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Engaged Shinto? Ecology, Peace and Spiritualities of Nature in Indigenous and New Japanese Religions

by John Clammer*

Shinto and Ecology

The Japanese scholar of religion Sonoda Minoru has described Shinto as “the ritual means by which early Japanese transformed their natural surroundings into a cultural landscape infused with religious and historical meaning” (Sonoda 2000:32).

This self-conscious positioning of Shinto as an ecologically sensitive religion does indeed have its basis in the characteristics of the religion. Japanese society in general has a relational view of the self – as being not a unique and individualistic essence, but as being the outcome of many forces, relationships and circumstances that shape any particular identity which is in itself dynamic and impermanent. This idea, which arises largely from Buddhism, is shared by Shinto which has as a central notion the permeability of identity. Thus the boundary between human and “nature” is not fixed – animals can be transformed into humans or humans into animals and humans certainly have the potentiality to become *kami* or gods/spirits. *Kami* themselves need not be “animate” in the usual Western sense, as in Shinto there are no “inanimate” entities – thunder can be a *kami* (*naru kami* or “sounding kami”), as can foxes, or trees, especially large and conspicuous ones, waterfalls and certainly mountains, of which Mount Fuji is only the largest and best known example. Fertility cults are also common as evidenced by the phallic symbols and festivals that occur at a number of well-known shrines. Nature in Shinto is thus not separate from humans as in many forms of Western religion and social science and philosophical thinking and Shinto has been variously described as a form of symbolic immanentism (as opposed to transcendentalism), a religious expression of vitalism, as a nature religion well aware of the impermanence of all things, as a sophisticated form of animism and as a deeply world affirming religion or perhaps set of intuitions (there being no fixed scriptures or absolutely defined ceremonial). In these respects Shinto shares many formal characteristics with Hinduism and has also given rise to many celebrated aspects of Japanese culture (although here too it is hard to determine the exact boundaries between the influence of Shinto and of the later adoption of Buddhism) including a cyclical conception of time, a strong sense of what in Japanese aesthetics is called *mono no aware* or an acute sensitivity to things, an equally strong sense of impermanence (hence the bitter-sweet experience of cherry blossom viewing in the knowledge that the blossoms last only between a few days and perhaps a week) symbolized perhaps best by the most holy site of formal Shinto, the Grand Shrine at Ise, which is totally rebuilt every twenty years in identical form on a site next to the existing shrine buildings: the site is very ancient, the actual buildings never more than two decades.

I have elsewhere characterized Shinto as a radical personalization of the universe: all is animate and the earth-as-mother is the central motif, and as such is the food-giver, leading at least one Japanese anthropologist to argue that rice itself is the principle *kami* of Japanese life as the chief sustainer of that life (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993). The Shinto cosmology then is certainly not anthropomorphic – *kami* may indeed be deified humans or the spirits of enemies, but are also spirits of place, of the moon and the sun, the five elements, the sea, rivers, wells and mountains, of harvest, of badgers, and include the mythical founding parents of the Japanese race *Izanagi* and *Izanami*, as well as more human affairs concerned spirits, including the *kami* of trades, of privies, of trades and protectors of ships and sailors.

Shinto should be seen as vitalistic or animistic – as conceiving of the universe not as inert matter, but as thickly populated by spirits or devas, not so much eco-centered but as holistic in its

recognition of the whole universe as alive and mutually permeable as all things become or become recycled as everything else and where humans, animals, plants, minerals, mountains and just about everything else form a continuum.

This proves to be significant both inside and outside of Japan. Within Japan many social movements and examples of the so-called “New Religions” (*Shin Shukyo*) have emerged based on Shinto. An example of the former is the Yamagishi movement, an organic farming and communal movement that began in Mie Prefecture in south-western Japan after the end of the Pacific war and has since spread to multiple communes all over Japan, to adjacent parts of Asia and as far as Switzerland. The Yamagishi movement is based economically on organic farming, the produce of which is sold in urban and suburban areas of Japan from their trucks that park at designated places according to a fixed weekly schedule, socially on a form of spiritually based communism in which on joining the movement personal property is turned over to the commune and thereafter all physical and other needs are met by one’s residential community in which members live a common life, based spiritually on Shinto. Another example (and there are many others) is the large New Religion *Tenrikyo* with a large following in Japan and branches overseas especially in places where there are substantial Japanese expatriate communities such as Singapore. Almost all of these socio-religious movements in Japan are also peace movements and the promotion of peace world-wide is a major motif in these social movements in the only Atomic bombed society in history. This has led to the emergence in Japan of the idea that Japan is now a spiritual center for the world – a place where peace, ecology, anti-militarization (Japan has the world’s only specifically war- renouncing constitution) and a sense of natural beauty and art abound.

The personalism and vitalism of Shinto can be seen in this light as a vocabulary or language for describing the sacredness of nature and the unity of humans and the rest of the biosphere. Although this language takes a particular cultural form, the essential ideas are of one piece with deep ecological thinking, and indeed perhaps add to it by containing an explicitly spiritual dimension, something perhaps inherent in, but not fully named, in deep ecological thinking.

Perhaps most interesting has been the discovery by non-Japanese of Shinto as the basis for Earth meditations and as a source of insight for eco-psychology and as a theory of cosmic vitalism entirely compatible with Buddhism, especially its Japanese Zen variety. As Fujisawa puts it “Shinto means the Way (Tao in Chinese) of kami, deifying the cosmic vitality generative of all beings, animate and inanimate. We understand by the Way a permanent center of the universe to be apprehended with incessant mutations. Kami is taken to mean the productive power of Taiichi – the Great Ultimate or great Void”.

The “social” teaching of Shinto in the past has tended towards nationalism and the ethnocentrism and even racism that is characteristic of such politically narrow perspectives. What is encouraging is the new thinking within Shinto that is attempting to purge itself of these associations and to rethink itself both in relation to ecology and to its place within the family of world religions, with which it is entering into increasingly promising dialogues. Its potentiality is great in not only encouraging ecological-mindedness amongst the Japanese (currently still the world’s second biggest economy) but through its links to the peace movement, in promoting a much wider awareness of the connections between ecology, peace, responsible development and social justice.

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