Dangefrous traps threaten to ensnare any author writing about Shinto. The “Way of the Kami” has for so long been touted as “Japan’s indigenous religion” or the “essence of being Japanese” that essentialism, overgeneralization, and romanticism dominate many discussions of kami-related religious practices in Japan. While most scholars today successfully avoid these problems, others still expound some version of the aesthetic nationalism promoted by nativists and nationalists since the late eighteenth century. Thus, to read the recent work on Shinto is to be both inspired and dismayed—inspired, because a wealth of novel ideas about Shinto as “experientialism” or “Japanese-ness” remain alive. I would like to take this opportunity to do two things: first, to provide a very brief synopsis of the history of Shinto to help clarify the problems inherent in these essentialist portrayals of Shinto; and second, to use four recent works to explore both how new approaches to the history of Shinto have revolutionized our understanding of the Way of the Kami, and how and why some scholars continue to portray Shinto as a particularly Japanese, aesthetic, and experiential form of religion.

For more than a century, people both inside and outside Japan have portrayed Shinto as “the essence of the Japanese people”—that is, as an underlying mode of thought and action that characterizes all true Japanese. Already in the late seventh and early eighth centuries, histories commissioned by the imperial house attested to the worship of kami in Japan. It was not until Motoori Norinaga in the late 1700s, however, that scholars looked back to those early texts to identify a uniquely Japanese way of worship, ostensibly shared by all Japanese, and distinct from the worship of foreigners—a way, according to Motoori, characterized by an innate sensitivity to nature and an unselfish oneness with the will of the kami, unmediated by individual thought.

Until Motoori’s time, and for more than a century thereafter, worship of kami had been virtually inseparable from other forms of religious practice. Buddhist priests officiated over Buddhist rites at shrines to such kami; shrines and Buddhist temples were operated together; and kami were often interpreted as trace manifestations (suijaku) of original buddhas (honji). Yet followers of Motoori, most notably Hirata Atsutane and his students, worked to change this. They argued that all troubles besetting Japan in the nineteenth century arose due to the pollution of kami by foreign (that is, Buddhist) influence. When in 1868 the leaders of the Meiji Restoration overthrew the Tokugawa shogunate and sought to establish their authority in the name of the emperor, they built on these nativist ideas to order the “separation of buddhas and kami” (shinbutsu bunri): the “purification” of kami-related (and thus imperially-connected) rituals, shrines, and priests. The rituals and teachings that they promoted soon came to be known as Shinto—and were explained to both Japanese and foreigners alike as time-honored, indigenous practice. Thus, purity and sincerity expressed through selfless obedience to the will of the gods (and consequently to the Japanese emperor, considered a direct descendant of the sun goddess Amaterasu) became trumpeted as quintessentially Japanese virtues—an uncritical oversimplification that aided the rise of fascism in Japan and served the makers of wartime propaganda very well. In short, Motoori’s intuitive, aestheticized version of kami worship fueled the development of a national cult of innate sensitivity—what we now call Shinto—that has since been used to explain Japan.

This is not to suggest that everyone accepted this nativist form of Shinto as a time-honored Japanese tradition. Since 1868, as before, critical observers have been sensitive to the politics of this seemingly apolitical Way of the Kami. As early as 1872, Mori Arinori, criticizing “those who believe in the senseless precept of simplicity or the natural state,” condemned the Meiji government for “its attempt to impose upon our people a religion of its creation” (Mori [1872] 1928, 3-4)—an evaluation seconded forty years later by Basil Hall Chamberlain in his 1912 essay, “The Invention of a New Religion” (Chamberlain 1912). During the first half of the twentieth century, it became dangerous to publish such interpretations in Japan, however, and after the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905, most foreigners sought easy explanations of the purported character of the newly powerful nation, rather than complex analyses of domestic politics.
After 1945, Japanese scholars such as Maruyama Masao and Murakami Shigeyoshi began to point publicly to the malleable values that had made Shinto a powerful tool of the Japanese state. Interest in Shinto as the ideology of the modern Japanese state has continued ever since. Among American and European scholars, critical interest in Shinto as a religion grew most spectacularly after the 1980s, when American interest in issues of church and state surged under the Reagan and Bush administrations, Prime Minister Nakasone began visiting Yasukuni Shrine (thereby enraging Japan’s neighbors in East Asia), and Helen Hardacre published her now classic Shinto and the State, 1868-1988 (Hardacre 1989). For the last several years, we have been reaping the excellent results of this critical scholarship.

What unites these critical approaches to Shinto is a dedication to seeing through the “Shinto” of the Japanese state. Thus, first and foremost, scholars have been questioning everything we ever learned about Shinto, particularly with two questions in mind: 1) when did these ideas about Shinto emerge; and 2) who promoted them, and why? Work based on this approach has exposed a vast array of new questions in the field and, in the process, transformed our understanding not just of Shinto or of Japanese religion, but of Japanese history, society, politics, and culture. In short, because so long Shinto was seen as synonymous with Japan, this new understanding of Shinto is revolutionizing our understanding of Japan as a whole.

The new English-language work on Shinto—that is, most scholarship published since the late 1980s—is based on the following basic assumptions, adopted for their usefulness in combating earlier ideas of Shinto as essential Japaneseeness:

1. Not all Japanese (whether defined as such by citizenship, residence, or blood) are the same. Whether now or in the past, different people in Japan have thought and done different things because of their gender, class, regional origins, generation, personal preference, and a plethora of other factors.

2. Therefore, there neither is, nor has ever been, a single Japanese way.

3. Whenever people have identified something as Japanese, they have done so for a reason—usually to convince others that theirs is the only right or natural or patriotic way.

4. Beliefs, symbols, and rituals can be—and often are—used for political purposes.

Because of these emphases, historical, sociological, and anthropological methodologies have dominated the study of Shinto during the last two decades.

Of the four recent works under discussion, two reflect this now mainstream approach among scholars both in Japan and abroad. Another work incorporates some of the insights of such social and historical work into an introductory-level, philosophical examination of Shinto. And the final work fights a rearguard action, denying both the assumptions outlined above and the scholarship that has arisen from them. Taken together, these four works might be seen as representative of the state of the field as a whole.

To get a sense of the range and emphasis of recent English-language work on Shinto, one need only consult some of the groundbreaking volumes edited or translated by Mark Teeuwen, John Breen, and Bernhard Scheid. In 2000, Breen and Teeuwen published Shinto in History: Ways of the Kami, an edited collection of essays that focused on the agendas of various institutional, ritual, and intellectual developments in kami worship (Breen and Teeuwen 2000). So much excellent work was being done that Teeuwen and Scheid followed this up with Tracing Shinto in the History of Kami Worship, a special edition of the Japanese Journal of Religious Studies (Teeuwen and Scheid 2002), in which essays focused similarly on identifiable attempts to shape and control the worship of kami. (For readers interested in the origin of the word “Shinto”, Teeuwen’s article in this volume on the development of Shinto out of the Buddhist jindô or “way of non-Buddhist deities” in the fourteenth century will be especially helpful.)

Such collections of essays, however, could not incorporate the now dominant critical approach to Shinto in a coherent historical overview. In 2003, then, the team of Teeuwen and Breen made accessible in English an important work that attempted to synthesize much of what had been done in Japanese on the subject before 1998. Edited by Inoue Nobutaka, a prominent sociologist of religion, Shinto—A Short History consists of four chronologically ordered chapters: ancient and classical Japan (by Moriyuki Mizue); the medieval period (by Itô Satoshi); the early modern period (by Endô Jun) and the modern age (by Inoue himself).

The authors focus on placing Shinto in social and historical context, viewing it, in Inoue’s terms, as part or all of a religious system specific to a historical period. “The concept of a ‘religious system,’” Inoue explains in the introduction, is “a tool to explore the historical development of religion in its intimate relation with the structural characteristics and changes of society as a whole” (3). In this formulation, religious systems are defined by their constituents (the “makers” and “users” of the religion), their organizational network (both “hard” buildings and “soft” institutional hierarchies), and their substance (conveyed through teachings, practices, and rituals). Because each religious system encompasses “clusters of religious groups that display typological similarities,” the approach allows for the coexistence of several systems at one time. Unfortunately, because the emphasis of the book is on Shinto instead of Japanese religions as a whole, the authors neither expand upon nor, in most cases, identify other religious systems over time. This means that the second approach that Inoue outlines in his introduction, namely, an awareness of the development of Shinto in Japan as part of broader East Asian and, indeed, global trends, remains relatively unexplored. The four chapters of Shinto—A Short History nevertheless provide interesting, insightful analyses of the social and political contexts in which various proponents shaped Shinto from earliest times to the present.

Originally written for a Japanese audience, this valuable, often quite detailed survey presupposes a readership at least somewhat familiar with the history and religions of Japan. For those with the requisite background, the work will elucidate hitherto unnoticed relationships between political and religious developments.

The basic narrative that emerges is as follows: The first Shinto religious system emerged when the new imperial state of the sixth and seventh centuries created rituals, legends, and a formal hierarchy of shrines to solidify the emperor’s dominance over the clans. As power devolved away from the imperial court during the medieval era, however, the constituents, network, and substance of the classical system of kami worship fell apart. Shinto became part of other religious systems, whether Shugendo, Buddhist, or Confucian. Much of Shinto political symbolism—the idea of Japan as a sacred land of the kami (shinkoku), the empha-
focus on Amaterasu and the myths of the Nihonshoki—emerged only as the imperial court and its esoteric Buddhist allies sought to resurrect the authority of an imperial line in eclipse. After the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when the classical imperial system had been entirely destroyed, proponents of kami worship finally began to move away from esoteric Buddhist assumptions: Yoshida Kanetomo worked to systematize a distinctively Shinto tradition (albeit strongly informed by esoteric Buddhism) and, almost 300 years later, nativists such as Motoori Norinaga eschewed the secret transmissions of esoteric systems to promote broader participation in kami-related research. It was only after these developments, and after the Meiji Restoration of 1868, that Shinto reemerged as a dominant, fully-developed religious system, now with all Japanese subjects as users, a new state shrine system as network, and state-sponsored teachings as substance. Even then, as Inoue shows, a variety of sects and new religions suggested the presence not just of other religious systems in general, but other Shinto systems as well.

While Shinto—A Short History focuses on Shinto, the volume of essays edited by Mark Teeuwen and Fabio Rambelli, Buddhas and Kami in Japan, addresses head-on the close relationship between kami and buddhas that characterized the medieval and early modern periods. The subtitle, Honji Suijaku as a Combinatorial Paradigm, sums up the revolutionary insights of the volume. No longer highlighting a one-on-one relationship based upon “the idea that local, native deities (kami) are emanations of universal, Buddhist divinities—a notion known in Japanese as honji suijaku (‘original forms of deities and their local traces’)” (1), the authors illustrate how the relationships between buddhas and kami ranged far beyond any simple correspondence. Instead, “complex combinations” emerged that included not only buddhas and kami but also deities and spirits of all kinds. It was these innovative combinations—politically useful, often “consciously and coherently transnational”—that, as Teeuwen and Rambelli point out, “lay at the basis of Buddhist cults of kami, of the incorporation of kami shrines in Buddhist temples, and of the development of Buddhist-inspired kami cults which at a later stage developed into an independent religion, namely Shinto” (1). The complex web of deities, rituals, doctrines, and institutions that developed under honji suijaku thus indelibly shaped the worship of kami.

The great strength of this volume is its clarification of these complicated combinations. As Teeuwen and Rambelli make clear in their extensive introduction, most scholarship before this, drawing upon the landmark study by Alicia Matsunaga (Matsu-

naga 1969), focused on the emergence of the classic honji suijaku paradigm itself, delineating four phases of transformation: 1) buddhas as foreign kami; 2) kami as sentient beings; 3) kami as dharma-protectors; and finally, 4) kami as traces of Buddhist divinities. The essays in Buddhas and Kami in Japan, however, move beyond this historical progression to highlight two vitally important and interrelated developments that accompanied and complicated the combinatory process: one political, the other substantive.

First, selected cults of the kami—mostly tied to the imperial court—were never completely assimilated into Buddhism. The reason for this, according to Teeuwen and Rambelli, was not because of a theological taboo about death, but rather due to political necessity. In the wake of an eighth-century attempt to place a Buddhist priest on the imperial throne, they suggest, “it would seem . . . that the isolation of imperial kami ritual from Buddhism was informed by the need to bolster the principle of hereditary imperial and aristocratic rule” (23). The result, Teeuwen and Rambelli argue, was the creation of a fertile tension between Buddhist and kami cults, one that encouraged repeated innovations in both.

Second, and most exciting for the study of Japanese religions, is what Teeuwen and Rambelli call “the diversification of the divine realm.” This volume makes absolutely clear that the Japanese religious world ranged far beyond merely Buddhism and Shinto. Mountains, animals, demons, ghosts, vengeful spirits (goryô), foreign tutelary deities, deified Buddhist patriarchs, and a plethora of other beings were created and worshiped outside of any one specific tradition. As the essays show, a vast array of people, each for their own purposes, linked many such deities to each other, and to kami and buddhas as well, creating networks of deities according to understandable political and logical rules. Not only the cults of kami, but also various forms of Buddhism in Japan were altered as much by their contact with these other modes of worship and thought as by their contact with each other.

As Teeuwen and Rambelli sum it up, “Honji suijaku, then, was not a simple mechanism for ‘buddhifying’ kami, but rather an extremely versatile tool for assembling complex divine entities of the greatest possible power” (30).

The articles in Buddhas and Kami range from political and institutional history to literary and ritual exegesis, highlighting the reasons behind the “multiple identities” or “identical multiplicities” through which specific combinations of deities or spirits were associated with each other. Arranged in roughly chronological order, the essays cover an array of historical topics ranging from the early transformation of the thunder child, Dôjô Hôshi, into a protector of the Buddhist dharma (by Irene H. Lin) to Inoue Takami’s description of the separation of buddhas and kami in 1868 at Suwa Shrine.

Two essays in the volume offer especially provocative rethink-
ings of deities in Japan as a whole. In “Worthy Deities and Sav-
ing Deities”, Satô Hiroo highlights a hitherto unnoticed way in which people classified deities in premodern Japan. Based on his analysis of written oaths and ritual addresses from the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, Satô argues that the most important distinction made between deities relied not on identity (whether they were Buddhist or not) but on function (whether or not they saved or punished people). Moreover, Satô shows a correlation between function and form: “saving” deities were unseen and abstract, while “wrathful” deities were “physically present in the form of a statue or image at some specified place in Japan,” and were thus best situated to punish people (100). Within the Buddhist cosmology and hierarchy of beings, saving deities such as buddhas and bodhisattvas were also superior to tangible, wrathful divinities, whether buddhas or kami. Thus, in a hierarchical ordering of deities, the writer of one oath could refer to “buddhas of the past, present and future, of all ten directions” in one breath, then to the same buddhas (“in the Lecture Hall of this mountain, Sakyamuni [and] Maitreya” and “in the Hall of Turning the Wheel, Sakyamuni”), each as separate entities in their tangible enshrined forms, in another (105). These more tangible buddhas then became categorized with the tangible kami of Hachiman, Inari, Ise and the like. They became buddhas of Japan akin to the kami of Japan, inseparable from specific locations. In the honji suijaku cosmology of medieval Japan, then, it was not so much that...
buddha “originals” ranked above kami “traces,” but that abstract, saving buddhas ranked above all tangibly enshrined, wrathful deities, of whatever persuasion. The kami thus earned a place in the Buddhist worldview alongside Indian deva and locally enshrined buddhas. All localized deities—buddhas as well as kami—had their source in the buddhas of the realm of enlightenment.

While Satô reinterprets the honji suijaku paradigm as a bipolar arrangement of abstract sources and tangible traces, Iyanaga Nobumi emphasizes a more multifaceted interpretation in his “Honji Suijaku and the Logic of Combinatory Deities.” Upon the collapse of the classical order, he suggests, members of the elite as well as people from every social stratum were freed to use any and all available mythological sources—including both popular legends and Hindu mythology—to legitimize their own positions. Using two case studies, Iyanaga shows how specific groups of deities were associated together for recognizable reasons. Authors seeking to justify their own existence, Iyanaga suggests, were especially drawn to tales of origins. Since the only metaphysical framework available was Buddhist, they looked to Buddhist mythology for answers, where “the only way people had to think about Japanese deities was according to the model of Hindu deities as they appear in Buddhist cosmology and mythology” (175). In creating complicated networks of equivalences between kami, devas, and other deities, Iyanaga suggests that medieval authors not only created a “system of combinatorial identifications [that] neutralizes” and “dissolves” the individuality of each deity, so that each of them can play the role of any other” (165), but that they did so intentionally, creating “a kind of ‘Japanese Hinduism’ inside Buddhism” in an attempt to develop a new theology, “continuing a movement of revolutionizing Buddhism” (175). Any study of honji suijaku thought, then, should include study not only of Japanese and Buddhist materials but also Hindu myths as well. Once again, the medieval religious world is shown to consist of far more than kami and buddhas alone.

The other essays in this volume suggest some of the concrete politics behind such associations and combinations. In an era of divided authority, the politics of both kami and buddhas involved not only secular authorities but also the priests and promoters of various cults, who themselves vied for authority over land and people during the medieval era. Allan Grapard’s examination of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century oracles of Usa Hachiman highlights the value of the oracle in shoring up the claims not only of rival priestly families but also of those claiming authority over imperial territory. Mark Teeuwen, in “The Creation of a Honji Suijaku Deity: Amaterasu as the Judge of the Dead,” demonstrates how honji suijaku allowed advocates to expand the role of Amaterasu in an attempt to survive the demise of Ise’s earliest constituents, the ancient clans, and instead encourage worship by everyone. It was this desire for a wider constituency, Teeuwen argues—not imperial politics, nor a sense of Amaterasu as a national deity—that helps explain the sudden popularity of the Sun Goddess in the Kamakura era. Lucia Dolce likewise highlights the attempts of priests to secure solid backing, as she explores the cult of the thirty kami (sanjū banjin) in the Nichiren tradition, in which kami of the twenty-two imperially supported shrines were identified as guardian deities of the Lotus Sutra. She both traces the cult’s origins to a fourteenth-century priest’s strategy of expansion in the Kinai area, and shows that debates in the late 1400s between the Hokke school and the Shinto advocate Yoshida Kanetomo prompted further elaboration of kami worship in Nichiren Buddhism. Susan Blakeley Klein, in contrast, looks to the struggle of the aristocracy for survival in order to explain some of the literary strategies used to support honji suijaku. In order to attract students, and to secure the livelihoods of even mediocre successors, Klein suggests, aristocrats—whether teachers of poetry or Tendai priests—emphasized the esoteric transmission of hidden truths, using metaphors, associations, allegories, and word play to reveal the religious “origins” behind literary “traces.” Through such literary strategies, aristocratic experts could not only harmonize seemingly contradictory evidence, but also could promote a radical non-dualism while providing a religious justification for the study and writing of poetry.

If the honji suijaku paradigm so infused medieval Japan, then, how did its influence decline? Bernhard Scheid highlights a new awareness in the mid-seventeenth century of Shinto as a religion distinct from Buddhism. In “Both parts or ‘Only One’? Challenges to the honji suijaku paradigm in the Edo period,” Scheid demonstrates how, due in part to the struggles of Yoshida School priests to establish and maintain their superiority over other schools, the meanings of Ryôbu Shinto and Yuitsu Shinto shifted from Yoshida Kanetomo’s original meanings to draw a distinction between Buddhist Shinto (Ryôbu) and non-Buddhist Shinto (Yuitsu). Fabio Rambelli, meanwhile, shows how honji suijaku thought continued throughout the Edo period, shaping carpenters’ and others’ interpretations of their work. Using texts from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century, Rambelli shows how at least some craftsmen or priests envisioned work “as a projection of the cosmic activity of the buddhas and local activities of the kami onto a smaller plane” (283). The honji suijaku strategies for the sacralization of work, he then suggests, strongly influenced Hirata Atsutane and other nativists, and even some corporations today. For Rambelli, as well as for Irit Averbuch in her essay on the honji suijaku structure of the Shinto dance kagura, honji suijaku logic, though now minus its Buddhist trap-

Thomas P. Kasulis’s Shinto: The Way Home stands in sharp contrast to the books considered above. The first two books under review are addressed to the expert or at least the generally informed reader; Kasulis’s slim work is a clearly written introductory text. Inoue, Teeuwen, Rambelli, and their colleagues are historians, sociologists, literary scholars, and the like; Kasulis is a philosopher. Indeed, while Kasulis recognizes that the work of such scholars made the topic of Shinto interesting to him (xix), he also seeks to provide a counterbalance to such analysis in two ways: first, by providing a philosophical analysis; and second, by looking for what is good in Shinto, not what is materialistic, political, or (as in the militarism of the war years) bad. That is, when given a choice, Kasulis’s book presents Shinto in a positive light, seeking its potential usefulness in the present world.
Kasulis approaches the topic from two directions. First, he sets out a basic philosophical framework of analysis, distinguishing between two types of Shinto spirituality: existential and essentialist. Existential Shinto spirituality, for Kasulis, is descriptive: “a self-identity that arises from naming a way of living” (5). Essentialist Shinto spirituality, in contrast, is prescriptive: it “arises from an intuition about an inner core of one’s being . . . that defines or drives one’s values, beliefs, and actions” (5). Kasulis then narrates the history of Shinto as “a tension between these two forms of spirituality” (6). In this framework, classical-era Shinto included both existential and prescriptive forms of spirituality; from the ninth to the nineteenth century (that is, the years of honji suijaku), existential forms predominated; from 1801 to 1945, from Hirata Atsutane through the Second World War, existential Shinto came to dominate. Since the war, the dynamic between the two remains unresolved.

In many ways, Kasulis’s interpretations are helpful and provocative. His distinction between existential and essentialist spiritualities, while problematic upon close examination (see Mark Teeuwen’s excellent review of the book in the Journal of Japanese Studies [2006]), will surely raise many helpful questions for students raised to think of religion as prescriptive. His examination of the differences between the Kojiki and Nihonshoki (80–83)—emphasizing the former as written for a domestic audience, and the latter designed with a Chinese-reading audience in mind—not only helps prepare readers to think critically about Shinto in ancient Japan, but also explains the dominance of the Nihonshoki for the next millennium. And the structure of the book as a whole—drawing readers in with a positive, attractive presentation of Shinto spirituality, then showing how that very attractiveness (as prescriptive or “essentialist” Shinto) abetted the rise of virulent nationalism—conveys the dangerous allure of nostalgic spirituality.

Yet, Kasulis has fallen into the very trap that he warns against. Kasulis has structured his book, or at least his historical analysis, to emphasize the potential dangers of essentialist, or prescriptive, spirituality. He therefore identifies the most significant historical break, to which he devotes more than one-tenth of the book (nineteen pages), as between the “romantic nostalgia” of Motoori Norinaga and the “ideological bulldozers” of Hirata Atsutane and his successors (118). According to Kasulis, the pacifist Norinaga advocated an aesthetic spirituality, found most vividly in “appreciation for the ‘ah-ness of things’” (as Kasulis translates mono no aware), while the activist Atsutane promoted militant engagement in nationalist politics of the day. Thus, quite unintentionally, according to Kasulis, “Motoori Norinaga’s methodological and religious assumptions led him to conclusions that were to have a major impact in the ensuing two centuries—and, as a byproduct, laid the foundations for a rabid form of ethnocentrism” (116). Drawn as he is to Norinaga’s aesthetics, Kasulis distances Norinaga from the political ramifications of such nostalgic spirituality.

Kasulis, in effect, remains firmly within Motoori’s orbit. Kasulis’s description of Shinto draws heavily upon Motoori’s; if Motoori focused on aesthetic appreciation and experience, so does Kasulis. The first chapters of the book elaborate on Shinto as the experience of connectedness, whether with nature or with other humans. For Kasulis, in Shinto, everything is connected to everything else, every individual person or object is part of the whole of nature. Thus, while people might worship at a torii (gate), that torii is merely a “holographic entry point” into the interconnectedness of all existence. A torii, a sacred tree, a grain of rice, indeed the emperor himself—all are holographic entry points that provide access to “the way home,” the return to a sense of connection.

Kasulis then reads this sense of connectedness onto everything he discusses. He reasons in circles that start and end with Norinaga. Kasulis writes that “much of the indigenous Shinto-related spirituality,” most notably evident in the myths of the Kojiki that Norinaga studied, “was obviously consistent with aspects of the contemporary Shinto spirituality” as described by Kasulis based on Norinaga’s interpretations (92). In his discussion of the Kojiki myths, for instance, Kasulis refers to a generalized, ahistorical Shinto, asserting that “this Shinto gateway leads, not to somewhere else . . . , but to where one has really been all along” (85). While this may indeed be the case, here, as elsewhere, Kasulis provides no evidence to support the idea that others besides himself (in the twenty-first century) and Norinaga (in the eighteenth) found similar meaning in the eighth-century texts.

Kasulis’s emphasis on holographic entry points takes him into very troubling waters. Despite abundant evidence that many of the teenage kamikaze pilots of 1945 “volunteered” for the suicide missions under duress, Kasulis chooses to offer a more positive interpretation of their actions—again, with no evidence to support his point. “[Following] the holographic reasoning,” Kasulis suggests, “the whole (the Japanese nation with the emperor as its holographic entry point) is within each loyal Japanese pilot. Their voluntary death confirmed this holographic relation. In effect, by dying for the emperor, the kamikaze pilots were dying for themselves” (111). The irony—even tragedy—of Shinto: The Way Home is that Kasulis, while warning readers about the potential danger of aesthetic nostalgia, falls into the trap himself.

At least Kasulis recognizes the danger, and in doing so, has pulled himself partway out of the quicksand of aesthetic essentialism. In contrast, Stuart D. B. Picken, the author of Sourcebook in Shinto: Selected Documents, is firmly—even exuberantly—mired in its depths. Picken, whose first book on Shinto appeared in 1979, wholeheartedly embraces the stereotypes and generalizations of Shinto studies of that era (Picken 1979). For Picken, there is no value in critical scholarship, because one can only understand Japan experientially:

I must argue that anyone who claims to understand Japan by any means other than experientially, whether economic, sociological, anthropological, political, or through predetermined theories, is living in [a] world of intellectual make-believe. Without grasping the meaning of concepts such as oharai [purification], mono no aware, kunigara [national character], kokoro [heart-and-mind], and kansha [state shrine], the inner secrets of the culture remain concealed. People who make such claims are describing an invented Japan based on Western models. They are not speaking of the Ding an sich—the Japan itself as it really is. (xvi)

According to Picken there is “the” Japan, and its essence is Shinto, All Japanese—indeed all Asians!—share a single outlook: the book’s preface is filled with references to “the Asian mind,” “the Japanese love of life,” and “the relatively gentler civilizations of Asia.” And the most important thing that one must do in order to understand Shinto, and thus Japan, is to empty oneself of any analytical thought and focus instead on feelings. In his introductory note to the first excerpt in the book, Picken goes so far as to
recommend “the experience of purification in a river or under a waterfall” as a “prelude . . . to the study of Shinto” (3).

Picken’s Sourcebook in Shinto is ostensibly a collection of Shinto texts designed to supplement his textbook, Essentials of Shinto: An Analytical Guide to Principal Teachings (Picken 1994). In fact, however, it is a collection of texts—often in excerpts no more than a few paragraphs long—placed within Picken’s tendentious framework. Even the typesetting reveals that the emphasis of the volume is on Picken’s analysis, not the texts themselves: Picken’s explanations appear in a larger font than the quotations.

The texts seem chosen for two purposes: first, to demonstrate what Picken sees as the fundamental Shinto character of the Japanese; and, second, to show how some scholars have (in Picken’s mind, mistakenly and unjustly) criticized Shinto based on their Western assumptions. Except for one section on “Shinto Thought to the Meiji Restoration,” the focus is on Japan before 1000 and after 1868—that is, imperial Shinto. For Picken, Shinto consists of purification, shrines, aesthetics, and support of the emperor all rolled into one. It is Japaneseess itself. (This is evident in the appendices he includes: a list of Japanese emperors, a lecture he gave in 1993 on the misogi or purification ritual, and a list of current equivalents to the former “first shrines” [ichi-nomiya] of ancient provinces.)

Picken’s purpose, above all, is to identify a single, fundamental Japanese identity. When commenting on the Kojiki, Nihonshoki, and early poetic anthologies, Picken—like Motoori Norinaga before him—unquestioningly sets out upon “the task of distinguishing the ‘Japanese’ essence from the Chinese externals” (1) in order to reveal “the continuity that is a profound characteristic of Japanese culture throughout the ages” (32). When commenting on the current imperial system, Picken cites the protective ness of the Imperial Household Agency—notably its objections to the publication of doctored photographs of the crown prince—as evidence that “to portray the emperor as a figure in cartoons . . . is worse than unthinkable. It is well nigh blasphemous. This is . . . inherent in the cultural way of thinking” (124). Clearly, in Picken’s mind, the editors of the publication in question did not share in this Japanese way of thinking; they must not have been truly Japanese.

Picken provides and clearly identifies texts that support his theories and some that oppose them. Thus, he praises a 1926 text by Kato Genchi for portraying “the Japanese classical tradition . . . [as] cosmic mythology with universal elements, not crude myth to be ‘demythologized’ ” (248). And, introducing four paragraphs from Helen Hardacre’s Shinto and the State that give a short chronology of relations between Shinto and the state from 1868 to 1930, Picken sums up her critical overview as “[leaning] toward a conspiracy theory whereby somehow or other, a scenario may exist in the minds of some Japanese to reestablish State Shinto” (96).

This is not to say that there is nothing good about this volume. It includes several relatively inaccessible and newly translated works, including excerpts from English and Japanese studies that are long out of print, and texts by contemporary Shinto priests such as Yamamoto Yukitaka, the high priest of Tsubaki Grand Shrine. (Picken, an ordained minister in the Church of Scotland, served as an advisor and translator for Mr. Yamamoto and is a member of the board of Tsubaki America.) Good or bad, at the price of $149.95, Picken’s anthology will reach only a limited audience.

Picken’s Sourcebook reminds us that the essentialist interpretation of Shinto is alive and well—if not among scholars, then at least among many of the most vocal Shinto priests and leaders of new religions. As Kasulis’s work shows, the attraction of Motoori’s exotic, aesthetic, romanticized ideal remains extremely powerful. Happily, the work of most scholars today is bringing us closer to an understanding of Shinto and kami worship unfiltered by Motoori’s assumptions. Let us only hope that an introductory text, bringing that awareness to the public, is somewhere in the works.

Notes
1. Here, as M. Teeuwen (2006) has noted concerning other details in the book, Kasulis overstates his case. It was not Atsutane who linked the phrase Yamato damashii (the spirit of the original Japanese people) to expulsion of the Western barbarians and reverence for the emperor; Atsutane died before the slogan became popular, though his followers did make the connection.

References


