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Thomas P. Kasulis/Shinto: The Way Home

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Introduction

Shinto is particularly difficult to explain, even for most Japanese. Because its basic values and patterns of behavior have filtered into Japanese culture as part of tradition, most Japanese seldom reflect on Shinto as a “religion” in which they consciously participate. For them, being Shinto is neither a set of beliefs formalized into a creed nor an identifiable act of faith. Its festivals and annual celebrations are things Japanese do because it is traditional, just as some Americans celebrate St. Patrick’s Day and Mardi Gras with parades and parties. One does not have to be an Irish Catholic to drink green beer nor practice Lenten abstentions to enjoy Mardi Gras in New Orleans. Analogously, Shinto can be considered merely part of Japanese cultural custom. This is not the whole story, however.

Westerners with some exposure to Shinto know it also as a religious tradition stressing sensitivity to nature, purification, and simplicity. Most foreign tourists to Japan have been impressed with the extraordinary serenity, restrained design, and natural beauty of many Shinto sites. Towering trees, white gravel grounds, carefully pruned shrubs, and beautiful flowers instill peace in many visitors, a peace arising not from an aesthetic flight from the world but from a heightened appreciation and outright enjoyment of it. Boisterous Japanese families with young children and old folks on pilgrimages suggest Shinto not only celebrates life but also brings celebration to life. I have heard many foreigners say they felt oddly at home in such environs. Some who have lived in Japan for some time have gone so far as to say that on many occasions they have “felt Shinto” themselves.

Most people are aware of another dimension of Shinto as well: the Shinto of nationalism, imperial reverence, and ethnocentricity. It is the Shinto of kamikaze pilots and militarist fervor, the Shinto of a divine emperor leading a unique global mission for the Japanese nation and its people. It is the Shinto that dominated the international politics of the first half of the twentieth century.

This book investigates how these aspects—the traditional festivals and rites, the celebration of nature and life, the nationalism and militarism—can coexist in the same religion. Is there perhaps something about the paradox in Shinto that can shed light on other religious traditions as well? Or, on the contrary, is the case of Japanese Shinto unique? In exploring such questions we will examine Shinto *spirituality* as both point of departure and ultimate destination. By framing the discussion in this way, we will find subtle links within the development of Shinto that we might otherwise overlook. There are two warnings, however, about the term “spirituality” as employed in this book. First, the term is not being used to emphasize personal over social or institutional religiosity. Second, the term does not necessarily imply something mystical or transcendent. Let us consider each point briefly.

With respect to the first admonition, when some people hear the word “spirituality” rather than “religion” they think of a religious experience that is especially personal, individual, and outside “organized” religious institutions. Yet reflection shows that spirituality is seldom a strictly private affair. Felt as an inner resonance, spirituality is not an external phenomenon we can study simply by looking at it. Its character emerges only through the intimation of those who share their intimate experiences with us. The neophyte internalizes spirituality by doing what others do and talking how they talk. To express one’s own spirituality, one must first be impressed by the spirituality of others. Even the Buddhist or Christian hermit, alone in an isolated cave or cell, sits in the lotus position or kneels in prayer. The hermit did not invent these postures but learned them from someone else. Even in solitude, the hermit reflects a communal context. We must not overlook this vital communal dimension in even the most personal expressions of the spiritual.

The other admonition is not to assume that “spirituality” always implies a belief in something transcendent or supernatural. People sometimes think that spirituality is inherently mystical, a withdrawal from everyday affairs. It need not be so. Whereas any religious tradition may include ecstatic departures from the ordinary, religious people frequently find the spiritual in the most quotidian of human experiences. Spirituality can be like our awareness of light: we might

experience it as a blinding, all-encompassing flash or as the medium through which we see the configuration and coloration of our ordinary world. It is the difference between a flashbulb going off near our faces in a darkened room and our being engrossed in the luminescent nuances of an Ansel Adams photograph. Both are experiences of light. Indeed the light of the flashbulb and the highlights on the misty peak of El Capitan are in some respects the same thing—light. Yet the different contexts make for a different kind of experience. So, too, for spirituality. It may appear so intensely and abruptly that it obliterates everything else, or it may be reflected off or refracted through the most mundane events. As we will see, Shinto spirituality most often takes the latter form. To limit our sense of spirituality to the mystical would be to miss a major part of what it means to be Shinto.

The path we take in this book winds its way in the following manner. Chapter 1 offers an entrance into the spiritual feelings associated with Shinto. Throughout Japan's history, there has been an orientation in living—a manner of feeling about the world and of feeling one's way through the world—that has deeply affected Japanese culture and resonates profoundly with Shinto spirituality. Much of this is not so distinctively Japanese, however, that people from other cultures and traditions cannot empathize with it. Indeed, like other foreigners who have spent time in Japan, I have at times "felt Shinto." This does not mean I *am* Shinto, but I have felt in Shinto settings certain responses congruent with Japanese accounts of their own experience. Furthermore, I suspect similar events occur in virtually every culture, in situations not necessarily associated with Shinto at all. Drawing from my own experiences of the relevant sort, chapter 1 outlines a generalized account of the kind of sensitivities at the heart of the Shinto worldview. The goal is to encourage readers to look for correlates in their own lives—regardless of whether they have ever been to Japan or visited a Shinto site. This approach will give us a foundation for further insights into Shinto's function within Japan.

Chapter 2 takes us from the special event of consciously entering a Shinto context to the less self-conscious spirituality of the ordinary. The more we investigate everyday life, the more we enter into cultural particularities. Whereas chapter 1 addresses Shinto spirituality as an

experience not necessarily limited to Japan, chapter 2 explores certain aspects of Japanese daily life insofar as they reflect this spirituality. Incidentally, being Shinto (unlike just feeling Shinto) is almost exclusively a Japanese phenomenon: very few people outside Japan identify themselves as Shinto. When asked in polls or a census, however, the type of data compiled for encyclopedias and almanacs, almost all Japanese (over 90 percent) identify with Shinto. For many Japanese, “feeling Shinto” and “feeling Japanese” are barely distinguishable.

Spirituality, as noted earlier, commonly has a communal setting to nourish it. Where there is community, there is social organization. And where there is social organization, there are institutions. This is certainly true for Shinto. To understand Shinto spirituality fully, we must investigate its social and political aspects. Furthermore, because Japanese social and political organization has undergone radical changes through the centuries, it is not surprising that Shinto has institutionally changed through time as well. In light of this, some scholars have spoken of Shinto in the plural rather than the singular. Prehistoric animistic/shamanistic Shinto, early imperial Shinto, Buddhist syncretistic Shinto, nativist Shinto, folk Shinto, Sect Shinto, Shrine Shinto, State Shinto—all are scholarly designations appropriate to certain contexts.

To delve deeper into the cultural contexts of the religion and probe into why at times there seem to be multiple kinds of Shinto, we will explore the tradition at various points in Japanese history. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 survey this history, especially in terms of doctrines and institutions. As we will see, Shinto is a religion with roots going back to Japanese prehistoric times. But in another sense, it is also a religious tradition whose “history” really begins sometime around 1801. This somewhat arbitrarily chosen threshold marks the death of Motoori Norinaga, an intellectual who gave Shinto a new footing, a basis that after his death became the foundation for a new (or almost new) kind of Shinto institution.

This is an appropriate point to introduce a distinction that will serve us well in trying to understand the evolution of Shinto. It arises from our concern about what it means to identify oneself as “Shinto.” We will distinguish two kinds of spirituality: existential and essentialist. The first proceeds by finding an appropriate label for what a person

values, believes, and does. “Because I behave or feel in such-and-such a way, I am Shinto,” for example. We can call this an “existential” Shinto spirituality. It is a self-identity that arises from naming a way of living: the patterns of one’s existence in the world. The second type of spirituality arises from an intuition about an inner core of one’s being—one’s essence, soul, or innate character—that defines or drives one’s values, beliefs, and actions. “*Because* I am Shinto, I behave or feel in such-and-such a way.” We will call this an “essentialist” Shinto spirituality because one’s identity as Shinto precedes and determines (rather than merely names) one’s patterns of religious behavior.

The difference between an existential and essentialist spirituality is subtle. Indeed, on the surface, a person who identifies with Shinto in one manner may be virtually indistinguishable from one who identifies with it in the other. Yet as will become increasingly clear as the book proceeds, how people identify with a religion can profoundly affect how that religion functions within a society. For an initial glimpse of what is at stake, let us consider the difference between an existential and essentialist form of identity in an example that has nothing to do with religion.

Suppose there are two comments people commonly make about Mary: (1) “Mary tells a lot of jokes” and (2) “Mary is a comedian.” What is the connection between the two statements? There are two possibilities. One is that Mary typically jokes about matters and, to classify this pattern of behavior, people call her a “comedian.” In this case the word “comedian” *describes how* she frequently acts and speaks. As such, her being a comedian is an existential identity. The other possibility is that Mary is by nature a comedian—and because she is a comedian, she thinks, feels, and acts in certain ways. If this is the situation, then her being a comedian is an essentialist identity: it *explains why* Mary behaves as she does. If she is going to be true to who she really is, she should let her comic nature guide how she acts. A key difference between the two ways of being a comedian hinges on the causal connection between the two statements (1) and (2). If the relation is that (2) is true because of (1), the situation is existential; if (1) is true because of (2), it is essentialist.

In summation: if we know Mary is existentially a comedian, we know something of her style or manner. We know about how she has

chosen to interact with others. If we know Mary's being a comedian is essentialist, we know something about her basic nature that causes her to behave in certain ways. Different expectations derive from the two modalities. Suppose Mary tells lots of jokes but is also an accomplished pianist. If her being a comedian is existential, we cannot by knowledge of this fact alone predict how she performs on the piano. She may be desperately serious when she plays the piano but light-hearted at other times. If her identity as a comedian is essentialist, however, we might reasonably expect that her comic side is evident even when she plays the piano. She may even use a piano in her act at a comedy club.

Let us apply this existential/essentialist distinction to Shinto spirituality. When people say they are "Shinto," are they giving a conventional name for how they happen to think, feel, and act? Or are they designating an essential part of themselves that *leads them* to think, feel, and act in certain ways? If the former (the existential identification with Shinto), the connection with the religion is ad hoc and flexible. Their Shinto spiritual identity would then be a conventional name applying to some of their typical ideas, values, and practices. To change such an existential identity would be akin to a change in preference, taste, or habit. If, by contrast, the identification with Shinto spirituality is of the essentialist form, the situation is more prescriptive than descriptive. Insofar as the essentialist identity is based on people's true nature, they *must* (or should) behave in certain specified ways. The essentialist Shinto spirituality determines and prescribes, rather than simply describes, their thoughts, values, and actions.

Shinto's development as an institution through Japanese history is a tension between these two forms of spirituality. This book contends that at different times one or the other kind of spirituality has tended to dominate. In chapter 3's discussion of Shinto's origins, we find the foundation for both. Chapter 4 then shows how in the millennium from the early ninth through early nineteenth centuries, Shinto took the form that favored a more existential mode of spirituality. Chapter 5 explains how and why this tendency shifted to more essentialist modalities of Shinto spirituality from 1801 to 1945. Furthermore, it explains how the tension between the two kinds of Shinto spirituality remains unresolved in Japan even today. In chapter 6, the final chap-

ter, we will consider the options Japan faces for resolving this tension and also explore some general issues about the interface of existential and essentialist spiritualities in other religious traditions as well. This discussion will give us the opportunity to reflect on what our study of Shinto can teach us about spirituality in general.

A few points about stylistic conventions. First, this book uses the modified Hepburn romanization of Japanese. For readers who would like an approximation of how to use this romanization in pronouncing Japanese terms and names, see the appendix. Following common English usage, the following eight Japanese words have been Angli-



*The Great Torii of Yasukuni Shrine
A schoolgirl walks home silhouetted beneath a torii of Yasukuni Shrine
in Tokyo. Such huge torii frame the main approach to the central
shrine building.*

cized by dropping the long vowel markers: Shintō, shōgun, Tōkyō, Kyōto, sumō, Honshū, Kyūshū, Ōsaka. Second, the Japanese convention for personal names is to give the surname first and then the given name. This book follows that convention. Third, the Japanese given name may be an acquired name (such as an ordination name or pen name) and Japanese often refer to famous people by that name alone. The haiku poet Matsuo Bashō, for example, is usually referred to as “Bashō,” not “Matsuo.” This convention too will be followed here.