

SHINTO, “THE WAY OF THE GODS,” OR JESUS CHRIST, GOD’S “WAY”?

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The ancient Japanese religion of Shinto confronts Christians with some very basic questions. Do we gain blessings in this life as the result of our own actions, or are all blessings given to us by God’s grace? Do we enter eternal life as the result of our own efforts or the efforts of those who survive us, or is eternal life also a blessing given to us by God’s grace alone?

Upon entering the world of Shinto we find a pattern of ritualized behavior known as “the way of the gods,” but God has provided us with another “Way,” Jesus Christ. The Lord calls us to follow Him.

In this article some of the main beliefs, organization, and practices of Shinto will be discussed. Suggestions will be offered as to ways Christians can introduce those who follow “the way of the *kami*” (“gods”) to the One Who is “the way, the truth, and the life,” Jesus Christ, God’s only Son (John 14:6 *GOD’S WORD*).

I. Shinto

“The term *Shinto* in English comes from two Japanese words, *shin* (which can also be read *kami*) and *to*, or more commonly *do*, meaning “way.” Shinto, therefore, means the way of the *kami*, or the divine as understood in Japanese culture” (Picken xxi). “*Shinto* is translated best as ‘The Divine Way’, (popular but less accurate: ‘The Way of the Gods’” (Manske and Harmelink 17).

A. Religious Beliefs

Shinto is the indigenous religion of the people of Japan. The beginning of this religious belief system is obscure, but apparently it developed as a part of Japan’s early agrarian society. “It was believed that the heavenly *kami* descended on top of mountains in the spring, and villagers would ascend to greet them with festivity. They would be brought into the fields to mate with the female *kami* of the soil and rice, work to bring in the crop-child, and then be thanked and sent off at the harvest festival” (Ellwood 206). Two of the oldest books in Japanese, the *Kojiki* (712 A.D.) and the *Nihonshoki* (720 A.D.) record the story of the *kami*, but “it was not until the end of the twelfth century that it gradually came to refer to the way of the *kami* in a sense that included doctrine” (Eliade 280). Even so, Shinto has no authoritative writing or set of beliefs that are normative for the religion as Christianity has the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments of the Bible.

Shinto is also known as the national religion of Japan. Although few people in Japan can tell you what their religious belief is, almost all Japanese take part in some Shinto ceremony or festival during their lifetimes. According the Agency for Cultural Affairs, statistics reported in

1994 indicated that 118.38 million Japanese were believers or followers of Shintoism (Katayama 181). This indicates that Shinto has more adherents than Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, or any other religion in Japan. However, Shinto, like many religions in the Far East, is syncretistic. It has become integrated with other religions and belief systems that have been introduced to Japan. It is often practiced along with other major religions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. Thus, although the numbers indicate many followers of Shinto, few Japanese are considered “pure” believers in Shinto (Wakabayashi). In fact, the World Book Encyclopedia reports that “fewer than 3 percent of Japanese practice strict traditional Shinto” (World Book 9).

The focus of Shinto is worship of the *kami*, often translated as “gods.” However, in the Japanese language singular and plural are not distinguished as in Indo-European languages:

although there may be many *kami*, they all share the same character. *Kami* thus refers to the essence of many phenomena that the Japanese believed were endowed with an aura of divinity. Rocks, rivers, animals, trees, places, and even people can be said to possess the nature of *kami*. Anything that can inspire a sense of wonder and awe in the beholder, in a way that testifies to the divinity of its origin or being, can be called *kami*. (Picken xii)

In sum, Shinto is “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’ . . .” (Eliade 280).

B. Organization

Shinto is characterized by three types of social organizations, all of which are interrelated: Shrine Shinto, Sect Shinto, and Folk Shinto.

1. Shrine Shinto. Shrine Shinto is the oldest type of Shinto and has the largest number of followers, involving worship of the *kami* at the local shrine. Such worship has had a unifying effect upon Japanese society. “While Shrine Shinto has no founder, it possesses an organization based on believers, (parishoners) and others, festivals and other religious practices, doctrines rooted in Shinto traditions and Japanese myth, all centered in the shrines’ spiritual unification” (Eliade 280). The strategic location of shrines in such places as fields, houses, neighborhoods, businesses, and streets affects the self-understanding of Japanese people. “Shinto is indeed a religion that is ‘caught’ rather than ‘taught,’ its insights ‘perceived’ before they are ‘believed,’ its basic concepts ‘felt’ rather than ‘thought’ (Picken xxxii).

2. Sect Shinto. Sect Shinto is less common than Shrine Shinto and is of more recent origin. In the nineteenth century 13 sects were formed, each with its own leader. Membership was based on “an individual’s religious experience or upon the basis of Fukko (‘revival’) Shinto. Generally, these groups do not have shrines but instead use churches as their centers of religious

activity” (Eliade 280-81). Since the end of World War II and the dissolution of government control over the sects, “these groups and their churches experienced repeated schisms combined with the appearance of new, Shinto-derived religions, producing a complicated picture” (Eliade 286). The new religions are characterized by shamanistic leadership, syncretism of religious and philosophical beliefs, closely knit social organization, and individualism (Ellwood 218-219).

3. Folk Shinto. The third major type of Shinto is Folk Shinto. It is the most common among people in the lower levels of the Japanese socioeconomic. It does not have any official teachings or social organization. Rather, its beliefs derive from three sources: 1.) ancient traditions, such as divination, shamanistic rituals, and folk medicines; 2.) basic elements of Shinto, such as customs of abstinence and purification rites, as well as worship of house and field *kami*; and 3.) syncretism of Shinto with beliefs from foreign religions such as Buddhism, Taoism, and Christianity.

C. Practices

Shinto finds its fullest expression in the practices of the Japanese people. Japanese society is very unified, with family and community providing the norm of behavior.

1. Family. Families often participate in Shinto through community rites and festivals at the local shrine. This includes going to the shrine on various occasions throughout the year, such as after the birth of a child, on the third and seventh birthday of girls and the fifth birthday of boys, on a person’s 20th birthday, and on New Year’s Day. People also go to the shrine, for example, before a new car is bought, a new job is sought, or a marriage proposal is made. The belief, based in Shinto, is that through participation in the action, a blessing will be received. So on these occasions, a person goes to the shrine, an offering is given, a prayer is made to the local *kami* for a blessing, and a paper with the name of the shrine’s *kami* written on it is bought to assure the person of the *kami*’s blessing (Wakabayashi).

2. Community. The Japanese community also takes part in worship activities through *matsuri* (festival). These festivals take place in every month of the year for almost every conceivable reason. In some *matsuri*, for example, young men participate by carrying portable shrines through the local streets of the city while the rest of the citizens watch and encourage them. By participation in such community worship, abundance of blessing, harmony and unity are promoted in Japanese society as a whole (Manske and Harmelink, 17).

II. A Christian Witness to Followers of Shinto

As the indigenous religion of the Japanese people, Shinto affects their worldview. Christians seeking to give a Christian witness to someone of a different religion or worldview need to be aware of the other person's beliefs.

[T]he heart of a culture is the “world view.” [In his most recent lectures, Bunkowske places “religion” in the center or “heart” of culture.] The world view leads to the belief system, which in turn leads to values, which in turn leads to behavior, which in turn is contexted by our artifacts, that is to say, the things we use in our society . . . We are beginning to see how important an understanding of world view is for communication across cultures. We need to understand what world view is in the center of the cultural skin or we will never be able to communicate with people of backgrounds different from ours, because the well-spring from which life itself flows is at the core of our way of life, our culture. (Bunkowske 30, 32)

But we need to get started. We propose beginning our Christian witness with people who follow Shinto not at the core of their religious beliefs, but rather nearer the “skin” of culture: those areas in which there is common ground between the way of Shinto and the way of Christ.

A. Finding Common Ground

The first point of common ground between followers of Shinto and of Christ is the belief that the world is the result of a divine act. “According to the myth, there existed the first three gods, Amenominakanushi-no-kami, Takamimusubi-no-kami, and Kamimusubi-no-kami, who were all invisible. Later, a god couple, Izanagi-no-mikoto and Izanami-no-mikoto, produced the eight islands of Japan” (Katayama 183). According to Christianity, the Triune God -- the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit -- created the heavens and the earth out of nothing (Gen. 1).

Second, both believers in Shinto and in Christ acknowledge both the spiritual and material dimensions of life. The spiritual dimension is acknowledged in Shinto since “[a]ll natural objects and phenomena are also worshiped and considered as having gods, so there are myriads of gods in Shintoism, as the phrase goes *yaoyorozu-no-kami* (8 million gods)” (Katayama 183). Christians likewise acknowledge that there are spiritual and material dimensions to life in the Nicene Creed: “I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of . . . all things, visible and invisible.” Both the ancient writings of Shinto and the Holy Scriptures of Christianity speak of the heavenly realm. See Ephesians 6.

Third, Shinto affirms the importance of tradition, life, purity, and loyalty in their ancient ceremonies, lively festivals, religious ceremonies, and ancestor worship. Christians also appreciate, for example: 1.) tradition in their liturgical services, 2.) life in their joyful holiday celebrations, 3.) purity in the Sacrament of holy Baptism and the practice of Confession and Absolution in worship.

B. Areas of Tension

Once a Christian develops a relationship with the follower of Shinto through discussing areas of common ground, the Christian can begin to discuss areas of tension that exist between the two religions. One area of tension, for example, is the emphasis in Shinto on the performance of rites in order to receive blessings in this life. At the local shrine followers of Shinto worship the *kami* (“gods” that are “immanent”) in order to receive material and temporal blessings. This keeps them from considering the eternal life to come and the transcendent God Almighty. It gives people the false idea that they can manipulate God by their own actions in order to achieve their self-chosen objectives. God the Creator will not be told what to do by His creatures. Rather, He promises graciously to bless everyone who calls on His Name, both materially and spiritually, according to His good pleasure. Above all, He desires to bless all spiritually through faith in His Son, the Savior of sinners, Jesus Christ.

The culture of the followers of Shinto is generally of a more collective character than that of the followers of Christ in America and Western Europe. More than in the West, the group has influence in controlling individual behavior by using shame. Because Japanese people are very hard-working, many become self-righteous and trust in their own works for their material and spiritual well-being. They do not want to confess their unworthiness due to sin and humble themselves before God or their fellow Japanese citizens. This would cause them to “lose face.” Yet only through such repentance can God lift them up in glory through the forgiveness that is in Christ Jesus (Wakabayashi).

C. Areas of the Most Difficulty

Finally, Christians will need to discuss with gentleness and the blessing of the Holy Spirit those areas of most difficulty that exist between God’s Word and the religion of those with whom they speak.

One area of great difficulty between Christianity and Shinto is the Shinto belief in *kami* -- many “gods” -- instead of in the one true God, the Holy Trinity. The Shinto *kami* are not to receive worship, for the Lord “is a God who does not tolerate rivals . . . If you abandon the LORD and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you” (Josh. 24:19-20 *GOD’S WORD*). The true worship that God wants is “to believe in the one whom He has sent,” Jesus Christ (John 6:29 *GOD’S WORD*).

Second, great difficulty also exists between the Shinto belief in achieving purification through the performance of certain rites and ceremonies and the Christian belief that sinners are purified by God’s grace through Jesus’ shed blood. Shinto teaches that by a priest waving a purification wand and the washing of the mouth and finger tips with plain water a person can be purified of unrighteousness (Ono, 51-52). However, only the blood of Jesus “cleanses us from every sin

[all unrighteousness]” (1 Jn. 1:7 *GOD’S WORD*). This washing is available to everyone through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism.

Third, the greatest point of difficulty is the Shinto belief that on the basis of performing certain ceremonies, by his or her own works, a person receives blessings from the *kami*, instead of by God’s grace as the Christian believes. The greatest blessing of all, of course, is eternal salvation through Jesus Christ. Christians must clearly tell the followers of Shinto that it is not because of what a person does that she or he is saved, but entirely it is the blessing of God because of what He has done. Salvation is ours by grace alone, as the Bible says, “God saved you through faith as an act of kindness. You had nothing to do with it. Being saved is a gift of God. It’s not the result of anything you’ve done, so no one can brag about it” (Ephesians 2:8-9 *GOD’S WORD*).

Telling the Good News about Jesus to followers of Shinto or any other religious belief system is a very humbling activity. This Gospel of Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection is “God’s power to save everyone who believes,” including the person who speaks the message about Jesus Christ (Romans 1:16 *GOD’S WORD*). Therefore, when speaking to those who believe in Shinto, we Christians must remember that

[n]o human being is free from the temptation to idolatry, the worship of God’s created things rather than the Creator Himself. We have this powerful message of Law to share with those of Shinto faith, along with the Good News that Jesus Christ has paid everything we owe, performed all the duties that are required, suffered, died, and rose from death so that we can be free from sin and have new life in Him. (Nummela, 41)

Conclusion

Shinto is a deeply held religious belief and attitude toward life held by nearly all the people of Japan. This article has served as one form of introduction to Shinto. Stuart D. B. Picken suggests some others:

The finest possible introduction to Shinto, which underlies how much it is a religion of experience, is to take part in a festival, to help carry the portable shrine (*omikoshi*) or pull one of the great wagons through the streets. For the truly adventurous, I suggest making a journey to a mountain shrine to plunge into an ice cold waterfall at midnight with crisp, frozen snow on the ground. (Picken, xxxii)

Our prayer is that every follower of Shinto may be introduced to the power of the Lord Jesus Christ, the way, the truth, and the life. This introduction will take place through the bold witness of interested Christians like you. We pray that, repenting of their sins, adherents of Shinto may be purified through Jesus’ blood in holy Baptism.

“Consider this: The Father has given us his love. He loves us so much that we are actually called God’s dear children. And that’s what we are” (1 John 3:1 *GOD’S WORD*).

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