

Book Review

SHINTO, THE FOUNTAINHEAD OF JAPAN

By Jean Herbert
(Allen and Unwin, 70s.)

Review by Sebastian Swann

Source: *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 1, No.4. © World Wisdom, Inc.
www.studiesincomparativereligion.com

Since W. G. Aston published his *Shinto, the Way of the Gods* in 1905 curiously few reliable studies of the native religion of Japan have appeared in western languages. We have had some valuable monographs during the last sixty years on specific aspects of the cult and its history, but no overall study of Shinto in the light of modern scholarship in the history of religions.

M. Herbert's book looks at first glance as though it might fulfil this need. It is a large book, handsomely produced at 70s. by Allen and Unwin. The Introduction reads very encouragingly. The author assures us that in collecting material for his book he has not confined himself to the usual literary sources—the myths, that is to say, in the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*, the liturgies in the *Engishiki*, the exegetical works of the 18th century Shinto revival. He has gone enterprisingly further. During various stays in Japan between 1935 and 1964 he travelled the length and breadth of the country interviewing the priests of well over three hundred shrines. Every chapter of the book, moreover, was translated into Japanese and submitted to "specialists" for comment and criticism. To Professor Akira Nakanishi of Chuo University alone he submitted well over three thousand, two hundred questions, while meetings of the staff of Kokugakuin University deliberated further on his findings.

Such careful checking with Japanese authorities and such enterprising fieldwork looks promising enough. But alas, from the first page of the text the distressing suspicion arises that something is badly wrong. By page four and five the suspicion becomes a certainty. By the end of the second chapter the tragic conclusion emerges that the thirty years which the author spent in patient research, in travel, in tireless questioning of priests and professors have resulted in a book which is virtually unreadable.

What has gone wrong?

In the first place M. Herbert apparently regards Shinto as a monolithic expression of revealed truth, not susceptible to changes in time. "Shinto was born with the Japanese race and is one with it" (p. 15), is a statement which directly contradicts all the recent Japanese scholarship proving that neither the Japanese race nor the Shinto religion was a homogeneous whole. The race was an admixture of many ethnic streams, and the resulting cult likewise shows mingled Altaic, Chinese and Melanesian features. M. Herbert is therefore both dogmatic and inexact when he declines to deal with questions of origin at all, refuses to look to the Ainu, the Ryukyu islands or continental shamanism for any light on the original components of the cult, and pleads instead what seems to be a theory of miraculous virgin birth.

Further, he seems oddly unaware that Shinto has undergone any major change throughout Japanese history. Nowhere does he draw any distinction between the pre-Buddhist cult, usually known as early or primitive Shinto (*genshi-Shinto*), and later versions when the original archaic features had become modified under Buddhist and Confucian influence. Nowhere does he tell us that during the medieval period "pure" Shinto virtually disappeared, and that the attempt to revive it by theologians of the 18th and 19th centuries embodied features undreamt of in the 5th and 6th centuries.

This absence of any sense of historical change has led to the author's odd manner of exposition, whereby he juxtaposes pell mell on the same page the opinions of authors of greatly differing periods and degrees of reliability. On the first page, for example, we are given quotations from the 17th century Confucian historian Arai Hakuseki (described as "another modern Japanese writer"), the interesting but extremely tendentious 19th century scholar of the Shinto Revival Hirata Atsutane, the modern writer Harada Tasuku, and, most oddly of all, the late Professor Fujisawa Chikao, a fanatical apologist of the excesses of State Shinto and a frequent contributor to the dubious journal *Cultural Nippon*. These diverse authorities are not mentioned by name in the text. The quotations with which almost every page is covered are introduced by such phrases as "one modern Japanese author says ...", "as a modern writer puts it," "most great Japanese thinkers still agree with one of them who wrote . . ." To discover who these authorities may be one has to turn each time to the back of the book, where there are listed seven hundred and seventy-eight numbered entries, comprising both written works and live informants. Despite its length, however, this list includes not a single work by Yanagida Kunio, Hori Ichiro or Ishida Eiichiro, whose studies are surely indispensable nowadays to a proper understanding of Japanese religion.

Nor is this curious presentation in any way justified by clarity or even elementary communication with either the scholar or the general reader. Take his treatment of the important idea of *kami*, for example, the spiritual beings who are the objects of worship in Shinto. The reader is confronted at the outset with nineteen different etymologies of the word, ranging from "a modified form of *kabi*, mould, fungus," "a mispronunciation of the word *yomi* or *yomei*, Hades," to "a combination of *ka* (a demonstrative prefix) and *mi*, which stands for *hi*, the Sun." There follow several different definitions. We are given Professor Fujisawa Chikao's "invisible power which unites spirit and matter into a dynamic whole, while it gives birth to all things without exception," followed by a quotation from the 17th century Confucian thinker Kumazawa Banzan, rendered baffling by absence of context: "The Kami have no form but only function. On the contrary man has both form and action. The Gods cannot surpass the actions which have form and man cannot surpass the wonderful actions which have no form." (It is no good hoping to go to the original Japanese for any clarification of this mysterious passage, for the note at the back of the book refers us simply to the three volumes of Kumazawa Banzan's complete works.) After several more such resounding descriptions M. Herbert at last comes to the reader's rescue. The best definition of *kami*, he says, is "a sacred entity." A statement on a par with the Irish diagnosis of a mysterious sickness as "fever."

Nor is this all. In the chapter entitled "History and Main Subdivisions of Shinto." the author ignores all semblance of historical sequence and order. The reader is whirled incomprehensibly from a long quotation from Aston's *Nihongi* describing the introduction of Buddhism into Japan in 552 A.D. to Zen Buddhism. And Zen Buddhism, furthermore, described in ludicrously misleading terms by Professor Fujisawa Chikao. "Few people," we are told, "are aware of the

undeniable fact that Zen Buddhism was able to reach the culminating point of its development under the overwhelming influence of Shintoism." Few indeed.

On p. 48 and 49 the confusion becomes baffling. Short sentences and statements, apparently copied verbatim from jottings in a notebook, are flung together with the intention of describing Shinto during the Tokugawa period and the Meiji Restoration. Even with no dates and no background explanation, it is still possible to see that many of these statements are misleading or even false. "In matters political," we are told for example in an isolated paragraph, "the Buddhist monasteries became so powerful and arrogant that the Shogun had to destroy some of the most important and exterminate their inmates." Who, when, where? If Nobunaga's sack of the Hieizan monasteries is meant, then how did all the careful double checking with Japanese authorities fail to reveal the fact that Nobunaga was never a Shogun?

Worse still, the author either ignores or distorts any aspects of Shinto of which he does not happen to approve. The entire rise and development of State Shinto, from the Meiji period until the Pacific War, is reduced in this chapter to three asterisks. From an account of the separation of Buddhism and Shinto in 1868 the reader is flung straight, but for the three asterisks, to what the author calls "the American *diktat*" of 1945. Here we are told that the disestablishment of State Shinto under the American occupation was an act of wanton and meaningless revenge. Shinto had no more to do with "Japanese patriotism and loyalty to their Sovereign" in the war than did Catholic priests blessing the guns in Christian armies. The astonishing thing about this statement is that the bibliography at the back of the book *does* include *Kokutai no Hongi*, the celebrated document wherein the doctrines of ultranationalism taught in Japanese schools during the 1930s are specifically justified by distorted versions of the ancient Shinto myths. The author also fails to mention that it was the Religious Bodies Law (*Shukyō hōjinha*) enacted under the American occupation in 1945 that gave the Japanese people complete religious freedom for what was virtually the first time since the Meiji period. Likewise the reader is told nothing of the persecution of new religious movements during the 1930s under the tyranny of State Shinto. On the contrary he is assured that, unlike almost every other religion, Shinto has always been completely tolerant.

This leads to another serious shortcoming of the book—its gross misrepresentation of the part played by Buddhism and Confucianism in the history of Japanese religion. Buddhism is represented throughout as a pernicious foreign creed, which contributed nothing to the original Japanese spirit further than to make it "more conscious of itself" by contrast. Phrases such as "deeply tainted with Buddhism" appear again and again. The overwhelmingly important part played by Confucian ethics in Japan from the 17th century onwards, and the manner in which they were consciously amalgamated with the Shinto "spirit" in the 19th century, is likewise ignored. The Japanese are represented instead as being entirely free from qualms of moral conscience "such as those which are so prominent in the west."

Much of the book is concerned with the exposition and discussion of the early Shinto myths in the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*. Here it is surprising to read (p. 230) that "another critic, considered to be now the most influential thinker in the Jinja-honcho," stresses the historical authenticity of the myths and disapproves of attributing to them any symbolic or esoteric meaning. M. Herbert's technique is to juxtapose in a daunting manner a number of varying interpretations of these myths, while giving us himself "an interpretation which I beg to offer has never been presented before." This alas reads more like (p. 229) a mere description of the more obvious aspects of the myths than an attempt at interpretation.

What chiefly seems to vitiate the author's attitude is the notion that any attempt at objective or systematic scholarship should be rejected in favour of "explaining Shinto from the inside." To this end he has throughout the work "abstained from consulting any person who did not profess Shinto." Again and again he pours pejorative language on "scholarly" or "intellectual" explanations as necessarily distorting the true spirit of the Shinto religion. Far be it from this reviewer to insist on an "intellectual" approach to religion where obviously it is irrelevant or inadequate. To exercise the intellect on the deliverances of such depths and ranges of the mind as mystical illumination, for example, would be simply a waste of time. But to plead a rejection of scholarship as an excuse or reason for misrepresenting verifiable facts, for ignoring the findings of authorities who do not happen to "profess Shinto" (whatever that may mean), for confusion of presentation, for inability to discriminate between different sources of information, does not help the cause of truth. The publisher's claim on the jacket blurb that the book gives "the most authentic and authoritative picture of what Shinto means in the twentieth century" does not stand up to serious examination. Indeed I am astonished that a shrewd commercial publisher like Allen and Unwin should have risked what must have been a considerable outlay on a book quite twice their usual size. It seems tragic that so much patient research over so many years should in the end benefit neither the scholar nor the general reader. But I fear that to the scholar it will prove too inexact and tendentious, and to the general reader too boring to be readable.