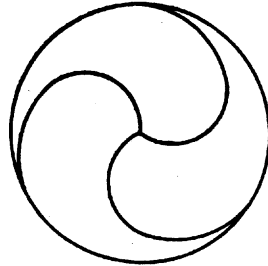


## WHAT IS SHINTO?



Shinto is the indigenous religion of Japan. The word 'Shinto' came to be used in the sixth century to distinguish the local religious practices and beliefs from Buddhism after the introduction of the latter into Japan. Shinto has coexisted with Buddhism ever since, and has undergone syncretism with both Buddhism and Confucianism. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were marked by a growing nationalism which sought to purify Shinto of Buddhist and Confucian elements. With the Meiji Restoration in 1868, Shinto became the state religion until its disestablishment in 1945.

Shrine is the mainstream of Shinto, and is quite simply the Shinto practices that are taken care of by the priests. The Shinto of the Imperial Court, constitutes a specific level of Shinto, as does popular or folk Shinto, which covers all the local practices and superstitions which often have no essential relation to the central myth.

There also exists what is called Sect (or Founder) Shinto which refers to thirteen sects of Shinto having individual founders which

developed among the common people mainly during the latter half of the Tokugawa era (1602-1868). These focus on specific aspects of Shrine Shinto and have admixtures of Buddhism and Confucianism.

### *The kami*

"Shinto" is written with two Chinese characters. The first, pronounced either "shin" (in compounds) or "kami", is usually translated by the word "god". The second, pronounced "to", "do", or "michi", means "way". "Shinto", then, means "the Divine Way". The meaning of "kami", however, must be clarified. A *kami* is any sacred being deemed to have mysterious power. Anything can be a *kami*, whether it be a mountain, a stream, a tree, a rock, an animal, an ancestor, or a heavenly being. There is no case of a living human person being worshipped as a *kami* (not even the emperor, in spite of the attribution of *kami*-nature to the emperor). There are said to be eighty myriads of *kami* although this is not a head count, but simply an enormous multiplicity. The *kami* are not infinite, nor omnipotent, nor necessarily

immortal, nor necessarily good. They are possessed of superhuman power, have consciousness and the power of choice, and are able to respond to prayer, and to slights (with anger), and the evil *kami* can be propitiated. These are few in number, and overall, the *kami* are characterised by benevolence.

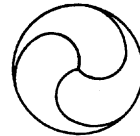
While Shinto can be considered a form of polytheism, the same *kami* is often understood and worshipped differently in different places and, conversely, there is a similarity in the ways different *kami* are understood and worshipped. Consequently there is no pantheon of gods each with its own distinct personality and cult. Rather, each *kami* is a representation of a supernatural life-force that runs through everything. It is, therefore, a polytheism with traces of monotheism. It also cannot be called pantheism with full accuracy, since there is distinction between the spirit of the *kami* and the sacred object in which it subsists.

## The Myth

Shinto mythology essentially begins with the two *kami*, *Izanagi* and *Izanami*. These are not the first *kami*, but are preceded by a number of generations of *kami* who dwelt in the Great Plain of Heaven. They are, however, the progenitors of the land and people of Japan. From Heaven, they projected a spear down to the ocean whereby *Onogorojima* (self-coagulating island) was formed. They then went down to this island, where, through procreation, they generated the islands of Japan and a number of *kami*. Among these *kami* was *Ameterasu-Omikami*, the Sun-Goddess, who is the progenitress of the Imperial line and of the Japanese people. *Ameterasu-Omikami* sent her grandson *Ninigi* to establish the Japanese imperial reign, and his great grandson, the Emperor Jimmu, according to the myth the first human emperor of Japan, unified Japan and established his imperial court in 660 B.C.E. (In fact Japanese

history begins some 1000 years later).

This summary is so brief as to be misleading. *Ameterasu-Omikami* is a benevolent deity, teaching her people rice culture and other skills. It is in their descent from her that the divine status of the Japanese people and particularly of the emperor is recognised by Shinto. At the same time, common descent from *Izanagi* and *Izanami* affirms a familial kinship between people, other living beings, and nonliving things such as mountains, streams, and the land itself -- an attitude that is deeply characteristic of Shinto, and has influenced not only Japanese culture, but also the way that later religions such as Buddhism and Confucianism have been adopted in Japan.



## Ritual practices

Shinto ritual centres on the shrines, which are many and variegated. Many are little more than the size of beehives, but some are surrounded by grounds of thousands of acres. The most important Shrine is the one in which *Ameterasu-Omikami* is worshipped in Ise. The shrines are characterised by simplicity and natural beauty, encouraging the sense that the people, the *kami*, and nature are kin. The worship rituals too are simple: a bow, a clap of the hands, and a prayer (usually for some material benefit -- indicating a trust in the benevolence of the *kami*). Ceremonies of ritual purification, dedication, seeking the beneficence of the *kami* and protects from evil influences, are carried out by the priests at these shrines.

Veneration of ancestors is an important part of Shinto practice, and this is carried out mostly in the home, in front of a family altar.

## Values and spiritual ethos

Shinto has no listing of moral precepts akin to the ten commandments. It is, however, characterised by moral values. Shinto is a way of life modelled on the gods, which is not imposed as precepts but is understood to be quite natural and spontaneous since one is a direct biological descendent of the *kami*. Such a life is characterised by purity (including, but not exclusively, ritual purity), honesty and sincerity (the absence of deceitfulness and pretentiousness), and gratitude. These virtues are a response to the presence and the benevolence of the *kami* in everything, and they give rise to such further virtues as benevolence, filial piety, respect, industriousness, etc.

While Shinto generally holds that there is a spirit (*tama*) that is not destroyed by death in everyone, the afterlife is not an issue in Shinto. The view of life in this world is optimistic and is seen as a sufficient motivation for living the way of the *kami*.

## Shinto and the Japanese People

While many other influences (religious influences such as Buddhism and Confucianism, historical influences such as the forced opening of the ports, and the fear of colonisation) must also be taken into consideration in order to understand the Japanese psyche, there can be no doubt that the influence of Shinto permeates Japanese society. The Japanese sense of cohesiveness must surely be attributed, in part at least, to Shinto. The Japanese sense of beauty, of simplicity, and of oneness with nature, too, is rooted in Shinto (even if, today, political and economic considerations give priority to industrialisation over conservation).

To some, Shinto is associated with nationalism and militarism. Perhaps the cohesiveness encouraged by the myth of descent from *Amaterasu-Omikami* and, traditionally, the focus on the *kami*-nature of the Emperor have proved compatible with nationalism and militarism, but as is clear from the above, this is only one aspect of Shinto.

Within Japanese society, Shinto is a religion without clear boundaries. The myth described above embraces all Japanese, and, in a sense, Shinto sees itself as including all Japanese. Some Japanese would explicitly define themselves as Shinto. Others, for religious, ideological, or other reasons, would deny membership in Shinto. Many, however, would participate in shrine rituals and in the ethos of Shinto, without ever feeling the need to define, even for themselves, whether or not they are members of Shinto.

## Questions for discussion

1. Can Christians learn anything from the kinship between humanity and nature that is characteristic of Shinto? Is there a grounding in Christianity for a similar kinship?
2. How does the above description of Shinto square with what we know of the Japanese? If there seems to be a contradiction, might this be because the specific historical encounters we have had with the Japanese have limited and biased our perspective?
3. Can our reflection on Shinto and on Japanese society provide a basis for reflecting on how people from other cultures and religions might look on Christianity and western culture?

*This is part of the series of leaflets prepared for the Catholic community by the Committee for Other Faiths. Understanding and friendly relations with those who believe in God and live their lives with religious principles and purpose contribute to the harmony of society and the happiness of all. The series offers useful information to those who want to overcome the obstacle of ignorance and promote through dialogue, prayer and action the Catholic Church's teaching of respect and love for all peoples.*

*The Committee is grateful to Dr. Michael T Seigel SVD for this contribution.*

**+ Charles Henderson  
Chairman**

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