

EVERY NATION GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF WORLD MISSIONS

THEOLOGY OF SHINTO

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THEOLOGY 1

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Introduction

Shinto, written 神道 (literally “god way” or “way of the gods”), is a uniquely Japanese religion and has shaped much of the Japanese worldview and psyche. Even the name of the country Japan, or *Nippon*, written 日本 (literally “sun origin”), comes from an ancient Shinto text that tells of Japan being divinely created by the Sun-goddess Amateresu.

According to the writers at Comparative-Religion.com there are three types of Shinto today.

“Shrine Shinto (Jinja Shinto) is the principle form, in existence from the beginning of Japanese history, through which others act. Folk Shinto (Minzoku Shinto) is a sub-string of this, centered on the veneration of small roadside images, with a particular focus on agricultural rites. Sect Shinto (Kyoha Shinto) has developed during and since the 19th century, with about 13 forms currently in existence, each one having a founder who sought to systemise Shinto belief.”¹

There is also a fourth type identified, State Shinto (*kokka shinto*) which famously (or infamously) tried to identify Japanese religion and state together, effectively rendering the Japanese monarch as Divine, but which was discontinued after the Second World War (1939-1945). There are still right-wing political groups in Japan who would like to see this type of State Shinto reinstated. The current governor of Tokyo (which has a population consisting of 25% of the total population of Japan) is a controversial figure because of his ties with such right-wing political groups.

¹ Brian Turner, *Comparative-religion.com*, s.v. “Shinto” [database on-line], available from <http://www.comparative-religion.com>. Internet, accessed March, 2005.

A majority of the people go to Shinto shrines only for annual events and rituals. Many Japanese people make a traditional first shrine visit in the New Year (*hatsumode*). There are also certain rituals observed involving the different stages of a person's life, like a newborn's first shrine visit (*miyamairi*), the shrine visit for 3 & 5 year old boys and for 3 & 7 year old girls (*shichi-go-san*), and the Shinto wedding ceremony (which interestingly enough is being replaced by “Christian” wedding ceremonies for many Japanese young people).

History of Shinto

Shinto has quite a long history – probably dating back to before B.C. 500. Shinto's history can be divided into the following four stages of development:

Prehistoric times to A.D. 522

During this earliest period of Japanese history, Shinto was the main religion among the people of Japan with no significant rivalry. Much of the early customs of this period are unknown but according to Clark:

“The traditions of early Shinto centered around agricultural festivals, clan or family loyalty, and reverence for life. Also, local shamans, as religious functionaries, spoke for the kami (gods) and combated evil spirits. They used Kagura, traditional Shinto sacred dance and music performed by young maidens (miko), to call forth the kami. Indeed, much of the traditional art, literature, and music of Japan may be connected to these shamanistic practices.”²

² Dr. David K. Clark, *Shinto, A religion profile from International Students, Inc.*, (Colorado Springs, CO: ISI, 2004), [book on-line]

One traditional practice which seems to have clear roots in early Shinto is the *matsuri*, or local festivals which are held in each local community in Japan. I have attended local neighborhood matsuri, company-sponsored matsuri, school matsuri and even a matsuri in Manila held at Manila Japan School. During these early times, the practice of holding *matsuri* to worship the *ujigami*³ or clan deity was begun. This practice is still seen commonly today although most modern Japanese do not know the significance or spiritual meaning of these local festivals.

A.D. 522 to A.D. 790

During this time period other religions were introduced from the countries of China and Korea. Confucianism and Taoism made some headway in Japan but Buddhism was widely accepted and even began to challenge Shinto as the leading religion of Japan. Buddhism continued to gain in popularity among the Japanese people and in the year 645 Emperor Kotoku embraced Buddhism and rejected Shinto. Other rulers remained faithful to Shinto but the challenge from Buddhism caused Shinto to become more systematic and structured.

The years 710 to 784 are the Nara period of Japanese history. The *Kojiki* and the *Nihongi* were both composed at around the year 720. These are the main texts of Shinto but because

available at <http://www.isionline.org/pdfs/Shinto%202004.pdf>, Internet, page 1.

³ Kenji Ueda, Nobutaka Inoue, and Norman Havens, eds. *Matsuri: Festival and Rite in Japanese Life*, (Institute for Japanese Culture and Classics, Kokugakuin University, 1988), [book on-line] available at <http://www2.kokugakuin.ac.jp/ijcc/wp/cjir/matsuri/index.html>, Internet, Chapter 2 "The origin of rites of worship within the local community."

they report events occurring some 1300 years earlier in the history of Japan, they are considered late works. There is also some question as to whether they accurately describe early Shinto since most scholars believe they were written with the politically motivated goal of establishing the Yamato clan as rightful rulers of Japan.

A.D. 790 to A.D. 1600

During the following 800 years of Japanese history the Heian, Kamakura, Muromachi, and Azuchi Momoyama Periods would ensue. The capitol city of Japan would moved to Kyoto which was less of a Buddhist city than the previous capitol, Nara. The Mongols, led by Ghengis Khan try to invade and conquer Japan but are turned back by bad weather conditions. Legend has it that a typhoon sent by the gods turned back the Mongol fleet. This is where the term *kamikaze* or “god wind” comes from.

A.D. 1700 to Present

At around the year 1700 Shinto experienced something of a revival when the study of archaic Japanese texts was reinstated. In his online reference “A Ready Defense”, Josh McDowell quotes one of the most learned Shinto scholars of the period, Hirata, who wrote the following.

The two fundamental doctrines are: Japan is the country of the Gods, and her inhabitants are the descendants of the Gods. Between the Japanese people and the Chinese, Hindus, Russians, Dutch, Siamese, Cambodians and other nations of the world there is a difference of kind, rather than of degree.

The Mikado is the true Son of Heaven, who is entitled to reign over the four seas and the ten thousand countries.

From the fact of the divine descent of the Japanese people proceeds their immeasurable superiority to the natives of other countries in courage and intelligence. They "are honest and upright of heart, and are not given to useless theorizing and falsehoods like other nations." ⁴

Japanese Emperor Meiji established Shinto as the official religion of Japan in place of Buddhism. However, since the people continued to embrace both religions, in 1877 Buddhism was allowed to be practiced by the people, with total religious liberty granted two years afterward.

Previous to and during World War II Shinto is once again promoted to the official state religion and the emperor is proclaimed the divine ruler of Japan. This is based on his lineage tracing back to the original emperor of Japan, Tenno Jimmu, who is asserted by Shinto to be the grandson of the sun-goddess Amaterasu.

Sacred Texts of Shinto

The Kojiki

The Kojiki (Record of Ancient Matters) is the oldest extant written record of Japanese mythology. It was written in A.D. 712. The Kojiki contains an account of the birth of the sun-goddess Amaterasu, who is the great grandmother of the first emperor of Japan. According

⁴ Hirata Atsutane, quoted by Josh McDowell, *A Ready Defense*, s.v. "Shintoism" [online reference], available from <http://www.greatcom.org/resources/areadydefense/ch27/default.htm>, Internet, accessed February 2005.

to the Kojiki Amaterasu was born from the left eye of the male god Izanagi No Mikoto. There are many other stories of various gods in the Kojiki and the capricious acts of these gods are the reason for the origin of various things in the human world – including the Japanese islands.

The Kojiki consists of three sections, creation, history of the first emperor of Japan onwards, and finally a section of genealogies.

The Nihongi (or Nihon Shoki)

The Nihongi (Chronicles of Japan) is an eight century compilation of many ancient Japanese myths and legends (completed in the year A.D. 720). It contains thirty volumes plus one volume of genealogies and charts. Unlike the Kojiki the focus is on recent rather than mythical events. There are two other (conflicting) accounts of the origin of the sun-goddess Amaterasu in the Nihongi.

The Yengishiki (or Engishiki)

The Yengishiki is a compilation of Shinto rituals. It contains 50 volumes of regulations, ceremonies and procedures. It was compiled between A.D. 905 and A.D. 927 and contains not only 10 volumes on conducting Shinto festivals and practices, but also 40 volumes on affairs of government.

Main Tenants of Shinto Faith

The "Four Affirmations" of Shinto⁵:

1. **Tradition and the family:** The family is seen as the main mechanism by which traditions are preserved. The main Shinto rituals relate to birth and marriage
2. **Love of nature:** Nature is sacred; to be in contact with nature is to be close to the gods. Natural objects are worshipped as sacred spirits.
3. **Physical cleanliness:** Taking baths, washing the hands, and rinsing out the mouth often is encouraged because of Shinto's emphasis on ritual purity. In the past, believers practiced *misogi*", the washing of the body in a river near the shrine. In recent years it is more common to merely wash one's hands and rinse out the mouth in a wash basin provided within the shrine grounds.
4. **Matsuri:** Festival worship and honor of local deities and ancestral spirits.

Shinto Practices (More Tradition Than Religion)⁶

Many Shinto practices are found in Japanese culture today. Many of these are not seen as religious practices by the people, but as traditions. Some Shinto practices which are seen almost

⁵ The definitions of the "Four Affirmations" are based on the ones at Japan Reference, [database on-line] available at http://www.jref.com/glossary/shinto_traditions.shtml, Internet, accessed March, 2005.

⁶ Some of the definitions in this and the following section are taken from *ReligiousTolerance.org*, c.v. "Shinto", [database on-line] available at <http://www.religioustolerance.org/shinto.htm>, Internet, accessed March, 2005.

wholly as Japanese tradition include:

Kagura: Ritual dances accompanied by ancient musical instruments. The dances are performed by skilled and trained dancers.

Matsuri: Seasonal celebrations are held at spring planting, fall harvest, and special anniversaries of the history of a shrine or of a local patron spirit. Other festivals include: January 1-3 *Shogatsu* (New Year); March 3 *Hinamatsuri* (Girls' festival); May 5 *Tango no Sekku* (Boys' festival); July 7 *Hoshi Matsuri* (Star festival).

Origami ("Paper of the spirits"): This is a Japanese folk art in which paper is folded into beautiful shapes. They are often seen around Shinto shrines. Out of respect for the tree spirit that gave its life to make the paper, origami paper is never cut.

Shinto Practices (More Religion Than Tradition)

Other Shinto practices are obviously religious in nature. Many Japanese still participate in these. Although they may deny that they believe in the deities worshipped, they feel bound by superstition, and duty as Japanese to continue the traditions of their ancestors. Some of the more "religious" Shinto practices are:

Recognition of sacred places: mountains (especially Mt. Fuji), hot springs, etc.

Shrines: Each shrine is dedicated to a specific *kami* who has a divine personality and responds to sincere prayers of the faithful. When entering a shrine, one passes through a *torii*, a

special gateway for the gods. It marks the demarcation between the finite world and the infinite world of the Gods. Shrine ceremonies include cleansing, offerings, prayers, and dances directed to the *kami*.

Mamori: Charms worn as an aid in healing and protection. There come in many different forms for various purposes. A common site is a *mamori* hung from the automobile's rear-view mirror. These are supposed to protect the driver from traffic accidents.

Kami-dana: Shelf of Gods, an altar which is given a central place in many homes.

Shinto Contrasted With Christianity

In its pure form, Shinto teaches the superiority of the Japanese people and their land above all others on earth. Shinto fosters a pride and a feeling of superiority in the Japanese people. This type of ethnocentrism is never a good thing for any people group. In the Bible, Jesus directly rebukes the Pharisees, who had great pride in their Jewish heritage and considered other races inferior. In his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul writes, "There is none righteous, not even one."⁷

The Bible also teaches that righteousness comes by faith in Jesus Christ, not on the basis of race. In the book of Acts the Apostle Peter clearly states, "I now realize how true it is that God

⁷ Romans 3:23

does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.”⁸

Since Shinto teaches the basic goodness and divine origin of the Japanese people, there is no perceived need for a Savior. This is the natural consequence of ethnocentrism and assuming that man is basically good.

How Japanese Today Are Affected By Shinto

Shinto Seen In Modern Japanese Language

Shinto embraces the moral values of loyalty and duty to the family, clan, or group. Many aspects of Japanese culture illustrate this theme, but one of the most obvious is the Japanese language itself. Clark puts it like this:

*The word for human person is *ningen* (literally, .between people.). To be human is to be together with other persons. Japanese society emphasizes community over individuality. The Japanese language includes conventions for speaking to those above, at, or below one’s social standing. Verbal communication thereby reinforces a hierarchically structured system of human relationships in which everyone participates. The correct use of Japanese language links a person to the social web.⁹*

Shinto’s Resurgence After World War II

The defeat of the Japanese government at the end of World War II temporarily brought about a huge open door for Christian missions. It also brought a new constitution which declared

⁸ Acts 10:34-35

⁹ Clark,3.

that the emperor is not divine and forbade state-sponsored Shintoism explicitly. But although there is no question that the god of Japan was made a public spectacle and removed from the sixteen-petal chrysanthemum throne of Japan, there has been a gradual re-encroachment by Shintoism in the government, schools and culture of Japan since that time.

In 1951, Prime Minister Yoshida visited Yasukuni Shrine to pay homage to the spirits of those who had died during World War II. This was the first such visit of a Japanese official since the end of the war. He rationalized his acts by comparing it to a high American official visiting the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.¹⁰ Just four years later Time Magazine reported in its Jan 17th, 1955 edition that one of the first acts of the new Prime Minister Hatoyama was a pilgrimage to Ise Shrine in violation of the post-war constitution. Much controversy has surrounded officials visiting shrines in Japan. Famous Japanese Christians such as Toyohiko Kagawa have defended the practice and even an American evangelical periodical compared such practices to the Western practice of saluting the flag.¹¹ Because of a lack of a unified stand against idolatry in the church of Japan, there is still much confusion among the Japanese people about whether it is acceptable for Christians to participate in visiting shrines and paying their “respects”. Some believe with Kagawa and others that it is just a cultural form of respect, and is no worse than saluting the

¹⁰ John M.L. Young, *The Two Empires In Japan* (Tokyo, Japan: New Life League Press, 1987) , pg.171

¹¹ *Eternity*, Magazine of Christian Truth, March 1955, Philadelphia.

national flag. Young refutes this with the following clearly stated biblical rationale:

(1) Ise is called a Jingu (god house); no one refers to the flag as a god. (2) There are no religious priests attending the flag with religious ceremonies, but these are always present at Ise Shrine where priests regularly perform rites such as waving the holy sakaki tree to drive away evil spirits, making prayers and offering food and wine. (3) No sacerdotal offerings of any kind are made to the flag, but these are regularly made to the enshrined "deity" of Ise. (4) One is expected to wash hands and mouth in a ceremony symbolizing purification of mind and body at Ise; there is no such religious preface to a flag salute. (5) At Ise worship is rendered to the so-called sun-goddess, with prayers made to her. No such is rendered to the flag. (6) The sun-goddess receives a bow; the flag receives a salute. The Bible prohibits a bow to anything except God or living beings who can return the bow. Nothing is said about a salute.¹²

In present Japan such state visits to shrines are commonplace. The pre-war national anthem has been reinstated despite controversy over the lyrics, which can be interpreted as emperor-worship. Public schools also have heavy Shinto influence. The ethics curriculum taught by all Japanese public schools has its roots in Shintoism and there are silent prayer times which have drawn heavy criticism because many school officials use these to push a Shinto agenda. All of this resurgent Shinto doctrine in the culture has made it easy for non-believers to simply view Jesus as another god among the 8,000,000 Japanese "gods."

¹² Young, pp. 194-195.

As old perhaps as Japan itself, Shinto is a rich mixture of folklore, reverence for all things natural and the Japanese nation itself. But to say one believes in Shinto has become almost meaningless: For most Japanese, the worshipping side of Shinto is relegated to a small cadre of priests and their helpers, most of whom inherited their jobs from ancestors. The Japanese today “practice” Shinto by making wishes at the local shrine, or enjoying its autumn festivals.¹³

Most Japanese today do not practice Shinto worship except as it has become part of the traditions of Japanese society.

How to Evangelize Japanese Shinto-Buddhists

Realize that Japanese May View Monotheism as Arrogance

I recently read a report on a religious summit in Japan held to promote understanding between monotheistic religions and Japanese religion. As I reflected on the comments of the Japanese participants I began to understand that to the Japanese mind, my insistence on monotheism can easily appear arrogant. The Japanese view the Christian God as a western God. Although this is untrue, it is certainly the common perception in Japan. Therefore we must use wisdom in broaching the subject of polytheism with the Japanese. We cannot use mere apologetics to reach the Japanese who are in the grip of thousands of years of Shinto tradition. Well-meaning Christians like Josh McDowell overstate the case against Shinto.

¹³ Eric Talmudge Associated Press, posted on February 19, 2004 by The Journal Gazette, <http://www.fortwayne.com>, Internet, accessed September, 2004.

“Shinto finds little acceptance apart from Japan since everything of Japanese origin is exalted and that which is non-Japanese is abased. Shinto is a textbook example of a religion invented by man to explain his ancestry and environment while taking no consideration of anyone but himself.

...

Furthermore, the Ko-ji-ki and Nihon-gi, as the basis of the Shinto myth, are found to be hopelessly unhistorical and totally unverifiable. The stories and legends contained in these works are a far cry from the historically verifiable documents of both the Old and New Testaments.

The concept of kami is both polytheistic and crude, surrounded by much superstition. This is in contrast to the God of the Bible whose ways are righteous and beyond reproach. Immorality abounds in the stories of Shinto while the Bible is quick to condemn acts of immorality.”¹⁴

In fact, most Japanese agree intellectually that Shinto is unverifiable and superstitious, but the fact is they *don't care!* Arguing that Shinto is crude and immoral is merely slapping the face of a Japanese, whose worldview is that Japanese culture is Shinto. Instead we must use the wisdom modeled to us in the Bible by the Apostle Paul.

Paul's four step strategy

In the book of Acts Paul addresses a city which is immersed in polytheistic worship. I am referring to the city of Athens in chapter seventeen. Paul uses a four point strategy which I think is a good strategy for Japan. In it he addresses a culture which is filled with idol worship, conflicting

¹⁴ Josh McDowell, *A Ready Defense*, (Nelson Reference, 1992) [book excerpts on-line] available at <http://www.whoisjesus.org/english/resources/areadydefense/ch27/default.htm>, Internet, accessed March, 2005.

traditions of various religions, and polytheism.

First, he carefully examines their system of worship and becomes familiar with it¹⁵. Paul is looking for a key, a “redemptive analogy” which he can use as an entry point to share the gospel with the men of Athens without causing offense. Second, he addresses them carefully so as not to give offense and to get their full attention¹⁶. Third, he uses this redemptive analogy in order to launch into a presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.¹⁷ And finally, after he has complimented the audience on their religiosity and used their own belief system and poets to explain God’s desire for relationship with them, he calls them to repentance.¹⁸ One can easily see how the stage is set for a presentation of God’s gift of His Son. Many of those assembled desired to “hear him again on the subject.”¹⁹

This is how we must also approach Japanese on the subject of Shinto and polytheism. Wisdom and sensitivity combined with the power of the Holy Spirit to preach the gospel.

¹⁵ Acts 17:23

¹⁶ Acts 17:22 – According to Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset and David Brown Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible, Most modern interpreters and the ancient Greek ones interpret this as “a conciliatory and commendatory introduction, founded on his own observation of the symbols of devotion with which their city was covered, and from which all Greek writers, as well as the apostle, inferred the exemplary religiousness of the Athenians.”

¹⁷ Acts 17:23-29

¹⁸ Acts 17:30

¹⁹ Acts 17:32

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