

# Shinto

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## I. The Meaning of Shinto

Shinto is derived from two Chinese words, *shen* [spirit] and *tao* [way]—*shen-to* [the way of the higher spirits or gods]. In Japanese, Shinto is *kami-no-michi* [the way of the kami or gods].

## II. The Grand Legend

The legend begins with primordial chaos, a mixture of yin and yang in an egg-shaped formation, from which a number of *kami* [gods] emerge in pairs.

The seventh generation of emerging *kami* were Izanagi [man-who-invites] and Izanami [woman-who-invites]. They were stirring the ocean brine with a spear when, in lifting the spear, drops fell, forming Honshu, the main island of Japan.

The high *kami* in heaven sent these primal parents to earth. They descended to Honshu and married. Izanami gave birth to many more *kami*. Izanagi continued to create islands, human beings, animals, and plants.

Cursed by Izanami, Izanagi sought to purify himself in the ocean. As he washed different parts of his body, new *kami* emerged: for example, Amaterasu, the sun goddess emerged from his left eye, Tsukiyomi, the moon *kami*, from his right eye, and Susa-no-wo, the storm *kami*, from his nostrils.

Affairs were not being ruled well on earth, and so Amaterasu sent her grandson Ni-ni-gi to rule. For a time earth was ruled by a *kami* who descended from the sun goddess. Ni-ni-gi's great-grandson Jimmu Tenno, though a lineal descendant of Amaterasu, was human and became the first human emperor of Japan in 660 BC. (For a fuller understanding of the grand legend, see Philippi's translation of *Kojiki*).

## III. Shinto History

A. Prehistoric period. Not much is known about this period. (For a brief summary of Japanese history prior to the fourth century AD, see Noss, *A History* 324).

B. Yamato period (Fourth century AD to 710 AD).

Between 538 and 552 AD new religions, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, came to Japan from China and Korea.

Following a major skirmish in 592 AD, the winning clan leader placed his Buddhist niece on the throne. She married Shotoku and the clans united under him as emperor. Buddhism became the national religion.

C. Nara period (710-784 AD).

Shinto – During this period the emperor had all the available information concerning the *kami* and the ancient origins of Japan collected; tradition and history were recorded and these writings represent a mythological history of Japan from the creation of the world to the seventh century AD. In 712 AD the *Kojiki* [Chronicle of Ancient Events] was written. Around 720 AD the *Nihongi* [chronicles of Japan], a record of early events, was written, and the *Engishiki*, a document containing early prayers and describing early rituals, was written.

Buddhism – During this period Buddhist temples were established and six Buddhist

philosophical schools were founded.

D. Heian period (794-1185 AD)

Buddhists developed *honji suijaku* [trace nature or trace manifestation] that allowed them to unify their gods, Buddhas, and bodhisattvas with Shinto deities.

Shinto adherents began to interpret Buddhist deities as manifest traces of the Shinto gods.

E. Meiji period (1868-1945 AD)

During this period Emperor Meiji disestablished Buddhism as the State religion, and replaced it with Shinto. He declared that the emperor is divine, that the emperor and the state are to be worshiped, that the Japanese Empire has a divine mission, and that the Japanese are superior.

F. After World War II, Emperor Hirohito denied his divinity and disestablished Shinto as the State religion.

#### **IV. Shinto Theology**

A. *Kami* [above the ordinary] is a divine consciousness, which flows through all life. It is manifested in sacred places, objects, or persons, but more specifically in the gods of Shinto. There are two classes of gods: 1) *Hitogami*, which are associated with sacred persons, like shamans, sages, or saints; and 2) *Ujigami*, which are associated with families or a local region.

B. The creation account in Shinto mythology indicates something of an eternal substance.

C. Man is essentially good and not considered to be sinful.

D. Salvation essentially is deliverance from the troubles and evils of the world.

E. Worship takes place at shrines.

1. There are three main types:

a) Those of local significance;

b) Those of a particular recurrent type. For example, the Inari shrine, where one goes when seeking success in business;

c) Those of great national and semi-political importance. For example, the Ise and Izumo shrines, residences for major *kami* such as Amaterasu.

2. Common features found in shrines:

a) The grounds are sacred and are marked off by *torii*, large sacred gates shaped something like the Greek letter P, only with two horizontal bars.

b) Inside is a large trough of clean water for *Harai* [ritual purification]. *Harai* removes both inward and outward defilement and permits the *kami* to be present in helpful ways.

c) Shrines are divided into two main segments:

The outer part is called the *haiden* [hall of worship]. Here one presents an offering by throwing a coin in the collection box or by lighting a candle [Food offerings are also acceptable]; and solicits the attention of the *kami* by ringing the bell or clapping his hands.

The inner part is called the *honden*. Inside the most sacred area is marked off by a thick rope with folded white paper strips. Within is the *shintai*, a physical object such as a mirror, jewel, or sword that embodies the *kami*.

3. The emperor is expected to appear at the grand shrine at Ise to announce any

major policy decisions.

4. In many homes there is a small family altar, a *kamidana*, for the veneration of *kami*.

5. January 1, the beginning of the new year, is an especially good time to visit a shrine.

Priests will sound a gong 108 times, representing 108 different purifications. Families will make special offerings and consult their fortunes on small pieces of paper.

#### F. Festivals – *Matsuri*

Broadly speaking, *Matsuri* includes all Shinto ritual, including the ritualization of life itself.

Specifically, these are local Shinto festivals that celebrate a local *kami* and invoke its presence. For example, a shrine will annually parade its *shintai* around the town wrapped in a special covering.

#### G. Cycle of life

Birth is considered to be a gift from the family tutelary *kami*.

The childhood “rite-of-passage” is the “seven-five-three” festival, that recognizes girls at age three and seven, and boys at age five. The child is dressed up and presented to the tutelary *kami* at his shrine.

The marriage ceremony is usually carried out at a shrine.

### V. Shinto Way of Life

A. Concept of community. *Ningen* [between people] is the Japanese word for person. *Ningen* emphasizes community over individuality.

B. Concept of indebtedness. The notion of *on* arises when one person receives something of value from another. The one who receives is indebted to the other. This can be seen, for example, in the Lord-vassal relationship and parent-child relationship.

The practice of *giri* is a social obligation with one with whom a relationship has developed.

### VI. Some Reflections

A. Acknowledge the striking beauty of Japanese culture.

B. Remember that the Japanese are

1. Family and community oriented. This makes it unnatural for them to act as an individual or to have personal faith.

2. Religiously syncretistic. They function in a syncretism of Shinto, Buddhist, Confucianism, folk religions, etc. that makes it difficult for them to see the need for an exclusive commitment to Jesus.

3. Deeply influenced by Shinto. Ellwood says “Most Japanese tend to think of Shinto as religion concerned with high and happy moments of life . . . People are married and babies are blessed in Shinto shrines.” (Ellwood, *Many Faiths* 186)

C. When witnessing to the Japanese, be sure to clarify God’s nature.

1. God is so very different from the *kami* who are local gods (of Japan) and created beings. Share with the Japanese the greatness of the God of the Bible. For example:

a. There is only one God (Deut. 6:4; 1 Cor. 8:5-6), and not many.

b. He created all that exists (Gen. 1:1; Ps. 33:6), and is not a created god. He is Lord of heaven and earth and sovereign over all creation (Rev. 4:8-11), including Japan.

c. He is self-existent and not dependent on creation for anything (Acts 17:24-25). He is not a servant of people. (For further contrasts between *kami* and God, see Clark, “Shinto,” 207).

2. It would be best when speaking in Japanese about God to avoid using the work *kami* for God; instead speak of God as *sozoshu* [creator] or *sozo no kami* [creator God]. (Clark, "Shinto" 210)

D. A good place to initiate discussion regarding their need of Jesus Christ as their Savior might be with the Japanese understanding of *harai* [purification] and their desire for a pure *kokoro* [heart], even though the Japanese understand these in a ritualistic sense. (Clark, "Shinto," 210-211).

1. Affirm what Jesus taught in Matt. 5:8, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

2. Affirm that all human beings are defiled before God (Rom. 3:23). No one has a pure heart (Jer. 17:9; Mark 7:20-23).

3. Point out that removal of defilement is not received through ritual purification. Only through the atoning death of Jesus Christ can they have their sins forgiven by God and hearts cleansed (Col. 1:13-14). God will give them a new life and a new relationship with Him (2 Cor. 5:17-18).

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