

Monotheism in Modern Shinto

Aasulv Lande

Abstract

The early Japanese Christian leader, Uchimura Kanzo, experienced Shinto a century ago as disturbingly polytheistic. There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of his experience and thought. But in my view, there already existed in his time a monotheist Shinto. It later changed character, but I argue that Shinto is still an inclusive, narrow monotheist religious cult. In modern Shinto, divine power includes some and suppresses other cosmic powers. An Emperor-centered monotheism with a universal scope emerged during early modernity. Shinto retained its inclusive monotheism after the Shinto Directive of 1945, but the privatization of emperor veneration has reduced Shinto to a norm for the Japanese people, even if a potential universality is still expressed. Postmodern Shinto dresses its universality in individual and varied coats, transcending the boundaries of Japanese nationality. New Shinto is in my view not polytheistic. However, its inclusive, monotheist universalism is transformed onto a purely spiritual and individualized level.

Keywords: monotheism, Uchimura Kanzo, Japanese modernization, Shinto, Shinto-Christian encounter

Monotheism was a great theme during the period of modernization in Japan. Within different religious contexts it meant a renewal and establishment of basic principles for ethics and education. It influenced all religions: Shinto, Buddhism, Christianity. Religions had to develop their monotheist capacities; monotheism was intimately tied to the idea of modernization, which was based on the idea of one consistent scientific truth.

Uchimura Kanzo's Experience of Shinto Polytheism

In the following, I quote from writings of the Christian modernizer, Uchimura Kanzo (1861-1930):

I believed, and that sincerely, that there dwelt in each of innumerable temples its god, jealous over its jurisdiction, ready with punishment to any transgressor that fell under his displeasure. The god whom I revered and adored most was the god of learning and writing [Temmanten: Sugawara Michizane], for whom I faithfully observed the 25th of each month with due sanctity and sacrifice... Then there is a god who presides over rice-culture [Inari no kami]... I ceased not to beseech this god of rice to keep my home from the said disasters [fire and robbery]. There was another god whom I feared more than all others. His emblem was a black raven, and he was the searcher of man's innermost heart [Kumano sansha gongen]... One god would impose upon me abstinence from the use of eggs, another from beans, till after I made all my vows, many of my boyish delicacies were entered upon the prohibition list. The number of deities to be worshipped increased day by day, till I found my little soul totally incapable of pleasing them all. But a relief came at last.¹⁾

After telling briefly the story of his conversion, he continues: "The practical advantage of the new faith was evident to me at once... I was taught that there was but *one* God in the Universe, and not many,—over eight millions,—(sic) as I had formerly believed. The Christian monotheism laid its axe at the root of all my superstitions. ... Monotheism made me a new man. *I resumed my beans and eggs.*"²⁾

If anything, the quotation illustrates how important the idea of monotheism was in a Japan which now focused on modernization. It also implies that, in Uchimura's view, Shinto represented an opposite of monotheism with its acknowledgment of a myriad ("eight millions") of gods. Shinto was polytheistic—which meant that there were a number of gods that were not integrated in one principle and which ruled over certain sectors of reality.

One might, however, question whether Uchimura's view was valid in all respects. In particular, one might question whether the term "polytheism" actually gives an appropriate image of the Shinto pantheon. In the following I will present an interpretation in which I look for monotheist attitudes inside Shinto traditions, particularly in the context of modern Japan where unifying and integrating ideas increasingly came to the fore.

Monotheism in a Shinto-Christian Encounter

I will distinguish between two dimensions of monotheism transmitted to Japan by means of the Christian mission. Monotheism contained an *exclusive* but also a *universal* theism. God was the *exclusive* God, but God was also the creator and *ultimate ruler of all that exist*. Could it be that Shinto contained or at least possibly developed different types of monotheism—a "non-exclusive" or even a "non-universal" monotheism?

I turn to the first of the two dimensions or aspects of monotheism just mentioned. Different from the monotheism represented by Christianity, which I see as “*exclusive*,” I see in Shinto an “*inclusive monotheism*.” The “inclusive monotheism” acknowledges and venerates one supreme god, but other divine powers are acknowledged and venerated as well. They are, however, included within or subordinated under the supreme divinity. Eventually they might be cooperative or supportive in accordance with established principles of the pantheon. The Christian “exclusive monotheism” and a possibly Shinto “inclusive monotheism” will both have a rallying center of supremacy—but they could be seen as extremes on one line of monotheist thought starting from “exclusive supremacy” and becoming increasingly inclusive.

Exclusive Supremacy (God) Inclusive Supremacy (A kami-hierarchy)

Referring back to the Uchimura reception of Shinto, the “inclusive monotheism” was not part of his conception. He saw Shinto cults as a display of parallel and un-coordinated phenomena: in other words, as polytheist.

But one should also be aware of the other dimension of the monotheist map. One might then observe a *universally valid* monotheism, normally implied in the faiths of Judaism, Islam and Christianity. According to these three traditions God is God for any religion, and in all respects. The universe has a united, divine base. One might eventually discard the gods of other faiths as false representations of the One True Universal God. Or, one might transcend the concrete divinities of the various faiths and use terms like “the Real” as John Hick, the distinguished philosopher of religion, does. In such cases, the various images might work as windows to the true image of God, showing the true God more or less clearly. However, in contrast with these modes of a universal monotheism one might envisage a “narrow monotheism,” which means a monotheist perspective basically but not completely limited to the field of one’s own religion, temple or shrine. Inside Shinto one might argue that individual shrines, e.g. Shinto of Ise, Shinto of Izumo, and possibly the coordinating organization of numerous Japanese Shinto shrines (Jinja Honcho), illustrate “narrow monotheism.” Izumo Shinto, where Okuninushi is venerated as the supreme Deity, and Ise Shinto, which promotes the Supreme Goddess Amaterasu no Mikoto, represent different “narrow” monotheist organisms. Basically they are concerned with a special field of reality, a regional field, or another part of the whole. But the “borderlines” of such fields are grey. The cult might be glancing beyond its borders. A number of shrines in Shinto can, if seen in isolation, be considered “monotheist” in this reduced and limited sense. I use the term “narrow monotheism” for such monotheist structures.³⁾

A line illustrating variations of fields where one’s monotheism applies will then show similarities to the variation between exclusive and inclusive monotheism:

Universally valid monotheism Monotheism valid in a narrow field

In the statement quoted from Uchimura Kanzo, this variation between “universal” and “narrow” monotheism is not considered. It is, however, fully possible to accept a monotheist structure as far as one’s own religion or faith is concerned, while admitting that the religious world might be greater, providing other divine relations for people and religions outside one’s own faith; one would nonetheless share a belief in a universal quality or capacity of the divinity one reveres.⁴⁾

Monotheist Developments by Hirata Atsutane and in the Taikyo Sempu Movement

The question of monotheism had been raised in light of the early encounters of Shinto with Christian thought. For example, there is an ongoing discussion about the influence of Christian monotheism on the thought of Hirata Atsutane.⁵⁾ Ishida Ichiro calls Hirata’s thought “Shinto-Christian syncretist Shinto” (*shin ki shu go shinto*). He argues that Hirata models Amenominakanushi no kami after the Deus of Christianity as creator and ruler of all things, who dispenses rewards and punishments to human beings in accord with actions during their lives, and who leads good souls to heaven and casts evil souls into an underworldly hell. He sees this Shinto-Christian syncretist “Hirata Shinto” as the rallying ideology of the Sonno movement of the late Tokugawa period, as also is evident in Shimazaki Toson’s “Yoake mae.” Furthermore, that same Hirata Shinto became linked to the movement of Taikyo Sempu in the early Meiji Period and to State Shinto from the last half of the Meiji period, Ishida holds⁶⁾ (Inoue, *Kami*, 128f.).

Ishida Ichiro sees a marked monotheist transformation of Shinto thought already in the very early stages of Western influence on the Japanese religious world. However, another scholar, Sasaki Kiyoshi, voices doubts about Ishida’s line of thought. The discussion focuses on two issues. One of these concerns Christian influence on the thinking of Hirata. The other implies the question whether a Hirata influenced by Christianity also influenced the Taikyo Sempu Movement. Sasaki admits the possibility of a monotheist Christian influence on the Shinto-based, modernizing Taikyo Sempu Movement, but he questions its connection to the thinking of Hirata Atsutane. Sasaki considers the creator-god concept of the early Meiji Taikyo Sempu Undo a distortion of Hirata’s thought.⁷⁾

I do not refer to this discussion in order to take a stand on the concrete issue of influence, but only to underline that it seems unreasonable to overlook Christian influence on Shinto thought during the period of Japanese modernization. One has, however, to be sophisticated when stating the degree of this influence and the character of the Shinto reception. In other words, it is a difficult case to state how Shinto received the influence and how Shinto was affected.

In this paper I am particularly interested in seeing how Shinto traditions and appearances have displayed various types of monotheist attitudes or foci. Which type of monotheism guides the thought of Hirata Atsutane and the Taikyo Sempu Movement?

I am inclined to see the monotheism of Hirata Atsutane as well as that in the Taikyo Sempu Movement as “inclusive monotheism.” Several divinities were recognized, but the monotheist focus led to a hierarchical lifting up of one particular Deity, such as Amenominakanushi. The process of interaction with Christianity is certainly an interesting subject. In this connection, however, I find it more significant to point to the inclusive character of the monotheism which emerged in Shinto contexts, whatever the relationship to early historical or contemporary factors might have been and whether outer factors (Christianity) or inner factors (old traditions of Shinto thought) were most prominent.

A similar reflection will accompany the discussion of a possible universal dimension of the actual Shinto form of monotheism. Universal ideas of a creator cannot be dismissed as irrelevant, since they were present in the expressions of Shinto thought referred to above. The question is whether one should consider a “narrow ” concept of the universal God the appropriate one. Although Shinto in the age of socio-religious expansion (Keio-Meiji-Taisho-Early Showa) focused on the Emperor as a cosmic principle, thus developing a universal monotheist system, there are limitations in the ethnic-national background which support the idea of a “narrow monotheism.” Yet I wonder whether this narrow monotheism should be seen as “universal in becoming,” thus deserving to be named by the term ‘monotheism.’

Early Postwar Monotheism of Professor Noguchi and Shinto Agencies

The postwar development of Shrine Shinto has taken a markedly new attitude to monotheism. Different from the above-mentioned “expansionist” Shinto, the postwar development of Shinto monotheism has become more moderate and delimited; in the above terminology, it has further “narrowed” the universal dimension of monotheism. In that respect it is interesting to look at the thought of Ise Kogakkan Daigaku philosopher Noguchi Tsuneki in his book, *Gendai ni okeru nanji no hakken - ware nanji tetsugaku no kenkyu* (The Contemporary Discovery of Thou: A Study of I-Thou Philosophy),⁸⁾ where he engages in a serious encounter with Western theology and philosophy. Admitting difficulties and the sharp contemporary confrontations between Shinto and Japanese Christianity—indeed, to the extent that dialogue seems unyielding⁹⁾—he nevertheless sees options for a fruitful encounter with present-day Western dialectical theology. As even the book title reveals, he is much inspired by the Jewish thinker Martin Buber. But he also engages in a positive encounter with the Christian theologians Emil Brunner, Karl Barth, Friedrich Gogarten, Ferdinand Ebner, and others. He argues that as Shinto creatively developed bodies of thought from its earlier encounter with Buddhism (Uden Shinto) and Confucianism (Suika Shinto), there are

promising opportunities today in encountering Christian thought.¹⁰⁾ Relating to contemporary Western ideas, he finds similar features in the I-Thou thinking of Jewish-Christian traditions and Shinto thought. This similarity appears especially in the relationship between human beings and God. In Shinto, however, the human-divine encounter takes a characteristic form, as already indicated in the Imperial Rescript of Education (1891) promulgated in the Meiji period. In line with a reverence for the modern Shinto breakthrough in the Meiji period, he holds that the Japanese people should be led by their several-millennia-old religious traditions to encounter the supreme Lord who is their Emperor.¹¹⁾

Noguchi does not discard the various Shinto cults which take place in different Shinto shrines. That variety presents no confusion; loyalty to the Emperor does not rule out veneration of different divinities. But in his interpretation of Shinto, the supreme norm of commitment and loyalty for the Japanese people lies with the Emperor. Subordinated to the cult of the Supreme Lord, there is a natural space for a plural veneration of divinities. One might thus on the one hand see his way of thinking as a typical expression of an “inclusive monotheism.” In the book referred to above, Noguchi is apparently *not a supporter of universal Shinto monotheism*—there is for instance no expectation that other peoples, national ethnic groups, or religious communities should venerate the Japanese Emperor as their Supreme Lord. His expectation of a monotheist Emperor-centered loyalty is expressly directed towards the Japanese people (*kokumin*). Has he then lost sight of the monotheist universality from earlier, prewar periods of modern Shinto thought?

As far as I can understand Noguchi, this is not the case. In the book to which I have referred, he makes the fundamental attitude of “*ware-nanji*” a universal phenomenon which also implies the attitude to the Divine. He names it the Great Insight of Shinto (*Shintotai*).¹²⁾ But this means that his Japan-centered understanding of the Emperor actually ties in with a universal I-Thou relationship. In the I-Thou relationship there is a universal space or category by means of which emperor veneration becomes universal. It cannot be called a universalization of the Emperor in the same way as Judaism, Christianity and Islam universalize God. But the Shinto monotheism does not stop at the borders of the Japanese nation. By means of a universal structure of encounter it extends worldwide. His universalism might well be seen as a “universalization in becoming,” a potential universalization of the Emperor, thus qualifying for what I previously called “narrow monotheism.”

It is most noteworthy that Shinto, already from the early Meiji period, developed a plurality of Shinto structures which, under the umbrella of State Shinto (Kokka Shinto), were united in a common veneration of the Emperor as the Supreme Lord. With the dethroning of the Emperor from an ultimate authority in its own right to a representative symbol of a democratic state after the Pacific war, a new plurality of Shinto expressions appeared. The plurality encompassed different types, such as singular shrines, social units (*shaka* 社家 Shinto), academic Shinto (*Gakuha* Shinto) and Shinto-related organizations (*kyokai* 教会

Shinto) such as Tenrikyo, Konkokyo, and closely related movements such as Omotokyo, Seicho no Ie, and Mahikari. A most representative structure is given in present day Shrine Shinto, the large part of which partakes in the overarching network of “Jinja Honcho.” This basis of new Shinto emerged after the Shinto Directive (Shinto shirei) promulgated by GHQ on December 15, 1945, had removed Imperial Shinto from the national body of State Shinto. The various Shinto bodies were then “set free” to define themselves as independent religious organizations. Nevertheless, Jinja Honcho maintains an Emperor orientation; Shinto believers are invited to “gratefully receive the emperor’s mind and will.”¹³⁾ The universalism of this pluralist, democratic Shinto differs in kind from the universal ideas on the Emperor from prewar and Pacific war eras. But the universalizing option is still valid, as various types of Shinto spread worldwide on democratic structures. Looking back to the above reflections on Noguchi’s thought, his ideas on Shinto’s “inclusive monotheism” as well as its democratized “narrow monotheism” are also paralleled by several of the agencies mentioned previously, including the Shinto of Jinja Honcho.

Shinto in a Globalized Context: Postmodern Shinto

Postwar Shinto has in various ways continued to develop relationships to Western religious traditions, not exclusively to Christianity. An example from recent years is provided by the work of the Institute for Japanese Culture and Classics at Kokugakuin University, Tokyo. Its symposium on Globalization and Indigenous Culture, held in 1996 in Tokyo, treats vital aspects of Japanese Shinto in dialogue with Asian as well as various European traditions. Interestingly enough, this symposium focuses on three dimensions: Religion, Language, and Family. In the context of the problem of monotheism, the focus on religion and family in particular provides dimensions related to the overarching problem of this article. The symposium promoted an awareness of *decontextualization*. This means that the Confucian traditions which have governed both Japanese family life and national life—including the Emperor-relationship—are challenged. As religions, languages and even family traditions are subjected to global processes of “decontextualization,” the question could be formulated: How does decontextualization affect the Shinto monotheism which has been seen above (by Noguchi) as a postwar, contextual Japanese phenomenon? The symposium sponsored by Shinto Kokugakuin Daigaku does not provide any definite answer. Does it imply that the Shinto “narrow monotheism”—the type illustrated by a tradition from Hirata to Noguchi—either explicitly continues the connection with the Emperor or with the Japanese people as a national unit (*kokumin*)? If so, it might imply that more flexible types of Japanese Shinto emerge in Japan and abroad, and catch on among people of various ethnic or national backgrounds. These sympathizers of various backgrounds or converts to Shinto might join societies or groups, or individually support a Shinto monotheism of an inclusive nature. There

is no development in Shinto to remove the integration or coordination of various Shinto cults. The postmodern emphasis on simultaneous plurality simply strengthens the already existing coordination with alternative cults. One might rather question the dimension of “narrow monotheism.” The universal dimension is in any case markedly weakened.¹⁴⁾ Does the disappearance of a universal concept such as the Emperor and the appearance of the whole pluralistic mood of postmodernity actually lead away from “narrow monotheism” towards a new polytheism? Might the devotion of Shinto-related groups be so loosely directed towards the Japanese Emperor (or a derivative of the Emperor) that universality is lost?

It is not common today to define Shinto as a monotheist faith. The distinguished scholar on Shinto, Ueda Kenji, thus considers Shinto polytheistic and sees the holy within each and every particular being. Now, if everything were left to itself it would fall apart in confusion and disarray; so Shinto arguments in favor of an integrating center have not disappeared.¹⁵⁾ Ueda thus proceeds to see an integrating center for major Shinto cults in the Sun Goddess Amaterasu and her descendants—Amaterasu is the central, divine quality of integration. This reminds one markedly of a transcending type of “narrow monotheism.” There is, however, a limit to this integration. According to a comment of Norman Havens,¹⁶⁾ the Shinto god does not legitimize social action. Shinto gods do not have this capacity, and legitimation is found instead in the “hierarchy of the Japanese social system.” Following Havens, I might put it in the following way: postwar, democratic Japan with its democratized Emperor lacks the dynamic center of universalization previously provided by the Divine Emperor who was incarnated in the Japanese social structure. Here lies a major difference between the Shinto of early periods of modernization (Hirata Atsutane and Shinto prior to 1945) and the late, modern Shinto. The normative role of a Universal Emperor for national life and behavior is substantially weakened; it might even be in a process of disappearing.

The situation could be seen as follows. Amaterasu—or any other godhead—is not in itself the ultimate authority in Shinto. This authority needs an immanent force, which during the years up to 1945 was identified with the Emperor and his agencies. The Emperor legitimized an authority which during the years 1891-1945 more and more functioned as a monotheist apex of universal character. This monotheism was of an inclusive nature, but also contained clearly universal features. After 1945, loyalty to the Emperor becomes an individual option even in Shinto. The Association of Shinto Shrines (Jinja Honcho) argues for a spiritual acceptance of the Emperor’s mind.¹⁷⁾ Shinto philosophers like Noguchi and a number of Shinto organs have represented some kind of “narrow universal” monotheism. Under the influence of globalization the “narrow universal” monotheism has shrunk even further. Izumo Shinto and Inari Shinto revere their different supreme divinities. Shinto-related organizations such as Tenrikyo, Konkokyo and Omoto retain a kind of emperor system but they do not pronounce loyalty to the incumbent Emperor—loyalty rests within the organizational power of the religion or shrine. There is little doubt that these various units of late postwar Shinto

display particular forms of “inclusive monotheism.” But can they still be called monotheistic in the sense of a narrow type of universally valid monotheism? Today such universalistic implications are definitely removed together with the State Shinto/Emperor system. But I am not willing to see late modern Shinto in its plurality as “non-universal polytheism.” Is not a universality of faith still preserved in many of the various bodies of contemporary Shinto? It might be “narrow,” but the internationalization and expansion of several of the groups indicate a vitality of universal concepts.

Conclusion

A look at features of Shinto in modern Japan reveals, first, a Shinto which attempts to break its polytheist image and character, replacing it with an Emperor-related Shinto characterized by a markedly inclusive monotheism. The supreme divine force works partly by co-operating, partly by suppressing other cosmic powers. This Shinto thus clearly differs from the Christian-Jewish-Islamic monotheism, which has an exclusive character. An Emperor-centered universal monotheism emerged during the years between 1891 and 1945, taking shape as a “narrow monotheism” with clear potential for universality. Postwar Shinto, with its legal background in the Shinto Directive of 1945, has maintained its “inclusive monotheism” while on the other hand the privatization of Emperor veneration has led to a diminished universality of Shinto. Partly it is reduced to a norm for the Japanese people (see Noguchi) with a general, universal implication, a “narrow universalism.” The emergence of numerous Shinto cults with differently oriented, inclusive monotheism is lately subjected to a general wave of globalization. This development blurs the traditional understanding of “Emperor” as a universal or national symbol and leads to individual Shinto, the authority of which includes different combinations of elements in an emperor system. Retaining inclusive monotheism, the new, postmodern Shinto takes on an individual and varied character. It transcends the borders of the Japanese nation. I therefore still find that a universal, “narrow” monotheism is retained. New Shinto is not polytheistic, but its universal ambitions are transformed onto a purely spiritual and individualized level.

Uchimura Kanzo experienced Shinto a century ago as disturbingly polytheistic. There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of his experience and thought. But as I see it, already in his time there existed a monotheist Shinto. It later changed character, but still Shinto should in my view be regarded as belonging among a category of inclusive, narrowly monotheist religious cults.

NOTES

- 1) Uchimura 1895/1971: 22ff.
- 2) Uchimura 1895/1971: 28f.
- 3) “Narrow monotheism” comes close to the concept of “monolatry.” I do, however, find the concept of “monolatry” unsatisfactory as there is in “narrow monotheism” an awareness of the universal. When Japanese Shinto was introduced in Eastern Asia during the Pacific war, it was actually accompanied by the idea of a universal Shinto in becoming. Eventually this universal Shinto might have been established in so large a part of the world that it would deserve the characteristic of “universal.”
- 4) State Shinto during the Showa period up to the Pacific war might provide one example. Emperor veneration was basically tied to the Japanese nation. But, the veneration was supposed to extend to the East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere—eventually wider. The whole universe was within reach of the Emperor’s universality.
- 5) Inoue 1998: 128ff.
- 6) Inoue 1998: 128f.
- 7) Inoue 1998: 129.
- 8) Noguchi 1971.
- 9) Noguchi 1971: 372.
- 10) Noguchi 1971: 375.
- 11) Noguchi 1971: 370-375.
- 12) Noguchi 1971:1 §82.
- 13) Havens 1998: 241.
- 14) It would be appropriate in this connection to list cults of a Shinto shrine and Shinto-related new religions, e.g. Omoto, Seicho no Ie, or the internationally expanding Mahikari movement. The subject is treated by Nobutaka Inoue in the publication Inoue 1997.
- 15) Havens 1998: 239ff.
- 16) Havens 1998: 240.
- 17) See “Three Principles of a Reverent Life,” issued by Jinja Honcho in 1950; Havens 1998: 241.

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