

Empathizing (Shinto)

A Shinto Shrine in the United States

Shinto is not practiced widely in the United States, although there is a significant Shinto population in Hawaii. Most Japanese immigrants to the United States are Christians or Buddhists, and unlike Buddhism, Shinto has not attempted to appeal to non-Japanese people. Because of this, it will likely be difficult to find a guest speaker. In lieu of that, the students can visit websites to enhance their appreciation of Shinto. The first, and still the most prominent, Shinto shrine in the United States is the Tsubaki Grand Shrine of America, established in Stockton, California, in 1986 (www.tsubakishrine.com). A visit to this site can give the students some grasp of the life of the shrine as it makes good use of photos that show the activities that occur at the shrine.

Shinto Worship

A complete Shinto worship ritual includes four basic events: purification, presentation, prayer, and participation. The presiding priest will first wave a wand over the heads of the assembled worshippers, or sprinkle them with salt or water in an act of purification. The priest then enters the shrine to present the offerings to the Kami-presence in the shrine. These offerings, consisting of fruits and vegetables, rice, salt water, seafood, and similar things, are presented and arranged with reverence and care. The priest then reads a formal prayer, either silently or aloud, in a chanting manner. The participation aspect ranges from the very simple to the very complex, depending upon the resources of the temple-goers. After going over this with the students, ask them to find parallels in the structure of the Mass.

The Beauty of the Natural World

One Shinto priest has written that being really alive is in part a matter of aesthetic perception and appreciation, because a large part of the world's goodness is its beauty (Rev. Yukitaka Yamamoto, *Way of the Kami* [Tsubaki American Publications, Stockton, CA, 1987], page 75). Reverend Yamamoto's statement embodies the Shinto reverence for nature and all things beautiful. Ask the students what they would identify as central to the world's goodness. Do they think it includes the beauty of the world? In what ways, if any, is the world's beauty an avenue to spiritual experiences and communion with God for them?



Shrine (State) Shinto and Civil Religion

American sociologist of religion Robert N. Bellah is perhaps best known for his elucidation of the concept of America's civil religion. It is noteworthy for our purposes that he began his academic career as a student and researcher of Japanese religion. Students who would like to read his seminal 1967 essay on this topic can find it on The Hartford Institute for Religion Research Robert Bellah page, (www.robertbellah.com/articles_5.htm). They can then read Varieties of Civil Religion on Religion-Online (www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=3041&C=2602). This chapter compares Japanese and American civil religion. Ask the students to examine the similarities and differences between Japanese government-sanctioned Shinto and American civil religion. Invite them to consider whether the experience with Japanese Shrine Shinto points to any dangers in the idea of an American civil religion.

