

# Comparing and Contrasting Shinto with Christianity

## Ritual and Belief

Participation in the rituals of their religion means more to followers of Japanese Shinto than does holding correct beliefs. Recording the beliefs of Shinto in an official document such as a creed would likely make no sense to a follower of Shinto. For Christians, on the other hand, beliefs are important, and correct belief is vital. This is true for most Christians, but it takes a particularly clear institutional form in Catholicism. Through the ages, the Catholic Church has recorded these beliefs in creeds and statements of faith. The importance of beliefs is also reflected in the *imprimatur* and *nihil obstat*, which are official Catholic Church approvals that declare material that teaches about faith to be free from doctrinal or moral error.

## God and the *Kami*

For Christians, God is the Creator of the natural world and is clearly distinct from it. Although the one God chooses to be in relationship with creation in an ongoing manner, God remains distinct from it. For followers of Shinto, the Divine, in the form of innumerable *kami*, and the world of nature are not so distinct. The Japanese are also likely to seek a mystical, felt experience of the *kami*, while Christians typically seek to be in relationship, rather than in mystical communion, with God. The Japanese may well not even know the individual name of the *kami* they worship, emphasizing instead feeling the deity more directly in their hearts. These differences reflect the extent of distinction between the Divine Creator and the created world in each faith.

## Human Nature

According to Shinto tradition, people are descended from the original deities and are born with a divine essence that cannot be lost. There is simply no concept of sin in Shinto, in part because the *kami* have not given concrete ethical commandments, nor can the people who share the divine essence of the *kami* become separated from them. Christians believe that people are created good as a part of God's good creation, but through Original Sin people have entered into a sinful state of being. All human efforts to escape sin are tainted by the sinfulness they seek to escape, and are thus futile. God's grace is necessary to overcome sin.



## Forgiveness and Purification

Both purification and forgiveness deal with what is perceived to be the problem with humankind. For Christians, disobedience, putting human will and ego ahead of God, leads to specific sinful acts. Both sin as a state of being and sin as the specific acts to which that state of being leads call for the forgiveness of divine grace, and perhaps penance. From a Shinto perspective, because the divine essence of the human being cannot be lost or destroyed, purification is needed. Purification in effect polishes the dulling overlay of that essence, allowing it to shine with its full brightness.

