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Unit 7

Shinto Ethics

Introduction

Shinto (or “Shintoism”) is the traditional religion of Japan. The term itself was coined only in the sixth century CE in an effort to distinguish the religions native to Japan from those, such as Confucianism and Buddhism, which had been introduced from without. From the beginning, Shinto was a syncretistic term referring to a blend of Japanese traditions, and used to distinguish these from non-native traditions. The formative tradition thus represents a diversity of religious beliefs. Moreover, in time, Shinto became as much a political as a religious system. For example, between 1848 and 1945, it was established as the official state religion of Japan under government control and protection. Shinto continues to play a significant role in Japanese culture and identity. In this unit, we approach formative Shinto as what your textbook, *The World’s Religions*, calls “the way of the *kami*,” the way of the gods or spirits.



Kanda Myojin, Japanese Shinto Shrine.

Photo by Heiwa.

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Following the unit structure, we will cover the following:

- the origin and meaning of “Shinto;”
- stages in the development of the tradition;

- Shinto sacred texts;
- an overview of Shinto ethical teachings;
- analysis and discussion of Jain ethics: conduct, principles, worldview;
- Shinto virtues and vices; and
- moral self and moral community.

Learning objectives

At the end of this unit you will be able to:

1. discuss the origin and meaning of “Shinto;”
2. outline the stages in the development of this tradition;
3. discuss the sacred texts of Shinto, the sources for its ethics;
4. offer a brief overview of Shinto ethical teachings;
5. analyze and discuss Shinto ethics on the levels of conduct, principles, and foundation;
6. discuss Shinto virtues and vices; and
7. suggest what the Shinto tradition defines as the moral self and the moral community.

Assigned reading/viewing/listening

Required readings

Read the following from the required textbooks:

- *The World's Religions*: chapter 9, Shinto – The Way of the *Kami*
- *Anthology of World Scriptures*: chapter 8, Shinto

Suggested viewing

- [My Religion Lab](#): *The World's Religions: Shinto*
- Chapter 8 in the [Companion website](#) for *Anthology of World Scriptures* (**do not submit** any exercises to your instructor)

How to proceed

- Step 1** Read through the entire unit to gain a sense of it as a whole.
- Step 2** Skim **chapter 9** in *The World's Religions*. At this point you may wish to view the Shinto section of the My Religion Lab that accompanies *The World's Religions* text.
- Step 3** Skim **chapter 8** in the *Anthology of World Scriptures*. This chapter introduces you to the sacred texts of Shinto.
- Step 4** Work through the unit carefully, one section at a time. Write notes in the margins or highlight what you think is important. As you work through each section, read the assigned page(s) in Van Voorst or Young. Always work back-and-forth from the course material to the books.
- Step 5** As you work through the unit, complete the various **exercises**. They help you measure your comprehension of the material you have just read. They also promote the development of critical thinking skills.
- Access the **discussion** area, and either begin a discussion or join a discussion in progress.
- Test your knowledge of the terms listed in the **glossary**.
- Take note of the **additional readings** that the text referred to in unit 7 other than Van Voorst and Young

Instructional content

Origin and meaning of “Shinto”

Shinto has no one founder. As we note above, the term was coined only in the sixth century CE, though the diverse beliefs encompassed by the term extend much farther back into Japanese antiquity. The name “Shinto” means “the way of the spirits or gods.” The name was coined in an effort to distinguish the native traditions of Japan from the Buddhism and Confucianism that had entered the country.



Read

The World's Religions: chapter 9, "The Origin and Meaning of 'Shinto'"

It is important to note that "Shinto" is a syncretistic term. Before the term was introduced, a number of indigenous religious traditions existed in Japan. These were incorporated into Shinto, which thus became a collective term for the religions and myths native to the Japanese islands.

As noted in the above reading, "Shinto," as "the way of the spirits," can also be understood as the Japanese word for "the sacred." The term actually comes from two Chinese words (*shen*, spirits, and *dao* or *tao*, way). The Japanese characters pronounced *shen dao* (or *shen tao*) can also be pronounced *kami-no-michi* (*no-michi*, way, and *kami*, spirits), "the way of the *kami*."

Stages in the development of the tradition



Read

The World's Religions: chapter 9, "Popular Japanese Religion" and "Medieval Shinto: Theoretical Amalgamation with Buddhism"


The pre-history of this tradition extends back into antiquity, for as we note above, long before the term "Shinto" was adopted, diverse religious practices developed in Japan. These practices included divination, healing rites, agricultural rituals, ancestor veneration, spirit possession, and the worship of various deities and spirits. As far back as scholars can delve into these early traditions, which some refer to as "folk Shinto," they find that harmony prevailed as a religious and ethical ideal. As your textbook states, "Through popular religion, people express a desire to live in harmony with the cycles of nature and to respect the spiritual power manifest in natural phenomena." Accompanying this respect for the harmony of the natural order, was a sense of awe, and some awareness of the presence of natural deities, or of spiritual forces in nature. The term "kami" can be used to refer to these natural deities (spirits of animals, mountains, etc.), to human and ancestor spirits, as well as to anthropomorphic deities.

The above reading mentions the special role played by women in folk Shinto. A female shaman (*miko*) was an important religious figure in early Japan, and remains so today in some rural areas where young girls are still apprenticed as shamans. A *miko*, when possessed by a spirit, became a kind of seer and an important transmitter of folk tradition, empowered to heal and to communicate with the spirit world. When Confucianism came to Japan, the role of the *miko* was diminished, and the importance of the female shaman was never fully recovered by Shinto.

Early Shinto absorbed the folk conceptions of the interconnectedness of humans and nature and of the importance of harmony. It also borrowed concepts and practices from Chinese and Buddhist traditions,

continuing thereby to develop its syncretistic character. For example, Buddhist temples were erected within Shinto shrines, and as a consequence, teachings explored relationships between the two traditions. Influenced by Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and eventually by Christianity, Japanese religion became as what your textbook calls “mixed Shinto.” Note that *The World’s Religions* gives particular attention to the amalgamation of Shinto and Buddhism.

Shinto sacred texts


	<p>Read</p>
<p><i>Anthology of World Scriptures</i>: chapter 8, “Introduction”</p>	

The above reading states that Shinto is unique among the major world religions in having no “scripture,” as modern scholars commonly understand that term: “Shinto recognizes no book as officially authoritative. It has no canon and no formalized doctrines or ethical systems that could be shaped by a scripture.” (Note that in making this statement, Van Voorst does not consider indigenous religions: The reference is to “major faiths based in historically literate cultures”).

That said, two books have special standing in the tradition. The first is the *Kojiki*, which means “Record of Ancient Matters.” The second is the *Nihongi*, “Chronicles of Japan.” Both of these books were written in the eighth century CE as the result of an imperial decree, and both are held in high honor in the tradition. At one time, before the disestablishment of Shinto as a state religion in 1945, these texts were taught in schools. Though this is no longer the case, they remain authoritative, and are our main sources for Shinto ethical teachings.

Note from the *Anthology of World Scriptures* that the *Kojiki* is divided into three books, the first of which outlines early Japanese mythology and proclaims the emperor’s family as destined to rule, while the second two books narrate legends of ancient emperors. The *Nihongi* comprises thirty books, some of which deal with stories told in the *Kojiki*, some of which deal with seventh century CE reforms that brought Shinto under more strict government regulation and that required greater obedience to the way of *kami*.

Anthology of World Scriptures: chapter 8, “Preface to the *Kojiki*,” which summarizes much of the contents of the *Kojiki* and thus gives you a sense of the work overall.

	<p>Terminology exercise</p>
<p>Directions: Based on what you have read in the manual and your textbooks thus far, define the</p>	

following:

- kami
- Shinto
- kami-no-michi
- syncretism
- folk Shinto
- mixed Shinto
- Kojiki
- Nihongi
- miko

Visit the companion website for the *Anthology of World Scriptures* textbook. Select the appropriate chapter and use the flashcards for terms and definitions in the unit.

Overview of Shinto ethical teachings

We have said that Shinto has no definitive canon. It has no definitive ethics either—at least no system of ethics that can be transmitted as a set of conduct rules applicable to all individuals. As scholars often note, the tradition has different meanings for different people, and what is right action in any instance is very much context-dependent. Yet there are central and abiding ethical notions that prevail throughout the diverse strands of this syncretistic tradition. One way to glimpse these is by studying the Shinto creation myth that is printed in both of your textbooks.



Read

The World's Religions: chapter 9, “The Shinto Myth: Japan as the Land of the *Kami*”

Anthology of World Scriptures: chapter 8, “The Creation of Japan”

This myth belongs both to folk Shinto (it was long transmitted in oral form) and to the formative Shinto tradition (it was compiled in written form, as part of the *Kojiki* in 712 CE). The myth tells of the creation of Japan, rather than of the world, by two *kami*, the original male (*Izanagi*) and the original female (*Izanami*). Through an account of the cleansing of *Isanagi*, the myth foreshadows the role of ritual purification in Shinto. It also offers a mythological link between the sun-goddess and the Japanese emperor. It puts the Japanese islands at the center of creation, establishes an interdependence between humans and nature, and presents Japan as “the land of the *kami*.” As we will see in the next section, these are ideas that translate into Shinto ethics.

Analysis of Shinto Ethics: Conduct, principles, foundation





Read

The World's Religions: chapter 9, “The Shinto Worldview”

- Conduct:** As you will know from having read the above myth of creation, purification is a key idea in this tradition, an old idea that goes back to Shinto prehistory and that remains important throughout the formative and later periods. Like Taoism and Confucianism, Shinto teaches the importance of harmony. The ideal is a this-worldly one that bears on all of one’s familial and social relationships and roles in life. The ideal has contributed to the importance of ritual in Shinto ethics, a point that *The World’s Religions* develops at some length. Read carefully the paragraphs from the above selection on shrines, rituals, and self-cultivation. Note that: 1) to this day, almost every village has a Shinto shrine where rituals are carried out; 2) the shrines divide, and join, sacred and secular space; 3) *kami* are associated with each shrine; 4) various conduct rites—purification rituals—are carried out at these shrines, and are considered essential on given occasions or stages in life; 5) the deeds performed at these shrines mark important moments in a life, in a year, or in the history of the tradition; 6) some ritual visits to a shrine are prescribed; 7) some shrines are maintained in the home for memorial purposes or for practice of daily worship rituals.
- Principles:** One simple way to state the profound principle that informs Shinto ethics is: “act out of reverence to the *kami*.” As your textbook observes, this is an “ecological” principle, for it implies reverence to the *kami* that permeate nature. When this reverence is lost, and nature is regarded as lifeless raw material, chaos is the result. The principle also implies deep respect for tradition: to forget one’s ancestors is to forsake reverence for the *kami*. The goal of the tradition is cosmic harmony, achieved through a life of purity, a life lived in reverence for the *kami*.
- Foundation(worldview):** We have encountered before the notion that individualism is both an illusion (a form of ignorance) and the cause of moral ill. Shinto holds to this notion. Individualism—a grasping for oneself or one’s group —leads to personal, social, national, and cosmic chaos, for it results in loss of balance or harmony. When harmony is lost, impurity spreads. The Shinto worldview teaches that *kami* are everywhere (some eight million of them exist), and are potentially in anything or anyone.

Given that reality is infused with *kami*, one must proceed through one's life with a reverent attitude to all that is.

	<h2>Exercises</h2>
<p>Directions: Prepare your answers to the following questions.</p>	
<p>Questions:</p> <p>Respond, in well-developed paragraphs, to each of the following questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss the Shinto creation myth from the <i>Kojiki</i> that is excerpted in both of your textbooks, explaining what you can learn from this myth about Shinto's ethical teachings. • What do you think are some similarities and differences between the ethical teachings of Shinto and those of either Taoism or Confucianism? 	
	<p>Now access the discussion area in the online course site to post your answer to these questions. Read and compare other students' answers with your answers. Interact with and give a substantive response to at least one other person.</p> <p>Contact your instructor if you still have questions after reading and discussing your answers with other students.</p>

Shinto virtues and vices

Selfishness is a major vice in this tradition, along with indifference, carelessness, disrespectfulness, and deception. Through ritual devotion and purification, self-cultivation is important and involves cultivation in many of the virtues that are significant in Chinese religion. As *The World's Religions* states, "Moral behavior," and particularly sincerity (*makoto*) and acting with "a truthful heart" are emphasized. In this context, Shinto reflects the influence of Confucian virtues introduced by China and Korea."

Moral self and moral community

We have noted more than once above that in Shinto, as in the folk traditions that belong to its prehistory, harmony is a key ideal and one based on a belief in the permeation of all reality with *kami*. This is an outlook

that does not allow for an easy partitioning of the moral community. The moral community is cosmic, not comprised of humans only. As we have also noted, the moral self is understood in relational terms, chiefly in terms that bind the self to the *kami* for whom reverence must be shown. The idea of a bounded and autonomous individual is foreign to Shinto.

Conclusion

This unit discusses Shinto as a syncretistic tradition that has a long prehistory in the folk religions of Japan. There is no single founder of this tradition and no single “moment” when we can say that the formative tradition took over from folk Shinto. The unit considers the meaning of “Shinto” and the stages in its early development. The unit introduces the two main sacred books of Shinto, and with particular reference to the creation myth from the *Kojiki*, it overviews some basic Shinto teachings. The tradition’s ethical teachings are discussed on the levels of conduct, principles, and foundation. Shinto virtues and vices are considered, along with the tradition’s understanding of “moral self” and “moral community.”

Glossary of terms

Izanagi—male principle in Shinto creation myth

Izanami—female principle in Shinto creation myth

kami—spirits, gods

kami-no-michi—the way of the kami

Kojiki—a Shinto sacred text comprised of three books

makoto—sincerity

miko—female shaman belonging largely to folk Shinto

Nihongi—a Shinto sacred text comprising thirty books

Shinto—the way of the spirits or gods

Additional readings

Kitagawa, Joseph M. *On Understanding Japanese Religion*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987.

Littleton, Scott C. *Shinto: Origins, Rituals, Festivals, Spirits, Sacred Places*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Ludwig, Theodore M. *The Sacred Paths of the East*. Princeton, New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2006.

Nelson, John K. *A Year in the Life of a Shinto Shrine*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996.

Yamamoto, Yunitaka. *Way of the Kami*. Stockton, CA: Tsubaki America, 1987.



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