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Shinto Man

By Joseph J. Spae. Tokyo: Oriens Institute for Religious Research, 1972. 79 pp. ¥1,000.

Coming so quickly after his important book, *Japanese Religiosity* (1971), readers will be surprised at the appearance this year of still another volume from the pen of Joseph Spae.

First the contents of the book. In his introductory chapter, Spae delineates some of the basic categories of theological and philosophical "anthropology" which have been developed in the West and draws contrasts with the Japanese view of man. In chapter 1, he devotes twelve pages to the history and structure of Shinto, giving special attention to the Shinto of the Imperial Family, the household, and the shrines. In chapter 2, he discusses "Basic Shinto thought on man", taking up some of the fundamental attitudes towards man in the Japanese tradition

and the nature of soul in Shinto. He then turns to the nature of *kami* in chapter 3, discussing Paul Tillich's concept of "polytheism" in connection with Japan. In chapter 4, "Elements of the Shinto Ethic", the author discusses "the problem of good and evil", the "antinomianism" of Shinto, the Shinto concept of sin, and the nature of "salvation" in this very this-worldly religion. In the final chapter, Fr. Spae discusses the old question "Is Shinto a religion?", concluding with Wilfred Cantwell Smith that "'Shinto' is still not rightly understood if it is thought of as a religion" (p. 68). Its real role should be to mediate 1) "between Japan's basic religiosity and her organized religions, Buddhism and Christianity", and 2) "between civil society, or the

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state, and organized religion". (p. 68 & p. 69) It is at this juncture that he introduces the concept of "civil religion" recently made popular in the United States by Robert Bellah.

Fr. Spae's understanding and evaluation of the concept of "civil religion" seems to depend heavily upon the work of Fr. John A. Coleman¹.

Modifying Coleman's definition, Spae defines civil religion as "a religious or ideological system which is dedicated to the social integration of society and relates man's role as citizen and his nation's role among the nations to their ultimate meaning" (p. 69).

So much for the content of the book. While Fr. Spae has done a good job of summarizing the "theological anthropology" of Shinto in a mere 70 pages, the reviewer was rather disappointed by the book's heavy concentration on theological formulations while neglecting the "an-

thropology" (i.e. view of man and society) among the folk. He was utterly astonished at Spae's suggestion that Shinto be adopted as Japan's "civil religion".

I. *Neglect of the Folk Tradition*

The perimeters of a religion are notoriously difficult to define. This is especially true of Shinto which is not merely a cultural religion but has become, in fact, a religious culture. Spae correctly recognizes that, unlike Buddhism (*bukkyō*), Confucianism (*jukyō*) and Christianity (*kirisutokyō*), Shinto is not a religion of doctrines (*kyō*). Unfortunately, by looking upon this religious culture almost exclusively through the spectacles of Shinto theologians, Spae has a way of making the "way of the *kami*" sound like "teachings about the *kami* and man". This may be inevitable when one uses the word "Shinto" as a reification of a living religio-cultural complex. Nevertheless, such expres-

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sions as "Shinto primarily sees man as..." leave one with the impression that Shinto is a "teaching" after all. The neglect of the folk tradition in Shinto and the heavily reliance upon "documents" (p. 17) give added weight to this impression. Only in a few places is the religion of the folk touched upon directly (e.g., in two paragraphs on p. 26). This reliance upon theological distillations at the expense of popular religious realities is especially regrettable in a book which aims to tell us something about the nature of man in the Japanese tradition.

II. *Shinto as Civil Religion*

Fr. Spae concludes his book by speculating on the future use of Shinto as civil religion. Apparently his evaluation of civil religion was inspired mainly by Coleman who has recommended the following relationship between church, state and civil religion in the United States:

The differentiation of civil

religion from both church and state is healthy for both the state which does not place itself in opposition to the church and the church which remains free to perform a prophetic religious function. The relation between civil religion (the state) and organized religion (the church) will be most harmonious when neither monopolizes the symbols of the civil religion but both cooperate in encouraging a relatively autonomous set of civil religious symbols.²

For Robert Bellah, civil religion is good for a nation; for Coleman and Spae, it is good for the churches too. But, while Spae cites Bellah's very cautious words concerning the possibility of using a *reformed* Shinto in a civil religion for postwar Japan, he overlooks Bellah's deep scepticism about Shinto voiced in the same essay. There, Bellah asks: "...what in Shinto can meet the needs generated by the break-

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down of state Shinto itself? What within Shinto can transcend its own particularism and provide the basis for a genuinely modern and a genuinely differentiated personality, culture and society?" Then, with a pause, he answers his own questions: "Probably nothing".³ While Spae assures his readers that transcendence is "deep at the heart of Japanese life" (p. 12), his account of the Shinto *kami* leads us to believe that they are less than "ultimate". How, then, can Shinto either "transcend its own particularism" (Bellah's prerequisite) or relate "man's role as citizen and his nation's role among the nations to their *ultimate* meaning" (Spae's definition of civil religion)?

The depths of this "particularism" of which Bellah speaks can only be gauged by taking a closer look at the folk tradition. If scholars once again are going to put Shinto forward as a candidate for the office of Japan's civil re-

ligion, Shinto's tradition of *saisei itchi* (the unity of religion and government) must be understood from the grass-roots up. Not only do we find *saisei itchi* as a slogan among the elite (p. 22), it was also a sociological reality within the pre-war village (especially in the *miyaza*) and family (especially in the role played by the *kachō* as the representative of the ancestors). When we look at Shinto at this level, we discover a stress not only upon "purity of heart" and "sincerity" (emphasized by Shinto theologians to this day), but also an uncritical ethos of obedience and a mystification of actual political and economic realities within the traditional village (pointed out by sociologists of religion).⁴ In other words, when we look at the "unity of religion and government" and other Shinto practices (especially the *matsuri*) of the traditional Japanese village, we begin to uncover the spiritual roots of an undialectical, *Gemein-*

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schaft-like "civil religion" which could be (and was) easily used by an authoritarian government for the manipulation of the Japanese people. While it is true, as Yanagita pointed out, that "it is a mistake to consider all the various facets of popular religion are encompassed by the single term Shinto"⁵, the actual practices of the Japanese folk must be included in any adequate analysis of the religious definition of man and society in Japan. This must be done even when religious practices are not as flattering as their official or theological reconstructions. Only after all of the facts have been laid upon the table should one put Shinto forward as the civil religion for post-war Japan's would-be democracy.

The proposal to use Shinto as a civil religion in modern Japan is an audacious ploy bordering on temerity. The danger of such a move is that the symbols of the civil religion can easily fall into

the wrong hands. There is also the danger that a "relatively autonomous set of civil religious symbols" might get completely out of control. Ambiguous, undialectical and prone to manipulation as they are, the symbols and values of a civil religion easily penetrate the "shield of faith" of the churches, making short shrift of their highly vaunted "prophetic ministry." (I might also add that if Shinto were once again adopted as an officially recognized civil religion, there would be all the more clamor to reestablish its preferential treatment by the government. This would be especially true if it emphasized Shinto's "practically non-religious character" (p. 70) since, under the present Constitution, the religion's non-privileged status is based precisely upon a recognition of its *religious* character.)

Finally, one should seriously ponder the question whether Japan needs more civil religion.

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It seems to the present reviewer that altogether too much remains of the sentiments and prejudices of the civil religion of pre-war Japan. What is more, the country seems to be far more “integrated” under the present Constitution and material success than it was under State Shinto and the era of political irrationalism (politics-by-assassination, etc.). While Fr. Spae obviously is not advocating a return to State Shinto itself, the reviewer doubts whether it would be possible to generate a national consensus among the Japanese people at the present time to support even a *reformed* Shinto civil religion. And without a consensus behind it, such a civil religion will never get off the drawing-boards of the architects of religion. Hopefully Fr. Spae will turn his attention again to this important problem and spell out his ideas in greater detail.

1. “Civil Religion”, *Sociological Analysis* (Summer, 1970), pp. 67-77. Coleman’s essay was an attempt to integrate two of Robert Bellah’s studies, “Religious Evolution” and “Civil Religion in America” [published in his *Beyond Belief* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), pp. 20-50 and pp. 168-189 respectively].
2. *Ibid.*
3. “Shinto and Modernization”, in *Continuity and Change, Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference for Shinto Studies, Kokugakuin* (Tokyo: Institute for Japanese Culture and Classics, 1968), p. 160.
4. See Chiba Masaji, *Matsuri no Hōshakaigaku* [Festivals from the point of view of the sociology of law] (Tokyo: Kōbundō, 1970), especially pp. 129-132 and pp. 291-332.
5. Yanagita Kunio, *Japanese Manners and Customs in the Meiji Era*, trans. Charles S. Terry (Tokyo: Obunsha, 1957), p. 299.

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