



Session 7 ***Shintoism***

Notes:

Questions

1. In what ways have the beliefs of Japanese mythology (kami, emperor, divinity, etc.) negatively impacted Japanese history, especially in the 20th century?
2. What aspects of Shinto history may explain the Japanese resistance to Christianity? (e.g., their belief in themselves as divine and powerful, etc.)
3. What are the best ways, in your view, to reach people in Japan with the message of Jesus?

Brief History of Shintoism

1. Origins (Prehistoric Japan, before 500 AD)

- Shinto (“the Way of the gods”) is Japan’s **indigenous religion**, rooted in ancient animistic beliefs and nature worship.
- Early Japanese clans (*uji*) each had their **kami** (spirits/deities) connected to natural features like mountains, rivers, and trees.
- Religious practices centered on **purification, offerings, and seasonal festivals** to ensure harmony between people and nature.

2. Early Development (Yayoi & Kofun Periods, ~300 BC–500 AD)

- Agricultural life reinforced reverence for kami related to rice, fertility, and weather.
- Clan leaders often served as both political and religious figures.
- No single founder, sacred scripture, or central authority existed.

3. Imperial Shinto (500–800 AD)

- The **Yamato clan** rose to power, claiming divine descent from the sun goddess **Amaterasu**.
- Shinto became tied to **imperial legitimacy** — the emperor was seen as the chief priest of Japan.
- *Kojiki* (712 AD) and *Nihon Shoki* (720 AD) were compiled, recording Shinto myths, imperial genealogy, and history.

4. Shinto–Buddhist Syncretism (800–1800 AD)

- Buddhism arrived from China and Korea in the 6th century and gradually blended with Shinto.
- Kami were interpreted as **manifestations of Buddhist deities** (a system called *shinbutsu-shūgō*).
- Shrines and temples were often built together.

5. State Shinto & Nationalism (1868–1945)

- During the **Meiji Restoration**, Shinto was separated from Buddhism (*shinbutsu bunri*) and declared Japan’s **state religion**.
- The emperor was promoted as a living deity.
- Shinto rituals became linked to nationalism and patriotism.
- After Japan’s defeat in WWII, the Allied Occupation abolished State Shinto, and the emperor renounced divinity.

6. Modern Shinto (1945–Present)

- Today, Shinto exists mainly as **community-based shrine worship**, seasonal festivals (*matsuri*), and life-cycle rituals (birth, marriage, New Year).
- It remains deeply woven into Japanese cultural identity, even among those who are not religious.

Key Points

- No founder or central scripture.
- Focus on purity, harmony with nature, and respect for kami.
- Historically intertwined with Japan’s politics, culture, and identity.
- Still influential in Japanese life today, though often more cultural than doctrinal.

Sharing the Gospel with Someone Practicing Shintoism

1. Understand Shintoism

- Core Beliefs: Belief in *kami* (spirits in nature, ancestors, objects), focus on purity, harmony, and rituals.
- No concept of one Creator God.
- Ancestor veneration is important.
- Emphasis on external purity, not forgiveness of moral sin.

2. Find Points of Contact

- Respect for nature → Genesis 1:1, Psalm 19:1 (God as Creator).
- Purity and cleansing → Hebrews 9:14 (true cleansing through Christ).
- Honor ancestors → Exodus 20:12, but worship God alone (Matthew 4:10).

3. Gently Expose Gaps Biblically

- Shinto rituals cannot cleanse the conscience (Hebrews 10:11-14).
- Sin is real and separates us from God (Romans 3:23).
- Worship should be directed to the Creator, not creation (Romans 1:25).
- Only Jesus offers eternal life (John 14:6).

4. Share the Gospel

- Begin with Creation: God is the Creator of all (Genesis 1:1).
- Explain the problem of sin: All have sinned (Romans 3:23).
- Present Jesus as Savior: The only way to God (John 14:6).
- Offer hope: Eternal life through faith (John 3:16).

Key Scriptures

- Genesis 1:1 – In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.
- Romans 1:25 – Worship of creation vs Creator.
- Hebrews 9:14 – Cleansing through Christ.
- John 14:6 – Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life.
- Acts 17:24-27 – God seeks a relationship with people.

Example Conversation

Shinto believer: “I feel peace when I visit a shrine because it connects me with nature and the spirits.”

A Biblical Response: “Nature’s beauty is powerful because it’s the handiwork of the One who made it all. The peace you feel is a glimpse of the deeper peace God wants to give — not just in nature, but in your heart through knowing Him personally.” (Col. 1:16-20)