

# Japanese Shinto's "Changing of the Shrine"

## *A Universal Symbol in Particular Attire*

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IN 1993 JAPANESE SHINTO, an ancient religious tradition whose origins go back to the cradle of Japanese culture itself, celebrated for the 61st time a festivity known as the *Sengū* or "Changing of the Shrine." Once every twenty years an exact replica of the principal shrine in the complex of 125 shrines that make up the sacred Shinto grounds of Ise is reconstructed in the shadow of its original.

The periodic ritual rebuilding of the main shrine first took place in the year 650 and, except for one interruption in 1462, has been completed faithfully ever since. Woodworkers and artisans carefully trained in classic methods and scrupulously supervised by the keepers of the tradition, remake the entire structure—from the massive white-cedar beams and footings to each individual wooden peg, not to mention the scores of implements and artifacts that adorn its interior. The work is done piece by piece with an attention to detail that has been the soul of Japan for as long as anyone can remember. And no sooner has the completion of the work been celebrated with a succession of elaborate rituals than the process of dismantling the old shrine in preparation for the next rebuilding begins all over again.

The whole event is something of a puzzle to historians of religion, and the Shinto traditionalists prefer to keep it that way. With Gods too many to count, and certainly too unpredictable for a theology to reason about, Shinto has resisted the pressures of the European Enlightenment and modern religious studies to come up with a logical explanation for itself. Unlike the major religions of the world, Shinto's scholars have long been too preoccupied with tracing the history of its customs to bother about examining

the underlying myths of Shinto or the enduring conviction of its own uniqueness. Not even the ill-fated contamination with the spirit of ultranationalism, which carried the spirit of Shinto beyond the realm of religion into colonialist and wartime aggressions, has been enough to provoke a change of heart in this regard.

But as in so many other areas of Japan today, conscious but subtle efforts were made to prepare the 1993 festivities for the eyes of the world, to scrub away the unfortunate stains of the past and invite scholars at home and abroad to try to place the event on a larger background of world religious history. Whatever the political meaning behind those efforts, they belong to a phenomenon of greater religious moment that has been in the making since the last changing of the shrine twenty years ago: the discovery of something universal in the proud particularity of Japan's native religiosity. The rite of dying-and-rebirth, the syzygy of old and new, is no longer merely a recollection and repetition of the myth of the creation of the islands of Japan. It has also become a cry, however faint, for a re-creation.

The decision to engage the participation of foreign scholars, students, and visitors as part of the religious symbolism of the Sengū is both novel and important. In this day when symbols get too easily confused with advertised images, it is easy for religious rituals of high cultural value to become vehicles for the worst kinds of tribal bias. But the foreign presence in last year's Sengū was not the tourist event it might have been a generation ago. It was rather a test of the depth of the symbol. For if Shinto is to be not only the exclusive property of Japanese culture but truly something religious, then in some sense it must transcend the story of a given people and speak to all people. The very fact that this question has been raised indicates a shift in Shinto from the sentiments of times gone by.

Of course, there are those who continue to insist that the changing of the shrine is too Japanese to be appreciated by the outside world. But their voices are weaker, their accent stranger to the ear than ever before. For myself, as a student of the past, and perhaps also as someone whose long years abroad have drained the last drops of patriotism from his aboriginal marrow, I am always suspicious of squinting for "cultural uniqueness" when it comes to things religious. The changing of the shrine is no exception. On the contrary, I find the commonalities with Christianity liberating.

From a first and distant glance of the open-air, natural magnificence of Ise, the twenty-year disposable Shinto shrine seems to have very little in common with the colossal, unmovable Christian cathedrals whose building would often be completed only several generations after the original architect had died. The heavy stone and towering spires seem to bear witness to

an unshakable belief in a single high God retired to a distant heaven. The careful attention to theological doctrine in the carvings and drawings seems to exclude the religiosity of the pagan masses. The punishing God hovers in the darkness overhead, threatening with eternal damnation those who do not assemble under the roof of the sacred space or who do their worship elsewhere.

But the differences begin to fade as soon as one's glance moves away from the solitary cathedral and sees the wider landscape of history out of which it emerged. The unfamiliar begins to look more familiar. After all, the first Christian churches were reconstituted pagan temples, and the sacred relics of pre-Christian Gods were often enclosed within its walls to guarantee that nothing would be lost in the conversion to a new way.

If Ise's shrine complex is to be compared with the European cathedral, then perhaps the proper counterpart to the movable shrine is not the cathedral building itself, but the tabernacle. Like the whole Ise complex, the cathedral as such is a universe in miniature. The tabernacle, on the other hand, was a portable tent that housed the God who moved about with his people Israel. This is the image the Gospel of John uses when it speaks of the incarnation of Jesus as God's "pitching his tent among us."

Like the arc of the covenant, the tabernacle is closed off to all but certain ministers ordained to perform the rituals connected with it. By clearly marking off the divine Other from the community of believers (the word *temple* originally meant a "cutting off"), the partnership or covenant between the two is sanctified. Only by being Other can Yahweh be Emmanuel, God-with-us. This same pattern is evident in Shinto's insistence on "sacred precincts" closed to the population at large.

The design of the temple in ancient Israel was, as at Ise, made according to divine instructions. Also, the fact that the cathedral is "oriented" to the east keeps alive the cosmic connection with the sun. Like the central divinity of Shinto, Amaterasu (her name means "shines over all"), Christ is the *sol invictus*, the sun that darkness cannot conquer. Even when the scholars of theology had lost the cosmic connection by smothering it in complex doctrines, the full weight of the natural symbolism was kept alive for centuries in the popular or "pagan" Christian imagination.

The similarities even reach to the challenge religion faced with the advent of the Enlightenment and the modern age. The "death of God" in the consciousness of modern Europe was an event first hailed as a liberation of the human and then condemned as a step away from nature to a homo-centric universe. When Nietzsche spoke of the event in the last century, he likened it to "sponging the sun off the horizon." It did not take long to

realize that mere mortals such as we were not up to the responsibility of sunning ourselves. In the end, Western Christianity survived the challenge.

Japan's religious consciousness has gone through no such turmoil at the intellectual level, but Gods of Shinto have become an endangered species for different reasons, reasons that should be familiar to the Christian West. The central focus of the Sengū, after all, is not a building by the myriad of Gods that animate all things in nature. Nature dies and rises on its own, year in and year out, because of the Gods who give it a life that endures beyond death. The Gods of Shinto *are* the life of the natural world in all its rich variety. The sacred does not lie outside of life but is one with it.

But when we look beyond the Ise rituals to the greater picture of modern Japan, we have to wonder how belief in the Gods can prevail when their natural habitats, one after the other, are being covered over in cement; when the air and water, their very life's breath and life's blood, is choking to death on industrial poisons of every kind.

For the re-enshrining of the Gods at Ise to be more than a hollow gesture from a distant past, it has somehow to remind participants of the banishment of the Gods of life and their replacement with the dead corpses of mass-manufactured products. The expansion of the secondary, artificial world is driving out the Gods. "Development" bulldozes over the Gods of the forest, only to transplant them in tidy, unnatural rows as decorations for a human-centered environment. To step out of this world of everyday Japan and into the simple majesty of Ise's craftsmanship and the economically senseless gesture of rebuilding a perfectly good shrine is to close one's eyes, give them a good rub, and open them again. This, to me, is the symbolic power of the Sengū that reaches beneath the surface of Shinto and into that deep ground where the roots of all religions are tangled with one another.

When all is said and done, the grace of the Shinto rite cannot be caught by contemporary moral concerns any more than it can be melted down to a pattern in comparative religion. Shinto's religiosity cannot be reduced to a weapon to defend nature against extinction by its human element; nor is Ise merely a cluster of customs and beliefs sharing certain features in common with other religious ways. Shinto is Shinto and Ise is Ise, and they deserve to be enjoyed as such. It is the business of scholars to deepen the level of that enjoyment, not to take it away. Perhaps the most fitting way for Christianity to enjoy it is through imitation. If the great cathedrals of Christianity would enlist the skills and religious fervor of the faithful to reconstruct their tabernacles every generation, this would restore something of the original meaning of the tabernacle and make Shinto spirituality part of its own history. And that, it seems to me, would be all for the best.