**Sacred Gates and Living Water: Connecting Shinto Traditions with Christian Mission**

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**Introduction**

Religious symbols and rituals are used in many religions to show what people believe, to connect with their god or gods, and to feel part of a group. These actions and signs help explain spiritual ideas in ways people can see or feel. For Christian missionaries who travel to share the message of Jesus, understanding these cultural practices is very important. One religion that uses many unique symbols and rituals is Shintoism, the traditional religion of Japan. In this paper, we will look at two parts of Shinto—misogi (water purification) and the torii gate (a gateway to sacred space)—and compare them with two Christian practices: baptism and the cross.  
This essay will show how learning about Shinto rituals can help Christians explain the gospel more clearly and avoid confusion when sharing their faith.

**Interpretation and Comparison of symbols/rituals to similar Christian rituals/symbols**

One of the most well-known rituals in Shintoism is misogi, a water purification ceremony done at shrines or rivers to clean both the body and spirit (Bernard, 2024). In Christianity, baptism also uses water and shows a kind of spiritual renewal. Both rituals prepare someone to connect with the spiritual world, but their meanings are very different. Misogi is done many times and is part of staying clean before meeting the spirits (kami), while Christian baptism is done once and shows a deep, permanent change—a person dying to their old life and becoming new through Jesus (Crow et al., 2018). Another important Shinto symbol is the torii gate, which marks the entrance to a sacred place. It represents moving from the everyday world into a holy space. Similarly, the Christian cross is a symbol of moving from death to life, and from sin to forgiveness. But while the torii does not lead to a personal relationship with the kami, the cross points to Jesus’ sacrifice and the gift of eternal life (Larsson, 2023). So, although these symbols look similar on the surface, their deeper meanings are quite different.

These similarities and differences are helpful for missionaries to understand. Knowing that Bernard (2024) determines Shinto practices come from a strong desire for purity and connection with the spiritual world, Christians can share the gospel in a way that respects those values while also clearly showing what makes Jesus’ message unique. For example, when explaining baptism, missionaries can connect with the idea of water as cleansing but explain that baptism shows a new life in Christ, not just a ritual of purity. They can also use the idea of the torii as a gateway to the sacred to show how Jesus is the true gateway to God (John 10:9, NIV). By being careful with how they explain symbols, missionaries can build trust and make the gospel easier to understand. This avoids confusion, like thinking that kami are the same as the Christian God or that visiting a shrine is like going to church. In this way, Christians can teach others to follow Jesus while respecting their culture, just as Jesus asked in Matthew 28:20 (NIV).

**Application to mission work**

Knowing these similarities and differences helps missionaries share the gospel in a kind and clear way. If a missionary understands Shinto practices, they can explain Christian ideas using things that already make sense to people. For example, since Shinto believers care about being clean before prayer, missionaries can explain that Christians also believe in spiritual cleansing—but only Jesus can truly clean the heart from sin (1 John 1:7, NIV). The torii gate, which shows a sacred space in Shinto, can be compared to Jesus being the way to God (John 10:9, NIV). These examples do not mean that the two religions are the same, but they can help start good conversations about faith. Finally, this knowledge helps missionaries build trust and avoid mistakes. If they respect the culture and understand its symbols, they can avoid confusing or offending people. It also helps them teach new believers in a way that connects with their background, while still staying true to the Bible. Jesus told his followers to make disciples and teach them to obey everything He commanded (Matthew 28:18–20, NIV). To do this in other cultures, missionaries need to understand how people think and what symbols they use. When they do, they can share the gospel more clearly and help others grow in their faith.

**Conclusion**

In both Shintoism and Christianity, symbols and rituals play a key role in expressing faith and connecting with the spiritual world. While practices like the torii gate and purification ritual in Shinto may look similar to Christian acts such as entering a church or baptism, their meanings are rooted in very different beliefs about God, sin, and salvation. Understanding these similarities and differences helps Christians avoid confusion and share the gospel clearly. By learning how other cultures use symbols and rituals, missionaries can build respectful relationships, explain biblical truths more effectively, and help new believers grow in obedience to Christ’s teachings.

**References**

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