

QUESTIONS AND PROBLEMS ?

Is Shrine Shinto a Religion ?

This is a very natural and at the same time a very important question. It will probably continue to be a question for several decades to come, if not longer,—certainly as long as the people educated in pre-war days survive, and probably as long as there are those who want to revive the pre-war status of shrines and the concomitant pre-war educational pattern based on Shinto.

The question is especially pertinent at this particular time because recently there has been a significant effort to devise some means to enable the government to grant special status to some or all Shinto shrines. However, unless the Constitution itself is revised, this probably can only be done by officially defining Shrine Shinto as outside the category of religion. Whether the Constitution should, or should not, be revised is, of course, a political question outside the purview of this journal; but whether Shrine Shinto is, or is not religion, or a religion, is something about which many, if not all, the readers are very deeply concerned. It is necessary, therefore, to give a somewhat detailed statement in order to clarify the subject.

In considering this question attention must be called at the outset to the fact that the Japanese conception of religion is not the same as the Occidental. Therefore, in reaching our conclusion we must not be limited by traditional Occidental ideas as to what constitutes religion. As Dr. Tetsuzō Tanigawa^a of Hōsei^b University stated in his discussion of *National Character and Religion* in the

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June, 1960, issue of *Contemporary Religion in Japan*, "Occidentals, who regard Christianity as what a religion should be....." cannot understand Japanese religions because the "nature of our religions is different from Christianity." Then he added, "Shinto itself is different and so is Buddhism." If religion is to be defined solely in terms of the traditional Occidental concepts, then neither Buddhism nor Shinto can be called religions.

Moreover, it must be noted that like many other religions Shinto is "more than a religious faith." It is, as Dr. Sokyō Ono,^a lecturer of the national Association of Shinto Shrines, so aptly states in *The Kami Way**, "an amalgam of attitudes, ideas, and ways of doing things that through two milleniums and more have become an integral part of the way of the Japanese people." Dr. G. B. Sansom, the well-known authority on Japanese history and culture also partially describes this broader aspect of Shinto when he calls it "a complex of social and political ideas."† And Dr. Saburō Ienaga^b approaching the subject from a different angle, says elsewhere in this issue (p. 5) that Shinto is "an agricultural cult widely practiced in ancient societies all over the world" and describes it as "a culture and customs in which one is born and brought up." The important point is that the student should not be led astray by the emphasis on this general cultural aspect of Shinto; because, while there are of course differences in detail, what can be said of Shinto in this regard can also be said of Hinduism, Judaism, and Christianity, not to mention other religions.

With this difference in the concept of religion and the similarity in the part played by various religions in the social and cultural nexus of their respective cultures in mind, let us turn to the ques-

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* Ono, Sokyō, *The Kami Way*, (Tokyo: International Institute for the Study of Religions, 1960), p. 3.

† Sansom, G. B., *The Western World and Japan*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), p. 482

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tion of whether or not Shrine Shinto is a religion. And first of all let us ask what contemporary Shinto scholars in some well-known Shinto universities of Japan have to say on the subject.

Here we are fortunate to have two very recent English publications to consult. In a volume entitled *Religious Studies in Japan*,* which was prepared by the Japanese Association for Religious Studies for the Ninth International Congress for the History of Religions, there are three essays on Shintō. Dr. Masayoshi Nishitsuoi^a of Kokugakuin Daigaku, the well-known Shinto University in Tokyo, writing about the Hikawa and Katori shrines under the title "*Social and Religious Groups in Shinto*" refers to Buddhism and Shinto as "two religions," (p. 227) and calls the Tōshōgū Shrine at Nikkō a "religious institution." (p. 227) Then in the closing sentence he says that his essay deals only "with the distribution patterns of a traditional religious grouping in a single area." [The italics here as elsewhere in this discussion are editor's.]

In an essay on the "*Traditional Tendency of Shintomism and its New Theoretical Developments*," Assistant Professor Yoshio Toda^b of the same institution refers in one place to Shinto as "a theoretical religion" (p. 229) and in another as "a national religion" (p. 231); and Professor Toshiaki Harada^c of Kumamoto University, under the title "*The Origin of Community Worship*," states that the shrine festivals constituted mainly "prayer for a good harvest and blessing of the crop," which would appear to be ample proof that such were considered to be a religion. (Incidentally, it might well be asked, if there is any question as to whether Shinto is or is not a religion, why are Shinto scholars members of the Japanese Association of Religious Studies; and why is Shinto considered to be a religion by the International Association for the History of Religions?)

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* Japanese Association for Religious Studies and Japanese Organizing Committee of the Ninth International Congress for the History of Religions, (ed.) *Religious Studies in Japan*, (Tokyo: Maruzen Company Ltd., 1959).

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In the *Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress for the History of Religions** which met in Tokyo in October, 1958, we find a number of other pertinent statements. In a paper on "*The Concept of Kami*" Professor Motohiko Anzu^a of Kokugakuin University began with the statement that "The object of worship in Shinto, in other words, the divine in this *religion* is at the present day nearly always signified by the single word *kami*. (p. 218) Professor Toshiaki Harada began his paper on "*Symbol of Deity and Social Life*" with a reference to "The *religious* life of the agricultural village of Japan..... (p. 296); and Assistant Professor Naofusa Hirai^b of Kokugakuin University in discussing "*Fundamental Problems of Present Shinto*" refers to Shinto as an "indigenous and racial *religion*."

Outside the specific field of Shinto scholarship, opinions are the same. Dr. Hajime Nakamura^c of the Department of Indian Philosophy of Tokyo University, writing on *The Ways of Thinking of the Javanese People* in the above-mentioned *Proceedings*, refers to Shinto as "the native Japanese popular *religion*," (p. 573), and in an article in *Monumenta Nipponica* (Vol XIV Nos. 3—4, 1958—59 p. 64) he calls it a "tribal *religion*." Moreover, Dr. Hideo Kishimoto^d of the same institution in "*Religion in the Meiji Era*"† calls it the "Japanese polytheistic folk *religion*." Thus one could continue to quote numerous authorities to show that present day scholars of Japanese religions assume, usually without discussion, that Shinto is a religion.

But some one may very properly ask, "What about before the

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* Compiled by the Japanese Organizing Committee for the Ninth International Congress for the History of Religions. *Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress for the History of Religions*, (Tokyo: Maruzen Company Ltd., 1960).

† Kishimoto, Hideo (ed.) *Japanese Religion in the Meiji Era* (Tokyo, Ōbun Sha, 1956), p. 4.

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war?" And here, again, we must say that the situation was essentially the same then as now. In those days political pronouncements on this subject were generally avoided by scholars of religions. Only those that were the protagonists of the official government position were outspoken. While tacitly admitting that Shinto was a religion, they constantly maintained that shrines were primarily "national institutions indicating the object of national morality," that is, something transcending religion.

Professor Yoshio Ōishi^a of Kyoto University, an authority on constitutional law who has in recent years been one of the leading spokesmen for this position, while passing by the present legal status of shrines as private institutions, states that "Shrines have two aspects: they are state institutions which constitute the basis of national morality and they are also *religious* institutions. He argues, however, that "shrines cannot be explained simply as *religious* institutions, even though it must be admitted that they have a *religious* aspect." And he maintains that while "Shrine worship may be regarded as *religion* in so far as the worshippers take the enshrined deities as an expression of the Absolute, which serves as the foundation of their spiritual peace and enlightenment, if the state considers that Ise Shrine is for the guidance of the people in their national life from the standpoint of national morality, because it inculcates respect for the ancestors of the Emperor who is the symbol of the state, it is within its province to establish such facilities as may provide a standard of national morality."*

Dr. Sokyō Ono, as noted above, supports this position when he says in *The Kami Way* that "In its general aspects Shinto is more than a religious faith." Thus the position represented by these scholars is that in their national morality aspect shrines transcend

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* International Institute for the Study of Religions, Inc., *Bulletin* No. 7, (September, 1959), pp. 35, 38.

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religion, but one of the most authoritative sources for that period, the Shintō Encyclopedia (1925) states somewhat guardedly that contemporary intellectuals regarded Shinto as “the morality or *religion* of the Japanese people;” but then goes on to say that Shinto is “a pure racial *religion* which has been transmitted from the age of the kami.” The main emphasis of the Encyclopedia is, as would be expected, on the national morality aspect; but it is significant that even it could not ignore the religious character of Shinto.

Foremost among the pre-war Japanese scholars in this field of the history of religion was Dr. Genchi Katō,^a who occupied the chair of Shinto at Tokyo University from 1921 to 1931. In the foreword of his monumental *An Historical Study of the Religious Development of Shinto* (*Shintō no Shūkyō Hattatsu Shiteki Kenkyū*) published in 1923, Dr. Katō begins as follows:

“In that which we call Shinto there is State Shinto and Sectarian Shinto. State Shinto includes Kokutai Shinto, Shrine Shinto, and other kinds of Shinto. For me, after taking all these types of Shinto into consideration, all that is called “Shinto” without exception must be regarded as a type of *religion*. It is different from the so-called world religions, such as Buddhism and Christianity. It is not a foreign religion. Shinto is definitely a kind of *religion* that is unique to Japan.”

In view of the position that Dr. Katō occupied in the educational world and of the fact that when he wrote these words the Japanese government was doing everything possible to convince people that Shrine Shinto was not a religion, these words are especially significant. Dr. Katō was not alone in maintaining this position, although he was perhaps more emphatic in stating it.

But, if someone pursues the historical point still further and asks about pre-Meiji Japan, the reply must still be the same. From the beginning of the Kamakura period until the Meiji Restoration and even later, shrines, temples, and related matters were treated as in the same general category. Not only were they under the over-all

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supervision of one official, a Temple and Shrine Magistrate (*Jisha Bugyō*^a), but they were also grouped together in various laws and edicts issued from time to time by the *de facto* feudal government.

Furthermore, to return to modern times, even after the Meiji Restoration there was for a long time a Shrine and Temple Bureau (*Shaji Kyokub*) in the Ministry of Home affairs. Indeed, it was not until 1912 that the Japanese government, after numerous administrative changes, finally succeeded *at the national level* in administratively separating shrines from other religions. But at the prefectural level the separation was never achieved. Until World War II there was a Shrine, Temple and Soldiers Affairs Official (*Shaji Heiji Kakari*^c) in every prefecture. Thus, it should be clear that, in spite of an attempted legalistic separation, Buddhist and Shinto institutions have all been regarded as having the same general nature; that is, they were religious institutions.

Why, then, did the government try to convince the people that Shrine Shinto was not a religion? This is an involved subject. Succinctly stated, the Meiji government wanted to give Shrine Shinto a preferred status and at the same time appear to pay full respect to the principle of religious freedom; but it could do this only by ignoring the fundamental religious character of shrines. The record is a long and complicated one that cannot be discussed here. Dr. Ichirō Hori^d of Tōhoku University summarizes the record briefly in *Japanese Religion in the Meiji Era*^{*}, where he states that "it is impossible not to recognize that Shinto is a religion," and adds that for the government to "claim that Shinto was not a religion was nothing more than a ruse."

Thus far, except for a brief mention in the introduction, nothing has been said regarding the attitude of foreign scholars. This is

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* Kishimoto, *op. cit.*, p. 94

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partly because the material available is too voluminous to handle adequately, but primarily because, in view of the preponderance of Japanese opinion supporting the position that Shrine Shinto is a religion, foreign opinion seems somewhat irrelevant. It may be well, however, to refer briefly to Dr. George B. Sansom's *Japan, A Short Cultural History*, in which he speaks of the "religion which came to be known as Shinto"as being "a polytheism of a crude exuberant type;" and then goes on to say that "the history of Shinto is a history of the development of.....inchoate ideas into an institutional religion."* Moreover, in his latest work, *A History of Japan to 1334*, he refers to Shinto as "an anonymous body of religious practices" and native religious usages."†

Actually, there can be no question as to whether or not Shinto, including Shrine Shinto, is a religion and, except for about three-quarters of a century during which the Japanese government attempted to make it a state cult transcending religion, it has always been so regarded. Had it not been for the political necessity of the Meiji government, probably the question would never have arisen.

In all fairness, however, it must be stated that many Japanese, who are deeply concerned about both the morale as well as the moral condition of their country, believe that, even though Shinto is a religion, it should none-the-less be made the basis of national morality and be given a preferred status. There is nothing reprehensible about this. Christians and Buddhists undoubtedly believe that their respective faiths should be in one way or another the basis for national morality and the establishment of righteousness in this country and in their special ways many are working toward the achievement of this goal. But this is a political problem which in no way affects the fact that Shinto, including Shrine Shinto, is and always has been a religion. (WPW)

* Sansom, G.B., *Japan, A Short Cultural History*, (Revised Edition, New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1943), p. 25.

† Sansom, George, *A History of Japan to 1334*, (London: The Grosset Press, 1958), p. 77.