

Tracing Shinto in the History of Kami Worship

Editors' Introduction

Mark TEEUWEN and Bernhard SCHEID

STUDIES OF SHINTO in Western languages are few and far between. In this journal, too, articles on Shinto have been rare. Compared to Japanese Buddhism, or Japanese New Religions, Shinto has had little appeal to both scholars and students even in Japan. Yet, few university courses about Japanese culture, history, and religion manage to get around the subject altogether. No doubt, many in teaching positions will recognize the feeling of unease that arises whenever the topic comes up. There is a fundamental uncertainty about central questions relating to Shinto. Is it a relic of ancient nature worship, surviving by some miracle into the modern age? An amorphous repository for Japan's metahistorical cultural subconscious, impenetrable for foreigners? Or is it an outdated invented tradition, cynically created by the Meiji government to aid the building of the Japanese nation state? Even if we limit our view to contemporary society, how is it that most Japanese are involved in some form of shrine practice (at least in the form of *hatsumōde* 初詣), while at the same time "Shinto" seems to mean nothing to them? These and other issues give Shinto an elusive, and, in the minds of many, an outright dubious character. In this special issue on Shinto studies, we have tried to collect a number of essays that may be of some help in "pinning down" this elusive Shinto in different historical periods. Of course, this is possible only if we first succeed in narrowing down the scope of the term. How Shinto may be used as a historiographical term will be the main subject of this brief introduction.

Shinto Studies: The Legacy of Kuroda Toshio

As has been pointed out by a number of authors, the major problem in using Shinto as a focus for research is the fact that the term itself lacks a stable frame of reference. Most commonly, the term is defined

as “Japan’s indigenous religion,” and is taken to refer to everything that has to do with native deities (*kami* 神) or shrines, from imperial ritual to folk religion. Speculation on the nature of Shinto then takes the direction of identifying features shared by all the disparate phenomena collected under this name, often overlain with a traditionalist, nativist, or even nationalist ideology. It is only natural that such a field of study has raised little enthusiasm outside Japan. Indeed, Kuroda Toshio’s criticism of Shinto as a historical category in this sense (KURODA 1981) has been met with wide acclaim, and his views have since formed the departing point of most Western studies of Shinto, including the essays collected in this issue.

Kuroda introduces his argument by focusing on the history of the term itself. He states that until at least the Kamakura period, the word Shinto was used not to refer to a “popular religion” by that name, but more or less as a synonym for *kami*. Moreover, he points out that during the later Heian and Kamakura periods, the worship of these *kami* functioned as a well-integrated constituent of *kenmitsu* 顯密 Buddhism, the orthodox system of exoteric and esoteric Buddhist schools that dominated religious practice throughout the premodern period. The so-called temple-shrine complexes, where *kami* and buddhas were worshiped side by side, were paradigmatic for the religion of that time. In Kuroda’s view, the religious thinking that gave rise to these institutions was not a compromise or a mixture between two opposing religions, but a well-integrated system of religious thought and practice applied to a range of different deities.

Within this system, groups specializing in *kami* worship existed alongside a number of more mainstream Buddhist factions. While these groups concentrated on certain Japanese *kami*, they did not question the Buddhist framework within which these *kami* were to be understood and worshiped. It was among such groups that self-professed forms of Shinto emerged towards the end of the medieval period. In the early-modern period,¹ this newly invented Shinto tradition gained particular favor among anti-Buddhist Confucian scholars, while at the same time, popular *kami* practice remained subsumed within Buddhism. By and large, it was not before the Meiji period that the notion of a non-Buddhist Shinto religion gained general acceptance, and was implemented in practice. It was largely due to repressive Restoration politics that “Shinto achieved for the first time the

¹ We use “ancient period,” “medieval period,” “early-modern period,” and “modern period” as equivalents for the Japanese terms *kodai*, *chūsei*, *kinsei*, and *kindai*. “Ancient” and “classical” roughly refer to the periods up to the 12th century, “medieval” to the time between the 12th and 16th centuries, “early-modern” to the 17th–19th centuries, and “modern” to the time since the Meiji Restoration in 1868.

status of an independent religion, distorted though it was" (KURODA 1981, p. 19). By gaining independence from Buddhism, however, Shinto was cut off from high-level religious philosophy, and as a result it "declined to the state of a religion that disavowed being a religion" (KURODA 1981, p. 19).

In this way Kuroda denies the existence of Shinto as a religious system, in effect during any period of Japanese history, and exposes the notion of Shinto as Japan's unbroken indigenous religion as a theological fabrication. At this point it is essential to specify that Kuroda does not, of course, maintain that kami cults or shrine worship are recent inventions. Far from denying the prominence of kami and shrines, Kuroda ascribes to them a central role within the hegemonic *kenmitsu* system, as a way to localize Buddhist power in the Japanese territory and state (KURODA 1996, pp. 374–75). What Kuroda rejects is the existence of Shinto as an autonomous system parallel to *kenmitsu* Buddhism.

Kuroda's views have had a liberating effect on the study of kami traditions. By dismissing Shinto as a historical category, Kuroda has made it possible to focus on aspects of kami cults that had been excluded from the former master narrative of Shinto. By stripping away the myth of a single, independent Shinto tradition, his work has led to an emphasis on aspects of discontinuity in kami worship, both diachronically, between various periods of Japanese history, and synchronically, between center and periphery, between different locations and social contexts. On the other hand, Kuroda's characterization of Japanese medieval culture as dominated by *kenmitsu* Buddhism also poses a new problem. Why is it that in texts from the latter half of the medieval period, "Shinto" suddenly emerges as a ritual and soteriological category contrasted to, and even competing with Buddhism?

Kuroda, of course, recognized this problem. He points out repeatedly that the *kenmitsu* system incorporated not only Buddhist, but also Confucian, Yin-Yang, Taoist, and kami elements, and points to this fact as a basic condition for the later evolution of non-Buddhist schools of Confucianism, Yin-Yang, and Shinto in Japan. Concerning the early history of Shinto, Kuroda wrote a number of articles on Ise 伊勢 or Watarai 度会 Shinto, a tradition that emerged in the Kamakura period and is generally regarded as the first school of Shinto thought (KURODA 1994–95, vol. 4). Kuroda notes that in the writings of this school "there was a neutralization of Buddhist vocabulary and an embellishment with expressions from Confucianism, Taoism, and the five-agent theory" (KURODA 1996, pp. 364–65); but he also points out that despite this unusual choice of terminology, Ise Shinto was firmly based on ideas of original enlightenment (*hongaku* 本覚) typical of the

wider *kenmitsu* system. Thus he concludes that “Ise Shinto arose and developed as a new form of exo-esotericism, and not as the earliest and most explicit form of ‘de-Buddhistization’ in medieval Japan” (KURODA 1996, p. 371). Kuroda, then, leaves us with the understanding that the explicitly non-Buddhist Shinto that we know from early modern and modern times had yet to develop in the Kamakura period, and that Shinto in this sense constituted a radical break with the *kenmitsu*-type Shinto schools of the medieval period.

This raises a number of questions that Kuroda, as a specialist of medieval history with only a limited interest in Shinto, has left for others to pursue. First, the emergence of Shinto as an alternative to Buddhism remains a fascinating phenomenon that needs to be studied in much more detail. Why and how did shrines and shrine priests survive, even when subsumed for centuries in shrine-temple complexes run by Buddhist monks? Were there certain limitations to the amalgamation of kami cults and Buddhism, both institutionally and ritually, that allowed kami cults to be disentangled from amalgamated institutions and ritual systems in due course? Who was it that did the disentangling, and why, and what determined the success of such attempts? To what degree did kami worship constitute a separate ritual category in classical and medieval times, and how did this category relate to the later Shinto?

Second, Shinto, when it emerged, never dominated contemporary discourse in the way *kenmitsu* Buddhism did in the late-classical and medieval periods. Even in the early-modern period, when Shinto for the first time found wide recognition as a ritual category of its own, its context was defined religiously and intellectually by Buddhism and Confucianism. Similarly, the foundations for the “state Shinto” of the Meiji period were laid first and foremost by Buddhist religious leaders and Confucian-minded bureaucrats, and it functioned within a society that can in no way be described as Shintoist in orientation. When studying Shinto, then, the question of Shinto’s position in relation to the dominant religious and intellectual discourses of the time is always essential. What did Shinto mean in a Buddhist, Confucian, or in a modern context?

Shinto and Kami Worship

These questions lead us back to the problem of using Shinto as a historiographical term. Clearly, using Shinto to refer to a kami-based indigenous religion with an unbroken history in Japan is neither historically accurate nor historiographically helpful. Rather than terming all practices and beliefs around kami “Shinto,” we believe it is essential to distinguish between kami worship on the one hand, and Shinto on

the other. We propose to set Shinto aside as a collective term for the various attempts made in different historical periods to unify kami practices and beliefs, and to construct a distinct kami realm, parallel to and clearly distinguished from Buddhism.

In making this choice, we are in fact following established usage as practiced (albeit implicitly) in most Japanese academic writing. Here "Shinto" is used almost exclusively in theological contexts, while historians writing on kami and shrines prefer more neutral terms, such as "kami worship" (*jingi sūhai* 神祇崇拜) or "shrine rituals" (*jinja saishi* 神社祭祀). Using Shinto in the sense proposed here is also consistent with the history of the term in the Japanese sources, as already pointed out by Kuroda. The term *shintō* 神道 developed from a simple word meaning "(the realm of) the kami" into a more sophisticated concept meaning "the kami Way" in the course of the medieval period, and evolved into an autonomous ritual system from there. Distinguishing between kami cults on the one hand, and Shinto on the other, makes it possible to view Shinto as a series of attempts at imposing a unifying framework upon disparate kami cults, or at creating a distinct religious tradition by transforming local kami cults into something bigger.

In such a perspective, the dynamic between Shinto as a unifying force and individual kami cults emerges as a central topic for Shinto studies. In actual practice, the particularistic, centrifugal pantheon of the kami has always stood in opposition to all centralizing conceptions, be they Buddhist or Shinto. This should be acknowledged as a peculiar religious phenomenon. The word "kami" has the advantage of being a plural; it does not imply that all kami are heading the same way. The term "Shinto," however—when understood as a singular "kami Way"—by definition suggests an integrated religion, along the lines of, say, Buddhism or Christianity, and thus goads us into ignoring the inherent diversity of Japanese kami worship. Therefore we regard it as essential to maintain a terminological distinction between the centrifugal and centripetal forces in the history of Japanese kami worship, and to limit the term Shinto to the latter only.

In this more specific sense, we may choose to use the term Shinto either in a historically correct manner, or in an analytical manner. In other words, we can either reserve the term for those traditions that referred to themselves as Shinto, or apply it, retrospectively, also to earlier attempts at creating a coherent ritual system out of scattered kami cults. Depending on what we choose at this juncture, our view of Shinto history will be radically different. If we employ the term Shinto in a way that is consistent with the sources, Shinto history began in the fourteenth century. If we define the term analytically, it can be argued that the nationwide system of ritual offerings to kami, instituted as

part of the Ritsuryō system and epitomized in the *Engi shiki* 延喜式 (“Procedures of the Engi Era,” 927), was a benchmark in the history of Shinto. Both alternatives have their pros and cons. Limiting Shinto to those traditions that identified themselves as such helps to bring out the contrast between these later traditions and the classical *jingi* 神祇 system, as we may term the world of the *Engi shiki* in a more historically correct manner. On the other hand, expanding the scope of the term Shinto to include the classical *jingi* system makes it easier to see the continuity between the two, and explains the great importance attached to the *Engi shiki* in most later Shinto schools.

As will be clear from this introduction, we ourselves lean towards the first of these two positions. The main point here, however, is that whether one chooses a source-based definition of Shinto and traces its origins to the fourteenth century, or prefers an analytical one that includes the *jingi* system, Shinto will present itself as a historical reality, and not as a suprahistorical essence unaffected by history. Only when it is “pinned down” in this way does Shinto emerge as a series of historical creations that can become the subject of historical study.

Shinto Addressed in the Essays of this Volume

THE ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL PERIODS

The above-mentioned *jingi* system is the subject of Allan GRAPARD’s essay in this issue. Grapard describes how a succession of “procedures” (*shiki* 式) in the early Heian period “hijacked” local kami cults by transforming them into state-sponsored rites, and gives an overview of various attempts by Japanese scholars to localize the concerns that guided the court’s treatment of different kami shrines. He characterizes the ritual system prescribed in these *shiki* as a vast organization based on Chinese legal parameters, but without any kind of overarching “theological” content; rather, the *shiki* present us with a new ritual set of prescriptions that reflect major social regroupings. Grapard addresses the question of whether this ritual system should be termed Shinto, and points out that such a move carries with it the danger of designating Buddhist aspects of the *jingi* system as peripheral to its (posited) “native” essence.

Here, Grapard draws our attention to a major difference between the *jingi* system of the *Engi shiki* and the “Shinto” that emerged in the form of later Shinto schools. While the former pertained exclusively to ritual, the latter also spelled out a doctrinal framework within which the rituals were to be understood. This development must be

seen in the light of the privatization of state ritual that was such a central feature of Japanese religious history from the later Heian period onwards. Through its doctrines, the Shinto schools transformed the state rituals of the *jingi* system into a vehicle for personal salvation. This transformation is explored in Mark TEEUWEN's essay.

Teeuwen argues that the word Shinto originated in the medieval period as a new reading imposed on an earlier word *jindō* 神道 (written with the same characters), which was a Buddhist term meaning "the realm of (non-Buddhist) deities." This Buddhist word can be traced back to the *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀, and ultimately to Chinese sources such as the *Gaosengzhuan* 高僧傳; in the later Heian period it functioned as a Buddhist technical term for the kami as local hypostases of Buddhist figures. *Shintō* was created out of this *jindō* when the word was reinterpreted on the basis of a passage from the *Book of Changes*, where a homonym of the Buddhist term occurs in the meaning "the divine Way." This new meaning was tentatively applied to *jindō* first in the late twelfth century.

This reinterpretation opened the way for speculation on the realm of the kami as an agent in the cosmogony, and therefore as something older, purer, and more fundamental than the realm of the buddhas. The new reading *shintō* (without the "turbid" voicing) was introduced as a token of the primeval purity of the kami realm in this sense, probably at some time in the fourteenth century. The origin of the neologism *shintō*, then, should be seen in the context of the "neutralization of Buddhist vocabulary and an embellishment with expressions from Confucianism, Taoism, and the five-agent theory" in the medieval period, as noted by Kuroda (see above).

We have already seen that this early medieval Shinto discourse was not an attempt to disentangle the kami from Kuroda's overarching Buddhist episteme, but rather conceived of itself as a specialization within the overarching *kenmitsu* framework. In the same manner that some specialized in Amida, or Fudō Myōō, or the *Lotus Sutra*, others chose the kami as their key to the powers of enlightenment. Concrete examples of doctrines and rituals that circulated among such specialists are described in Fabio RAMBELLI's essay. Rambelli sketches a widening array of esoteric initiations where imperial and kami symbols have replaced Buddhist ones, in what is best described as a "practical development of *honji suijaku* 本地垂迹 discourse."² These traditions have traditionally been dismissed as syncretic aberrations from "pure" Buddhist or Shinto orthodoxy, and they have therefore been little studied even

² That is, the doctrine that identifies kami as hypostases (*suijaku*) of Buddhist divinities (*honji*), as well as practices based on this understanding of the kami.

by specialists of Buddhism and Shinto. However, it was within the context of esoteric *shintō kanjō* 神道灌頂 (“kami initiations”) that the reading *shintō* was first devised, and that the first Shinto lineages took concrete shape.

Moreover, Rambelli points out that while these traditions were of medieval origin, and in many senses of a premodern nature, they were most successful in the early-modern period, and reached their largest diffusion in the early nineteenth century. This fact forces us to reconsider the established image of Edo-period Shinto as a religion moving away from Buddhism. Also, it places nineteenth-century developments such as the separation of kami and Buddhas (addressed in Sarah THAL’s essay in this issue) and the emergence of Shinto sects (discussed by INOUE Nobutaka) in a new light.

THE EARLY-MODERN AND MODERN PERIODS

The remaining essays sketch developments of Shinto after the term had gained wide acceptance as a designation for an autonomous religious tradition. The first two reflect the influence of Yoshida 吉田 Shinto in the Edo period. The Yoshida priests were the first lineage that consistently used the word Shinto as a self-designation for their own religious system, and as such the creation of Yoshida Shinto in the late fifteenth century formed a new departure in the history of Shinto. At the same time, however, Yoshida Shinto also served as a channel that streamlined the Shinto paradigm developed by medieval kami theologians, and became a starting point for the diffusion of these ideas on a much larger scale in the Edo period.

Bernhard SCHEID’s article discusses the school of Yoshikawa 吉川 Shinto as an example of the coalition between Shinto and Neo-Confucianism typical of the seventeenth century. Scheid points out the medieval predecessors of this coalition and argues that the theological ideas of Yoshikawa Shinto were much more indebted to Yoshida Shinto than is generally assumed. The main difference, in his view, is that Yoshikawa Shinto construed a moral discourse where Yoshida Shinto offered a value system based on the notion of purity, and that Yoshikawa Shinto displayed a doctrinal bias that contrasts with Yoshida Shinto’s ritual bias. Scheid backs up his conclusions by going into the details of the creation of Yoshikawa Shinto, which was actually meant as a continuation of Yoshida Shinto rather than as a new religious movement. The differences between orthodox Yoshida Shinto and Yoshikawa Shinto are explained as (not entirely successful) attempts by the latter to adapt Shinto to the needs of the shogunal government system.

A central aspect of the institutional strength of Yoshida Shinto is demonstrated in Hiromi MAEDA’s essay, which at the same time pro-

vides fascinating insights into the conditions of kami shrines and kami worship on the grass-roots level in the mid-Edo period. Maeda shows how the Yoshida exploited the need of many newly-created village shrines for legal and religious legitimation by issuing pseudo-court ranks to shrines, imitating an ancient tradition that was initially a prerogative of the Tennō (as is mentioned also in Grapard's essay). While acquiring even a modest traditional court rank would have been out of the question for an ordinary village shrine, the Yoshida offered the top First Rank for an affordable price—even if it was still a heavy burden for a small village. Through statistical analysis as well as a detailed examination of specific examples, Maeda reveals that the vast majority of village shrines—at least in the Kantō region—lacked even such common distinctive marks as a torii. Such shrines were not run by trained Shinto priests, but either by the villagers themselves or, more commonly, by Buddhist monks. Since the Yoshida accepted such general practice, the purpose of their shrine ranking was obviously first and foremost economic, and if it shaped general ideas of kami worship according to their own theology, this was only as a side effect. From the perspective of institutional history, Maeda's article therefore confirms Rambelli's considerations on the nature of popular kami worship in the early-modern period.

Mark McNALLY's essay takes us back to the avant-garde of Shinto intellectual history. In an in-depth analysis of the so-called *sandaikō* 三大考 debate, McNally singles out a turning point in the development of National Learning (*kokugaku* 国学), a movement often described as the wellspring of quasi-religious nationalism in modern Japan. According to McNally, however, such a characterization does not apply to early *kokugaku*, as embodied by its most prominent eighteenth-century representative, Motoori Norinaga 本居宣長 (1730–1801). Norinaga strictly confined himself to historical issues and to the methodology of *kōshōgaku* 考証学 (“evidential learning”), a kind of philological analysis of ancient texts. Through his analysis of the *sandaikō* debate McNally shows how Norinaga's methodological purism was challenged by Hirata Atsutane 平田篤胤 (1776–1843) in the early nineteenth century, some ten years after Norinaga's death. Atsutane spearheaded the reintroduction of a metaphysical, speculative exegesis of the Japanese classical texts. Combining ideas about the origin of the universe, the land of Japan, and the destiny of the individual soul, he opened the way for *kokugaku* to develop into a politico-religious ideology. Atsutane's religious form of *kokugaku* was to play a prominent role in the doctrines of Shinto sects in the Meiji period, as described by Inoue.

The concept of Shinto underwent yet another major transformation in the early years of Meiji, when the Restoration government took

drastic measures to separate kami from Buddha worship, and to elevate Shinto to the status of a national religion supporting imperial rule. Aspects of the Meiji transformation of Shinto are addressed in the last two essays of this volume. Sarah THAL deals with the “strategies of survival” employed by religious specialists under the conditions imposed by Meiji religious policy, particularly those who were engaged in former combinatory religious institutions at sites such as Gion/Yasaka in Kyoto, Konpira/Kotohira in Shikoku, and others. With surprising ease, the functionaries of these famous religious sites transferred first their religious affiliations from Buddhism to Shinto, and then changed the names and foundation legends of their sites, and even the identities of their gods. In contrast to received interpretations, Thal does not describe such changes as a “liberation” of original Shinto shrines from Buddhism. Rather, these institutions followed a pattern of multiple identities that had been established much earlier, and that enabled priests to adapt the religious identity of their temple/shrine to changing circumstances with relative ease. What was new after 1868, and probably unexpected to most religious functionaries, was that the “adoption of a kami identity now meant adhering to the imperial gods alone.” Yet, the traditional identities of many sites were preserved to a certain degree through ritual practice. Due to a drastic reduction of economic resources (shrines and temples were stripped of their lands in the land reforms of 1871), the new “shrines” relied heavily on what Thal calls *kitō* 祈禱-style practices, i.e., rituals for practical, this-worldly benefits. These were less controlled by the central government and followed by and large the established patterns of combined “Shinto-Buddhist” rituals.

Another outcome of the religious policies of the Meiji government was the establishment of “sect Shinto” as a new category of Shinto. In his essay on the formation of sect Shinto, INOUE Nobutaka points out that sect Shinto was separated from shrine Shinto as a result of the failure of the Restoration government’s early attempts at creating a Shinto-based national religion. As “non-governmental organizations” *avant la lettre*, the Shinto sects took over the task of extending “religious education” to the people after the government program known in English as the Great Promulgation Campaign had failed. As such, the Shinto sects filled the gap that opened up when “shrine Shinto” was separated from religion and defined as a body of state ritual.

At the same time, however, Inoue also points out that sect Shinto was merely organized, and not created, by the Meiji government. The sects recognized as sect Shinto incorporated many grass-roots groups that had formed spontaneously as a result of social change in modernizing Japan. Inoue argues that in explaining the formation of sect

Shinto, we need to focus on the interplay between spontaneous developments in religious organization on a popular level on the one hand, and the influence of Meiji religious policy on the other.

Concluding Remarks

What picture of Shinto history emerges from the essays collected here? Or, more specifically, what can we say about the development of the concept of Shinto itself on the basis of these essays?

With Grapard, we argue that one should be careful when applying the term “Shinto” to the *jingi* system (our term) presided over by the Jingikan in the ancient period, for the simple reason that the word *shintō* (in contrast to *jingi* and *jindō*) did not exist at this time. Rather than a form of Shinto, the *jingi* system was the canvas onto which Shinto was to be drawn in the medieval period. Shinto, then, emerged first in the form of esoteric Buddhist lineages specializing in kami worship. These lineages put forward Shinto (a word they invented) as the supreme focus for esoteric or *hongaku*-type practice, and stressed its superiority over exoteric Buddhism (Teeuwen and Rambelli).

This line of argument was developed further by Yoshida Kanetomo 吉田兼俱 (1435–1511), the founder of Yoshida Shinto, who defined Shinto as not only non-exoteric, but non-Buddhist. In this manner, he for the first time posited the existence of a non-Buddhist Shinto tradition unbroken since the dawn of time. Equally important is the fact that he succeeded in reviving the notion that kami worship should be conducted under the control of the Jingikan (and in establishing that this office was to be led by the Yoshida house). At this point, Shinto became the designation not only of a non-Buddhist ritual tradition, but also of a national institution of kami ritual under the control of the imperial court.

This notion was given concrete shape through the appointment of the Yoshida (in parallel with the Shirakawa 白川 house) as court overseers of shrine priests, and by their policy of extending at least nominal control over village shrines (Maeda). Here, Shinto for the first time acquired its typical modern structure of a tradition that straddles both imperial and popular kami worship. In contrast to the classical *jingi* system, where a carefully selected list of hand-picked shrines were granted the favor of imperial worship, “Shinto” was now understood to cover all shrine practice. This meant that court ritual became the model for all kami worship (in theory, at least), and it laid the foundation for the idea that emperor and people are united through their shared worship of the kami.

Shinto moreover took on the new meaning of a moral system in the

seventeenth century, a development that was most typical for the temporary coalition of Confucianism and Shinto in the Edo period (Scheid). Nevertheless, Shinto never developed a consistent moral code comparable to Confucianism, Buddhism or, for that matter, Christianity. This may be partly due to the impact of *kokugaku* thinkers on Shinto during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Rather than pursuing moral issues, *kokugaku* envisioned a strict and methodical purgation of native religious traditions from all foreign influences, placing national solidarity over universal ethical principles (McNally). These ideas were given concrete institutional form during the Meiji period, when an attempt was made to create a “pure” Shinto that could serve as the national religion of the new (“restored”) imperial state. This policy has had a lasting impact on the concept of Shinto up to the present time. Unwittingly, it has had the effect of widening the gap between theories of what Shinto ought to be and living religious practice.³

Religious centers adapted themselves to the new notion of Shinto and thus created what was to become known as “shrine Shinto,” while retaining the eclectic ritualism typical of premodern kami worship (Thal). In contrast to these institutions, new religious groups of various backgrounds were gathered under the label of “sect Shinto.” These groups were supposed to take over the national agenda of religious education (Inoue), but never succeeded in doing so on a comprehensive national scale. At the same time, Shinto was denied any religious character at all in order to be fitted into the educational scheme of nationalist propaganda.

Of course, Shinto’s history of metamorphoses did not end here. After WWII, more than one generation of Shintoists have sought to give new meaning to kami worship by redefining Shinto. We may be witnessing yet another radical shift in the term’s meaning in the recently popular definition of Shinto as an ecological religion, or as a form of polytheistic nature worship of the same type as the religions of various indigenous peoples around the globe.

The only consistent feature of all these “Shintos” is that they all seek to establish a conceptual framework imposing some form of control over actual kami worship. In our view, the history of Shinto is therefore a history of attempts at controlling kami worship by theological and discursive means. Since the medieval period, priests, intellectuals, and politicians have produced and reproduced a variety of discursive devices to this end in response to changing circumstances,

³ On this point, see BREEN and TEEUWEN 2000, ch. 1, “Introduction: Shinto past and present.”

but always in pursuit of a unifying conception. The study of Shinto, then, must take the form of a study of these conceptual devices, their practical implications, and their relationship with historical change. In this sense Shinto studies differ from the study of kami worship, a term that denotes a concrete body of practice, not an abstract concept. Here, then, we may have hit upon a timely subject for another special issue of this journal.

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