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Basic Knowledge and Basic Problems of Shinto

by Sokyō Ono

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This is a fine book. The manifold aspects of Shinto have been organized in a scholarly manner and the author shows a keen consciousness of the problems confronting Shrine Shinto.

In the preface Dr. Ono calls this book "A Comprehensive Study of Shinto" (*Sōgō Shintōgaku*), but the subjects studied are so manifold as to preclude the possibility of systematizing them in a very consistent manner. Therefore, he confines himself to piecing together the results of studies by Shinto scholars, including himself, and organizing them as concisely as possible.

That the book was not called simply "A Study of Shinto," (*Shintōgaku*) is probably because of the author's desire to make it not only a collection of information about Shinto, but also "a book for thinking about Shinto on the basis of what has been collected."

This means two things. One is that on the basis of this book students should "think candidly about the matters which they study and where the main problems are." The other is that people should "grasp the nature of the problems confronting Shinto in the present age and the way in which these problems should be considered." The former is the author's contribution to the "experts," that is, the scholars, and the

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latter refers to his appeal to "men of practice," that is, those who are concerned with the practical affairs of shrines.

The true aim of the book, however, is probably that of bringing about mutual adjustment between the "experts" and "men of practice." Is not the author, by providing a place for considering the various problems of Shinto, trying to correct the tendencies of both groups which are apt to become estranged from each other and lose sight of the path leading to the solution of their problems? This is what I mean when I speak of "an intense consciousness of problems" lurking in this book. The title of the book would seem to have originated at this point.

Another reason why this book is called "A Comprehensive Study of Shinto" is because this is the first attempt at collecting the complete results of research in the field of Shinto in a purely scientific manner, and because it aims at systematizing various Shinto studies which have been very diversified. "Comprehensive," therefore, is to be understood from these different points of view.

True to this term "Comprehensive," the subjects treated are really manifold. In addition to the introduction, a total of sixteen subjects are discussed.

Two of these, "The Geographical and Social Environment of Shrines" and "Shrines and their Facilities," concern the cultural environment of shrines. "A General Survey of Shrines" then defines and discusses them in outline; and this is followed by a detailed description of "The Status of Shrines," "The Enshrined Deities," and "Shrine Rites." Rites (*saishi*), being the most essential element of shrines, are discussed in five

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chapters, which constitute the major theme of the book.

"The Relation of Shinto to the State and the Imperial Family," which follows, is interesting because the author emphasizes that Shinto is related to the State through its relationship with the Imperial Family. In "Those Who Serve the Kami" the way in which service is rendered by priests and parishioners is discussed — a subject that is related to the chapter on "The Enshrined Deities" and ranks next in importance to the chapters on rites. Finally, the author discusses "The Grand Shrine of Ise," "A Summary of Modern Shinto Orders," "An Outline of Shinto History," and ends with "A Summary of Shinto."

It can be seen, therefore, that all problems concerning Shrine Shinto are covered, so that the book as a whole seems encyclopedic. Each item has its own independent unity, and no special consideration has been given to any relationship between the various items discussed. Moreover, the book can be characterized as being concerned solely with shrines, and as beginning its explanations with a discussion of actual shrine rites. In this sense it is, in fact "A Study of Shrine Shinto," and not a study of Shinto as a whole. If it were a study of Shinto, the manner of handling the subjects would undergo some change, even if the subjects discussed were not themselves changed perceptibly.

The matters discussed in this book all arise from the following formal definition of shrines, which the author gives in the chapter on "A General Survey of Shrines":

Shrines are based on Shrine Shinto, they enshrine kami (Shinto deities) and maintain various facilities necessary for the performance of rites and the observance of worship. People are associated with shrines either as priests (*shinshoku*) who perform

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rites or as parishioners (*ujiko*) or worshippers (*sukeisha*). Shrines spread the divine virtues of the enshrined kami; they enable the people to come in contact with the divine virtues through veneration of the enshrined kami; they organize the parishioners for worship; and conduct other activities. Shrines unify the spiritual and mundane elements of life and of human organizations (p. 75).

Shrines are very difficult to define academically. It is almost impossible, both formally and substantially, to include in one definition all the diversity they have developed throughout their long history. This is why in the past, in studies of religion and religious history, a conceptual definition was usually avoided and what was stated was confined to concrete descriptions of the shrines themselves. In the study of Shinto, also, a comprehensive definition, apart from its institutional and ritual aspects, has not yet been devised. The definition given above was drawn up by the author from the standpoint of Shrine Shinto, on the basis of a definition prepared by the Association of Shinto Shrines. Its expression is peculiar for this reason and sounds rather immature, but at least all the ideas discussed in this book are covered by it.

Let us examine now some of the major topics.

To begin with, in "The Geographical and Social Environment of Shrines," the author deals with the intensity of the changes in modern society and in the changes of the social-geographical environment of shrines. The religious atmosphere of shrines is derived to a great extent from the natural climate, but owing to a rapid qualitative change in society, this religious character is being lost at present. Moreover, on account of the changes in various cultural conditions, the parishioners' "spiritual alienation" from the shrines has become more accentuated.

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Classifying the relationship between shrines and believer-groups from the viewpoint of the location of shrines, the author divides shrines into three types, namely, the isolated, the distant, and the internal (*naizai*) ones. Of these he picks up the internal type, that is, shrines located in the cities, and emphasizes that propaganda activities which have been conducted by the shrines belonging to the other two types have become necessary also for shrines of the internal type in order to produce a parishioner-consciousness.

In "A General Survey of Shinto Shrines," in addition to giving a definition of shrines, the author discusses the history, purpose, and age of the shrines, and classifies them according to their respective characteristics. As for the names of the shrines, he provides the readers with fundamental knowledge that very surprisingly often tends to be neglected. What was once common knowledge in regard to shrines, has become very difficult to get hold of at present. This the author makes understandable for ordinary people.

How to handle "The Enshrined Kami" is a controversial point in the study of Shinto, and the theological attitude to be taken in this respect is attracting considerable attention. Shinto, as a religion that has emerged naturally, is characterized by a diversity in its enshrined kami. In many cases it is impossible to study them academically and it is difficult to rationalize about them theologically. Keeping this in mind, the author does not make the enshrined kami the focal point, but instead attaches greater importance to their worship, that is, he emphasizes religious belief, and asserts the priority of the "fact of religious belief." This is noteworthy.

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The chapter on "Shrine Rites" the essential factor in Shinto, is richest in substance, bearing witness to the weight of the history of the research involved. The author points out the essence of the rites by saying; "Basic in shrine rites is the collective contact with the kami. Individual contact with the kami may be said to take place on this basis or in harmony with it" (p. 215).

Adding theological elements, he says further,

The rites (*saishi*) are services to the kami. They constitute spiritual contact or communication between the kami and man, or between those who serve and that which is served. It is spiritual sympathy, a spiritual association. In Japanese this is called *sesshin*, literally, "contact with the kami." Shinto speaks of the "unity of the kami and man" (*shinjin gōitsu*) or the "oneness of kami and man" (*shinjin ittai*). Its ideal lies in the kami and man, or the one served and the server, being united in spirit. Where they are united, where they are in agreement, there the aim of coming in contact with the kami is achieved and the ultimate state of rites is realized. (p. 283)

Around this unity of the kami and man revolves the problem of its significance, method, and various ideas connected with it. For example, "sincerity" (*makoto*) and a "clean and bright mind" (*seimeishin*) are said to be prerequisites to the unity of kami and man. Realization of the function of making all things come into existence (*musubi*), is fulfilled when "sincerity" is made the basic attitude and "purification" (*kiyome*) is observed. What guarantees this in Shinto, says the author, is the kami. The unity of the kami and man is accomplished in this realization of *musubi*. *Matsuri*, that is festivals and rites, the service to the kami, have evolved on the basis of this idea.

According to the author the common form of relationship

between kami and man in *matsuri* is that of the kami being enshrined and man serving the kami. However, the kami are not only deities who are served but they are also deities that serve. In other words, "All things are kami respectively, and a mutual relationship of *worshipping and being worshipped* can exist between all things. This is the ultimate realm of *matsuri* (p. 285—6). However, man is, as man, one who conducts *matsuri* to the end, and here the one-sided act of service comes into question. When *matsuri* is expressed in deeds, it follows the principle of "waiting" (*matsu*). *Matsuri* is nothing but entertainment. The rites (*saishi*) are thus based on a relationship of "guest" and "host."

Shinto theology would seem to be most faithful, in the principle of "*matsuri*," to the mentality of the Japanese and seems to have succeeded in its theorization on the basis of folk-belief. The author divides the aspects of rites (*saishi*) based on this principle into three, namely, the expression of rites in daily life, the formal expression of rites, and occult-like rites. According to the author this is strictly an intellectual method. Essentially they are one. The occult-like rites mean "acts conducted chiefly for the sake of their mystic effect" (p. 288). From the viewpoint of the science of religion (*Shūkyō-gakuteki niwa*) they may be said to be rites rich in sorcery.

The author divides this into two. That which is expressed in action is called by him a "benedictory ceremony" or "divine mode" (*shintai*), and what is expressed with things are "ceremonies of offering and receiving sacred objects." Each of these is further divided into two, namely, "verbal ceremonies," and "tribute-offering ceremonies" and "divine objects

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receiving ceremonies." This classification is an attempt in conformity with ceremonies unique in Shrine Shinto and is worthy of note all the more as a field for research in religious ceremonies.

In "The Relation of Shinto to the State and the Imperial Family," the author says that Shrine Shinto is a community-like collectivity which includes everything from the family to the State, the fundamental characteristic of which lies in having the Imperial Family as its center. This assertion does not reveal any new point, but an interesting aspect of it can be seen in what the author asserts in connection with Japan's defeat in World War II.

Concerning the idea of the divine land referred to in the Shinto Directive, the author says,

"It was inevitable that the idea of the Divine Land, which arose along with the consciousness of a national crisis, was regarded as the ideological and religious support of aggression.

"It was unfortunate that Shinto should have been subjected to such suspicion. But to those who had been so optimistic as to naively think that the Divine Land idea could always be taken for granted, it provided a really very precious opportunity for reflection.

"However, it is a bad habit of the Japanese, when confronted with such a setback, that they do not hesitate to cast away even precious things. This bad habit can also be noted in Shinto. There is a big difference between reflection on a subject and an indiscriminate casting away of something as soon as it is condemned by others. There is independence in reflection, but abandonment is not an expression of responsibility. Such irresponsibility harbors the danger of reviving old things and repeating a mistake without reflection" (p. 445-6).

To be sure, the author admits that the Divine Land idea is a basic idea of Shinto, but he concludes: "How to rightly discern the Divine Will constitutes the key to judging the right-

fulness or wrongfulness of the Divine Land idea" (p. 446). Here we see the positive attitude of trying to make defeat in war an occasion for reflection instead of deliberately ignoring it. Herein is to be seen a consciousness that Shrine Shinto can no longer afford to show only naively sensitive reactions and that it must accept the fact of defeat in war squarely as a kind of breakdown.

Indeed, it may be said that the manner in which this problem is grasped will decide whether Shrine Shinto will degenerate into a mere cult of rites and ceremonies, or will be able to revive as a religion peculiar to Japan.

In the chapter entitled, "Those Who Serve the Kami," the author holds that the basis of Shinto lies in the participation of all in "services to the kami" (*matsuri*), and urges reflection on the tendency of *matsuri* to become special ceremonies monopolized by Shinto priests. Although the Shinto priesthood is a sacred intermediary profession, the author says, "if, for that reason, it is denied that people in general are the subject of *matsuri* and have responsibility to serve the kami, it would conflict with the religious consciousness and customs in Shinto" (p. 473). He also explains in detail how, since Meiji, not only the professional Shinto priests, but also those who served at the shrines before Meiji, parishioners and worshippers, have conducted themselves.

The problem of Shinto priests, parishioners, and worshippers as "Those who Serve the Kami" is one of the big problems confronting Shrine Shinto. In order to develop *matsuri* in daily life as in the olden days, the author seeks a return of *matsuri* to the earlier basis of the general community, through an

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historical analysis of "Those who Serve the Kami."

Regarding the parishioners in particular, he emphasizes that the easy-going regionalism, based on the state control of shrines after the beginning of the Meiji era, quickened the loss of the parishioner-consciousness which had been strong from the beginning, and reflects that Shrine Shinto has formulated no positive countermeasure to cope with this situation. But, then, ought not the problem be considered further and positive ideas be suggested as to how shrines should free themselves from this regionalism, and what ways and means can be conceived from the standpoint of shintology (Shinto-gaku: the science of Shinto).

"An Outline of Shinto History" does not give any new data in particular, but, in connection with the divine affairs (*jingi*) system in ancient times, the problem of historical facts and religious facts is taken up, and it is clarified in advance that Shinto history is a history on the plane of religious belief. This is a new attitude in the study of Shinto. In the past Shinto scholars paid no attention to distinctions related to this point.

In the last chapter, "A Summary of Shinto," the author gives a definition of Shinto, explains the basis for his classification, and deals also with the essence of Shinto. Therefore, this can be taken as a concluding synthesis of the book, or as the basic attitude of the author in handling various themes. In this sense, one way of digesting the book well would be to read, first of all, the introductory part and then this chapter.

As for the definition of Shinto, it used to be explained from an analysis of the sources but on the basis of his own detailed

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investigation, the author rejects this and aims at defining it by an analysis of actual phenomena. For this reason he hypothetically classifies Shinto from various angles, leaving the definition based on the substance till later on.

In dealing with the essence of Shinto, he starts by examining a series of definitions, and finally clarifies his own standpoint. According to the author, Shinto is "fundamentally a life devoted to the performance of rites for the kami in conformity with the tradition of the Japanese race," and, in a broader sense, it is "a collective noun for a group of religions having the character of being regarded socially as similar to it" (p. 780). By adding a theological definition, he tries to give Shinto a universal direction as a principle of life for all humanity. Thus, he suggests that

"Shinto contains a fundamental view of the world and a principle of action that all things have an invisible and SACRED SPIRIT (*mitama*), that SINCERITY (*makoto*) is the function of this spirit, that through the medium of SINCERITY people serve and are served in a harmonious spirit, and that through PURIFICATION (*harae*) people try to return to their original state and maintain a life of service (*matsuri*)" (p. 780).

Now it is here that a solid consideration is given to the KAMI for the first time, and the author's interpretation is noteworthy.

According to him the term "kami" is not based on the idea that an object is noble and sacred because its essence is fundamentally different from others, but on the generally presupposed belief that all things have a noble spirit in them. The term kami is something like a religious spell that awakens this noble spirit through the spirit of language (*kotodama*)

and makes an object the more noble and praiseworthy. (p. 784).

The author emphasizes that the term *kami* is an honorific and has been used in connection with *kotodama*. It is an honorific for worshipping in an attitude of *matsuri*, what has a noble spirit, and is regarded as having a character similar to that of *miko* in ancient language and *sama* of the present age. This is an excellent view based on the consideration of the *kotodama* belief, which is a characteristic of Shinto, and brings a new development in the interpretation of the concept of *kami*.

The above serves to introduce the major contents of the book. I now wish to evaluate its significance.

To begin with, in respect to the subjects discussed, the fact that modern, especially postwar, trends in Shrine Shinto are used gives a sense of freshness to this book. Compared with pre-modern periods, studies of Shinto in the modern age are very scarce. In this sense this book is a pioneer effort in the study of Shinto in the modern age.

In respect to his analysis, it is noteworthy that on the whole an effort has been made to conceptualize and define various phenomena, and that the standpoint of religious belief as the basis of analysis is clearly upheld.

What further controls this analysis is the fact that the center of the analysis does not lie in the past but in the present. The study of Shinto in the past was nothing but a history of Shinto, so that historical research on Shinto in itself was Shintology, based on the naive idea that the essence of Shinto lies in the history of Japan itself. Since about 1940, however, it has come to be recognized that historical understanding is nothing but an

understanding of the past in the light of the present. Consequently a reflection of the present has been introduced into Shintology. The significance of the present-centered viewpoint has been fully noted and emphasized even in Shintology in the postwar period of commotion when traditional values have been in question. In this book the author may be said to have moved forward in this same direction. Though historical analysis is still essential in Shintology, the author aims at an understanding of the present situation and future developments with a strong sense of problem-consciousness.

The author's effort to conceptualize and define Shinto may be due to his existential concern, and "belief" is upheld in this work as a standard of historical analysis.

This book can be a very good and ambitious new attempt at the study of Shinto. It is inevitable, however, that some points leave much to be desired.

One point is that, as the author's aim took the form of fulfilling two things concurrently, leaving aside "Basic Knowledge" for the moment, the manner of presenting the "Basic Problems" is conventional, does not show a complete shift from the passive attitude of the past to one of seeking positive solutions. This makes the character of this book somewhat vague. Secondly, the effort to conceptualize Shinto goes too far and the attempts at adjustment in some respects have become complexed. For example, this tendency can be observed in the classification of the clan deities (*uji-gami*), including their relationship with clans. Such a difficult name as "the clan deity of compound clans consisting of compound principals and many subordinates" (*fukushu tabaigata fukushi ujigami*)

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makes one question the purpose and propriety of such a classification.

Judging from the nature of this book, there may be some necessity for classifying current phenomena, but it may be useless and even harmful to typologize historical phenomena and thus sacrifice creative thought because of excessive abstraction or a hardening of ideas. (Here as elsewhere the original is rather vague, T. N.)

These points, however, do not seriously detract from the merits and value of this book. Those who read it will be struck by the freshness of the attempt and the author's breadth and depth in his study of Shinto. This book may be said to be indispensable for those who study religions in order to learn concretely and efficiently the past and present of Shrine Shinto.

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