

The to japan in the  
sixth century from



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The Japanese religions, including Shintosim and Buddhism, are rich and complex, and it contains many condradictory trends which may puzzle a Westerner. In the center of the tradition is Shinto, the “ natural” religion of Japan. Also in the center is Buddhism, the Indian religion that was brought to Japan in the sixth century from Korea and China.

Throughout the history of Japan, it has been these two religions that have contributed most to the Japanese understanding of themselves and their surroundings, and also to many important events. Shinto, meaning “ the way of the gods”, is the indigenou faith of the Japanese people. It began around 2, 500-3, 000 years ago. It has thirteen sects, each with a different founder. It has many scriptures, including Kokiji (The Record of Ancient Things), Nikong (Chronicles of Japan), Yengishiki (Institutes of the Yengi Period), and the Collections of 10, 000 Leaves. It has about 30 million adherents, but most are also Buddhists. But, none of the scriptures are sacred, as are the Sutras or the Bible.

The kami are the objects of worship in Shinto. They are sacred spirits, and they can take various forms such as natural elements like the sun, mountains, trees, rocks, and the wind, or abstract things like fertility, but also anscestors, national heroes, and protectors of family clans. The Japanese adherence to Shinto is not surprising, because various physical forces are often at work on the archipelago. This shows the people’s early connection to nature.

There are many typhoons, tsunami, volcanoes, and earthquakes that the Japanese worship as the unseen forces of nature that rule their lives.

Originally, Shintoists would only worship the Kami in nature, but, now the Kami are worshipped in shrines. Shintoists got the idea to use the shrines from the Buddhists. These shrines are usually simple buildings surrounded by trees. Here is an example of one: Before they would arrive at the shrines, the Shintoists would “purify” themselves by washing their hands and rinsing their mouth. They will bow twice deeply, clap their hands twice, bow once more and then, they would offer gifts, such as food, to the Kami. Then, they say a short prayer. The prayer usually urges the Kami to withhold bad weather.

The people did not want bad weather, because it would destroy their crop. Shintoists also pray for good fortune and to avoid evil spirits, especially before a special event, such as the opening of a business, a test or exam in school, or something else that is important. They will then offer the Kami a choice offering if the crop is spared. But the Japanese do not fear the Kami. The Buddhist rituals are performed by Shinto priests, private people who can marry and have children. There are even female priests. The priests are supported by the Miko, young ladies in white kimonos.

They must be unmarried, and are often the priest's daughters. Also, in contrast to the Western religions, there are no absolutes, although there is a goddess, Amaterasu Omikami, the Sun goddess. An absolute is an object of worship that is always present, such as a God. But, a certain kind of weather is not an absolute, because the weather can change at any moment.

Shinto is a very optimistic faith. It is thought by its followers that all humans are fundamentally good, and that all evil is caused by evil spirits. The

purpose of the rituals is to avoid evil spirits by purification, offerings and prayers.

However, death is considered evil in Shinto, and most tasks concerning it such as funerals, are done using Buddhist rituals. Shintoism had a major effect on the national affairs of Japan also. After the Meiji restoration in 1868, the Meijing rulers made Shinto their state religion and used the myths of Japan's creation to show a direct link between Shinto's beliefs and the Sun goddess and the Emperor family. This justified the emperor's absolute power. Shinto priests became state officials and shrines were funded by the government. After WWII, Shinto became completely seperated from the state, and became classified as a " normal" religion.

Today, most shrines belong to the Association of Shinto Shrines. When Buddhism was introduced in the 6th century, a few