo change—even revolutionary change—many of the early concepts, attitudes, and beliefs maintain a surprising vitality, influencing the nation throughout its entire history.¹

The influence of Shintō religion permeated Japanese society from the agricultural classes to the aristocracy. Shintō provided a spiritual nationalism and ethno-centricity for the Japanese that not only affirmed the divine lineage of the Emperor back to the sun-goddess, but also the divinity of the land/the nation as being the abode of the kami (deities). This type of "spiritual habitation" of the country meant that proper religious observances had to be kept in order to appease the kami and guarantee a peaceful and fruitful relationship between the nation and the gods.

This concept for maintaining the security and prosperity of the nation by following correct spiritual practices was kept right up to the early Kamakura period when Buddhism was in a process of reformation. This was due in part to the troubled atmosphere of the time. War, famine, pestilence, religious

institutional corruption, these matters were of prime importance because their deteriorating nature attacked the very foundation of Japanese culture, identity, and all that was deemed sacred for the security and stability of the nation. For some leaders of Buddhist movements in the early Kamakura period, nationalism was either of secondary importance or not to be addressed at all. But for Nichiren, considered by his followers as a Buddhist saint and prophet, the importance of nationalism was a strong concept given the historical circumstances of his time.

Regarding the unfortunate natural and societal situation of Japan in the early Kamakura period, Nichiren asked the basic question of "why is this going on?" He attempted to answer this question by delving into the scriptures of established Buddhist sects and utilizing their various insights to validate his unique answer(s) to the nation's plight. Trained as he was in the Tendai Buddhist sect, Nichiren's vocabulary was rich with Buddhist terminology, and his nationalistic propagation and analogies for validating his point had strong yet covert Shintō characteristics. It was because of the fusion of Buddhist salvific teaching and divine Shintō nationalism that Nichiren gave primacy to the concerns of the country during a time of national crises.
A Summary of Contents

Chapter One, "Religion and Nationalism in Early Kamakura Society" introduces the issues that affected the nation in the early Kamakura period. The first section points out the historical background of the time that was considered to be a spiritually significant age according to Buddhist chronology. The next section on the "Religious Answers to National Problems" provides a prelude to how the indigenous religious tradition of Shinto attempted to define its leaders and their right to rule as well as the divine protection that was to be given them by the native deities. The imported Buddhist teachings provided a new perspective to the national problems through an examination of existing conditions as possibly being consequences of immoral acts. The various characteristics of the teachings of the most prominent Buddhist leaders of the early Kamakura period are introduced in the next section of "Buddhism: Kamakura's Five Reformers." In the following four sections ("Honen," "Eisai," "Shinran," and "Dogen"), a few specifics on the differences and similarities of the nationalistic perspectives of the first four Buddhist reformers are examined.

Chapter Two, "Nichiren," looks at the particulars in the fifth reformer's life that can help to clarify his approach toward providing a viable solution for the nation's problems. This is done by examining his life as being the product of "A Buddhist-Shinto Fusion." In this chapter I argue that Nichiren's upbringing and lifelong exposure to the indigenous
tradition of Shinto (which emphasized the divine nature of Japan) provided an ethno-spiritual nationalistic element to his Buddhist teaching (which stressed complete faith in his interpretation of the message and meaning of the Lotus Sutra).

Chapter Three surveys the "Nationalism in Nichiren's Writings" by examining the methodology that Nichiren used in propagating his teachings. One of his principles for conversion was shakubuku, which he supported by referring to scripture. His political aspirations through the use of religion are examined in the next section. Nichiren's affirmation of Shinto is presented in a comparison and contrast of his Buddhist teachings to his Shinto activities. Finally, I conclude with some reflection on how Nichiren was primarily a Shinto influenced nationalist who supported his views with Buddhist teaching and how this imported religion (Buddhism) was made Japanese by its interdigation with Shinto.
CHAPTER I

RELIGION AND NATIONALISM IN EARLY KAMAKURA SOCIETY

The shift from the Heian (800-1200) to the Kamakura period (1186-1333) marked a turbulent era in Japanese medieval history. The religious atmosphere of the time concerned itself with a number of issues. Why were plagues and wars so prevalent? What did the troubled times mean for a divine nation like Japan that was inhabited by kami (deities)? Why were the hierarchs of both church and state so preoccupied with scandal, corruption, and intrigue? According to Japanese historian Masaharu Anesaki:

It was not a mere political revolution, but social, moral, and religious at the same time. The Buddhist hierarchies lost their prestige to a large extent, together with their political supporters at court, ceremonies and mysteries were much discredited, while undercurrents of unrest and aspiration manifested themselves in various ways.²

The unrest felt by the common class was expressed through their religion. Folk practices that were a fusion of indigenous Shintō beliefs and Buddhist salvific rituals became the means by which the commoners might find some explanation for national problems as well as spiritual solace and material relief.

In order to better understand how the medieval Japanese used religion to address their national (and ultimately personal) concerns, the following items will be explored: the historical background of the Kamakura period, proposed religious answers, 

the response by the indigenous Shinto system (along with its
relation to Buddhism) and finally what prominent Buddhist
reformers had to say regarding the national problems that
confronted Kamakura Japan.

Historical Background

The Japanese medieval period began near the end of the
twelfth century and lasted through the sixteenth century.
Japan's first great military ruler, Minamoto Yoritomo, rose to
power in 1192 and established a powerful feudal regime (bakufu)
at Kamakura near present day Tokyo. This marked the beginning
of the Kamakura period which lasted until 1333. As to why
Japan's early medieval period was filled with military feudalism,
one needs to look at two elements that contributed to the shift
from the previous high-cultured and aristocratic Heian period to
the turbulent Kamakura period.

The first is a corruption of the elitist aristocracy that
gradually failed to address the basic issues and needs of the
nation as time progressed. According to Kitagawa:

However, a radical event, such as the establishment of
the feudal regime, was not possible unless there was a
general feeling of approval on the part of the people
toward the necessary correction of what was basically
wrong with the previous government.4

3 Joseph M. Kitagawa, Religion in Japanese History (New

4 Ibid., 87.
What appeared to be "wrong" was the widening gap between the commoners and the guardians and teachers of culture, religion, and the socio-economic/political stratum. Kitagawa further explains:

In a definite way, the Kamakura period was marked by the rejection of artificial culture delicately concocted by courtiers and clergy, in favor of a more natural spirit and indigenous forms of culture and society.5 The desire for the "indigenous forms of culture and society" was based on the aristocracy's overemphasis on the propagation of Chinese governmental structure and culture as being superior to the Japanese. However important the cultural and political revolution of the Kamakura period was for the economic good of the common citizen, it was the radicalization of religious teaching that provided a spiritual base for the masses, who desired an improved condition of their lives. Though change occurred, it did not improve society on the whole. Change took place, and the crisis of the times was reflected in the claim by many Buddhists that this was the arrival of a spiritually significant time period in Buddhist teaching: mappo, the age of the final dharma.

This brings up the second element in the overall shift from the Heian to the Kamakura periods. What was strongly viewed as a spiritual matter were the natural disasters of earthquakes and plagues that afflicted the populace all too frequently. This is not to say that governmental corruption and incompetency were

5 Ibid., p. 8.
viewed as mere human problems unaffected or uninfluenced by spiritual matters. It was a fraction of the multi-faceted problems that Buddhism claimed would arise as the generations passed further and further away from the age of Shakyamuni's original teachings. As Stone points out:

Sutras and treatises divide this process of degeneration into three sequential periods beginning from the time of the Buddha's death: the age of the True Dharma (Skt. Saddharma, Jap. Shōbō) the age of the Counterfeit Dharma (Saddharma-pratirūpaka, Zōho) and the age of the Final Dharma (saddharma-vipralopa, Mappō).6

One way of interpreting Japan's natural and societal problems that was within the scope of the people was with a spiritual perspective. Aside from the native/internal problems that affected the social stability of Japan, an external problem arose in the form of the Mongol invasion of Chinese and Korean troops in 1274. This invasion contributed to heavy losses for the Japanese, who were now convinced that the age of mappō was indeed the cause of the frequent calamities that befell their country.

Religious Answers to National Problems

With the onslaught of national calamities, the cause of which was understood through a Buddhist teaching (mappō), it seemed only natural that the existing dialogue between the clerics controlling the major temples and the governmental

aristocrats controlling the structure of society would strengthen. The urgency of proper spiritual practice for the good of the nation took precedence over other mundane matters. If the world (Japan) drifted away from the original teaching of Shakyamuni, and the age of mappō was upon the country, then perhaps a return to the original teaching of the Buddha would assure spiritual peace and perhaps worldly prosperity for all. It is precisely at this point of national crisis that new religious leaders arose and "religion" stepped forward and boldly proclaimed to have the panacea for the country's ailments. An interesting aspect of this national spiritual therapy was that a number of practices were propagated as the solutions to the existing and widespread problems.

Though these propagations were Buddhist practices, they were not free from religious and political elements found in the teachings of the indigenous Shintō religion, which emphasized divine ethno-spiritual nationalism. For most Buddhist leaders, Shintō provided the basic religious means of explaining things such as one's divine right to rule, how natural phenomena affect man as well as can be affected by man, and how a country can perceive itself as being the abode of nation protecting deities.

Shintō

With the death of the boy-Emperor Antoku (1178-1185) at the hands of the Minamoto clan, questions arose concerning the Imperial family's divine lineage. What enabled the Kamakura
shogunate to overshadow the Imperial family's hereditary, divine right to rule? Why did the Imperial family's tutelary deities not defend the boy Emperor? These and other questions were important because of the strong relationship Shinto had with the Imperial family and the nation. Allan G. Grapard described the relationship between Shinto and Japanese nationalism:

Shinto may be looked at as a multiheaded phenomenon: appearing at times as a loosely structured set of practices, creeds, and attitudes rooted in local communities, it is also a strictly defined and organized religion at the level of the state.7

Hirai defined Shinto as:

The traditional indigenous religious practices of the Japanese people as well as their worldview, based on their concept of Kami. Shinto is a "national religion," practiced for the most part by Japanese (including overseas immigrants), and which, with the exception of several sects, has no founder but instead developed naturally.8

This "national religion" was practiced by the Japanese because of their understanding of what Kami can do for the country. One of the Kami's duties was to provide divine protection for the nation they inhabit (Japan) and to provide protection to one of their descendants, the Emperor.

The Emperor claimed to be a descendant of the Sun Goddess Amaterasu-Omi-Kami. According to Japanese mythology, the Imperial family's lineal descent from Amaterasu was established


through her grandson Ninigi-nō-Mikötö, who descended to the earth to rule the islands of Japan. The loyalty that an individual would show to the Imperial throne and the veneration of Amaterasu was one and the same thing. Holtom writes:

The emperor, ruling in a line that reaches back unbroken to her historically manifested person, is the extension in time and space of her very body and soul. The god-emperor and the great deity mediate one and the same will. Reverence for one is reverence for the other. To fail to honor the sun-goddess is to fail in the first duty of a subject to the state; it is treason against the sacred national structure itself.\(^9\)

The early Japanese did not draw a line of demarcation between the sacred and profane dimensions of life, or between matsuri (religious rituals) and matsuri-goto (political administration), both of which were ultimately under the authority of the emperor who himself was directed by the divine will.\(^10\)

When Buddhism was introduced to Japan in the sixth century C.E., it was already nearly a thousand years old. Buddhism equipped Shinto—a primitive religion—with a worthy doctrinal and ethical content.\(^11\) With its precepts and rules for ethical and moral behavior, it influenced the thought of the Japanese by confronting the human misfortunes of sin, sickness, and death with a new vocabulary that took into account one's circumstance

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\(^11\) Holtom, p. 129.
as being the consequence of one's moral or immoral acts.

According to de Bary:

With a keener sense of moral responsibility and self-restraint went a growing sense of moral power. New energies were summoned up by the call to a life of discipline, self-mastery, and high aspiration. The life of the spirit, aiming at liberation from the world, replaced the life of the spirits and man's helpless dependence on nature as the basis of religious thought and practice.¹²

Perhaps the assimilation of Buddhist thought with native Shinto teaching took place due to the Buddhist theory of honji suijaku ("true nature manifestation"), and not by some sudden awakening to having been immoral. The honji suijaku theory maintained that Shinto deities were manifestations of Indian Buddhist divinities. Buddhism claimed that the worship of a kami amounted to the worship of a Buddha in its kami form. As Grapard emphasizes:

The crucial point is that these systematic associations were always established at the level of particular shrines and temples and not at an abstract, national level. In other words, Shinto-Buddhist syncretism remained grounded in each particular religious community, thereby retaining original Shinto characteristics.¹³

One example of Buddhist-Shinto synthesis was the Tendai Shinto (Sanno-Ichijitsu-Shinto) that was located at Enryakuji on Mt. Hiei near Kyoto. In Tendai's philosophy of ultimate reality, primordial Buddha nature as represented by Sakyamuni Buddha was


¹³ Grapard, p. 127.
held to be the reality behind all phenomena, including the kami. The main deity of the Hiei shrine, the tutelary deity of Enryaku-ji was considered an incarnation of Sakyamuni.\footnote{Hirai, p. 280.} It was in this atmosphere of integrative thought that the founders of later Buddhist sects studied. Priests such as Hōnen, founder of the Jōdo sect, Shinran of the Jōdo-shin sect, Eisai of the Rinzai Zen sect, Dōgen of the Soto sect, and Nichiren of the Nichiren sect, became known as "the five reformers" of Kamakura Buddhism.

**Buddhism: Kamakura's Five Reformers**

The dominant Buddhist sect at the time was the Tendai that operated out of the prestigious monastic institution on Mount Hiei.\footnote{This Pure Land teaching propagated the use of nembutsu (chanting the Buddha's name) in order to receive salvation. The Buddha referred to here is not Shakyamuni but Amida. Amida was a bodhisattva who wished to help all sentient beings achieve Buddhahood. He made forty-eight vows regarding a Buddha land that he would establish for the faithful following his enlightenment.} This temple complex was strongly supported by the government, and the power and influence it exerted over the common classes were vast. This led to many internal struggles to gain control of the most influential "spiritual positions" in the monastery. These positions of influence were important for maintaining the economic patronage necessary to operate the temple. With the political and natural calamities that plagued the nation, the patronage that was important to the monastery was consistently threatened to be severed. This was due to the
perception that the rituals performed for the nation were ineffective.

The governmental figures were concerned with maintaining a level of national control. Their pleas to the religious institutions were met with empty rituals. The common classes likewise looked to religion for answers and they naturally turned to their agrarian Shintō folk practices with which they felt they could somehow influence the deities and improve their immediate condition.

The Buddhist leaders of the early Kamakura period were aware of what the people needed: salvation from both the social and natural disasters that tormented the nation. The prominent Buddhist figures of the time propagated numerous different teachings regarding individual and national salvation, yet they all had a peculiar commonality: efficacious results based on simple practices. According to Anesaki:

> The Buddhist religion of the new age was not one of ceremonies and mysteries but a religion of simple piety or of spiritual exercise. Dogma gave way to personal experience, ritual and sacerdotalism to piety and intuition, and this new type of religion exerted its influence beyond class limits, exhibiting many democratic features.\(^{16}\)

The immediate results promised by the new Buddhism, made the religion itself a doctrine that was concerned with the present state of mankind, not just his afterlife. The calamities in Japan during the Buddhist age of mappō could be viewed as a compounded "blessing in disguise" that gave Buddhism an

opportunity to be propagated further not just as a religion of this world, but more specifically as a religion of the Japanese nation.\textsuperscript{17} The five reformers of Kamakura Buddhism differed in their nationalistic perspective in terms of: 1) possible Shinto influence, 2) their perception of Japan (as a divine nation), and 3) specific religious/nationalistic teachings.

\textbf{Hōnen (1133-1212)}

Born the son of a samurai, Hōnen became the first individual to launch the Buddhist reformation of the Kamakura period. He studied at the Enryakuji temple on Mt. Hiei and became a monk of the Tendai sect at age fifteen. Hōnen stressed the aspect of faith over meditation in order for one to receive the benefits of salvation, re-birth into the Pure Land. Hōnen focused on individual salvation and making that path towards salvation accessible to people of all classes.

The nembutsu practice was not exclusive to Hōnen since Heian nobles were known to chant the nembutsu ("Namū Amida Butsu") during evening services. Hōnen made the practice an exclusive element in his teachings. His lack of syncretism with indigenous practice was formally condemned in 1205 by the retired Emperor Go-Toba. Wishing to halt the new growing sect of nembutsu exclusivists, the monks at Kōfukuji temple presented a document to Go-Toba, known as the Kōfukuji sōjō, that outlined nine points of alleged sacrileges and crimes committed by nembutsu exclusivists.

\textsuperscript{17} Kitagawa, p. 110.
followers. One of these sacrileges was the "error of rejecting the Shintō gods." Hōnen refused to venerate the more famous of historical shrines, thereby breaking an accepted Buddhist link with Japan's indigenous Shintō spiritual past. The last point listed was of a national concern for the retired emperor: the "error of bringing confusion to the nation since the nembutsu practice is not based upon the harmony of the Dharma of the Emperor and Buddha." According to Matsunaga:

This criticism blames the decline of the eight sects of established Buddhism, with the resulting failure of the Ritsuryo government, solely upon the upsurge of the senju nembutsu movement. What the author actually meant was that a religion arising from the masses naturally upsets the existing authoritarian control, and he used the existing state of political and social confusion as proof of his contention.

Hōnen's break with acknowledging Shintō deities is indicative of his fervent desire to propagate just Buddhism, with an exclusive practice. He focused on Amida's Pure Land as a place to which an individual should desire to go posthumously. His teaching was not "Japan-centered" in the present tense but retained the Buddhist other-world character. Though Hōnen taught that one may receive grace from Amida Buddha and have a re-birth in the Pure Land posthumously, he stressed his "better after-life" teaching in order to provide spiritual solace in the present life and hope for a better one in the next. The solace that Hōnen brought was the idea that through the easy path of

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18 Matsunaga, Vol. 2, p. 64.
19 Ibid, p. 66.
faith all people have an equal opportunity at spiritual salvation. Hōnen did not propagate a nationalistic teaching in his nembutsu practice.

**Eisai (1141-1215)**

Born into a priestly family at the Kibitsu shrine in Bizen, present day Okayama Prefecture, Myoan Eisai became a monk at Enryakuji at the age of fourteen. Accepting the Buddhist teaching of mappō as the explanation for the physical and spiritual degradation of the nation, Eisai was convinced that there was an urgent need to revitalize Buddhism in Japan. The way that this was going to be done was by going to China to rediscover the true source and teachings of Buddhism. Focusing his study on T'ien-t'ai (Jp. Tendai) Buddhism, the twenty-eight year old monk spent only six months in China but returned to Japan with approximately sixty scrolls of T'ien'-t'ai Buddhist teachings. In 1187 Eisai went back to China, this time with the intent of journeying on to India to visit the sacred area associated with the historical Buddha-Sākyamuni. Unable to obtain the necessary travel documents from the Chinese government, Eisai opted to stay on Mt. T'ien-t'ai for four years and study under the Ch'an (Jp. Zen) master Hsu-an Huai-ch'ang.

Since meditation (Ind. dhyāna, "mind concentration") is a practice that was associated with Buddhism from its creation, the training that Eisai undertook was not new and unfamiliar. The exclusive practice of his Lin-chi (Jp. Rinzai) school was
contemplation of a sound, a word, or a phrase while in seated meditation (Ch'an hua-t'ou). Though Eisai studied in China he did not develop a disdain for his own country as being spiritually inferior. He sought a return to a former glorious age of one's spiritual traditions. According to Kitagawa:

His chief concern was not with a "certainty of salvation" as in the cases of Hōnen, Shinran, and Nichiren. His main preoccupation was with the purification and restoration of the traditional glories of Buddhism in Japan.20

The "traditional glories of Buddhism in Japan" that Eisai sought were articulated in his nationalistic teachings that stressed Buddhism as providing salvation for the state. These teachings were documented in a text he wrote to defend his position against Enryakuji accusations that he was attempting to establish a new heretical sect of Buddhism in Japan. In 1194 Eisai wrote Közen gokoku-ron ("Arguments in Favor of the Promulgation of Zen as a Defense of the Country"). Eisai's Shintō nationalism is evident in his veneration of the Emperor:

In our country the Divine Sovereign shines in splendor and the influence of his virtuous wisdom spreads far and wide. Emissaries from the distant lands of south and central Asia pay their respects to his court.21

He was loyal to the imperial family in an age of feudal dissension and declared, "How true it is that our land of Japan is above all nations, excelling India and China and superior to

21 de Bary, p. 364.
all other countries." Martin Collcutt outlines the Kozen gokoku-ron:

In this long work Eisai offered four major arguments in favor of his Zen: that it was the very essence of Buddhism; that it was not a new teaching but had been accepted by Saicho and other patriarchs of Tendai Buddhism; that it was based on the disciplined observance of the Buddhist precepts; and that its sponsorship would certainly lead to the rejuvenation of Buddhism in Japan and to the prosperity and security of the nation.

Unlike Hōnen's accessible path of salvation through faith for all classes, Eisai did not direct his attention toward the common classes. He sought alliance with the new military political order which found his strict yet simple teachings compatible with the new dominant bushi (warrior) class. Hōnen refused to venerate certain Shintō shrines, yet Eisai praised the divinity of the Emperor. The reality of economic patronage was important to Eisai. As the bushi class supported him he was able to spread his teachings. Since Eisai influenced the necessary classes and individuals who would support his propagations, his teachings could be extended throughout the nation.

Shinran (1173-1263)

The founder of the Jōdo Shin-shu ("True Pure Land Sect") was born into the family of a minor bureaucrat in the vicinity of Kyoto. Though specific details about his life are scarce, five

22 Holtom, p. 139.