

ZOROASTRIANISM, SHINTO, BAHA'I, SCIENTOLOGY, WICCA, AND SENECA TRADITIONS

What Makes a "World Religion"?

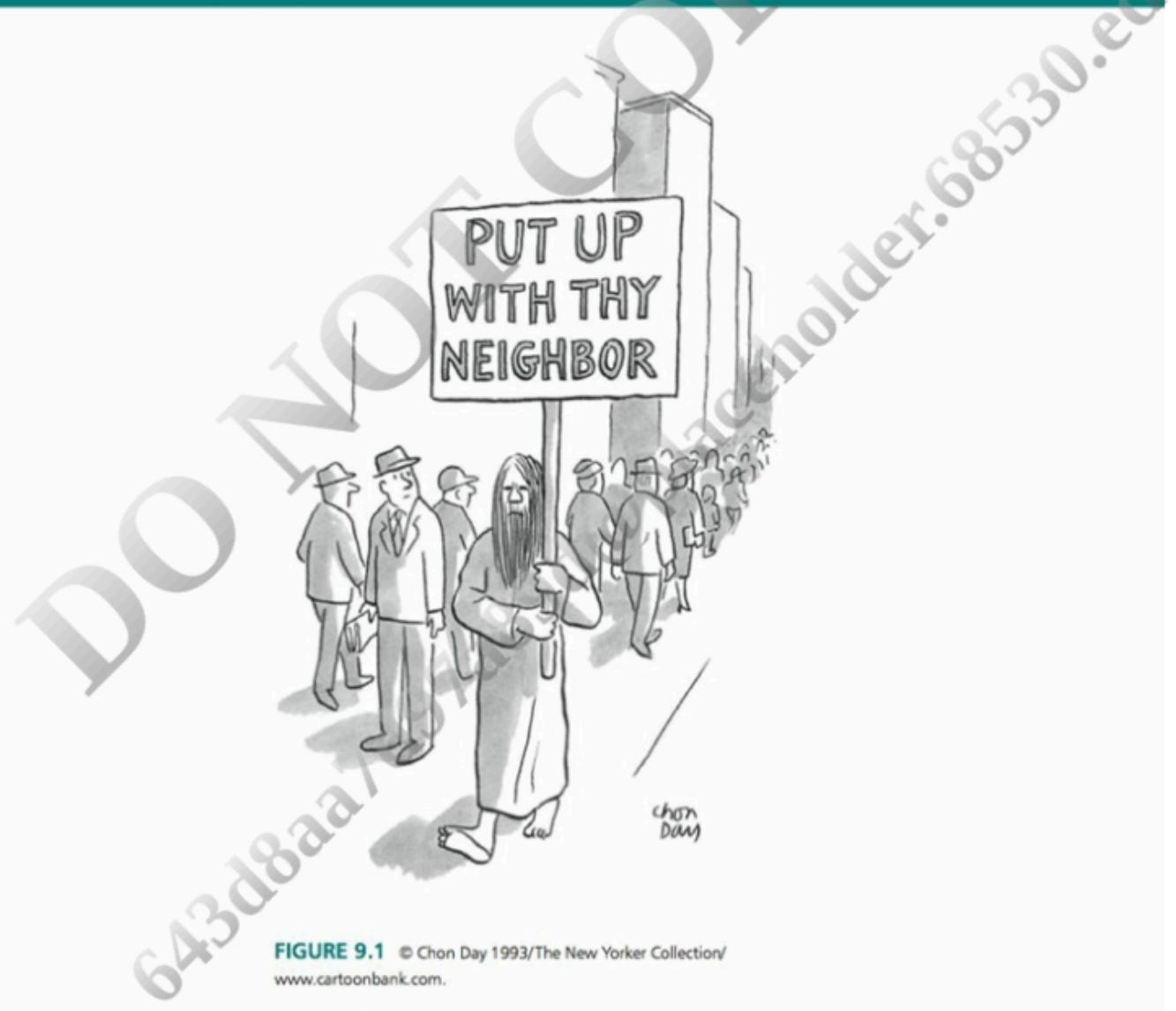


FIGURE 9.1 © Chon Day 1993/The New Yorker Collection/
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***The earth is but one country,
and humankind its citizens.***

BAHA ULLAH, FOUNDER OF BAHAI



Overview

Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism are generally called “world religions,” but this designation is questionable since it is not based on a set of features they share. For example:

- Judaism is ancient and influenced many later traditions, but it is followed by only a tiny fraction of the world’s population, while Zoroastrianism is older than Judaism and also influenced later traditions.
- Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are found throughout the world, but so is Baha'i; and Confucianism and Taoism are not international traditions, and they call themselves “teachings” rather than religions.
- Shinto is a national tradition, but its practitioners sometimes say it is a religion and sometimes say it is not a religion.

Such issues lead scholars to try to be more inclusive in their survey of religious traditions. In this chapter we shall survey six more traditions, pointing out key characteristics that may help us understand the phenomenon of religion.

- Zoroastrianism is the ancient tradition of Persia. It is monotheistic and scholars believe that its teachings about the purpose of life, the coming of a savior, and the afterlife influenced Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

What Makes a “World Religion”?

Zoroastrianism

History and Teachings of
Zoroastrianism
Zoroastrian Rituals

Shinto

History and Teachings of Shinto
Shinto Rituals

Baha'i

History and Teachings of Baha'i
Baha'i Rituals

Scientology

History and Teachings
of Scientology
Scientology Practices
Scientology Rituals

Wicca

History and Teachings of Wicca
Wiccan Rituals

The Traditions of the Seneca

History and Teachings of the Seneca
Seneca Rituals

Conclusion: To Be or Not to Be a Religion?



- Shinto, the ancient tradition of Japan, is so closely related to the rulers of Japan that it is often designated simply a national tradition rather than a religion, even though it involves belief in spiritual beings and rituals focusing on personal and family matters rather than political issues.
- Baha'i is less than two centuries old and accepts all other religions as valid.
- Scientology was invented by one man as a kind of psychotherapy; then he began calling it a religion.
- Wicca was developed in the 1950s to resurrect the “nature religions” of the British Isles before the arrival of Christianity.
- The Seneca, a Native American tribe, had no word or concept “religion,” though other people often talk about their “beliefs” and “religious rituals.”

After surveying these traditions, we shall return to the issue of defining religion, noting the political and legal implications of the designation.

What Makes a “World Religion”?

In the last three chapters, we have explored seven major traditions that are alive and well. This is far from a complete examination of the 10,000 traditions identified by *The World Christian Encyclopedia* as today’s religions, not to mention the thousands that have gone extinct. We chose Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism because they are commonly called “world religions” – the “Big Seven” – in Religious Studies textbooks. But what makes them count as “world” religions? Is it because they are followed by huge numbers of people? This is not true of Judaism. Judaism is included because it is foundational to two traditions that are followed by large numbers of people. But if this is enough to be counted a “world religion,” then Zoroastrianism should count too, because of its enormous influence – in the perspective of Religious Studies – on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. But Zoroastrianism is not called a world religion. Is a “world religion” one that it is followed by people in diverse regions around the world? This does not apply to Confucianism and Taoism, for example, but they are among the Big Seven.

In fact, the inclusion of the seven traditions in the standard listing of “world religions” is somewhat arbitrary. It grew out of the early efforts by European scholars to understand the phenomenon of religion, which we discussed in Chapter 3. As we saw, it took some effort for Western Christian scholars to recognize non-Christian traditions as religions at all, rather than as mere “superstition,” “magic,” “heresy,” or even the dreaded “paganism.” The phrase “world religions” came into use when the first Parliament of the World’s Religions was held in Chicago, during the time of the 1893 world’s fair (the World Columbian Exposition), but representation at the Parliament was neither systematic nor comprehensive.

In light of such criticism, many universities have changed their “World Religions” courses to courses focused on specific traditions, such as Chinese traditions or Islamic Studies. Over the past several decades, scholars have thought more carefully about other categories as well, and have tried to treat all religious traditions with equal respect. Some have rejected the





What Is a Pagan?



FIGURE 9.2 Wiccan Beltane Fire Festival, Edinburgh, spring 2008.

Jeff J. Mitchell/Getty Images.

People who grew up in a monotheistic tradition often hear non-monotheists referred to as “pagans.” Dictionary definitions of the term range from “non-believer” to “polytheist” – someone who believes in more than one god. The photo above, from *National Geographic*, depicts what it calls a “pagan fire fest,” actually a Wiccan Beltane celebration of spring in 2008.

The term “pagan” is avoided by scholars of religion because of its negative connotations. The term comes from a Latin root that means someone from the countryside rather than from the city. The connotation goes beyond today’s adjective “country” – referring to someone who is unsophisticated and lacks polish, someone with the characteristics valorized in “country” music in the U.S. (See Gretchen Wilson, “Redneck Woman” and Hank “Bocephus” Williams Jr., “A Country Boy Can Survive.”) Reflecting the correlation between religion and politics throughout history, a pagan was someone not involved in the central government’s urban religious organization and therefore was considered untrustworthy and a potential threat. So the Latin *paganus* refers to someone both uncivilized (literally: not living in settled/urban society) and uncouth (literally: not known to anyone in our group; outlandish – meaning from “outside our land” and therefore strange, foreign). A pagan was someone who did not recognize the religion of the city – the religion that legitimized the central government. This is why a pagan was a potential traitor, just like anyone else who failed to recognize the principles that legitimate the government.

“church–sect–cult” taxonomy that we mentioned in Chapter 1, seeing the term “church” as reflecting a unique (i.e., not universal) Christian paradigm, and “cult” as unnecessarily prejudicial. “New Religious Movements” (NRMs) is a phrase introduced by American scholar J. Gordon Melton (b. 1942) in the 1970s and adopted by many scholars in place of “cult.” As well, many universities have introduced the study of African Traditional Religions (ATRs) into the curriculum, along with other “indigenous religions” of colonized areas – such as Native American Religions.

In this chapter, we shall briefly examine six traditions that do not get counted as “world religions.” Two of them are ancient, one being international because of its profound influence on the monotheisms (Zoroastrianism), and the other being found only in Japan (Shinto). We shall also look at two new religions (Baha’i and Scientology), and one that defies categorization as ancient or new (a modern version of an ancient tradition – Wicca). We shall then consider the traditional culture of the Seneca, an indigenous people of what is now New York State. Having surveyed these diverse traditions, we should have a broader understanding that will help us as we return to the question of defining religion.

Zoroastrianism

History and Teachings of Zoroastrianism

Before Islam came to Iran (formerly called Persia) in the 7th century, Zoroastrianism was the major religion there. It probably began in the 9th or 10th century BCE, but it appears in historical records only in the 6th century BCE. Founded by the prophet Zoroaster, it was the state religion of several Persian empires. Iran today lies between India to the East and what the ancient Greeks called Mesopotamia to the West. Scholars of religion are therefore not surprised to find that Zoroastrianism has much in common with both Hinduism and the Western monotheistic traditions. Many of the core beliefs of Christians, Jews and Muslims have earlier counterparts in Zoroastrian tradition. According to Mary Boyce (2001,1), “Zoroastrianism is the oldest of the revealed world-religions, and it has probably had more influence on mankind, directly and indirectly, than any other single faith.” Ideas in Western monotheism about the cosmic struggle between good and evil, the coming of a savior who will ultimately vanquish evil, a final judgment, and life after death are examples.

As we saw in Chapter 2, according to Zoroastrian teaching, the single eternal and transcendent god, Ahura Mazda, created a beautiful and orderly universe. Evil is represented by Angra Mainyu, also known as Ahriman, an evil spirit independent of the great creator Ahura Mazda. All of history is characterized by the conflict between good and evil, but in the end Ahura Mazda will triumph over all evil.

Zoroastrianism teaches that human beings participate in the maintenance of a well ordered universe by thinking, speaking, and acting well. Prefiguring the biblical teaching, Zoroastrianism teaches that at the end of time, a savior – a **Saoshhyant** (“one who brings benefit”) – will renew the world, restoring its perfect order. The Saoshhyant, according to tradition, will be born of a virgin – a characteristic that was later stressed in Christian and Islamic teachings about Jesus. Dead people will be resurrected and they, along with the



people still living at that time, will be judged. From a History of Religions perspective (see Chapter 4), this appears to be a forerunner of biblical teachings about the Last Judgment.

The details of the final judgment vary slightly in different Zoroastrian traditions. According to some versions, judgment will be by ordeal. People will have to walk through a river of molten stone. To those whose thoughts, words, and deeds were pure, the river will feel like cool milk. Those who contributed to disorder through dishonest thoughts, words, or deeds will, of course, burn. According to another version, people will have to cross a very narrow bridge suspended above fires of molten rock. Those whose thoughts, words, and deeds were pure will be guided easily across the bridge by the luminous reflection of their souls. This reflection will be in the form of a pure – or “virginal” – angelic figure, a daena, standing in paradise at the end of the bridge.

Scholars have coined a technical term for a “guide for the soul” – **psychopomp** – because such figures are found in a number of traditions around the world. The psychopomp role can be played by ancestors, for example, as they are in some African traditions, or angels, as in some folk traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In the modern Persian language, the term for the daena is *din*, which, as we saw in Chapter 1, is used for the English term “religion” – so that religion becomes the “guide for the soul.” The Persian term is also related to the Sanskrit *dharma*, which, as we saw in Chapter 7, can be translated as law or duty – also appropriate “guides for the soul.”

Interestingly, scholars see the Zoroastrian daena as a possible source for the traditional Islamic teaching of the houris. As we saw in Chapter 6, houris are mentioned in the Qur'an as “pure companions” for those who make it to heaven. But in Islamic traditional literature (hadiths), they are described as voluptuous heavenly virgins awaiting righteous men. It goes without saying that these traditions have been passed on by males, some of whom have determined that there will be precisely 72 such beauties awaiting them. Why 72? The Muslim traditionists do not explain. But in a fascinating coincidence, the special belt – kushti (or kusti) – that Zoroastrians wear for prayer is made of 72 perfectly white wool threads. These 72 threads represent the 72 chapters of Zoroastrian scripture (Yasna, the main collection and the ritual recitation of scripture). Kushti means “pathfinder,” again indicating a connection with the notion of daena as a psychopomp. The Zoroastrian undershirt worn during prayer is called a shudreh (or sedreh), “good” or “righteous path.” And in another fascinating coincidence, some scholars relate the term shudreh to the Sanskrit *shudra*. As we saw in Chapter 7, in Hindu teaching the shudras are the lowest varna. But the root meaning of the term in Sanskrit is “color of the soul,” which seems to tie in with the notion of the daena as a luminous reflection of one’s conscience.

Also like Abrahamic traditions, Zoroastrian scripture was revealed to the human race through a prophet, in this case Zoroaster. The holy volume is called the Avesta. It includes the **Gathas**, hymns attributed to Zoroaster, as well as later writings, totaling twenty-one books.

Other aspects of Zoroastrian teaching about spiritual beings are complex and have evolved over time. For example, Ahura Mazda's communication with humans comes through a number of Entities or Attributes, called the Bounteous Immortals. In Zoroaster's writings, these Immortals are sometimes presented as abstract concepts and other times described as if they are persons. In one version of the theology, Ahura Mazda had rival twin sons, Spenta Mainyu (Bounteous Spirit) and Angra Mainyu (Destructive Spirit). The first



Freddie Mercury, Famous Zoroastrian



FIGURE 9.3 Freddie Mercury.
© Hulton-Deutsch Collection/Corbis.

Freddie Mercury (d. 1991), lead singer of the British band Queen, was born Farrokh Bulsara to Indian parents who were Parsees. He grew up in Mumbai and was initiated into Zoroastrianism at age 8 in the ancient ceremony called Mayjote. After a bath of purification, during which a priest chanted prayers, young Freddie stood before one of the eternal fires and repeated the prayers of acceptance into Zoroastrianism. Then he was given his *shudreh*, a shirt made of white muslin symbolizing innocence and purity. Around his waist the priest tied the *kushti*, a cord made of pure white lamb's wool symbolizing service to humanity. The *kushti* was wrapped around him three times to remind the young boy of the three aspects of Ahura Mazda – creator, preserver, and rebuilder of the world. Finally, the boy was showered with rice, rose petals, coconut, and pomegranate and dressed in his new clothes.

In Mumbai, Freddie attended St. Peter's boarding school, where he learned Western classical music along with Indian music. There he and four schoolmates formed the rock band The Hectics, in which he played piano. When he was 18, Freddie's family moved to Britain, where he attended Ealing College of Art in London. Later he played in several bands, most famously Queen, which he formed with Brian May, Roger Taylor, and John Deacon. Freddie wrote most of their hit songs, including *Bohemian Rhapsody* and *We Are the Champions*. When Mercury died in 1991, his funeral was conducted by Zoroastrian priests in the ancient Avestan language.



chose good, and so is associated with truth, justice, and life. The Destructive Spirit, Angra Mainyu, chose evil and so destruction, injustice, and death. In Zoroaster's telling, these forces are under the ultimate control of Ahura Mazda. However, after Zoroaster was gone, some of these forces were re-described by later generations as gods themselves. In some interpretations, Ahura Mazda was identified as the god of good and Angra Mainyu as the god of evil, calling into question the monotheism of Zoroastrianism.

In the 7th century, when Arabs brought Islam to Persia, many Persians converted to the new religion. In the 8th–10th centuries, Zoroastrianism was suppressed in Persia, so many of its members emigrated east to India, settling in the Gujarat and Maharashtra states, especially around Mumbai. There they were called "Parsees," that is, Persians. Most Parsees were farmers until the British colonized India in the 18th century. They flourished under the British, adopting British customs and dress. By the 19th century, the Parsees were well known in Indian society for their education, generosity, and success in business.

Today there are fewer than 200,000 Zoroastrians worldwide, mainly in Iran and India. Famous Zoroastrians include the orchestra conductor Zubin Mehta, the rock musician Freddie Mercury of the band Queen, and the Tata family, who are car manufacturers in India. While Zoroastrianism discourages marriage with outsiders, many Zoroastrians in modern times have intermarried. Women are encouraged to join the professions, too, so they tend to have fewer children than their neighbors. Intermarriage and the low birth rate have contributed to the decline in the number of Zoroastrians.

Zoroastrian Rituals

The energy of Ahura Mazda, the creator, is represented by fire, the sun, and light in general. (This is why General Electric used "Mazda" as a brand name for light bulbs from 1909 to 1945.) Zoroastrians pray in front of a fire or a source of light. Rituals center around fire, keeping it lit, and feeding the fire five times a day.

The centrality of fire in Zoroastrian ritual has misled some into believing that Zoroastrians are "fire-worshipers." They do not worship fire. Instead, fire represents Ahura Mazda and it is seen as a purifying element. Zoroastrian worship services are carried out in a "fire temple"—a building that houses an urn with a fire and a source of water. The fire is in a small central room with no other source of light. The fire is maintained by a priest, the only person allowed to enter the special room. The priest conducts the Yasna service, the recitation of Avestas in their entirety. At the end of the recitation, the priest makes an offering "to the water" of a mixture of hoama twigs (see Chapter 7), pomegranate, and milk, for symbolic purification.

The most important Zoroastrian holiday is the beginning of the new year, **Norūz**, believed to have been founded by Zoroaster. It is celebrated on the first day of the vernal (Spring) equinox, around March 21. Even after Zoroastrianism was marginalized by Islam in Iran, Norūz remained a popular holiday, as it is still throughout regions influenced by Persia. It remains a holiday in many parts of Central Asia, India, Afghanistan, and Kashmir, though generally without religious significance for non-Zoroastrians, and is celebrated by Baha'is and some Muslims as a religious holiday, too.

Similar to Jewish practice associated with Passover, Zoroastrians prepare for Norūz with a thorough housecleaning. As well, on the last Tuesday evening of the year is the



FIGURE 9.4 A Zoroastrian priest starts a fire as part of Sadeh, the ancient feast celebrating the creation of fire. © Eye Ubiquitous/SuperStock.

“Festival of the Fire.” People build fires outside and jump over them. In the secular celebrations of Norūz, people think of this as marking the transition from the old year to the new year. The religious meaning is expressed in a prayer in which people consign their fears, weakness, and suffering to the fire for purification, exchanging them for courage, strength, and health in the new year.

It is also common for people to precede the holiday with prayers at the family cemetery. Reflecting the folk belief that the ancestors’ spirits visit at this time, children traditionally put on “ghost” costumes and go from house to house to get sweets.

On new year’s day itself, people put on new clothes and begin a 12-day period of visiting family members and friends, where they are served sherbet, pastries, and dried fruits and nuts. A special table is set for Norūz, the “Seven S’s” (*haft sin*) table, with flowers and seven items beginning with the letter “s.” These items symbolize good things for the new year: rebirth, wealth, love, beauty, health, and patience.

Zoroastrians share with Hindus a concern for purity. This is perhaps most evident in their unique funerary practice. According to Zoroastrian rules of purity, a corpse is utterly impure – the ultimate pollutant. Only specially ordained “pollutant caretakers” – nasellars – can handle them safely. The nasellar takes the corpse to a dakhma – a circular tower with an inclined plane on top (known in English as “towers of silence”), where it is exposed to the elements (and birds of prey) until all that is left are bones. Once the bones are thoroughly dried out, they are put in a pit at the center of the tower where they gradually disintegrate and disappear into the soil, eventually to be washed to sea.



Shinto

History and Teachings of Shinto

As we saw, many of Zoroastrians' foundational beliefs are shared by other monotheists throughout the world, and the secular celebration of the new year in the spring is popular in diverse cultures. Shinto, by contrast, is an ancient tradition grounded in one place and one culture, Japan. It flourished in Japan long before the Chinese traditions of Confucianism and Buddhism arrived, and has continued to reflect Japanese culture and values throughout the ages.

Shinto has no founder, no inerrant doctrines, and no scriptures that are considered sacred, as if they were revealed by a god. The oldest written record of its teachings and practices dates from the 8th century. Known as the *Kojiki* ("Records of Ancient Matters"), this text includes a story describing the creation of Japan. The gods commissioned the creation of a new, perfect land. After some missteps, the eight islands of Japan were created. The missteps had to do with attempts to defy the laws of nature – which in the story included the priority of males over females. According to the story, when the man and woman commissioned by the gods to create this beautiful place began their project, the woman greeted the man first – and nothing happened. Then they tried again, but with the man speaking first; this time things went much more smoothly.

As we have seen (in Chapters 5 and 7, for example), explanations for the subservient status of women are not unusual in religious traditions. They reflect the rise in the social status of warriors as human beings made the transition from hunter-gatherer to agrarian lifestyles and warriors were needed to protect the newly settled land on which people's livelihood depended. With the ascendancy of warriors came the domination of males over females – particularly in their control of female sexuality, as warriors sought to make sure that their offspring alone benefited from the fruits of their labor. However, Shinto is not one of the traditions known for inequality between males and females. The emphasis in the *Kojiki* is less on social or moral teachings than on the rise of the imperial family who commissioned the text. The second oldest text, the *Nihon Shoki* ("Continuing Chronicles of Japan"), also from the 8th century, focuses even more intently on formalizing the imperial government. These early sources demonstrate that, from the beginning, Shinto has been a strictly Japanese tradition and reflects a fundamental orientation toward nature.

Shinto is not the only tradition that has influenced Japan. We saw in Chapter 8 that Buddhism came to Japan from Korea in the 6th century, and Confucianism not long thereafter. Many Shinto shrines were built on the grounds of Buddhist temples and evidence from the earliest written records of Shinto show signs of Buddhist influence. Starting around 1600, religious scholars in Japan emphasized the unity of Shinto and Confucian teachings in such things as the virtues of filial piety, sincerity and loyalty, and the need for emperors to show wisdom, benevolence, and courage. Still, Shinto remains the indigenous tradition of Japan.

The word *Shinto* comes from the Chinese *Shēntao*, which means "the way of *kami*." In a general sense, *kami* means divine or supernatural power – "the force" or power of the universe, which is considered sacred in all its manifestations. In a narrower sense, *kami*