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Shinto and the Heart of Japan through Ise Shrine

I am lucky to have the opportunity to participate in the Ise-Japan Study Program 2016, which is organised by Kogakkan University in collaboration with Ise City. This program is an interesting one that introduces Japanese indigenous religion, tradition and culture. I have benefited tremendously from participating in this program, and the knowledge that I have obtained from this program will be instrumental for my research on Japanese social history. I would like to thank all the administrative and teaching staff of Kogakkan University for their support over the past three weeks.

Shinto has been established as a religious practice in Japan for more than 1450 years, coexisting with Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. Shinto developed with local practices of agricultural rituals and festivals in Japan during the Yayoi period (300 BC-AD 300). The term “Shinto” was coined in the sixth century when Buddhism entered Japan from China. Shinto became the state religion at the time of the Meiji Restoration in 1867 when it was formally separated from Buddhism. At the end of the Second World War, Shinto was abolished as the State religion because of its association with Japanese military aggression in Asia. However, it still remains the centre of the rituals and community festivals in Japan until today.

Shinto honours ancestors, pays tribute to *kamis*, or spirits, and has had strong relationships with the Japanese state, emperor and culture. It is said that eight million *kamis* exist, most of whom are associated with the heavens or natural objects on earth. One of the most important deities among the eight million *kamis* is Amaterasu-omikami, the sun goddess, who, according to legend, gave birth to Japan's first ruler, Emperor Jimmu.

As a religion, Shinto has no founder, no official sacred scriptures, and no fixed dogma. It has a very formal and organised structure of religious practices and collection of folk practices, everyday beliefs and secret rituals. Shinto places tremendous importance on ritual purity and cleanliness in one's dealings with the *kami*. Diverging views on the nature of Shinto exist inside and outside Japan. Some view Shinto as a symbol of the Japanese nation because of its close links to the founding of Japan and the Japanese Imperial family. Others see it as a community religious practice because of its emphasis on local shrines and local guardian gods. Perhaps Shinto should be best viewed as a set of customs, rituals and beliefs relating to ancestor cults and animism.

Shinto is a strong spiritual force that continues to have an effect on the social structures of modern Japan. Although the majority of Japanese people claim no religious faith, most of them visit shrines on New Year's Eve and they visit their ancestors' graves regularly or occasionally. The popular participation in activities relating to Shinto by Japanese people shows that Shinto plays a significant part in the everyday life of Japanese people.

The well-organised Ise-Japan Study Program 2016 is a wonderful opportunity to learn about Japanese religion and culture. I would highly recommend this program to

anyone who wishes to understand and study Japanese culture and society in future.

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伊勢神宮に見る神道と日本の心

今回の「伊勢」と日本スタディプログラムに参加し、日本文化に対して大きな感動を得た上に貴重な体験ができた。皇學館大学の先生方や国際交流担当の職員の皆様に感謝を申し上げたい。このプログラムを通じて、神道は日本社会や日本人の心における如何なる位置を占めているのかを多少なりとも理解できた。

神道は、日本人の暮らしの中から生まれた信仰である。日本人の祖先は、農耕や漁撈などを通じて自然との関わりの中で生活を営んできた。日本人は清浄な山や岩や滝などの自然物を神宿るものとして祀った。祭りの場所に建物が建てられ神社が誕生し、日本の各地で発生した神々への信仰は、国土統一にともない、形を整えていった。仏教が中国から伝来した際には、この日本固有の信仰は、仏教に対して神道という言葉で表わされるようになった。

神道の神々は、自然現象を司る神や衣食住を司る神などでその数が八百万だと言われている。神道の信仰が形となったものが祭りである。祭りは、稲作を中心に暮らしを営んできた日本の姿を反映し、地域によって色々な形で行われている。神道の祭りを行うのは、神社に限られておらず日本の皇室は勿論、おり、家庭や職場で神棚があることも珍しくない。

神道のもつ理念には神々を祭る環境として清浄さを何よりも尊ぶ。神社は常に清らかさが保たれ、祭りに参加する人たちは必ず心身を清める。これら神道の理念や特徴は、日本人の生き方に深く影響しているといえる。つまり、神道における清浄さは美しい日本や日本の社会秩序の形成や維持に十分に影響を与えていたと思われる。神道の神々は新しさ故に汚れのない清潔な環境を好むとされ、伊勢神宮における二十年に一度の遷宮はその象徴とも言える。その一方以前の神宮に使われていた木材は再利用され、捨てられることもない。つまり清浄さと今の概念で言うリサイクルが何の矛盾もなく共存しているのである。

このプログラムは大変充実しており、講義や現場見学を通じて、神道における様々な側面を学ぶことができた。今回の体験は私自身の日本への理解を大きな役割を果たしたと言えるだろう。