



SHINTO

A RELIGION PROFILE FROM INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS, INC.

HISTORICAL ROOTS

To Westerners, Japan remains an enigma. This is nowhere more true than in its religions. Japan's traditional faith, Shinto (or *kami no michi*)—"the way of the gods"—is rooted in Japan's national history and intricately intertwined with its culture.

Early Formative Period (pre-history–790 A.D.)

Early Shinto (before 538–552): The phrase "early Shinto" describes the religious life that flourished in Japan before Buddhism arrived in Japan in the 6th century after Christ. The main written sources describing early Shinto are documents called *Kojiki* and *Nihongi* (chronicles of early myths recorded after 712 by members of the imperial court) and the *Engishiki* (descriptions of early prayers and rituals).

Because the myths of the *Kojiki* and the *Nihongi* were written so much later than the actual period they purport to describe, there is some question as to how accurately they describe the beliefs and practices of early Shinto. Nevertheless, it can be known that the traditions of early Shinto centered around agricultural festivals, clan or family loyalty, and reverence for life. Also, local shamans, as religious functionaries, spoke for the *kami* (gods) and combatted evil spirits. They used *Kagura*, traditional Shinto sacred dance and music performed by young

maidens (*miko*), to call forth the *kami*. Indeed, much of the traditional art, literature, and music of Japan may be connected to these shamanistic practices.

Many specific customs of the common folk in this period are now shrouded in some mystery. But one distinction clearly emerges from that ancient tradition. There are two major patterns of *kami* in Shinto, the *hitogami* and *ujigami*. The *hitogami* are members of the class of *kami* (or *gami*, gods) associated with sacred persons like shamans, sages, or saints. The *hitogami* system is strongly individualistic, and it reverences the important, sometimes idiosyncratic religious figures of Shinto history. The *ujigami*, however, are a class of *kami* associated with families, clans, or a related local region. It is *ujigami*, not *hitogami*, that a Japanese family would reverence when participating, as part of filial duty, in ancestor veneration.

Early Interaction with Buddhism (552–710): Between 538 and 552, new religions came to Japan from China and Korea. The arrival of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism initiated new dynamics of religious interaction. In early Shinto, each community probably worshipped its local deity according to provincial custom. But under the influence of other faiths, the adherents of Shinto gradually organized

their deities into a pantheon and coordinated a system of shrines.

Although neither Confucianism nor Taoism gathered a distinct religious following in Japan, great conflicts erupted over whether or not to accept Buddhism. These debates led to clan warfare and, ultimately, to the assassination of the emperor in 592. The winning clan leader placed on the throne his Buddhist niece, and she in turn chose as her regent the very influential Shotoku (573–621). Shotoku made Buddhism the national religion and used it as part of his campaign to consolidate the state and to create a more mature Japanese culture.

Despite Buddhism's importance in the imperial court, however, powerful clans still supported Shinto. Several emperors in the late 600s updated the Shinto rites and gave them parallel status with Buddhism. In this period, strong ritual connections emerged between the imperial court and the Grand Shrine of Ise. The Grand Shrine of Ise is dedicated to two goddesses, one of whom is the all-important Sun Goddess, Amaterasu.

The Writing of the Kojiki (712): It was as part of this revival of Shinto in the imperial court that the emperor commissioned the writing of the *Kojiki*. The creation myths in the *Kojiki* present a cosmology of various gods. Seven generations of

Christianity, but made Buddhism a branch of the state. The Tokugawa governors also revived Confucianism, an active faith of moral obligation or duty.

Meanwhile, Shinto continued to evolve toward nationalism. A renewed interest in Japan's classical literature permeated Shinto in this period. Advocates of Shinto sought to retrieve the historic Japanese spirit, to indoctrinate the people with this spirit, and to purge Japanese life of foreign influence. Several Shinto themes of the past—the divine origin of the imperial line and the sacredness of the national tradition—blossomed during the later Tokugawa period. This national ethos fostered a distrust and even hostility toward foreign ideas, including even those of China. The adaptation of Shinto themes to these nationalistic concerns created a kind of Shinto civil religion. The full fruit of this nationalism ripened in the twentieth century and culminated in World War II.

Meiji Period and the Modern Era (1868–1945): In 1868, various pressures, both from within Japan and from foreign nations, conspired to topple the Tokugawa regime. Soon the whole feudal system collapsed. A group of younger *samurai* class members restored the emperor to the throne in the famous Meiji restoration. Their banner cry was “return to antiquity,” although ironically they quickly moved to bring Japan into the modern world. In 1889, the Japanese established a parliament system while retaining the emperor as a symbol. Japan turned its energies to becoming a powerful economic force influenced by Western-style democratic principles (although actual power continued in the hands of a small group of unelected officials).

The government in the Meiji era lifted the ban on Christianity (as part

of its movement into the modern world), disestablished Buddhism, and established Shinto as the state religion (as part of its restoration of the imperial line). In the late nineteenth century, missionaries reintroduced Roman Catholicism and introduced Protestantism for the first time. The Japanese made incredible economic and political strides, changing from a feudal state to a modern leader among the nations.

In the years leading up to World War II, Shinto played an increasingly prominent role in Japan's national life. The Constitution of 1889 officially declared a “nonreligious” Shinto. This set of values and ideals—it is hard to call this form of Shinto a religion—served to affirm the imperial way and to glorify the natural structure. To this nonreligious use of Shinto, the government wedded Confucian ideals such as loyalty and filial piety as well as *samurai* values like self-discipline. This reinforced the national consciousness of sacred superiority. The nationalists used these notions of sacred nationalism and a stated desire to bring the “whole world under one roof” to support Japan's involvement in World War II.

It is difficult to interpret the prewar era of development in Shinto. Some scholars say that the nationalistic and militaristic use of Shinto is in fact the creation of a separate Shinto cult. One calls it the Kokutai cult (Woodard, 11). The nationalistic use of Shinto by the government between 1868 and 1945 was to some degree an overlay over the traditional religious life of those in the provinces.

At the end of World War II, the United Nations imposed a new Constitution on Japan. During the military occupation (1945–1952), the government (as reshaped by occupation authorities) required genuine religious freedom. Shinto was disestablished, and Emperor Hirohito offi-

cially disclaimed his divine status. In this context of total social breakdown and unprecedented freedom, many traditional religions struggled gradually to reorganize while many new faiths exploited their new opportunities.

Despite all that is new and foreign in Japan, that which is ancient and fundamentally Japanese still permeates the consciousness of the nation. In many areas, Japan maintains a remarkable tension between accepting new influences and retaining its ancient character. This is nowhere so true as in religion.

THE SHINTO WAY OF LIFE

The spirit of Shinto: Shinto embraces the moral values of loyalty and duty to the family, clan, or group. Many aspects of Japanese culture illustrate this theme. The word for human person is *ningen* (literally, “between people”). To be human is to be together with other persons. Japanese society emphasizes community over individuality. The Japanese language includes conventions for speaking to those above, at, or below one's social standing. Verbal communication thereby reinforces a hierarchically structured system of human relationships in which everyone participates. The correct use of Japanese language links a person to the social web.

Reinforcing the principle of duty is the feudal notion of *on*, “indebtedness.” Though some Japanese will deny that this concept is relevant to the modern context, the principle of indebtedness still exerts powerful influence on Japanese social relationships.

The feudal origins of *on* relate to a gift of land made by a lord to a vassal. In return, the vassal gave loyalty to the lord, thus establishing a mutual relationship of obligation. The parent-child relationship is also

key. Children are to care for their parents in old age and to venerate them after they are dead (concerning ancestor veneration, see "note" at end of this profile). These examples show two important features of this system of indebtedness: the relationship often develops between a superior and an inferior, and the relationship is between particular people and is not just loyalty to an abstract moral principle.

Related to *on* is *giri*, a social obligation requiring Japanese to act according to strict social norms toward those with whom a relationship has developed. *Giri* is a broader concept than *on* in that *giri* applies not only in hierarchical relationships (say, emperor to subject), but also to relationships with peers (say, between friends). One interesting expression of *giri* is gift giving, a regular occurrence in Japanese society. So many gifts are given, in fact, that wedding gifts are recycled.

In addition to group loyalty, the Japanese highly value aesthetic sensitivity and refinement. This aesthetic sensitivity is directly relevant to the Japanese understanding of religious faith. The Japanese value "poetic realities"—"realities of immediate experience and feeling that resist any description" (Ellwood and Pilgrim, 105). For instance, Shinto speaks of *naka ima* (literally, the middle of now), the emphasis on living in the purity of the present moment.

By contrast, Western Christians often assume that right doctrine is centrally important to any religious faith. To the Japanese mind, this may not be so. From the Western perspective, the Japanese tendency toward vagueness and imprecision in religious expression is surprising, confusing, and even irritating. The Japanese way has its own rationale, however. Anyone who would understand the logic should enter into it and seek to appreciate it aesthetically.

The Japanese are known as an extraordinarily gracious people. At the interpersonal level, Westerners are struck by the extreme deference that Japanese people often show. Yet while this courtesy is remarkable, Westerners should not misread it. In business negotiations, for instance, the Japanese can be uncommonly tough opponents. A certain external agreeableness can shield from Western view the deep loyalties that the Japanese have for all things Japanese.

Another important feature of the Shinto view of life is its emotional depth and purity. We find this not only in the interest in ritual purification (*harai*), but also in the emphasis on a pure *kokoro* (heart). One cannot express Shinto morality in lists of rules. Shinto is more concerned to preserve or restore a ritual purity of an unclouded mind and an undefiled soul. These form the ground for proper action. Truth (*makoto*) in this context is something lived out in *kokoro*. Truth is not propositional; truth does not refer to correct descriptions of actual states of affairs. Truth is experienced. Japanese expect that communicating *makoto* requires not explicit statements, but refined, allusive speech. This is most difficult for foreigners to master.

Shinto scholar, Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801), captures this feature of Shinto. His concept is *magokoro*, "sincere heart," an ideal that combines both *kokoro* and *makoto*. *Magokoro* is the very essence of the gods and of whatever is divine within humans as well. The ideal is not a concept to be thought, however, but a quality to be experienced. Again, this sense of the quality of experience (over against an interest in precise theological statements) makes the Japanese religious experience quite different from that of Western forms of Protestant Christian experience.

The practice of Shinto: The actual lived experience of Shinto is quite varied, but mostly it centers around the Shinto shrine. (Shinto places of worship are called "shrines;" Buddhist places are termed "temples.") The sacred grounds of a Shinto shrine are marked off by *torii*, large sacred gates shaped something like the Greek letter π , only with two horizontal bars. Along the path from the *torii* to the main building, one always finds a laver for purification. The main shrine building houses several areas. In the most sacred place is the *shintai*, an object such as a mirror, jewel, or sword that embodies the *kami*. The *shintai* is not itself the direct object of veneration. The faithful worship the deity that indwells the *shintai*.

A worshipper will approach the main building, stopping to cleanse with water. She will present offerings by throwing a coin in a collection box or by lighting incense. In front of the main shrine building, she faces the altar area, bows her head, claps twice to summon the *kami*, and holds her hands together in front of her face. In this stance, she offers prayers to the *kami*. For more devout followers, worship involves attention to ritual purification and quiet waiting in expectation for the *kami* to come and commune with the believer. In many homes, a small family altar (*kamidana*) provides a place where ancestors are revered.

Worship, however, is not confined to overtly religious acts.

In general, the notion of right practice seeking purification and celebrating the vital forces of life permeates the Japanese religious sensibility and the whole of Japanese life. From the ancient mythic accounts of the actions of the original *kami* in creating the world to the ritual invocation of *kami* to bless a new oil tanker [or a new traffic light], from the most

sacred ceremonies of the great Shinto shrines to a sense of proper social order and etiquette, the concern for right practice, purification, and life-celebration is evident. This religious awareness and form is deeply ingrained in the Japanese tradition (Ellwood and Pilgrim, 6-7).

Community celebrations center around annual *matsuri*. Broadly, *matsuri* means all Shinto ritual, including the ritualization of life itself. More specifically, however, the *matsuri* is a local Shinto festival that celebrates a local *kami* and invokes its presence.

SHINTO RESISTANCE TO CHRISTIANITY

Although the new Constitution stripped back the nationalism of the prewar era, traditional Shinto continues as an aspect of contemporary Japanese life. Only about 1.5 million of the 120 million Japanese declare themselves Christians. But 112 million adhere to Shinto. Many Japanese see themselves as followers of several religions, for 93 million are also Buddhists! Despite these numbers, however, 65% to 75% of Japanese claim to follow no personal religion. For the most part, religious allegiance is nominal. To be Shinto, in the mind of many Japanese people, is simply to be Japanese (Reader, Andreasen, Stefansson, 33).

A major factor in the Japanese resistance to Christianity is its demand

for exclusive religious allegiance. In a culture where Buddhism and Shinto have developed a "division of labor," this requirement for an either/or choice seems odd. For many Japanese, religions do not offer a personal faith; they provide ceremonial services. Traditionally, Buddhism conducts funerals, but Shinto performs weddings. Today, it is quite popular in Japan to have a "Christian" wedding. But this means only that the dress, format, and setting are Western and church-like. Ironically, of course, the Japanese are quite exclusive *culturally*. But *religiously*, they are syncretistic, and thus for Christianity to compel an exclusive commitment to its own teachings and to its God alone seems difficult.

Christian teaching did make significant inroads during the Christian century (1549-1649). St. Francis Xavier (1506-1552) first introduced Roman Catholicism to Japan and met with initial success. According to estimates, perhaps 10% of the population was Christian during that era. Yet Christianity could not make the religious compromise that Buddhism made. Although Buddhism is as much a foreign religion as Christianity, its accommodation of Shinto (for instance, through *honji suijaku*) meant that Buddhism was thoroughly "Japanized." As an uncompromisingly monotheistic religion, Christianity could never consent to a process like this. A century after Xavier, during the Tokugawa era, terrible persecution fueled by anti-foreign

and anti-Western passions wiped out the Christian movement. Christianity did not return to Japan for over two hundred years.

In the novel *Shogun*, one person is forced to decide whether to remain a Christian. She says, "I have been a Christian for a hundred years. I have been Japanese for a thousand." This captures, in the Japanese spirit, the sense of many Japanese that adherence to the foreign religion about Jesus means somehow to betray something fundamentally Japanese. Therefore, the Japanese people have not chosen Christianity in large numbers.

Both the Japanese resistance to Christianity and Japan's allegiance to the new god of materialism connect with the fact that Shinto *kami* are very immanent. Historically, in views where the gods indwell nature, it becomes difficult to distinguish the gods from nature. If one begins by saying that god refers to the life force immanent within nature, one ends up after a time only with nature. Thus the real religion of many Japanese, rightly proud of their economic achievements and power, is actually irreligious and secular. Shinto is a deep tap root that sustains certain basic cultural customs or social patterns. It is also a bark that overlays a basically secular life orientation. But the real heart of the plant for many is participation in the business of business. The strongest personal religion is secular materialism.

| THE NATURE OF THE GODS CONTRASTED WITH GOD | |
|---|---|
| Shinto | Christianity |
| There are many gods (<i>kami</i>). | There is one triune God. |
| The <i>kami</i> are procreated by other gods. | God created all things and persons. |
| The <i>kami</i> indwell material objects and the natural world. | God transcends the world in His being. |
| The <i>kami</i> may be helpful or hurtful. | God is loving and absolutely good. |
| The <i>kami</i> are the gods of Japan. | God is the Creator and Lord of all peoples. |

THE HUMAN RELATIONSHIP TO THE GODS OR GOD

| Shinto | Christianity |
|---|--|
| The <i>kami</i> are offended by ritual or ceremonial pollution related to blood or death. | God is alienated by the moral rebellion expressed by the self-centeredness or disobedience of His creatures. |
| The <i>kami</i> might commune with those who are ritually purified and who wait for their presence. | God promises to be present to anyone who calls upon Him for forgiveness. |
| Shinto believers can fulfill their duty while following their own life's agenda. | Christians follow God when they fulfill God's agenda and will. |
| Shinto believers gain the good graces of the <i>kami</i> by following the principles of purification. | Christians enjoy a relationship with God through trustful reliance (faith) on God. |
| Enjoying the good graces of the <i>kami</i> depends on human efforts. | A relationship with God is a gift (grace) that no one can deserve. |

RESPONDING TO PEOPLE INFLUENCED BY SHINTO

1. *Understand that every Japanese is deeply infused by Shinto:* Anyone who encounters Japanese culture experiences the universe of Shinto. Shinto is, in a sense, the very national air breathed by all Japanese. Thus, it is quite different from Christianity where dedicated followers of Jesus may try quite deliberately to live out their faith every day. Shinto is more background belief and practice than is the lifestyle of a faithful Christian. Yet it is not for that reason any less powerful as an influence. Indeed, it may be for this reason all the more powerful.

2. *Acknowledge the striking beauty of Japanese culture:* Often, the aspects of Japanese culture that Americans and Europeans first come to know seem very strange. One thinks of the *sumo* (large wrestlers wearing very little clothing), *sushi* (eating fish and other sea creatures raw), and the *furo* (bathing with friends at the neighborhood bath house).

Yet without question, Japanese culture is extraordinary. Beautiful national shrines are exquisite. The tea ceremony conducted by a skilled practitioner captures all the stylized beauty of the ancient traditions. Immaculate Japanese gardens skill-

fully create a sense of utter serenity and calm. The list goes on. Willingness to appreciate and enjoy this beauty is a priceless quality for anyone who would influence a Shinto person toward Christ.

3. *Enlist the aid of the Japanese Church:* Just as the Western church mirrors its setting, the Japanese church reflects its culture. A church in Japan is, to Western eyes, very hierarchical. The pastor holds the power in the group, and the elders exert authority over those who are younger. There is something very Japanese about this arrangement even if it seems unattractive to Westerners. A major advantage is that the church is a social group to which a Japanese person can belong. Without that belonging, commitment to Christ cuts a Japanese person off from a social network. Contact your local ISI team member or one of the groups listed under "Organizations" for a group to which your friend can belong.

4. *Recognize that the Japanese speak about difficult topics very carefully:* A Japanese person is deliberately subtle in his or her mode of speaking, especially when discussing matters with those who are above him/her on the social ladder. In Japan, it is not considered good form to be blunt, and most Japanese will

hint delicately at important but unpleasant facts rather than say them right out loud. Ambiguity is, in fact, a sign of respect.

5. *Focus on clarifying religious terms:* Although the Japanese value ambiguous ways of communication, a Christian sharing his or her faith must move with sensitivity toward clarifying key Christian terms. The word *kami*, for instance, is notoriously vague. My father once spoke with four Japanese persons about God. Sensing their confusion, he asked them what the word *kami* implied to them. Their answers helped him realize that the Japanese view the *kami* as being Merlin the magician, Robin Hood, and Santa Claus, all rolled into one.

The communication of Christian meanings is impossible without carefully defined Christian terms. To some degree this is circular. One cannot express Christian meanings without Christian words; one cannot define Christian terms without understandings of Christian truth. Nevertheless, communicating the gospel should begin with the biggest truth there is—God's existence and nature. God is the creator who is fundamentally different than the creation. He is not any *kami* (a god), but *sozoshu* (creator) or *sozo no kami* (creator God).

6. *Use the Mars Hill discourse:* Paul's sermon to the philosophers of Athens (Acts 17:22-31) clarifies God's nature. A Christian may express without reservation that the "God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands." This contrasts the *kami* who are created and who indwell the *shintai*. "He himself gives all men life and breath and everything else." God is the creator of all—including spiritual beings, emperors, and ancestors. "From one man he made every nation of men." The human family is one in its origin and in its need for a Savior. Paul's words to his pagan audience address many of the monotheistic Christian teachings that a Japanese person, steeped in Shinto polytheism, tends to misunderstand.

7. *Use the harai (purification) concept:* The Japanese believe that those who wish to come into the presence of the *kami* must be pure. *Harai*, the act or state of purification to remove defilement, is therefore very important. The need for *harai* parallels the biblical idea that moral righteousness is a prerequisite for entering God's presence. A skillful Christian can use this analogy as the basis for communicating a central Christian claim. As *kami* indwell shrines that are sanctuaries of purity, so God remains morally pure. As ritual pollution separates humans from *kami*, so moral pollution keeps humans from God. Thus, the Christian teaching that we must be changed before we are allowed to be in God's presence finds some echoes in Japanese thinking.

Despite initial similarities, Christians must explain several important distinctions in order not to distort the Gospel. The Japanese notion of pollution is ritual, not moral. The biblical teaching is that the cause of our pollution and con-

sequent distance from God is our disloyalty to God. We humans express this infidelity when we treasure our own goals and values. But when we are consumed with our own interests and desires, we cannot come into God's presence. Only as we experience God's gift of forgiveness for this disloyalty do we become pure. Our need, therefore, is to give up our devotion to the Kingdom of Self and allow God to make us faithful followers of the Kingdom of God. We do not need ritual purification, but new life based on a relationship to a new King (2 Corinthians 5:17-18).

8. *Counteract the tendency toward syncretism:* Following the *honji suijaku* principle, Japanese thinking has long identified the gods of various religions or vaguely accepted them all as legitimate deities in a hierarchically structured pantheon. It is all too easy to add the Christian God to the mix as yet another deity. Clarifying the nature of the god must include identifying the God as the only true God. Again, God is not just *kami*, but *sozoshu*.

9. *Declare that God is not servant, but Lord:* I once viewed a *National Geographic* special program on Chinese native religions. One village elder explained the beliefs of his village. They worshipped a god, he said, because the god brought good weather and bumper crops. As long as the farming was good, they worshipped this god. If famine should come, however, the villagers would not hesitate to discard that god and find another. They needed a god who could guarantee rain.

This mentality is not far from the religious practice of many people—including some Christians. We are tempted to love God for His gifts instead of loving the Giver of the gifts. But the point of worshipping God is not to gain certain advantages. We cannot use God to further

our agenda. The irony of the gospel is that as we truly forget our petty plans and commit our ways to God and His Kingdom, we find the fulfillment we thought our plans would produce. We think satisfaction comes in fulfilling our interests. Only if we are planted like a grain of wheat and die do we find life.

10. *Share that the creator God fulfills the human longing for meaning.* The Japanese people enjoy the security of highly developed social networks and the joy of a brilliant culture history. But there is more to human existence than these. A Japanese word, *ikigai* (purpose in life), captures this idea. Few Japanese have found *ikigai*, however, even though failing to find it is a great loss. The Christian faith declares that through God as revealed in Jesus, *ikigai* is found. When human longings for significance are so great that economic miracles, social networks, brilliant culture, and national honor do not satisfy, God's presence does.

Summary: Japan today is a leading participant in the worlds of global trade, scientific and technological research, and international politics. Yet despite the post-World War II economic miracle, the Japanese are a people quite unlike Westerners. Though they receive much from many cultures, they successfully domesticate those borrowings into their own ethos.

A Christian who encounters a Shinto person should recognize that very ancient and powerful traditions shape this person's life. The Japanese sense of decorum, politeness, and apparent cooperation can mask the deep currents of national loyalties and cultural values that flow through the soul of every Japanese person. Yet, the Japanese culture, for all its beauty, does not meet the most basic aspirations of the human heart. These are

longings planted by God who has put "eternity in our hearts" (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

An admirer of Shinto will come to Christ only when economic success, cultural achievements, and community relationships are understood for what they are: expressions of a desire for significance in life that tend to substitute for relationship with the creator God. Followers of Jesus can share with adherents of Shinto that one will not find *ikigai* in economic or material gain, in art or cultural tradition, in clan or community relationships, or in academic achievement, but only in Jesus.

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Organizations:

The Japan Network
7925 - 186th Street SW
Edmonds, WA 98026
Compuserve #102077,227
Phone: 1-800-33-JAPAN

Helps American Christians reach Japanese for Christ; also provides materials.

Japanese Christian Fellowship Network
P.O. Box 260532
Highlands Ranch, CO 80126-0532
phones:

(303) 730-4226 (direct line for Japanese-speaking people)
(303) 730-4160 (ext. 126 or 224)

e-mail: SKuroda@project.com

Has a nation-wide network that helps locate Christian fellowships for Japanese.

Witnessing Tool:

Shiakari Pass, by Ayako Miura. The powerful true story of a young Japanese man who discovers his own sinful nature as he tries to live a good life in his own power. Available in both book and video. Order through The Japan Network.

Note: Is it ancestor "veneration" or "worship?" This act amounts to worship for a few devout Shinto believers but it is a quasi-religious reverencing for the majority of secularized Japanese people whose Shinto experience is only a veneer. In both cases, however, it is a hindrance to the gospel. Moreover, it is so entangled in Shinto customs, rituals, and idioms that Christians should not participate in it.

Funds for the production of this profile were given to ISI in loving memory of Dr. James Roberts, long-time friend of international students.

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