



Hall of Dance at the Ise Grand Shrine. Ise Grand Shrine is dedicated to the worship of Amaterasu and is the most sacred Shinto shrine.

CHAPTER 9

SHINTO

We in the West could learn something from those of the Shinto faith about the reverence for the land and water and our responsibility for them.

Shinto is a religion about Japan and its people, and it is practiced by four million persons in Japan.¹ Because of its geographical ties, it is rarely practiced outside Japan, although there are Shinto temples where groups of Japanese have migrated (e.g., Taiwan, Hawaii, and California).

— ORIGINS —

Shinto is rooted in a myth which seeks to explain the origins of the land of Japan as well as the origin of its people. The myth arose in the form in which we will consider it about the sixth century CE as Chinese influence was entering Japan. Buddhism was beginning to take root. Confucian principles were accompanying it. Thus, while things Chinese were attractive, what did it really mean to be Japanese? This question was answered by bringing together the ancient strains of Japanese history and mythology to create the myth that will be examined below.

THE MYTH

Central to Shinto is the concept of *kami*, which is a life energy or self-creative life force that permeates everything, be it animate or inanimate. Kami constantly seeks to manifest itself and does so in multiple ways. It may be manifest in waterfalls, rocks, trees, mountains, hills, animals, and people. All contain this sacred energy, and nothing is without it. But what is universal in nature may also be individual, so there are divine figures that are manifestations of kami and are themselves called kami or gods. The name of the religion reflects this, for the word *Shinto* is derived from the two Chinese words *shen* and *Tao*. Shen are the good spirits or gods, and Tao means “way.” Thus Shinto is the way of the gods, implying that life is to be lived in harmony with them. The Japanese name for the religion is Kami-no-michi, which also means “way of the gods,” just as the Chinese does. So the practice of Shinto implies belief in the kami and a life lived in harmony with kami, meaning not just the “divine” figures but all of life, the world, and the universe.

Kami has some similarities with Latter-day Saint thought, but none are to be pressed too far, for they are similarities, not parallels. The most obvious point of similarity might be the Light of Christ, which permeates all space and which people bring with them into this world. However, kami is something that resides in a person and is his or her enlivening power, much like a soul. Since kami is eternal, it could be compared to an intelligence, which has no beginning and no end. This intelligence resides in a person and in all other life, but it is not an independent entity which seeks to manifest itself as humans, animals, or other life. Instead, it is something that our Heavenly Father clothes with spirit form, bringing us as spirit children into his presence in a premortal existence. Only then do we enter an earth life, so what seems similar to Latter-day Saint understandings of life at first is actually quite different. Kami is more appropriately compared to Brahman in Hinduism.

The foundational myth is found in two histories of Japan. The first history is the *Kojiki*, or “Record of Ancient Matters,” written in 712 CE by Ono Yasumaro. This is the oldest surviving book in Japan. The second writing is the *Nihongi*, or *Nihonshoki*, the “Chronicles of Japan.” It was written by a committee in 720 CE as a corrective to the

Kojiki, which the committee felt had overemphasized the imperial or Yamato clan and not sufficiently located Japan among the nation-states of Asia. It was written in Chinese. Both of these writings contain the basic myth of Shinto, but perhaps before we go further, we should ask what a myth is.

First, the term can have a variety of meanings. If I say, “Ah, that’s just a myth,” I am probably saying that something is not true. On the other hand, if I were to talk about the Creation myth in the book of Genesis, I would be talking about a literary genre. In literary terms, a myth is any story about gods without judgment of truth or falsity. In between these two uses of the term is the one we will use. A myth may simply be an attempt to explain something we observe using the building blocks at hand. Thus, if I were today trying to explain the origins of the Japanese islands, I would use the “mythic” language of plate tectonics and volcanology. However, in the seventh century CE, these tools were not available to the ancient inhabitants of Japan. Therefore, they explained their origins in their own way using the building blocks they had.

Izanagi and Izanami. According to the myth, the heavens were separated gradually from the lower world, which was unformed and chaotic. For seven generations, kami were born and resided in the heavens, but with the eighth generation, the kami decided it was time to create the land of Japan. To that end they sent Izanagi, the primal male and kami of the sky, and Izanami, the primal female and kami of the earth, to create the islands. First, Izanagi dipped his jeweled spear into the watery brine, and as he lifted it out, foam dripped from the tip and formed the great island of Japan. Then, Izanagi and Izanami discovered their sexual differences and had intercourse, which led to Izanami giving birth to various other islands of Japan, along with additional kami. The last kami to which she gave birth was the kami of fire, which burned her to death, thereby forcing her to go to the world of the dead.

Upon Izanami’s death, Izanagi was brokenhearted and determined that he would follow her into the underworld and bring her back. After searching for her, Izanagi finally found Izanami, but since corruption had begun to set in, she told him not to look at her. He ignored this, looked, and was horrified at what had happened to her.

She, for her part, was intensely angry that he had seen her in this state, so she along with the other inhabitants of the underworld began to chase him. He fled, finally finding the exit, and escaped, slamming a rock over the entrance, and the two parted with something less than loving words.

Izanagi and Izanami play roles similar to those of Elohim and Jehovah on the one hand, and Adam and Eve on the other. Elohim and Jehovah created this world by organizing preexisting matter, much as did Izanagi when he dipped his spear into the primordial ocean. Adam has some similarity to Izanagi, also, in that he was a participant in the creation of this world as the premortal Michael, but his goal was to dwell here. That does not seem to be part of what Izanagi and Izanami envisaged. Adam and Eve, by contrast, are definitely the first parents of the entire human family, and while the entire Japanese people were viewed in the myth as descendants of the gods, it is not clear that any pair stands at the beginning of that family as do Adam and Eve. Thus there are some interesting contacts between the Latter-day Saint view of creation and that held in Shinto, but the parallels are not firm.

Amaterasu, Tsukiyomi, and Susano. Izanagi now found himself polluted with the corruption from the underworld, so he went to the River Hi and began to wash himself. As he washed his left eye, suddenly the sun goddess, Amaterasu, was born. As he washed his right eye, the moon god, Tsukiyomi, was born; and finally, as he washed his nose, Susano, the storm god, came to life. We should notice who is giving birth to these kami. It is Izanagi, the male.

It turns out that Susano was a troublemaker. He challenged Amaterasu to a contest to see who could have the most children, and he cheated with a fertility jewel. In the end he had more children, but Amaterasu had more sons, so she was the winner. Thoroughly displeased and angry, Susano stomped down the dykes between Amaterasu's rice paddies, defecated in the great hall, skinned the sacred pony from its tail to its head, and threw the carcass into the spinning room, causing Amaterasu to prick her finger on a spindle. Disgusted and angry, Amaterasu decided she had had enough, went into a cave, and slammed the door, saying that she was never going to come out. Of course, when the sun goddess goes into a cave and slams

the door, the world gets dark, and the rice and other crops cannot grow. Thus the other kami realized that they had to entice her out, so they decided to hold a great party outside the cave. They hung a rope over the cave and put beautifully singing birds on it. They stomped on a bucket. Basically, they had a great time, and Amaterasu wondered how they could have so much fun without her.

As the party progressed, someone had an idea. The suggestion was made that they tell Amaterasu that they did not need her anymore because they had found someone more beautiful than she, and the suggestion was put into practice. Needless to say, this piqued Amaterasu's vanity, and she wanted to see this creature that was more beautiful than she was, so she carefully opened the cave door just a crack. Outside, someone held up a mirror which dazzled the sun goddess with her own beauty. Other kami pulled the door open and led Amaterasu from the cave. The sun, of course, came back up, the crops began to grow again, and harmony was reestablished. Susano was punished by having his beard clipped and was banished to the islands, and Amaterasu's sovereignty was confirmed.

Susano, however, redeemed himself. He found a beautiful maiden who was being threatened by a dragon with eight tails, which he killed, thereby saving the maiden. In one of the tails he found a jeweled sword, which he sent to Amaterasu as a peace offering. He married the maiden and became the father of a powerful dynasty of kami who ruled on earth in Japan. The most powerful of these offspring was Okuninushi (Great Lord of the Country).

After a time, Amaterasu decided that it was time to bring the Japanese islands under her full sovereignty. To that end she sent her grandson Ninigi to claim the islands for her, and as symbols of his authority, she sent with him the jeweled sword found in the dragon's tail, the fertility jewel with which Susano had cheated in their contest, and the sacred mirror used in enticing her from the cave. Ninigi must have been a consummate diplomat, for rather than confronting Okuninushi, he convinced him to assume the role of protector of the royal family, and Ninigi became the first ruler of Japan. His grandson, Jimmu Tenno, then became the first emperor of Japan, and the royal family still traces their lineage to Jimmu and through him to Amaterasu. It is no accident that the symbol on the Japanese flag is that of the rising sun.

The message of the myth. As we remember, a myth is intended to explain something. What do we learn about Japan and its people from this myth? First, the land of Japan is a unique creation of the gods, and the people are all descendants of these same deities. The royal family in particular is directly descended from the sun goddess. A nineteenth-century Japanese author details the historical significance of this story in the following words:

People all over the world refer to Japan as the Land of the Gods and call us the descendants of the gods. Indeed, it is exactly as they say: our country, as a special mark of favor from the heavenly gods, was begotten by them, and there is thus so immense a difference between Japan and all the other countries of the world as to defy comparison. Ours is a splendid and blessed country, the Land of the Gods beyond any doubt, and we, down to the most humble man and woman, are the descendants of the gods. Nevertheless, there are unhappily many people who do not understand why Japan is the Land of the Gods and we their descendants. . . . Is this not a lamentable state of affairs? Japanese differ completely from and are superior to the peoples of China, India, Russia, Holland, Siam, Cambodia, and all other countries of the world, and for us to have called our country the Land of the Gods was not mere vainglory. It was the gods who formed all the lands of the world at the Creation, and these gods were without exception born in Japan. Japan is thus the homeland of the gods, and that is why we call it the Land of the Gods (Hirata Atsutane [1776–1843]).²

From Hirata Atsutane's words, it is clear that such a vision of Japan could lead to a theory of the divine right to rule the Asian basin. Precisely this occurred prior to and during the Second World War, and the myth, updated somewhat to appeal to modern ears, was used to underline loyalty to the emperor and the superiority of the Japanese people. Thus it was not an accident that General Douglas MacArthur required two things in the terms of surrender from the Japanese: (1) that the emperor deny his divinity and (2) that the shrines which had been nationalized and used as centers supporting the war effort be denationalized and returned to local control. It was MacArthur's intent to break the power of the myth. Did he succeed? Probably to some degree.

Emperor Hirohito reigned from 1926 until his death in 1989. He was succeeded by his son, Akihito. With a sixty-three-year hiatus between coronations, there was much debate whether Akihito would use the old enthronement ceremony, which traced the lineage of the emperor back to Amaterasu. Akihito chose to use the traditional ceremony. Do people still believe in the divine lineage of the emperor? That is a difficult question to answer, but within the last decade, a prominent mayor of a major Japanese city made a public statement that he did not believe in the divinity of the emperor. Within a month, someone tried to assassinate him.

The Japanese are still very loyal to the emperor, whose primary role is ceremonial. Much of the loyalty to the nation is now found in loyalty to companies and businesses. Such loyalty is leading Japan to a prominent place in the world economy.

The concept of a chosen land is not new to Latter-day Saints, for the new world was preserved so that in the end the fullness of the gospel could be preached to all the world from there. Rather than providing a reason for national dominance and a right to rule, the chosen land is the place from which missionaries will leave to preach the gospel in other lands, “conquering” them for God, not for a nation. Thus, being chosen for Latter-day Saints does not provide the basis for a divine right to rule, but the divine obligation to enrich human life wherever it is found.

— DOCTRINES —

In Shinto there are no set doctrines, scriptures, or ethics. The primary emphasis is to be in harmony with the land and the kami. Doctrine and ethics come from Buddhism and Confucianism, both of which a person practicing Shinto may well hold. Essentially, Shinto deals with the here and now, and thus couples may be married by a Shinto priest. Ethics may come from both Confucianism and Buddhism, but the principles of social interaction are generally derived from Confucianism. Buddhism deals with the future life, so Buddhist priests may conduct the funeral of a family member. While the *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki* contain the myth of Shinto, neither is considered scripture in the way Christians view their scriptures. They are not holy books or the words of God.

A combination of values and behaviors, derived from the above religions, is captured in what is known as the Bushido Code (“the Warrior Knight Way”), the medieval chivalric code of Japan. It was this code that defined the behavior and view of the samurai warriors of Japan. According to Noss and Noss, it has eight elements to it. The first was loyalty to the emperor and then to the immediate lord one served. Other virtues were gratitude; courage, by which life would be willingly given; justice; truthfulness, even if it were to lead to personal harm; politeness, even to enemies; reserve, in which no emotion should be shown; and finally honor, in which one willingly took his or her life to atone for failure or defeat.³ It was the combination of these virtues that carried the kamikaze pilots of World War II into battle.

The word *kamikaze* means “divine wind” and refers to a time in 1281 when a large Mongol army was attempting to invade Japan. A huge typhoon, a divine wind, swept up the coast, utterly destroying the fleet and saving Japan from invasion. So when Japan was once again threatened by invasion by foreign powers during the Second World War, a new kamikaze was born, that of the suicide mission in defense of land and emperor. It was precisely these values that were enshrined in the Bushido Code. Today, as already suggested, these values find their manifestation in loyalty to companies as the Japanese enrich their country through the channels of legitimate business dealings.

— WORSHIP AND RITUALS —

THE SHRINE AND PRIESTS

There are two centers of worship in Shinto—the shrine and the home. We will first treat the shrine, of which there are more than 87,000 in Japan. A Shinto shrine is usually located near some natural object such as a beautiful waterfall, a mountain, a river, or a hill. It may also celebrate a family. The shrine houses the kami of that natural object or family, and thus, for example, we find shrines to the kami of Fujiyama or to the royal Meiji family. Anything awe-inspiring may be worthy of worship, and a temple will be built because of the self-existent spirit that is there. The author was told by a student that he and a companion had discovered a Shinto shrine on the top of a tall building in Tokyo dedicated to the kami of electricity, certainly a mysterious power that has affected all modern lives.



Torii gate at the entrance of the Ise Grand Shrine. Torii gates separate secular from sacred space.

As persons approach a Shinto shrine, they usually encounter a torii gate, which separates secular from sacred space, or more sacred from less sacred space. Thus, as persons enter the shrine area, they pass through a torii or perhaps a series of toriis. Entrance to the Meiji shrine in Tokyo, for example, occurs by passing through several gates. The torii has its roots in the myth reflecting the rope hung over the cave with the birds sitting on it.

Latter-day Saints certainly understand the concept of sacred space. Just walking onto the grounds of a temple is moving from secular to sacred space. Even non-Latter-day Saints feel the difference. As one enters the temple and proceeds beyond the recommend desk, one moves into progressively more sacred territory. This is accentuated particularly in the Salt Lake and Manti Temples as persons move progressively upward, ultimately entering the most sacred area, the celestial room. It is precisely for this reason that persons whose lives do not reach a certain level of sanctity are not admitted to the sacred precincts of the temple.

Just inside the entrance to a Shinto shrine is normally an ablution pavilion, where people may wash off their fingers and rinse out their mouths. This is part of purification, for the gravest sin is to

come ritually impure into the presence of the kami. Priests must also be ritually pure, and should they have pollution that cannot be superficially removed, they may immerse themselves in a ritual bath. Better, however, is to avoid becoming impure before serving in the shrine.

Shinto shrines normally have a parish associated with them. This is a geographical area, and the people living within it are responsible to care for the kami and the shrine dedicated to that kami. This may include rebuilding the shrine every twenty to twenty-five years. In return, the kami is expected to watch over the people and their welfare. Shrines are managed by a lay committee. If the shrine is large enough, it may have one or more priests, and it is the responsibility of the lay committee to raise the funds to pay for the services of the priests. If the shrine is of insufficient size or prestige to be able to have priests, then the laity may fulfill the priestly functions.

In the past, the role of shrine priest was passed from father to son, but since the Second World War, priests attend schools to learn the rituals. From personal experience, the author has noticed that the motives seem to vary from priest to priest. I have met some who seem to have little belief in the kami but see themselves functioning more as museum curators preserving the traditions of Japan. On the other hand, I have met priests who are deeply immersed in the spiritual dimensions of Shinto and firmly believe in the worship and efficacy of the kami. An increasing number of priests are women; in the late 1990s there were 21,091 priests, 10 percent of whom were women.⁴ The first function of the priests is to provide the daily offering of food to the kami, which is eaten spiritually, for without nourishment, a kami cannot function. They then ask the kami on behalf of worshipers to provide good health, prosperity, and success. They also remove impurities and even demons from people through the act of purification, which is carried out by waving a branch of the sacred sakaki tree (a low spreading, flowering evergreen) or a purification wand over the worshiper. Through purification, anything may be brought within the orbit of the kami, and thus Shinto can be quite open to new inventions and technologies. Priests may be asked to purify a new home, a car, a computer, a couple at a wedding, and any other number of things. Even demons may be exorcised.

Similarly, purification is very much a part of Latter-day Saint belief. Baptism under the hands of one having authority would be similar to a priest waving the cleansing wand over a person to bring about ritual purity. The purity that baptism or taking the sacrament brings is the purity of persons who have had their sins removed and who have taken upon themselves the purity of Jesus Christ. Latter-day Saint purity is much broader than that found in Shinto. Latter-day Saints also have ordinances of healing or other blessings to bring about quietness in persons who are afflicted with disease or who are troubled mentally or emotionally about something. Some of this Shinto priests can also do. Both Shinto and Latter-day Saints use priests to mediate cleansing power, each recognizing a divine channel from God through them. In the area of purity, then, there are some appropriate parallels.

SHRINE WORSHIP

The central shrine is divided into two areas—the honden and the haiden. The honden is the holy, sacred area of the shrine where the symbols or images of the kami are kept. This is the area that is solely for the priests. The other area, the haiden, is the place of offering and worship for the laity. The first act upon entering this area is to give an offering, which may be of money, material, or other valuable items. However, a symbolic offering is also appropriate and might just be a sprig from the sakaki tree or a paper streamer tied to a nearby tree. After the offering, worshipers ring a bell or clap their hands to gain the attention of the kami. Having done so, they may then offer prayers to the kami, and these are thoroughly personal prayers for the well-being of children, assistance in childbirth, good grades on an exam, and the many other things that we encounter as human beings. Near the main shrine at Meiji, the author saw a bulletin board with pegs on it where a person could hang prayers on three-by-five pieces of wood in the presence of the kami, and the topics of concern were those listed above. The bulletin board seemed to be very much like the prayer roll in the temples of Latter-day Saints. Following their prayers, worshipers clap to signal an end to their prayers and to show their thanksgiving. If their prayers are answered, they are expected to return to the shrine and thank the kami. The last act



Prayers hung on a prayer board at the shrine in Meiji.

is a communal meal in the presence of the kami, which is usually a symbolic drink of rice wine. Occasionally a family will rent a hall and have a meal in the presence of the kami.

HOME WORSHIP

Almost every Shinto home will have a *kamidana* (a “god shelf”). It is before the god shelf that daily offerings and worship take place. Just as in the shrine, food offerings are placed before the kami each morning to nourish them. These usually consist of rice, steamed vegetables, and sake. After they have been consumed spiritually by the kami, they may be used by the family materially. On the god shelf may be genealogical tablets for deceased relatives which are kami. There also may be symbols of other kami, particularly the kami of the local area. But if a family visited Ise, the shrine of Amaterasu, and brought home a small mirror symbolizing her, that might well be placed on the god shelf too. Thus various kami may be worshiped at the god shelf. Worship before the god shelf is very much like that in the shrine. Hands and mouth are rinsed off and out. The hands are clapped to attract the kami, and then prayers are offered. Hands are clapped to indicate the end of prayer, and many who practice Shinto would never dream of starting or ending a day

without prayer. An interesting feature of home worship is that a Japanese family is likely also to have a butsudān either beside the kamidana or in the next room. This is a Buddhist altar and indicates the close relationship that has grown over the years between Shinto and Buddhism.

MATSURI

Matsuri are festivals that center on the shrine. Generally they are attended by the whole village, and even if persons never darken the door of the shrine at other times of the year, they turn out for matsuri, of which there is a variety. These are fun times.

O-Harai. The first festival is called O-Harai and is probably not technically a matsuri. This is a national act of purification that takes place twice a year, in June and December. In preparation for it, the priests go through a month of purification rituals in which they purify mind and body. They abstain from sex, strong drink, and foods that are not purified by a ritual fire.⁵ At the ritual proper, which may be performed at many shrines, rituals of national cleansing are carried out. At a proper moment, the emperor, as the descendent of Amaterasu, grants the nation absolution.

Shogatsu Matsuri. Shogatsu Matsuri takes place from January 1 to 3. Houses are thoroughly cleaned, and gifts are given to superiors as tokens of appreciation for their work. Visits are made to the shrines, and after offerings are given to the kami, prayers are said for prosperity and health in the new year.

Obon. Obon occurs in mid-August and is actually a Buddhist celebration commemorating the annual return of the dead to the family homes. This is the time of year when the graves are cleaned and prayers are offered for the dead. Traditionally, reports are also made to the ancestors on the state of the family, as we have seen with Confucianism. What ties Shinto and Buddhism together in this festival is the Shinto practice of *bonodori*, a traditional dance, which honors those who have died and enables souls to become kami. Thus Obon includes both the Buddhist and Shinto elements.

Shadow Matsuri. Shadow Matsuri is an ordinary festival and does not directly involve the kami. It is still a festival that centers at the shrine and may be held at any time during the year. It climaxes with

the carrying of the *mikoshi*, a very elaborate portable shrine, around the neighborhood for all to see. The author has seen one of these festivals parading down a main street in the heart of Tokyo.

Taisai. Taisai is a major festival and is often held at planting or harvest. It occurs in the area of the shrine, but the center is the *mikoshi*, which contains the symbols or images of the *kami*. The *mikoshi* is carried all through the neighborhood with the purpose of sanctifying the land and the people. All are exposed to the divine aura of the *kami*. Carrying the *mikoshi* sanctifies those who carry it, and thus both men and women will serve as bearers. This is a joyous event, since all are participating in the divine presence. Often a *mikoshi* from a neighboring village will be brought over, and there will be good-natured shoving and pushing to see which is the stronger *kami*. At the end of the day, after the people have felt the presence of the *kami* and the *kami* has surveyed his or her domain, the emblems are reenshrined and the festival ends.

BIRTH AND MARRIAGE

Apart from the above rituals, there are really only two others to mention. The first is the ritual at the birth of a child, which involves taking the infant to the shrine sometime after birth to be purified by the priests. The other ritual similarly involves purification of the bride and groom as a part of marriage.

— WOMEN —

Some scholars believe that before Chinese influence came to Japan, women were equal with men. It is a woman, *Amaterasu*, who is the *kami* of the sun. It is she from whom the royal family is descended, and it is she who is essentially head of the *kami* pantheon. At the earthly level, in agrarian societies, some scholars argue, women worked with men and shared the burdens of life. With the coming of Chinese influence—Buddhism and Confucianism particularly—women were placed in a subordinate position to men, which is where a woman would be today in Shinto life. We must remember, however, that Shinto cannot be separated from the other two religions. We cannot tell where one stops and the other starts.

— CONCLUSION —

Shinto is primarily about Japan and its people, and while there are shrines outside the country, the kami are truly Japanese. The religion is about living in harmony with the land, with nature, and with the kami. We in the West could learn something from those of the Shinto faith about reverence for the land and water and our responsibility for them.

— NOTES —

1. “Major Religions of the World Ranked by Number of Adherents,” Adherents.com, last modified August 9, 2007, http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html.
2. C. Scott Littleton, *Shinto* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 34.
3. David S. Noss and John B. Noss, *A History of the World's Religions*, 9th ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1994), 375.
4. Littleton, *Shinto*, 98.
5. Noss and Noss, *History*, 373.