

Shinto

History and Development

The religion of Shinto is shrouded in the murky pre-written history of Japan. The people worshipped the Kami (gods, spirits) which inhabited all of nature, the trees, the rocks, the streams, and even the food that the people ate. Like many other polytheistic cultures, the Japanese were also deeply concerned with the role of ancestor Kami/spirits whom they believed interacted with the people. The combination of these elements and others came to be known as Shinto (in Chinese - The Way of the Gods) or sometimes it is called Kami no Michi (Japanese for The Good Spirit Way).

For many Japanese, to be Japanese is to practice Shinto. It reflects what one scholar has called the “Japanese National Spirit. Prior to the introduction of Buddhism into Japan in approximately 552 A. D., Shinto was like many pagan cultures, with fertility rites, prosperity charms and ancestor worship deeply ingrained in the culture. There was no formal priestly caste nor any indigent organization to speak of. But after the popularity of Buddhism started to spread, including the acceptance of Buddhism by Emperor Kotoku in 645 A. D., Shinto started to develop more of an institutional sensibility with formal priests and rituals being established.

There are thousands of Shinto shrines all over Japan. Usually located in the forests and near streams, the Shrines embody the Shinto emphasis on beauty, cleanliness and connection with nature. The shrines are meeting places, where the practitioner can meet and entreat with their ancestors and those Kami/spirits who might be of aid to them. Many of the more prominent Shinto festivals are connected to the

production and harvesting of the rice crop. Others are connected with purification by water to deal with human pollution of mind and soul.

Over the course of time Shinto developed many different variations e.g. Imperial Shinto (Koshitsu), Shrine Shinto (Jinja), Sect Shinto (Kyoha), Folk Shinto (Minzoku) and others. One of the keys to the many variations was the religious pluralism so common to the religion. Central to all versions of Shinto is the connection to the Emperor and the Imperial Family. The kami/gods which had created the Japanese islands had given birth to the Imperial family as well. Shinto has many tributaries to its different strains. One can look closely and see the contribution of Chinese Taoism, with its prosperity charms, shamans and exorcisms. Confucian rituals also can be found throughout the culture and history. Even the much later infusion of some Christian influence in Japan left some impact on Shinto in certain parts of the country. But by far the most influential contribution was from Buddhism. The significance of this can be seen to this day, with Shinto priests conducting most birth rituals and weddings and Buddhist priests conducting virtually all funerals. However in the late 1800's there was an mostly unsuccessful attempt to "purify" Shinto from Buddhist influences during the Meiji restoration. Later in 1882 Shinto became the state religion, which lasted until the end of World War II. With the Emperor's public admission of being a mere human, Shinto went through some serious soul searching, as the nation struggled with their only recorded defeat by outside powers. More recently there has been a rebirth of interest in ritual and practical Shinto, as astrology and other forms of divination have become more popular with the masses again. As more recent versions of Buddhism have become major

political powers, such as the NSA, the Japanese ability to weave Buddhist themes and Shinto sensibilities is back in full force.

Scripture

Shinto is driven by ritual practice and not by formal adherence to scriptural sources. The closest thing one can find is two 7th-8th century A. D. documents. The Koji ki are a collection of ancient events and rituals. The Nihon Shoki is considered a historical chronicle of the earliest days of Japanese culture and development. These books contain the early versions of the myths that center Japanese self-understanding. Here one learns of the Sun goddess Amaterasu, perhaps the most beloved of all the kami. You may also learn a lot of the ancient mindset of the Japanese people, but these records really don't carry much weight with people. It is not that they are formally disdained, but they do not have any real impact on how people think or run their lives.

Jesus

Like other Asian religions, there is no formal place for Jesus within the system. Individuals can and will incorporate Jesus as some sort of higher level Kami, much as Mahayana Buddhists who have turned Jesus into a Bodhisattva. Siddhartha Gautama of India then becomes Shakyamuni of Japan, so in Buddhism this transformation has already been accomplished. As pluralistic and syncretistic as the Japanese tend to be, it would not be surprising to see some acceptance of Jesus into Shinto thought, as long as it is a Japanese version of Jesus.

Supreme Being/God

Shinto does not contain the idea of a supreme being which created all and is separate from creation as seen in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Nor is there a being which is beyond all attribution such as Brahman in Advaita Vedanta Hinduism. But much like lay Hindus and Mahayana Buddhism or the gnostic Greeks, Shinto does have a hierarchy of gods/spirits/kami which dominates their thinking. The creator Kami are Izanagi and his wife Izanami, who gave birth to all other Kami. Their most important daughter is the sun goddess Amaterasu, who is the ancestress of the Yamato Imperial family. Like other pagan cultures much of primitive Shinto was concerned with fertility rites, with phallic statues and other such reminders still dotting the countryside. The divine spirits are within all of nature and as such all life is respected as being part of the divine source or even family. The hierarchy plays a central role in Japanese thought as certain Kami are historically much more important and even the lowest form of life or inanimate object is perceived as being full of Kami. Some of the more important Kami might be ancient revered heroes or even creative forces in nature. Usually the Kami are benign and are seen as being beneficial and protective of the people.

Human Predicament

Like virtually every other religion in the world except Biblical Christianity, Shinto sees humans as basically good. The Kami of humans is of a higher order than the kami of rocks or food, and it is of a lower order than that of the Emperor and the creator gods, but nevertheless all are ontologically the same. They all share the same divine qualities. One popular way of saying this is “man is Kami’s child”, This means that the persons owes their life to the kami and that they are essentially a sacred thing. Then

what is the Shinto understanding of all the problems in the world? The understanding is that somehow the mind and soul/kami become polluted through uncleanliness and wrong thinking. In some understandings of this, an act is wrong because it is literally unclean as in physically dirty, rather than because it is immoral in some significant way. To spill someones blood in a murder is straightforwardly wrong since it is unclean. Since Shinto promotes community, some of the predicament might be explained as operating for selfish or individualist reasons. Hence wrong thinking. One famous example of this might be an person who abandons his family heritage of being a farmer, and decides to be a fisherman instead. This selfishly driven act flies in the face of all his ancestral kami who were farmers. By shaming them he has shamed himself. This “loss of face” is often, even to this day, followed by ritual suicide or seppuku/hari kari. This will restore the persons honor and integrity to himself and to his kami. Because Buddhism is also mixed in within Shinto, a cyclical view of history with its attendant ideas of karma and reincarnation are part of the understanding. Although Shinto’s lack of theological emphasis precludes it from understanding just how the individual Kami both reincarnates and at the same time dwells in nature as a spirit/god still, most people still believe that their actions/karma are dictated by previous lives and actions.

Salvation

If one is a divine being or Kami, then the concept of salvation is fairly irrelevant. If one is not lost then one need not be saved. The majority of Kami surround the believer and/or live in nature and this is not seen as punishment as the Hindu or Buddhist might believe. This can be seen as a direct carryover from the Taoist

influence in Shinto. The Taoist never saw the world as an illusion in the sense that the Advaitist or Buddhist see in Maya. Therefore to be in the cycles forever is not a bad thing. Each life offers the opportunity for self improvement and honor. This same Japanese mindset shows itself in NSA or Soka Gakkai Buddhism, which contrary to most other versions of Buddhism, is a world-affirming religion. There are at best brief discussions of “High Plain of Heaven” and “Dark Land” within Shinto, which seems to be some approximation of heaven and hell, but these are not really explained in the ancient texts nor believed by most people.

Last Things

The world of nature is subject to the repetition of innumerable cycles which the individual repeats ad infinitum. This mindset gave rise to the sense of living in the middle present (naka-ima) So there literally is no past or present at least in the deeper perspective of it all. One is involved in the eternal unfolding of the world and always this is done in the “middle” of all time. This is all part of the will of Amaterasu, who created all things. This is believed to create a mindset that one is to live each moment as fully as possible. Sharing this with Zen in that for each believer, each moment and each act becomes a meditative moment, as in gardening or origami or even pouring tea.

Summary of Basic Beliefs.

The Japanese may be one of the last cultures in the world that still allow their mythology of the past to dictate their understanding of the present. The focus on Amaterasu as creator of all the subsequent Kami instills in the Shinto mindset a common nature and order to all of life. The Kami spirits inhabit all of nature down to the

smallest atom. The kami themselves are generally benign and have a hierarchy from the Sun God Amaterasu to the Yamato Imperial Family to all the rest of life. The Kami are all around us and our ancestors are watching and interacting with us.

One meets with the Kami at the Shrines which are usually close to running water and trees if possible. The gate of the shrine is the Torii which is the place where one leaves the normal world to interact with the Kami. Certain rituals are performed which always include ritual washings with pure water of ones hands and face and rinsing of the mouth. The believer might put paper prayer requests and an offering there inside the shrine.

Most of the national and community based Shinto festivals are centered around the Rice crop. There are some festivals which involve ritual cleansing with water to rid the nation and individuals of uncleanness and impurities of thought and soul.

One way of summarizing basic Shinto beliefs may be found in the “Four Affirmations”:

- 1) To preserve Tradition and the Family - Celebrations are related to births and weddings.
- 2) Nature is sacred therefore it must be loved. One who is loving nature is loving the gods.
- 3) A tremendous interest in physical cleanliness. Followers bath and rinse their mouths often.
- 4) Matsuri - the honor given to the ancestral kami and other kami.

Witnessing Tips

As always with all non-believers, one must speak the truth in love to them and love them enough to be honest about the real problem and brave enough to love them enough to tell them about a savior. Being sensitive to Japanese culture in small ways is important so that one does not stop conversations before they can start. Wearing a suit and tie, being clean and not smelling in an offensive way, will go a long way in gaining an audience with a Japanese person.

Like the Greeks on Mars Hill in Athens, the Japanese have a deeply held view that Japan and Japan alone is at the center of the universe and the god's eye as it were. To those Greeks Paul gave a contrary teaching - that all races came from the same couple, therefore implying that the Greeks were not unique in the world but rather one culture of many - something most obnoxious to the Greek understanding. This definitely confronted them and it was completely necessary. Part of the process of witnessing and making disciples involves confronting that which is false and replacing it with the truth of God's word. The Japanese arrogance toward non-Japanese (foreign devils) needs to be confronted in this very way. At this point I would speak to the fairness that the Japanese conscious must hold - If there is a divine reality - would it favor one person over another? If so why and on what basis?

Paul also spoke of the singularity of God, that there is only this one God who created all things. This is just as offensive to the Japanese as it was to the Greeks (and basically to all pagans!). But it must be brought up. One important distinction in witnessing to Japanese (and Chinese as well) is that many times the Christian witness

is ignored or dismissed as not being authentically Japanese. In other words if it came from somewhere else it must be inferior. One way of addressing this false notion is to point out that Buddhism in general, reincarnation, karma and Taoist and Confucian ideals and values ALL came from somewhere else, yet the Japanese culture has accepted them. Since these ideas are all acceptable while yet being foreign, then it is at least consistent that Jesus Christ can be found acceptable in the same way. This is not to make Jesus parallel with the false ideas of Buddhism, etc. It is only to gain a foothold in the door for a conversation.

At this point one might ask why the Shinto follower believes in reincarnation and karma? Are they observably true? If so where? I would contrast those unproven ideas, with the historical evidence of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. The Japanese don't really have a concept of sin as a moral category, so the need for the crucifixion must be addressed. One might take the Sarin gas bombing of the Tokyo subways by the Aum Sri cult as an illustration of what virtually all Japanese would know to be bad or wrong. Most Japanese would know also that it was wrong to lie and steal and murder as well. The Scriptures teach us in Romans 2 that all gentiles, including the Japanese, have the law of God written on their hearts. Some of the more popular Japanese Buddhist groups such as the NSA, emphasize the creation of a better society. This by definition implies that somethings are not good and others are quite good. If that is the case then there is something evil or sinful, this being so the next question is how does one deal with it.

The Japanese believe that being washed with water, externally and orally, is enough to cleanse them of any wrongdoing or uncleanness. Consistent with their denial of normative moral categories, the Yakuza gangs have been a blight to Japanese culture for centuries. But like anywhere else in the world, the average Japanese is not indifferent to the problem of crime and evil. If I murder someone, does taking a shower really cleanse me from that act? Here one might ask "If I spilled some pop on you and messed up your clothes, you probably would say no big deal. A little water will clean everything. But If I rape and murder your daughter, I don't think water is sufficient to cover that do you?" Many Japanese have struggled with accepting their role in WW2, both the loss of face from losing the war, and the horrors committed by the military. So again one can see that merely rinsing ones mouth, while perhaps good for bad breath, does nothing to cover mass murder.

Another potential point of witness is the historic understanding that ritual suicide (sepaku/hari kari) plays for the Japanese culture. In this ancient ritual the person will literally gut themselves with two cuts of a sword, and if one should scream or cry out from the pain it is a major failure and loss of face. So the person would usually ask their best friend to play a role. The friend stands next to the person committing suicide and has their sword drawn. If the person begins to cry out - their best friend will "rescue" them from great shame, and behead them! The Christian can present an altogether different and superior message. Jesus says the greatest love of all is that a person should give up their life for someone else. To save someone from death is surely better than to be a part of killing them! If the response is that the person needs to die to regain

face, then one must ask why? Does not the Japanese teach that each person is “Kami’s child”? If they are and they are basically good - why then must someone die - especially for a point of honor? By contrast the Christian can show that although we were made by the One God, we have failed Him in every possible way in how we treat each other. We have taken what God made and defaced it through violence. Our shame is then both figurative and literal. So now it is true - someone must die to make things right. To be fair - each and every person who has done evil and marred the creation of God in all its forms must pay the same price. All must die. But here we offer instead the Gospel. God who is the creator of all, and who is just, is also a loving person. So loving, that He sent His own son Jesus to die for the sin and shame of destroying the world so loved by the Creator. This single act - shows what both love and justice are. Then the Christian can point out that the resurrection of Jesus and the now possible resurrection and restoration of all who believe - is a far superior understanding than the endless cycle of reincarnation. Once resurrected, one will never have to suffer again nor lose face. A world of harmony and beauty, made pristine like it once was, awaits in Heaven. All of this is made possible not by my own efforts, which surely always fall short, but by believing in the Savior Jesus.

It is also important to remember the Japanese stress on community. One can point out that to believe in Jesus is not to stand alone, but to gain a world wide community as a member of the Body of Christ. No believer is alone but always in community with our invisible Heavenly Father and our visible brothers and sisters in Christ.

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