

Is a Shinto Renewal Possible?

SAEKI Shōichi

佐伯彰一

Professor Emeritus, Tokyo University

IT BEING THE BEGINNING of a new year, I was casting about for a cheerful topic to write about when I struck on the idea of “Shinto renewal.”

Is a Shinto renewal—a Shinto renaissance—possible? The question may strike many as one that presents a host of difficult problems. I would like to boldly propose, however, that not only is a Shinto renewal possible, but that the time is ripe for it.

Spiritual Dismantling by the Occupation Forces

It is true that misunderstanding and apathy toward Shinto is still prevalent throughout Japan. The debates carried out in newspapers, magazines, and other forms of the mass media present a bleak picture with regard to Shinto, and only tend to make one pessimistic. If Shinto is discussed at all, it is invariably taken up as a target of criticism.

The treatment of Shinto in Japan after its defeat in World War II has been harsh and unsympathetic. The immediate source for this attitude was the enmity shown toward Shinto by the American Occupation Forces, who undoubtedly wished to crush and destroy Shinto.

I myself, though but a fledgling navy officer during the war, was forced to serve as a liaison officer for the Occupation. I say “liaison,” but in fact my role was to show up every morning at headquarters and accept the orders and rules of the Occupation forces. At first I had trouble understanding their spoken English, but I played the role of a member of the defeated side and put to good and frequent use the phrase, “I beg your pardon.” Eventually I became accustomed to their speech, but I still recall the intense effort that was required. I soon learned, or rather was taught, that the purpose of the “democratization” being applied by the Occupation forces was none other than the spiritual dismantling of the Japanese people, specifically the emasculation of Shinto, the essence of Japanese spirituality.

From the more distant and objective perspective of the present day, it must be admitted that one could not expect otherwise from the Occupation

forces. From their point of view a small, insignificant, and apparently poor and weak country in the Far East had suddenly and without warning attacked the great country of America. Since this was not something that anyone in his right mind would have attempted, the Americans must have felt that what caused the Japanese to act so senselessly was a crazy creed or belief, a belief that the Japanese were a “chosen people,” best suited to rule the world. The force that moved the Japanese to act on this belief and to fight against the United States was thought to have emanated almost entirely from Shinto.

Further, it was concluded that it would not be enough to take away Japanese military power: the spiritual foundation for Japan’s militarism must also be demolished. The policy of the Occupation Forces, beginning with the orders concerning Shinto, can be understood clearly if seen in this light.

In fact, however, this view of Japanese spirituality was the result of the analysis of Japan devised by specialists and researchers during the war as an easily understandable way to explain the “enigma” of Japanese actions and ways of thinking. It was widely accepted by the American command and those in charge of the Occupation, and served as the basis for their actions.

It is not difficult to respond to such a view concerning Shinto. In fact Shinto has never even had the concept of “proselytization.” There was never any idea of sending missionaries abroad to disseminate Shinto ideas and beliefs—at least not until modern times. The idea of viewing other religions with enmity, of fighting against them, and of forcing other people to follow the Shinto faith, had no precedent in Shinto.

This misunderstanding of Shinto by the Americans during and after the war is actually an image of Shinto made in their own image. In other words, since the Middle Ages Christianity has had a strong belief in the idea of a “crusade,” where one fights against heresy and eliminates members of other religions. The interpretation of Shinto by the Occupation forces was that of a “Shinto crusade,” something they felt must be stamped out even though it was no more than a figment of their imaginations.

Sadly, this misunderstanding by foreign people has been accepted by many Japanese, not only right after the war, but today as well. A kind of triumphalist criticism of Shinto continues, with no end to examples of people being dragged into court over some Shinto rite or another. Even if their intent is not malicious, it is surprising how many intellectuals identify Shinto with Japan’s colonial rule and wartime activities, and portray Shinto in a dark and forbidding light.

This view of Shinto is a sellout to the prevalent modern, Western religious view. It is a reflection of the unquestioned attitude that faith and belief in a

single transcendent and absolute God, as in Christianity, is the most progressive form of faith and the most advanced religion. This attitude arose from the historical movement in which modernization was practically equated with Westernization, as well as from the faith in “progress” and the cult of evolution. Its tacit assumption is that all things—including religion—evolve and progress, that polytheistic religions that include belief in many and various gods are relics of an ancient and outmoded mentality, and that religion also must break away from such primitive ideas and “evolve” to monotheism.

I have long felt an aversion to such an obstinate and mechanical way of thinking. However, there have been many people in Japan—both before and after the war—who have blindly believed such cheap “progressive” views of history, especially among pseudo-intellectuals who flaunt their knowledge. These people have blindly followed the policies and commands of the Occupation Forces, even at times presenting these ideas as if they were their own. There have, moreover, been occasions since the early Shōwa period (1930s) when materialism and leftist ideology were left unchallenged. Not a few took an anti-religious position based on a hostile atheism, spouting Marx’s axiom that religion was “the opiate of the masses.” Since they believed that Communism was “the highest and final stage in the development of human history,” they of course had no interest in reconsidering the claims of Shinto.

Are we to conclude, then, that there is no hope for a renewal of Shinto?

Leftist Ideology and the Flourishing of Monotheism

In these closing years of the twentieth century some unexpected and major changes have been taking place. We have witnessed the death of leftist ideology with the collapse of the Soviet Union and communism in Eastern Europe. Word has come that already there is a renewal of the church and monasteries in the former Soviet Union. The shallowness of the so-called progressive view of history, in which religion was dismissed as so much bourgeoisie hypocrisy or a relic of a bygone feudalism, has been exposed.

It is not my intent to dance on the grave of such ideas, saying that now is the time for the renewal of religion and the season for the resurrection of the gods. I must say, however, that in the sense of judging everything from the perspective of a linear view of history and humankind, leftist ideology and monotheism are like two peas in a pod. They think that their own beliefs and opinions are absolutely right, and anyone who doubts or disagrees be damned! They were thorough in carrying out the interrogation of heretics and the elimination of other teachings. If we look closely at the history of

religions in the world, the transmission and dissemination of monotheism has left in its wake the destruction of local religions and nature beliefs. The remains of Greek and Roman temples, and the ruins of the Maya and Aztec civilizations in South America, tell a clear tale. In the shadow of monotheism we find the defeat and massacre of older religions, and it reeks of blood.

Monotheism has swept through the world like a bulldozer, toppling and trampling the ancient gods and native deities. In this sense Japan has been strangely and exceptionally fortunate. The fact that Japan is an island at a safe distance from the major continents probably had something to do with this. It is also true that Buddhism, though one of the great world religions, was not arrogant nor destructive toward ancient folk religious traditions. It was tolerant and valued the peaceful coexistence of religions. This legacy is due in a large part to the discernment of remarkable Buddhist monks like Saichō and Kūkai, but we cannot overlook the response of Shinto—the admirable and wise response of the Shinto tradition. Except for some friction and discord at the beginning, Shinto and Buddhism have led a remarkably peaceful coexistence. I myself am deeply aware of my roots in local customs that flow from the ancient traditions connected with mountain religion—religious practices and beliefs that are both Shinto and Buddhist. I am deeply moved by this sort of tolerance and coexistence, and by the fact that these ancient roots have survived despite the worldwide domination and pressure of monotheism.

The renewal of Shinto means a reconfirmation of our ties with these ancient and timeless gods and a celebration of the modern revival of this ancient nature religion, a religious tradition that has been exceptional among world religions for its survival. The ancient gods that were supposed to have been eradicated by monotheism still live on in the hearts of those who follow Shinto. Let us express this faith with joy and pride.

The truly bitter times after the war were, in retrospect, a kind of “religious persecution.” But I would hope that we can accept it as a time of trial, and that we have faced the persecution with patience. Now, with the strength and wisdom gained from such discipline, let us combine our voices and power to realize the renewal of Shinto.

—from *Jinja shinpō*, 1 January 1993
[translated by Paul L. Swanson]