



Michael Pye, ed. *Exploring Shinto*

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IF A READER stirred by Wordsworth's verse were to open a book entitled *Exploring Wordsworth*, and were to find there voluminous information on the poet's life and times with sophisticated analysis of the sociopolitical context of his work, but no echo of his inspired lines, no reference to "A knowledge, a dim earnest, of the calm/ That Nature breathes among the hills and groves," to "a sense sublime/ Of something far more deeply interfused,/ Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns," or to "A grandeur in the beatings of the heart," such a reader might well complain that the "essence" of Wordsworth had been missed, and might well be dismissed as a sentimental reactionary by the current guild of Wordsworth scholars. The work under review is so terrified of "essentialism," against which it warns again and again, and which it sometimes conflates with Japanese nationalism, that it loses the essence of Shinto, the distinctive sense of the sacred that causes the stroller to pause in silence or even in awe at a wayside shrine, the intensity of devotion visible in the faces and gestures of those who pray there, the serene majesty of a religion that might plausibly claim to be based on divine revelation.

The problem with this self-consciously "etic" rather than "emic" book is less a lack of contemplative sensibility than the lack of a language that could articulate the deliveries of religious perception. Such a language might be sought in the phenomenology of Heidegger, who would have no shame in writing about "the essence of Shinto" had he the knowledge of it enjoyed by the learned authors of this volume. Shinto itself might be considered a rather inarticulate religion, in that the eloquence of its sites and rituals is not matched by literary or philosophical explications such as abound in Buddhism. A multi-authored attempt to answer the question "What is Shinto?" comes up with: "a rich storehouse of resources from which people seek various kinds of guidance and succor" (21). Michael Pye offers "a tentative personal answer" to the same question, stressing that "Shinto as we know it today is the result of a series of inventions and reconstructions" (28). The same could be said of any religion. "Different kinds of *kami* may be revered in the various shrines of Shinto, which provide a focus for their sacred power" (29). "Different" and "various" are the important words here, not

“sacred power,” which becomes just a counter inspiring no effort of thought and which readers might take to refer to an unimportant superstition.

The recent “emic” initiative of John Dougill’s Green Shinto website and the book *Shinto Moments* (KATO 2020) is a valiant effort to affirm Shinto as a religion of universal spiritual and ecological relevance for today. I hope it will prove to be the seed of a discovery of Shinto comparable to that of Zen due to the work of D. T. Suzuki (1870–1966). The authors of the book under review seem to imprison Shinto within its history. The claim that “Japan is the land of the gods,” found in the *Nihon shoki* and affirmed by Kitabatake Chikafusa (1293–1354), is ridiculed. The possibility of a demythologized Shinto that would step back to the enduring religious insight that such language vehiculated is not entertained. The nationalist Hiraizumi Kiyoshi (1895–1984), editor of Kitabatake’s work, comes in for severe strictures from Gaétan Rappo. “Despite his extreme positions, Hiraizumi was not condemned after the war,” and went on in 1971 to criticize postwar studies “for their lack of interest for the mystical aspect of Shinto” and to call it “the indigenous religion of Japan, which managed to survive through the times and despite foreign influences, something that original European religions were not able to do, as they were destroyed by Christianity. This leads him to stress the importance of keeping the original spirit of Shinto in Japan, even after the War” (50–51). Yet it is true that Shinto is the only indigenous religion among the many religions in Japan today. Even if seen as a framework for local cults and deities rather than a single religion, its sturdy perdurance is due to a contemplative core, which, though lacking the instruments to do so philosophically, older historians bravely attempted to articulate. Today such efforts are dismissed as “romanticizing and idealizing” (HARDACRE 2017, 4). It could be argued that even Buddhism and Christianity are general frameworks for a variety of cults bearing only a family resemblance to one another.

Even if Hiraizumi cannot be acquitted of the methodological error of essentialism, it is his links with Germany that make this a sinister crime: “His mostly indirect similitudes with the thought of leading Nazi scholars also explains clearly why he was actively used by the German scholars of Shinto, who were identifying his idea of Japanese spirit with the core concepts of Nazism” (51). The German scholars turn out to be “the *Monumenta Nipponica* school” identified by Bernhard Scheid in a tendentious essay (SCHEID 2013). “Hiraizumi’s work was prominently used by figures such as Hermann Böhner and even translated into English in the early issues of *Monumenta Nipponica*. The fact that Nazi terminology was used in such translations shows the many parallels that were seen between his work and the ideas that the scholars of Sophia University tried to spread, partly in order to justify the Axis alliance” (48–49). In fact, Hiraizumi had only one essay in *Monumenta Nipponica*, in the first issue (translated into German, not English), alongside Suzuki, Sansom, Boxer, Holtom, Anesaki—

hardly a Nazi line-up. Looking at the early issues of *Monumenta Nipponica* it is hard to find “abundant use of Nazi rhetoric” (49). Scheid pounces on a handful of occurrences of the words *Blut und Boden*, *völkisch*, and *entartet* in the 1939 and 1940 issues, which occur in a purely Japanese context with no reference to politics (indeed Scheid scolds *Monumenta Nipponica* for not getting involved in political debate). Rappo misquotes from Scheid a phrase from the journal’s founder Johannes Kraus, SJ, in a review of Bohner’s translation of Kitabatake Chikafusa’s *Jinnō shōtōki*. Kraus did not call it a “picture-book [*Bilderbuch*] of Japan’s popular national worldview” (49) but a *Bibelbuch*, which is not “extreme” (49) but factual, in that since the Meiji Restoration that work was central in Japanese education.

SCHEID (2013, 248) accuses Bohner, scion of an esteemed Lutheran missionary family and untiring translator of Japanese classics, of “constant and systematic usage of *Blut-und-Boden* terminology,” but this is not borne out by his dozen contributions to *Monumenta Nipponica* or his account of Japanese religious history in his introduction to the *Jinnō shōtōki*. To be sure, “Bohner was deeply influenced by a text that shaped the Nazi concept of the Third Reich” (SCHEID 2013, 256), Arthur Moeller van den Bruck’s *Das Dritte Reich* (1923). This was a call for a “conservative revolution,” and its title was stolen by the Nazis much as they stole, and distorted, Wagner and Nietzsche. Its author did not reciprocate Hitler’s admiration at their one encounter in 1922, but declared, “I had rather commit suicide than see such a man win power,” and he did so in 1925. What Bohner quotes from him is a stirring call for Germany to return to the spiritual high point it reached in literature and philosophy in 1800 and to undo the soullessness of the state-centered Prussian Reich (BOHNER 1935, 12–14). Bohner saw the *Jinnō shōtōki* as speaking to the Japanese in an equally stirring way. Rappo follows Scheid in accusing Heinrich Dumoulin’s early work on Kamo no Mabu-chi of giving “the sense that medieval Shinto was a corruption of the original pure Shinto” (49) in an “essentialist framework” and using Shinto “to showcase what he sees as fragments of the Japanese national spirit” (50). But Dumoulin was already a great admirer of Buddhism at that time, as was Bohner, and both saw the encounter of Buddhism and Shinto as mutually beneficial, as Scheid admits (SCHEID 2013, 256).

The Buddhist-Shinto interaction is the theme of the nine central essays in the book under review. Its intellectual foundations in Tendai are richly expounded by Yeonjoo Park, with a focus on Kōshū’s encyclopedic *Keiran shūyōshū*, which could offer material for a phenomenology of the kami. “What *kami* do—and do very well—is to ‘manifest’... ‘dimming the light and becoming like the dust’ (*wakō dōjin*)... a specific term that signifies appearance, disclosure or manifestation of that which is normally hidden, divine, enigmatic or salvific” (88–89). Like biblical revelation, “it takes place for the salvation of all beings” (89). Dunja

Jelesijevic's essay on *shinbutsu* dimensions of Noh, seen as "an arena in which religious traditions can interact, through their respective symbolic languages" (170) likewise brims with phenomenological potential, and indicates the key role that the art of literary criticism might play in articulating the Japanese sense of the sacred. If asked how Buddhist engagement with Shinto can flourish given that Shinran, founder of the most populous Buddhist sect, forbade worship of the kami, the essays by Robert F. Rhodes and Markus Ruesch reveal that even here there is a great variety of interactions.

Four essays on Sect Shinto round off the collection. Their complex and sometimes dramatic accounts of the variety of institutional formations and affiliations, and of strategic interactions with the state, again leave little space for phenomenology of the different spiritual styles of these movements. Michael Pye's final word is that "Shinto is 'particularistic' in two senses. First it is mainly located within one ethnic perspective.... It is not a 'universal' or 'world' religion. Second, it is pluralistic in its plurality even within that ethnos itself" (306–307). But all religions are both universal and particularistic, in different degrees, and the universal aspect of Shinto is being recognized today (helped by ecological awareness) in a way that promises a powerful international presence.

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