Beatrice M. Bodart-Bailey
Fordham University

Religion and Society in the Shinto Perspective

Terrible are the ocean billows;
Yet, shall we not set sail
With entreaties to the gods?
Manyōshū, VII/1232[1]

Throughout the ages men have looked to the gods for protection from the elements like this seventh century sailor in Japan. Human needs—material and spiritual comfort—are universal. What differs is how man perceives the divine. These different perceptions of the divine—as jealous godhead, universal force or benevolent and angry spirits—has deeply moulded the thoughts and actions of the believers. As religions spread from country to country they were both coloured by the civilizations they encountered and deeply influenced the *Weltanschauung* of their converts.

Shintô, the Japanese national religion, is remarkable for its immobility in this respect. For over two thousand years it has been practised by one people, belonging to the same confined geographical setting and the same political entity. Foreign religions and philosophies were introduced into the Japanese islands, but never was Shintô eclipsed by them, nor its practice threatened by invaders of a different creed. Consequently, Shintô has left its deep imprint on every facet of Japanese life.

Those remembering the experience of the Second World War might question whether Shintô deserves the honour of being called a "religion". Was it not Shintô which coerced the Japanese people to totally sacrifice themselves for the war effort—culminating in the macabre idea of one general to use young fighter pilots as human missiles; the

1. Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkôkai ed., *The Manyôshû* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), p. 287.

dreaded *kami kaze* fighters on their suicidal missions, which required them to crash their planes into enemy warships. All this is true. For this reason the American occupational forces issued a lengthy decree forbidding the practice and encouragement of Shintô by any public institution and cutting off all financial support by the state to Shintô shrines and clergy.[2] What the Americans eliminated was the so-called "State Shintô" which—speaking in the most general terms—could be said to be related to the mother religion as different Christian sects are related to Christianity. State Shintô, that is to say, the nation-wide control and support of Shintô by the state together with obligatory worship for all citizens, only came into existence after the Meiji restoration towards the end of the last century. Its history has been brief compared to that of the mother religion. Moreover, besides the unhappy interlude of State Shintô, the religion has never been, in its over two thousand years of existence, the cause of or supported any fighting. This is more than what we can say for most other religions.

What is Shintô? Shintô has no creed, no code of ethics, hardly any metaphysics, no important body of scriptures to compare with the Christian Bible or the Muslim Koran. Shintô has no prophets. Its highest patriarchs will not be able to tell you how many gods there are. They will even differ in their replies to the question of whether Shintô is polytheistic or monotheistic.[3] In Shintô there is no strict demarcation between the divine and the profane, the spiritual and the material. Westerners, frustrated in their attempts to obtain concrete information on the nature of this religion, at times end up disputing whether Shintô is a religion at all.

To understand Shintô, one must put aside all preconceived ideas of what a religion ought to be. Most of all one must not search for an intellectual philosophy. As one high Shintô priest put it:

> In Shintô one can be a devotee without requiring to understand anything intellectually. The worshipper is much more deeply

2. Jean Herbert, *Shintô at the Fountain-Head of Japan* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1967), pp. 53-4. This article relies extensively on J. Herbert's work, who through interviews with Shintô priests over several decades has brought together material otherwise not available.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 23, 25, 29.

> affected by the trees around the temple or by the small lake near it than by any theory.[4]

Important in Shintô is the direct experience of communicating with the divine. An experience of deep emotional nature which, due to the fact that it is spiritual experience and not intellectual theory, cannot adequately be described in words.

Man's close relationship with the gods is borne out by the Japanese creation myth which relates how the gods, men and all other creation came forth out of the same divine womb.[5] Or as one modern Japanese author puts it:

> Man is indissolubly bound up with the gods by both biological and spiritual ties. They share one and the same divine blood, which flows through animals, plants, minerals and all other things in Nature.[6]

With this belief the Japanese required no code of ethics. As all men are related they must love each other like members of the same family. They must treat all creation with reverence and for their own benefit live with it in harmony. Moreover, man, as part of this divine creation, must not abuse his body or soul, but train his mind to be at peace with itself and in harmony with its surroundings. One of the most shameful things for a man is to lose his mental equilibrium, to lose self-control and fly into a rage.

Human sins and weaknesses are perceived like dust obscuring a mirror, dirt clouding the divine soul of man. Important are ceremonies of purification, both physically and spiritually, so man may enjoy his birthright; living in close communion and harmony with the gods and nature. The Japanese word for describing this ideal pure state of mind is *makoto*. A modern Japanese exponent of Shintô explains this term:

> *Makoto* is a sincere approach to life with all one's heart, an approach in which nothing is shunned or treated with neglect. It stems from an awareness of the Divine. It is the humble,

4. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
5. Iwanami Shoten, ed., *Nihon shoki* (Vol. 67 in *Nihon koten bungaku taikei*), Tokyo, 1968. I, 78-80, For part translation see R. Tsunoda *et al.* comp., *Sources of Japanese Tradition* (Columbia University Press, 1968), I, 25-6.
6. Herbert, p. 21.

> single-minded reaction which wells up within us when we touch directly or indirectly upon the workings of the *Kami* (gods), know that they exist, and have the assurance of their close presence with us.
>
> Then, while on the one hand we sense keenly our baseness and imperfection in the presence of the *Kami* (gods), on the other hand we will be overwhelmed with ineffable joy and gratitude at the privilege of living within the harmony of nature.[7]

Like few other people the Japanese have suffered from natural calamities. Yearly the hurricanes, the so-called *taifun*, have inflicted great damage. Active vulcanoes and earthquakes, often followed by huge tidal waves, have devastated large stretches of land and claimed untold lives. Yet in spite of this fact the Japanese look at nature with loving intimacy. Nature is truly "mother nature"—something to be loved, communicated with and respected. Japanese literature—and especially poetry—furnishes us with an admirable record of these sentiments. Whether it be the unsophisticated verse from the seventh century, the aristocrat's poem from the Japanese middle ages or the *haiku* (short verse) of the famous seventeenth century itinerant monk Matsuo Bashô, one is always struck by the deep sensitivity with which nature is approached as a mirror of the human soul. The sound of the wind in the pines, the reflection of the rising moon on white sand and even the noise of a frog jumping into a puddle are all endowed with deep significance, telling more about life than sophisticated philosophical terms could do.

As nature is filled with divine blood it is the natural home of the gods. While the gods will enter the shrines built for them by men or certain ritual objects kept in the shrines, they will just as well live in outstanding natural phenomena : odly shaped rocks, huge old trees or beautifully shaped mountains, like mount Fuji. As far as practical a hempen rope decorated with white strips of paper is tied around the sacred phenomenon to alert the unweary that he is approaching a deity and to ward off evil influence.

To the great confusion of the Western mind with its own ideas about god and gods, the divine can also manifest itself as a province

7. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

or island or simply as the spoken word.[8] It can appear in the shape of a human or animal and manifests itself in the souls of the deceased after a period of purification. This confusion in the eyes of the outsider as to what is a "god" in Shintô is brought about partly by the fact that there is no adequate translation for the Japanese word *kami*. J. Herbert has suggested the translation of "sacred entity",[9] which even though it covers many aspects of *kami*, does not adequately express the idea of its fluidity, symbolized by the all-pervading divine blood.

Another reason for the indefinable nature of *kami* is that it simply does not matter. As the most important aspect is direct communication with the divine, the individual emotional experience of the worshipper, which will, in any case, differ from person to person, there is really no point in insisting upon a precise description of the divine. Thus the appearance of *kami* can vary to suit the needs of the worshipper. Farmers will pray to *kami* protecting the harvest and to *kami* of the locality. Merchants and tradesmen have their own *kami*. A very personal kind of protection is given by the ancestral *kami*. They are worshipped at the family altar and in return they have the duty to protect the house and its inhabitants. The *kami* of outstanding men and women of the past are worshipped so that one may be blessed with their talents. Thus the ninth century statesman Sugawara Michizane, known for his erudition and penmanship, is prayed to by students before examinations. The sixteenth century Tea Master Sen no Rikyû, in turn, hears the prayers of those attempting to learn the intricacies of the Tea Ceremony.

The scriptures speak of eight—or sometimes eighty—hundred myriads of *kami*. The Shintô clergy is not interested in specifying an exact number. The great eighteenth century Shintô scholar, Motôri Norinaga, could state with impunity:

I do not yet understand the meaning of the word *kami*. He considered *kami* to be anything beyond the ordinary, anything mysterious, powerful or terrible, including such diverse phenomena as dragons, mountains and seas, foxes, fireflies echoes and the emperor.[10] Thus, to write in English that Shintô believes the emperor to be

8. *Manyôshû*, pp. 46, 59.
9. Herbert, p. 25.
10. *Motôri Norinaga Zenshû*, Tokyo, I, 150-2. See also Carmen Blacker, *The Catalpa Bow* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1975), p. 34.

divine, to be a god, is misleading. He is not, according to traditional Shintô beliefs, a divinity in the Western sense of the word. Yet as the concept of *kami* does not exist in English, efforts to define his position with other terms are self-defeating.

According to Shintô mythology the emperor is the direct descendent of Amaterasu, the sun goddess, who sent her grandson, the first emperor, to rule the Japanese islands. But all other human beings are also descended from the gods *(kami)*, albeit *kami* of lesser status. It is only with the coronation ceremonies, when the emperor receives the ancient mandate to rule the Japanese islands, that he acquires his special *kami* status. Any attempt to define this status is complicated by the fact that the word *kami*-amongst many other things-can simply mean "above" or "lord" or "superior." Thus when in Japan's earliest records the emperor is hailed as *kami* by a people who knew themselves to be descended from and intimately related to the *kami*, it is virtually impossible to tell how exalted they considered his position in relation to their own.[11] One thing we do know for certain is that throughout many centuries in the course of Japanese history emperors have been the puppets of military rulers, at times having to endure poverty and insults. Although their *kami* status was never questioned, they were certainly not regarded with the awe appropriate to a divinity in the Western sense of the word. It was only after the Meiji Restoration (1868), when the country after three hundred years of rule by the Tokugawa military clan was asked to give allegiance to a new regime headed by the emperor, that the *kami* status of the emperor was interpreted as divine, close to the Western sense of the word. This was a useful political device to quell the many dissenting voices when Japan was struggling to turn herself into a powerful modern nation. It is, however, not in accord with Shintô tradition.

Some Japanese have described Shintô as "the faith at the basis of all religions"; primitive, but not in the derogatory sense of the word. They see it as "original", before any separation had taken place into rival sects and contradictory creeds. It was regarded as such a basic element of human existence that it did not even have a name. The word Shintô—which means literally "the Way of the *kami*"—only came into existence when it had to be differentiated from Buddhism, introduced into Japan around the fifth century AD.

---

11. *Manyôshû*, i.e. pp. 30, 34-5.
12. Herbert, p. 34.

Seeing itself not as a creed or faith to be acquired, but inherent in every Japanese by the fact that he was born, Shintô could afford to be tolerant. Over the centuries, Shintô shrines and Buddhist temples have often shared the same precincts and have worshipped communal deities. Certain rites require Buddhist priests to be present and Buddhist ceremonies at times employ the services of the Shintô clergy. Before State Shintô turned the Shintô clergy into civil servants, men were at times ordained both as Buddhist and Shintô priests.[13] The seventh century/prince Shôtoku, who as regent greatly assisted the spread of Buddhism in Japan, is reported to have said:

> Shintô is the root and stem of a big robust tree replete with an unexhaustible amount of energy and Confucianism is its branches and leaves, while Buddhism is its flowers and fruit.

Modern Japanese authorities on Shintô still whole-heartedly subscribe to these words.[14] Also the general public has always regarded Shintô, Buddhism and Confucianism as complementary. Traditionally it has been common to marry with a Shintô ceremony, live one's life according to Confucian precepts and die in Buddhism, as the latter religion promises an elaborate paradise. Popular worship is very intense, but people do not really care whether the gods they worship are Buddhist or Shintô, notes a contemporary Shintô priest.[15]

With its tolerant acceptance of other beliefs, Shintô could not fail to be influenced by them. An example of this is how Shintô scholars have at times become painfully aware of their own lack of scriptures as compared to the voluminous material existing in Buddhism and Confucianism. The earliest written records, the eighth century *Kojiki* (Records of Ancient Matters) and *Nihongi* (Chronicles of Japan) relating the story of creation and the early history of Japan, both show the imprint of similar Buddhist and Confucian works. A thousand years later, in the eighteenth century, Shintô scholars would still feel the need for authoritative scriptures, carefully re-interpret these works and elevate others, such as the early poetry collection *Manyôshū*, to the status of religious writing.

But while Buddhism and Confucianism left their mark upon Shintô, the reverse is equally the case. Confucian scholars and

13. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

Buddhist priests throughout the centuries have travelled to China to study at "the fountain of wisdom", and have welcomed learned migrants from China. Yet both Japanese Buddhism and Confucianism are markedly different from that practised in China. This can be particularly well observed in Zen Buddhism, which in Japan was infused with the deep religious attachment to nature inherent in Shintô.

A product of the fusion of the austere meditative practices of Zen and the intimate attachment to nature of Shintô is, for instance, the Way of Tea or the Tea Ceremony, as it is better known in the West. Created by Japanese Zen monks[16] as one of the possible "Ways" to spiritual maturation, it has come to develop a unique sense of aestheticism through its search for spiritual harmony within an unadorned natural environment. This aestheticism, firmly rooted in Shintô's reverence for nature, is noticeable in all aspects of traditional Japanese life, be it in architecture, pottery or the wrapping of a gift.

How does Shintô cope with the modern world? Does the emphasis on harmony, the virtually primitive communion with nature and the worship of ancestors not preclude change and forbid individual assertion?

Paradoxically, it is the archaic element in Shintô which has permitted it to adapt itself remarkably well to modern Japan. The gods are housed in unadorned shrines, built of natural material in untreated form. There are no baroque shapes jarring upon the modern mind. A *tori*, a simple gate, marks the entrance to the shrine compound. A water-basin with a wooden ladle permits the worshipper to rinse his mouth and pour water over his hands as an act of purification. The worshipper approaches the sanctuary and claps his hands to catch the attention of the deity or deities housed in the shrine. He says a silent prayer, usually throws a coin as donation into a container and moves on. He might purchase some object blessed by the priest for his protection, amulets which now frequently find their place on the windscreens of cars to protect the driver from the hazards of traffic. There are no regular communal services, no sermons which might alienate the modern worshipper with traditional views. Only when he feels the need will the worshipper seek the advice of the priest

16. The so-called "founders" of the tea ceremony, Murata Mokichi Shukô, Takeno Jôô and Sen Rikyû were all monks of the Rinzai branch of Zen.

or have him perform ceremonies which might include the purification of a suburban plot prior to the erection of a house, or the blessing of a new car, motorbike or swimming pool. Devout people may come to their local shrine daily or even twice every day for prayer, others perhaps just once a year. Some may worship at home in front of a family altar while, especially in the country, some might pray facing the rising sun. Throughout the densely populated cities, towns and villages large and small shrines are nestled between office blocks, homes and shops, and a short prayer—perhaps on the way to the underground—is easily accommodated in the hectic life-style of the modern urbanite. Indeed the cleanly swept temple grounds, usually surrounded by greenery, are an inviting oasis away from the bustle of the roads. The annual festival of each shrine provides an opportunity for the local community to congregate; the traditional colourful parade of a portable shrine by the boys and men of the neighbourhood and the many small shops that spring up for the celebration, ensure that at least on this occasion the shrine becomes the focus of attention for also the less religious minded.

Shintô's tolerance as to the number and shape of *kami* has always permitted new sects to spring up without coming into conflict with the mother religion. Many of these sects centre around an outstanding pious local figure of the recent past, who is worshipped as *kami* and whose collected sayings and writings are treated as scriptures. In contrast to the mother religion, these sects are often highly organized with their own hospitals, schools and even universities, catering for those who feel the need for support from a strong "church" in their daily lives.

Shintô with its history of over two thousand years, appears well-equipped to cope with our modern pluralistic society. At first glance, it appears that it is its great tolerance which has permitted Shintô to adapt so well to social and intellectual change. But is being tolerant about something which does not really matter—namely, the conceptualization of the divine—really tolerance? Next one may cite Shintô's simplicity—the fact that it lacks the intellectual concepts found in other sophisticated religions—as reason for its long unchallenged existence. Yet can a religion which has succeeded in so deeply moulding the character of a people really be called simple?