

John Breen and Mark Teeuwen, *A New History of Shinto* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), xii + 264 pp., \$94.95 (cloth), \$32.95 (paperback).

Shinto, the spiritual tradition specific to Japan, has seen a surge of interest, both popular and academic, in the West over the past decade. Much of the general interest can likely be credited to the circulation of Japanese popular culture texts, particularly *anime* films and television shows, that afford non-Japanese audiences some degree of exposure to a cultural geography that many experience as markedly different from their own. One such area of difference is the spiritual orientation evident in texts ranging from the films of Hayao Miyazaki (e.g., *Spirited Away*, *Princess Mononoke*, *My Neighbor Totoro*, as well as others) to the television show *Inuyasha* (in which a centuries-old shrine and its attendants figure prominently) to the various iterations of the *Pokemon* cartoon series (suggestive of a teeming spiritual dimension that coexists with the everyday world of humans). From a broader perspective, Shinto is often characterized as an indigenous spiritual tradition that, due to the enforced isolation of Japan by the Tokugawa Shogunate during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and the first half of the nineteenth centuries, managed to survive into the modern era appreciably more intact (though not to say static) than other indigenous religions in Africa, the Americas, and Europe. As such, a more detailed understanding of Shinto would be valuable in illuminating its potential areas of kinship with, and provide a larger context for a deeper appreciation of, Pagan traditions, practices, and experiences.

As with other indigenous traditions, a clear picture of how Shinto might have originated and developed has been difficult to achieve. There was no writing system in Japan before the import of Chinese characters in the fifth century CE, and unlike the Abrahamic monotheisms, Shinto privileges neither the written word in the form of sacred texts (the *norito* prayers are written not to be read silently, but to be intoned audibly by priests as respectful requests to the *kami*, or “gods”) nor any articulated creed. Its history is rather complex. At least until the Meiji era, its history is characterized largely by local practices centered on specific shrines rather than a uniform set of doctrines and rituals. Post-Meiji, Shinto’s history manifests by contesting perspectives on its relationship to political power, imperial and otherwise. Since at least the early twentieth century, the characterization of Shinto as vital to the “uniqueness” of Japanese culture and identity has been a topic of debate within Japanese religious scholarship, both in and outside Japan.

In *A New History of Shinto*, John Breen (Reader in Japanese at SOAS, Uni-

versity of London, and associate professor at the International Research Centre for Japanese Studies in Kyoto) and Mark Teeuwen (professor of Japanese studies at the University of Oslo) raise the stakes in this conversation appreciably. They argue that previous approaches to Shinto's history have been disadvantaged by a shared tendency to foreground a predetermined notion of what Shinto is (and is not), and contend that a fresh approach stripped of such preconceptions (and attendant agendas) will yield a much clearer picture of the fluidity of how the category of "Shinto" has been understood and deployed. This is particularly consequential for ongoing debates concerning the nature of what this tradition, as well as Japan generally, "is" or "should be" with regard to cultural nationalism. Chapter 1 provides a succinct and useful overview of the prior literature, and concludes that "The crux of the matter is that kami shrines, myths, and rituals are a great deal older than their conceptualization as components of Shinto. Therefore, the only way to delve into [their] histories...is by laying the concept of Shinto to one side, at least a start. Only in this way we will be able to...identify the significance of Shinto in [these] histories" (21). Chapter 2 examines the development of indigenous deity cults, and their evolving relationship to Buddhism and eventually the state, from *c.* eighth century CE until the Meiji era. Having established these foundations, in Chapters 3–5 Breen and Teeuwen then focus on what they identify as the three core facets of what comes to be understood as "Shinto" – shrine, myth, and ritual – and focus on one specific example of each: Hie shrine, the site of which is a longstanding shrine complex near Kyoto; the myth of Amaterasu Ōmikami (the sun deity) and the cave; and the *Daijōsai* ritual by which a new emperor accedes the throne. This approach allows Breen and Teeuwen to argue in Chapter 6 and in the Conclusion, that ultimately what is understood and received as "Shinto" today is a construct, "not...the unchanging core of Japan's national essence, but rather...the unpredictable outcome of an erratic history" (228).

This argument is not without controversy, to say the least, and the authors explicitly state their awareness that it runs counter to what they identify as the "Shinto establishment's emic understanding that kami shrines, myths, and rituals are, of their very essence, aspects of Shinto, and have always been so" (228). This book is an important contribution to this conversation; its nuanced analyses of history and the details of the shrine-myth-ritual nexus lay the groundwork for further academic inquiry and offer many thought-provoking ideas to the reader already somewhat conversant in Japanese religion. It also suggests some fascinating and potentially useful areas of shared inquiry with the study of Pagan traditions, particularly the interplay between the values of

modernity (e.g., pluralism and 'objectivity') and the complex function of ethnicity in indigenous traditions and practices. The more casual reader interested in the topic, particularly in Shinto spirituality as it is understood and experienced by practitioners, might be better served initially by other recent works, in particular Thomas P. Kasulis' *Shinto: The Way Home* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004) or George Williams' *Shinto* in the "Religions of the World" series (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2005).

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