

Aike P. Rots, *Shinto, Nature and Ideology in Contemporary Japan: Making Sacred Forests*

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A compelling question for contemporary scholars is whether religion can (or should) be mobilized as part of the effort to resolve our environmental crises. On the one hand, entrenched beliefs often run counter to scientific explanations and may stand in the way of progressive reform. On the other hand, it seems ill-advised to neglect or dismiss what for many people is the most central and defining feature of their identity, the most significant influence on their attitudes and behavior. And in the longer term, it is obvious that religions do change in response to changing social, political, and economic conditions—indeed, they themselves often provide the impetus for such changes.

A related question is whether some religions are more conducive than others to pursuing an environmentalist agenda—are certain religions inherently “greener,” in other words? The animistic beliefs of indigenous peoples as well as “Eastern” religions like Buddhism and Shinto are often cited as promoting a greater appreciation for the natural world, while “Western” religions like Christianity are blamed for its overexploitation. This was the thesis famously set forth by Lynn White (1967) in his classic article, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis.”

It is within this context that Aike Rots presents his excellent analysis of Shinto in Japan. The book focuses on the *chinju no mori* (sacred shrine forests) that accompany or surround a Shinto shrine compound. These forests are recognized as dwelling places of the *kami* (the spirits or deities that are the object of worship in Shinto ritual). But their significance, of course, extends well beyond the mystical realm. “As vestiges of Japanese tradition, they are seen as places where children can be socialized as members of their community—and, ultimately, as patriotic and morally responsible citizens” (101). They thus play a role in promoting nationalism.

The author adopts a transdisciplinary approach, combining an examination of written texts and popular media with ethnographic fieldwork. He begins with some historical background on Shinto as an invented tradition, which developed out of Buddhism while incorporating localized folk beliefs and nationalistic sentiments. Over time it has come to be considered uniquely Japanese. It thereby appears to qualify as both “Asian” and “indigenous,” a doubly fitting antidote for Western depredations.

Indeed, Shinto advocates have all too eagerly embraced White’s thesis, presenting their own religion as an instructive example for the rest of the world to emulate. Japan, they maintain, developed as a “forest civilization,” wherein the Shinto reverence for nature held human abuses in check and prevented the mass destruction of forests that occurred in other parts of the world. This is what the author labels the “Shinto Environmentalist Paradigm,” a revisioning of Shinto as a friendly nature religion, free of its past associations with Japanese imperialism.

Much of the book is devoted to the hypocrisy inherent in this paradigm. As thoroughly documented by historian Conrad Totman (1989), widespread deforestation did occur throughout Japan prior to the Edo period (1603–1868)—well before any significant Western influence. The Edo government proceeded to mount an ambitious reforestation effort but, as Rots observes, “the incentives for this reforestation were economic and pragmatic, rather than based on any kind of ‘Shinto’ appreciation of nature as sacred” (113).

More specific to the present day, the author demonstrates through a series of examples that Shinto’s vaunted love of nature is mostly limited to the circumscribed shrine forests, which through long-term human meddling have become more like productions than nature preserves. A notable case in point is the Grand Shrine at Ise; its forest is maintained mostly to supply timber (i.e., cypress logs) for the shrine buildings, which by tradition must be rebuilt every twenty years.

Shinto priests generally lack the time and resources, not to mention the scientific expertise required, to involve themselves too deeply in environmental movements. They also have to juggle competing interests, like corporate sponsors and a public that is mainly concerned with promoting economic vitality. The Shinto establishment, as epitomized by Jinja Honchō (the Association of Shinto Shrines), has made little effort to address global issues such as climate change, pollution of the oceans and atmosphere, overconsumption of resources, and loss of biodiversity.

Still, Shinto has inspired some degree of grassroots activism, mostly aimed at protecting forests from resource extraction or construction projects. Local priests may lead such efforts, but often it is lay volunteers, including scientists, who take the initiative. A common strategy is “sacralization”—that is, reasserting the sanctity of an endangered forest by invoking Shinto imagery. “Religion” is thereby redefined as

“culture,” “heritage,” and “tradition” to gain wider acceptance and appeal. Rots coins the term “discursive secularization” to describe this process (169).

The book also addresses the influence of Shinto worldwide. A particular turning point was the inclusion of Shinto in the “Religions of the World and Ecology” conferences at Yale during the late 1990s, which showed Japanese scholars the international interest in Shinto and its applicability to environmental issues. Shinto shrines have been established in San Marino, the Netherlands, and California (though only the San Marino shrine is supported by Jinja Honchō). The author also credits the influence of popular media like the animated films of Miyazaki Hayao for relating Shinto concepts to environmental concerns. In its embrace of animism and seeming affinities with neo-paganism and nature spirituality, Shinto appeals especially to people “who feel disillusioned with certain aspects of Western culture and are looking for alternative worldviews based on notions of nature as divine and enchanted” (201).

Such internationalization raises interesting questions for a religion so closely entwined with nationalistic sentiments. I wonder, for example, how Jinja Honchō will react to the inevitable syncretism that will occur as Shinto adapts to other cultures. Can there be *kami* of foreign origin, or do they have to be imported from Japan? As the author notes, “[i]t is this paradox—apparently concerned with the environment and internationally oriented, while increasingly nationalistic and explicitly political—that defines contemporary Shinto” (202).

Overall, I found this book to be well researched, highly informative, and thought provoking. The author maintains a healthy skepticism toward the strategies and motivations behind the Shinto Environmentalist Paradigm but is cautiously optimistic about the future role of Shinto in environmental activism, especially at the grassroots level and among a younger generation of priests. As is often the case with institutional hierarchies, the most practical and creative developments may be led from the bottom up.

REFERENCES

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