

Dhiren Pooran

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Shintoism's Controversy

The word Shinto, from Shintoism, literally translates to “the way of kami,” referring to Gods and Spirits. The religion pervasive in most of Japan functions more as a way of life. It is an optimistic faith which finds its virtues in purity, harmony, and respect for nature. In Shintoism, there is no central God and followers instead worship objects and phenomena, such as the Sun, mountains, trees, some animals, etc.

When considering death, Shintoism holds firm to a manner of equality, in that judgement is not passed and everyone simply passes away. Sometimes this forthright approach lands Shintoism in hot water, such as its view on sexual activity which is very open.

In some religions, actions in life determine one's placement after death however Shintoism does not subscribe to a heaven nor a hell. This leniency, though unassuming and virtuous on the outside, can still cause issues in future.

The Yasukuni Shrine, as one of the religion's major points of controversy, has buried within over a thousand Class A, B and C war criminals from World War II. This sparked debate over Shintoism's core beliefs and attitudes towards those deemed evil.

While there is controversy concerning its religious customs and culture, Shintoism still embodies its original philosophy of spiritual universality. Despite recent polemical statements, its forthright practices only reflect an uncensored view on life.

Shintoism's culture is one which promotes optimism and respect for nature. Customs include shrine visitation, purification of followers and offerings to the kami. At its core, the religion functions as a way of life as shrines and rituals are commonplace across the nation.

Controversy arose from Shintoism's open notions which most other religions condemn. As with Christianity, sexual relations outside of marriage are strictly prohibited and treated as sin.

Shintoism practices no such restrictions and judges no one for their experiences.

At one point in history, an ancient Japanese festival, Utagaki, involved celebrating the changing seasons with singing, eating, dancing, and having sexual intercourse; although the festival had been partly banned since 798 AD and fully banned from 1868, it originated from Shinto beliefs.

Though views on what was considered to be profane in Shintoism had been set in an ugly light, the religion itself persisted in Japanese culture. However, morals became a public concern with the advent of the Yasukuni Shrine controversy.

When war criminals are enshrined alongside those who honorably fought and died in battle, it leads one to question the perceptions of Shintoism and those who follow it. Understandably, citizens would treat such a revelation as an injustice, but to understand how this decision came about requires the knowledge of Shintoism's role in World War II.

State Shinto, a religious nationalistic movement, began in 1868 with the Meiji Restoration. Japan began to craft a version of the religion which idealized Japanese citizens and promoted Japanese superiority. They adopted a pseudo-missionary approach reminiscent of Christianity.

In World War II, Japan used a connection in lineage between the then current emperor and Amaterasu (Sun God) to spur on Japanese soldiers in battle. Over many years of its upkeep, the main ideology of Japan was that they were fighting at the behest of the son of Amaterasu (the emperor) and that they, themselves, were descendants of Gods.

Citizens were promised that if one died in the service of the emperor, the Yasukuni Shrine would accept their souls and that the emperor would personally visit them. This shrine was regarded as a great honor for one to die for and served as the final destination for one's soul.

The controversy that surrounds the Yasukuni Shrine began with war criminals being admitted into enshrinement. The reasoning for such a questionable decision was that those war criminals had technically died in service of their emperor and as such, met the requirement for enshrinement. Since Shintoism reverted to its original form from State Shintoism, its traditional values of refusal to pass judgement were also reinstated. Shinto priests simply carried out their duties according to the shrine's purpose.

Michael Pye's, "Religion and conflict in Japan with special reference to Shinto and Yasukuni Shrine," aims to describe Shintoism in its most basic forms, from Traditional Shintoism to State Shintoism in World War II and back to Contemporary Shintoism. This relation to one of Japan's most prominent religions bolsters his main point of religion's influence in conflict. However, he maintains that few aspects of Shintoism are, at their core, detrimental.

He brings the worship of Japanese people, regardless of status, into the argument stating that all Japanese soldiers should be remembered since, "they lost their lives as Japanese in the service of the country," (11). He also makes that point that, "like any other kami they may also, on occasion, be requested to care for the living," (11), giving them a responsibility even after death.

Though not quite an afterlife, Shintoism holds true to the notion of another plane filled only by the spirits of those passed. A core belief is that even after death, you care for the dead and they, in turn, care for you. This shows a rigid connection to one's roots, ensuring that one is never forgotten.

Pye brings about the dilemma of worshipping those who have not only achieved success but failed in the pursuit of it as well as those who have committed war crimes, "Ancestor veneration in Japan is moulded by the concept of descent, which is so typical of the indigenous religion Shinto," (6). This being a core belief of Japanese citizens, he explains how one justifies another's questionable actions.

In Shintoism, those who are unsuccessful in their endeavours can be worshipped by their views and virtues. Pye brings the example of Sugawara Michizane, who was, "unjustly banished for alleged disloyalty," (6), during the Fujiwara Period. Prior to his death, he spent his life composing poetry but spent his life as a spirit causing thunderclaps and general chaos. After the series of events, his title and status were restored and 70 years later, he was revered as the God of calligraphy for his talent in poetry.

In respect to those who have committed war crimes, Pye recounts the famous tale of *the 47 Ronin* who bided their time for over 1 ½ years to avenge their wrongfully indicted lord. "Triumphantly they bore the head of the villain to their master's tomb for report, only themselves to receive the order to commit ritual suicide," (Pye, 7). However, their virtue and dedication are what remain worthy of worship to this day.

Chang Kun-chiang's work, "Neo-Confucian Shinto Thought in Early Tokugawa Zhu Xi Studies: Comparing the Work of Hayashi Razan and Yamazaki Ansai," compares Confucianism with

Shintoism. Though his analysis of their differences, he also tackles the effect of Buddhism on society's perception of contemporary Shintoism as well as various other forms of Shintoism.

Neo-Confucianism found its roots almost a millennium ago in the 11th century. Kun-chiang regards Shintoism as, "the original tradition of Japanese culture," (3) and describes criticizing Buddhism, "to highlight the unorthodoxy of Buddhism, so as to confirm Japan's identity," (3).

Although Buddhism has garnered many followers, the ubiquity of Shintoism is a testament to the importance of its way of life.

Shintoism shares similarities with Hinduism as well in terms of the religion taking on a more saturated role, existing as a way of life. When conflating Shintoism with Hinduism, what stands out is the comparable appreciation of virtue and nature. Hinduism has survived and grown due to its unwavering principles and staying true to one's beliefs, even when regarding its highly controversial caste system; this stability is a notion which Shintoism has put into practice.

Differences arise in Shintoism's rules of morals, where Hinduism uses a karma system, class system and believes in rebirth, Shintoism enforces equality across the board and even in dying maintains an earthly connection.

Kun-chiang describes a great Shinto philosopher's take on their namesake religion as one which, "was to be steadfastly proper and straight in religious spirit," (11), furthering the argument that the religion stays on its own course for its own betterment. The debate over the Yasukuni shrine is not one which can be solved by compromising Shintoism. If priests were to conform to society's qualms with the war criminals, they would undermine, not only their own decision, but the way of life to which Japan subscribes.

This is not to say that Shintoism is without its issues, however one cannot deny the oneness it presents and the open-mindedness it proclaims. Shintoism is a religion that allows one to find meaning in the simple phenomena that surround them, worship nature for its majesty and give life to those who have passed. In a truly unique sense, it abolishes the constraints which other religions preach in favour of life and its necessary discrepancies.

To give worship to those who have committed atrocities and to absolve them are two very dissimilar notions, a line Shintoism treads with caution. The religion denotes humans as inherently good beings who support each other as a community. To denounce an individual, especially in death, would be to blaspheme against the way of kami.

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