

Shinto and Modern North American Non-Christian Belief

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All humans as they evolved through time, watched miracles occurring all around them - acts performed by powers greater than themselves. The sun rising and setting, the change of the seasons, storms, earthquakes, volcanoes. No culture is without beliefs of how the universe (however that is conceived) came into existence and how it works. Thus religion¹ develops. What is striking is the degree of similarity that exists between religions that have no traceable connection. Two such religions are Shinto, the traditional faith of the Japanese, and Wicca, a non-traditional western faith currently gaining prominence in North America.

Origins:

Shinto's origins are lost in the antiquity of the Japanese people. It is evident in the earliest records of Japan and maintains a hold over the Japanese people today. As long as the Japanese have existed, so has Shinto in some form or another (for it would be foolish to say Shinto today is the same as Shinto 2000 years ago)/ "Shinto" itself literally means "way of the kami", written with the two characters, 神 ("shin" - kami) and 道 ("to" - way).

Wicca's origins are even more obscure since it was never supported by a governing body, as was the case with Shinto. As well, for over a millennium it has been "underground" because of Christian prosecution; even today it is a relatively reclusive and little known religion. Despite these hindrances, Wicca finds its origins in the pre-Christian folk traditions of Western Europe, particularly in the North West, Celtic traditions. The word "wicca" is Anglo-Saxon in origin and means "to bend or to shape". The practitioners of Wicca are "Witches" (male and female) and are certainly related to those persecuted in Europe and North America, although they are neither the

¹Religion, for the purpose of this paper, will be "One's consciousness of being in a special relationship with the Divine," - a definition offered by Genchi Kato in his book, A Study of Shinto.

stereotypical Halloween “witch”, nor the Christian “witch” that worships Satan. Many however, prefer “Wiccan” to “Witch” because it lacks the cultural bias historically placed on “Witch”.

Focuses and Goals of Worship:

Kami are the object of worship in Shinto. “Kami” is essentially an honourific for spirits and implies a sense of adoration for their virtues and authority. These spirits are present in all things, qualities, and phenomena. For example there are kami that represent the qualities of growth and fertility, natural phenomena like thunder and wind, natural objects such as rocks, mountains, rivers, and the sun, and animals and ancestral spirits. There are also guardian kami that protect areas of land and their residents, persons in certain occupations, or the residents of a household. Kami are not necessarily greater than man, there are those that are pitiable and weak but are nonetheless considered kami. Kami-worship, the, can be said to be a form of animism, the spirits of which are conceived to have nobility and authority and who all function harmoniously, in cooperation with each other.

The goal of the practitioner of Shinto is to maintain a rapport with the kami in order to obtain divine protection, guidance and to remove negativity; “to live life in communion and accord with the mind of the kami.”² The rites of Shinto are a celebration of life; both the everyday life and the major events in an individual’s existence.

The major focus of Wiccan worship is simply the “Goddess”. although the concept of the Goddess is anything but simple. The Goddess represents and is present in everything that exists. “Goddess” is somewhat of a misnomer since She in an infinite number of entities, male, female, or otherwise. In some respects She is a sentient and tangible entity, and in some respects She is only

²page 50: Shinto The Kami Way by Sokyō Ono

the life energy that is imbued into the planet and exists in all things, connecting them together. So from this perspective, it seems Wicca might be a monotheistic religion. However, this too would be misleading for from another valid perspective, there is a concept of God and Goddess that symbolizes the dualism of the universe evident in male / female, positive / negative, sun / earth, life / death, or yin / yang. From this perspective it appears that Wicca is dualtheistic, however, this is not sufficient either. The Goddess, as a whole can be seen as three stages of development, the Maiden, the Mother, and the Crone. These stages are evident in everything; from life, to the changes of the season. As well, there exist an infinite number of spirits that include animistic spirits similar to the kami, the dead, guardian spirits, and the gods and goddesses of all religions. They all have individual personalities, traits, and abilities, and yet are still all only facets of the Goddess. All this seems very contradictory and paradoxical, but Wiccans tend to embrace paradox and have no inherent difficulty in accepting the validity of two contradictory ideas. The focus of worship, then, is the Goddess in anyone of Her forms depending on what is most prevalent for a certain ritual, in a certain environment, or to attain a certain goal.

The goals of Wiccans are very similar to those in Shinto; to attain a communion with divinity and to gain protection and guidance and to promote the positive in life. The major rites of Wicca are deeply tied to the change of the season and the “Turning of the Wheel of the Year,” and the celebration of life and death.³ Everyday life is celebrated in Wicca as it is in Shinto and in a way, the everyday activities of life like cleaning, preparing food and eating, and even defecating are all considered “rituals” in celebration of life and the Goddess.

³For Wiccans, life and death are not considered different; they are different aspects of the same thing and Wiccans emphasize cycles of life, death, and rebirth that are apparent in the change of the seasons and the harvest etc.

Structure:

Shinto today is a much more structured than Wicca in many ways. Firstly, Shinto is and has always been intricately interwoven in the government of the Japanese. The most obvious example of this is the supposed direct descendancy of the first Emperor of Japan from the sun goddess, Amaterasu-Omikami. Obviously, because of Shinto's involvement in Japanese government, Shinto has never persecuted in the same ways as Wicca and has been allowed to be institutionalized in many ways. Today, Shinto exists in many forms:

- 1) Popular Shinto: This is the least tangible form of Shinto and exists through ways of life and customs that have survived from primitive times and are preserved in unorganized folkways.
- 2) Domestic Shinto: This refers to the type of Shinto practiced at home with home altars and private shrines.
- 3) Sectarian Shinto: This type of Shinto exists as individual, independent religious bodies that were originally placed under the supervision of a government office by the Meiji government.
- 4) Imperial Household Shinto: This type of Shinto is exclusively practiced by the Imperial Family.
- 5) Shrine Shinto: This is the oldest and most prevalent type of Shinto. It involves visiting shrines in order to worship kami.

Wicca has the most in common with Popular and Domestic Shinto, with regards to organization (mainly due to its very different political history). Wicca has very little formal organization, although there are some "churches"⁴ (such as the "Covenant of the Goddess,") that have received official government recognition and can perform legal marriages etc. Wicca's following is still fairly small and focused in (but certainly not restricted to) urban centers. There are

⁴"Church", here, referring to a political body as opposed to a physical structure.

also certain traditions that are becoming more prominent, perhaps the fore-runners to sects. Two of the most prominent are Gardnerian, based on the writing of Gerald Gardner, and Dianic, a tradition that focuses more on the female aspects of Wicca. However, Wicca is inherently creative in a way that limits this sort of classification; practitioners are encouraged to write their own rituals and find meaning in their own symbols.

Wicca is typically practiced in one of three ways: 1) solitarily 2) in a "Circle" or 3) in a "Coven". All Wiccans practice some form of Wicca privately (Solitary Wicca) for Wicca, like Shinto becomes more than just a system of belief, but a way of life and interaction and perception. A Circle is a loosely knit group that perform rituals together either regularly or occasionally or even only once. Most Wiccans have been part of a Circle at some time or another. There are no particular ties other than common belief and the desire to celebrate a festival or occasion with fellow Wiccans. The size of a Circle can vary from two to several dozen and will constantly fluctuate. A Coven on the other hand is a very tight-knit group of people. They hold more similar beliefs, perform regular rituals together, and generally provide a close support group for each other. They are necessarily smaller than Circles, the upper limit generally accepted as about thirteen. There are no restriction on one's belonging to Covens and Circles although it is not common to belong to more than one Coven at a time because of the high level of commitment required.

Scriptures and Leadership:

Neither Wicca nor Shinto have any dogmatic texts such as the Bible, the Buddhist Sutras, or the Koran; nor do they have founders such as Jesus, Gautama, or Mohammed. They are very much faiths of the people; individuals are in direct contact with divinity and can experience it themselves. Both are very much integrated into the everyday lives of its followers and their perceptions of the world.

Shinto does make use of many historical texts such as the *Nihon Shoki* and the *Kojiki*, the earliest texts documenting Japan, for they provide a great deal of information about ancient Shinto beliefs and mythology. However, they are not treated in the same way as, say, the Bible; they are not the direct words of the kami. The same is true of Wicca. There exists a substantial body of writing on the religion, but none of it is dogmatic.

Priests serve the Shinto shrines, their main purpose conducting ceremonies, rituals, and festivals. They are required to study through one of a variety of institutions that includes the Kokugakuin University and the Association of Shinto Shrines. Each shrine is in the charge of a chief priest⁵ and in larger shrines there may be a series of other priests of varying rank. At the “Grand Shrine of Ise” (whose principle deity is the Sun Goddess) there is also a head priestess and since postwar times, provisions have been made for female leaders of any shrine.

Wicca has a role for priests and priestesses but they are slightly different than in Shinto. The priest or priestess (or both) conduct the rituals just like in Shinto, but the position is more like a role and the person fulfilling it often changes, allowing more people in the group the opportunity to lead. They are not considered of necessarily higher rank or ability; they are simply the guide that orchestrates a ritual. There is no formal training involved, nor is the position by any means full time. Of course a prospective priest / priestess would have to gain a certain degree of experience and knowledge, their ability being judged by their fellow practitioners.

The difference in these roles, however, are superficial and related more to the religions’ histories of political support, than an actual theological difference. This is even more evident when considering smaller, more local Shinto shrines that do not employ a full time priest. Important

⁵Although there exist relatively unimportant shrines that are often left unattended, only being directed by a priest on special occasions and holidays.

ceremonies are lead by locals that are not full-time priests, or by visiting priests. Other worship os left to individuals and small groups of individuals.

Places of Worship:

Today, for the major portion of Shinto, the place of worship is a shrine. A shrine provides a dwelling for one or more kami and is a place where they can be worshiped and served. A shrine in its simplest form consists of an inner sanctum, in which is house the sacred symbol that represents a kami, and space outside for offerings.

Wiccans do not have permanent places of worship. Instead they ritually create “Sacred Space” by “casting a circle” at the beginning of a ritual which can be held anywhere from a forest grove, to someone’s livingroom. “Casting a Circle” involves the projection of a sphere of energy around the area that is believed to create an area that is “between the worlds”, neither in the normal physical world nor in the world of the spirits. This tradition has the obvious benefit of being mobile and having no permanent or overt trappings of religion that would be necessary for those trying to maintain secrecy. Today, as with Shinto, many people have permanent home alters on which offerings or objects of significance can be placed, however a circle must still be case before rituals are performed before it.

This appears, on the surface, to be a large difference between Shinto and Wicca, however, I don’t believe that they are as inherently different as it seems. Originally, rites for the kami were performed at any significant place, one in which the kami was manifested or apparent. Shrines, too, were not randomly places; their locations had significance. As well, a shrine is not a sacred place unless the symbol that is housed in the inner sanctum is present. This all implies that it is not the shrine itself that is sacred, but that it must be imbued with sacredness by another source, similar to

“sacred space” in Wicca. Shrines became a necessity because of the large following, something Wicca has yet to attain.

Ritual Structure:

The structure of rituals in Wicca and Shinto are strikingly similar, even if their content may differ. In Shinto, there are four basic elements to worship. The first is Purification, or the removal of all pollution, evil, and negativity. This is accomplished through the use of water in either bathing or symbolically rinsing one’s mouth and hands. Formal purification is also performed by the priest of a shrine using a special wand covered in paper streamers and a few strands of flax. Sometimes this also involves the sprinkling of salt or salt water. Purification of shrines is accomplished through cleaning and sweeping and the hanging of purification symbols like bamboo, sprigs of sakaki⁶, and rice-straw ropes with paper and flax pendants.

Second is the Offering. Offerings are the minimal ritual requirements for the kami and they are used to maintain a good standing with the kami, so ideally, they are performed daily. There are four types of offering normally presented: money (used to maintain the shrine), drink (normally water or sake placed at the altar), food (in many forms), and material offerings (including paper, silk, jewels, or weapons).

The third element of Shinto ritual is Prayer. Originally, prayers were written by the priests in any manner that they deemed appropriate and except for during the Meiji Era, when they were standardized, the same tradition continues today (although the standardized prayers are still commonly used). Prayers generally begin with praise for the kami; mention the origin or history of

⁶Sakaki is a sacred tree that often figures in Shinto.

the particular rite or festival being observed; express thanks; report to or petition the kami as may be appropriate; detail the offerings being presented; and add parting words of respect and awe.

The final element is a Sacred Feast. At the end of the ceremony the participants formally drink a sip of rice wine in order to “eat together with the kami”. In shrine festivals, often the priests and their guests assemble for a relaxing meal.

A Wiccan ritual, too, begins with purification and in a very similar manner to Shinto. Purification of the participants can be in many forms but almost all involve the use of water and / or salt, either sprinkled, tasted, meditated upon or washed in. Following this purification is the purification of the space in which the ritual is to take place. It is often accomplished by the symbolic sweeping of the area with a broom. The casting of the circle occurs next. This is accomplished by formally recognizing the four directions of the circle, North, South, East, and West and their corresponding elements of Earth, Fire, Air, and Water and by inviting the God and Goddess to the ritual along with any other particular deities that are to be recognized.

The body of the ritual follows and is roughly equivalent in purpose to the Prayer element of Shinto. The reason for celebration is described along with the history of the ritual and the meaning of the symbols if appropriate. This is followed by the making of offerings, dancing, singing, meditating, or any other activity deemed appropriate. Then those with specific goals or desires in mind ask for cooperation and aid to achieve those ends. The role of the offering plays a much smaller role in Wicca than in Shinto. It is more of a sharing between the deities and the practitioners than an offering to please the deity. The absence of offerings does not antagonize deities. The offerings that are made are similar to those in Shinto with the exception of money.

The participants of the ritual then partake of a ritual feast which involves the eating of a piece of fruit, biscuit, or cake (depending on the ritual) and the drinking of juice, water, or wine. The

circle is closed by acknowledging and thanking the God and Goddess, the elements, and any others deities that were present and releasing the energy that was built inside the circle by the ritual so that it could move out into the world and affect the changes instructed by the ritual. Feasting and socializing continue for as long as is desired.

Spiritual and Social Characteristics:

Both Shinto and Wicca are intimately tied to nature as a source of spirituality. No amount of artificial, man-made beauty can compare to that found in nature and so both religions revere nature as sacred.

Socially both religions are based upon society. They emphasize that people are inherently social creatures and are dependant upon and connected to all living things, especially other people. In neither religion is there room for egotism - all people are equal and must play their roles to create a harmonious society. All people are worthy of respect and the good of the society is emphasized. This is not to say that there is a lack of individual rights in either religion; quite the contrary. Both emphasize that harmonious society comes from the mutual respect of individual rights.

Shinto is not taught to the public in schools or even in the shrines - Shinto tradition passed on through everyday life. Similarly, Wicca is really only taught through books and on a one to one basis. Although there are some "Fam Trads" (Wiccans who were raised with Wicca), most Wiccans officially become practitioners in early adulthood. Even so, seldom is Wicca a learning of a different perspective on life; for the most part Wiccans will describe their "discovering of Wicca" as learning that there was a name for beliefs that they already held and that there were others that shared their beliefs. In both cases, the practitioners would describe each religion as not so much something that you become or believe, but something you simply are.

Neither Shinto nor Wicca find conflict with other religions. Shinto merely seems to view other religions as specific kinds of kami worship, and so they do not contradict Shinto beliefs. This is obvious through history and Shinto's ability to coexist and in some cases, amalgamate with other belief systems such as Confucianism, Buddhism, and Christianity. Wiccans see all religion as being different paths to the same goal. An analogy that is often used is that of a mountain that has many paths circling around it on all sides, but all of which lead to the top. In other words, all religion has ultimately the same goal, but not all people perceive the world in the same way, thus have different beliefs, none of which have inherently more truth or validity. Wiccans, then, are more likely to borrow deities, rituals, artifacts etc. (depending on personal beliefs and values) than they are to describe other religions in terms of their own. The important point being that neither religion finds itself in conflict with any other religion; neither see one belief system as necessarily inferior.

In terms of morals, neither religion has a strict standard; what is correct and not correct, or what is good or evil is up to the discretion of the people involved, at the time that they are involved. Moralistic judgements vary from situation to situation based on circumstance, motivations, and purpose. Nothing is unconditionally evil.

Conclusion:

Even from this simple comparison of some of the major elements of religion, some astonishing similarities between Wicca and Shinto can be seen. What can be concluded from these similarities in two obviously unconnected religions?

I would suggest that if humanity as a whole is sincerely interested in trying to gain a greater understanding itself and create peace in our world community, it would be advantageous to place religion under the microscope of the scientific method. Historically, it seems, that religion has been the subject of so much emotional bias that this sort of study would be impossible, however, many

other aspects of society were subjected to the same sort of bias and still have been studied to a great extent. Language for example, seems to be such a random phenomenon, however, through comparison, a vast amount of universality has been discovered. Perhaps through a similar comparison of belief systems, some of the “universal truths” of human belief that have been so elusive and so intensely sought could be discovered. The similarities exist and are obviously apparent in such examples as Shinto and Wicca. A study such as this could emphasize that humans aren't that different after all; that we have a lot more in common than is typically thought.

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