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Christian Education in the Sign of the Covenant — A Study of Aishin High School in Western Japan —

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Christian Education in Japan

While membership never cut across the 1% mark of the population, Christianity still managed to exert a broad influence on Japanese culture. The reason for this was the deep involvement of foreign missionaries in the establishment and maintenance of educational institutions, especially for women's education. This concentration on education and science (as indirect ministries) rather than on direct evangelism, and on women as the core target group, was a result of the socio-political background of the Bakumatsu and early Meiji periods. Missionaries, acting under the anti-Christianity edict against Japanese conversion until 1873, used education as much as a 'tool' as the Meiji government did. Their attempts to enlighten the populace differed only in their goals and subsequent measures. "Mission schools" (*misshon sukūru*) provided high-level instruction for social groups that were discriminated

against in the public educational system. Although as a kind of indirect evangelism Christian education hardly yielded appropriate fruit, it certainly changed the social and economic face of modern Japan with the introduction of Christian feminism and the promotion of vocational education. Then, in the Taishō period, non-Christian Japanese educators absorbed originally Christian and humanistic approaches to reformed education, contributing largely to Japan's first phase of alternative education (Ushida 2002). But today most Christian schools are neither revolutionary in their teaching methods nor especially religious. Their Christianity has become a commodity standing for the idea of internationalization. With the shift of political priorities from Europe and America to Asia, it is doubtful how long this commodity will remain marketable (Yuki 1997).

A Christian School

Within the limited scope of a single case study, I would like to show how the people involved in Christian education evaluate Japan's educational landscape, define their own goals and methods in reaction to perceived problems, and how their efforts are in turn regarded by the non-Christian educational world.

This essay is based on qualitative empirical research into a Christian high school, established in 1988 by the Non-church Movement (*Mukyōka*) in Shimane prefecture. Officially claiming denominational freedom, the school is internally dominated by the Non-church faction especially in regard to religious education. While it was established to counterbalance the deficiencies of the Japanese educational system and while it has attracted a large number of 'problem children,' the school rejects the idea of special treatment. It is not based—in contrast to most of the alternative school projects today—on granting its students more freedoms. Instead it emphasizes self-imposed restrictions. *Yakusoku*, which means the biblical *covenant* as well as any worldly *promise* or *agreement*, is the key term of the school's philosophy.

Through interviews¹ with teachers, students, parents, and supporters as well as with outside educators and through participation in the boarding school's daily life, a complex mosaic of differing identities evolved. The diversity of their respective views can hardly be fully represented by the official narrative² of the school's foundation. Work on this project is in progress, and I hope to include more schools in the future.

Facing the Educational Crisis

My motivation in conducting this

study is rooted in previous work on the Non-church Movement and my interest in the ambiguous role of Christian education in Japan. But it was also urged by the public discourse on education currently conducted in Germany. After scoring badly in international comparison tests evaluating learning abilities, Germany is now looking to more successful countries like Finland³ and Japan⁴ for models to emulate. In this context Japan, which is still often criticized as too collective a nation, has suddenly reached idol status for educational reformers.

However, this rather one-sided notion stands against the perceptions of students, parents and educators in the idolized country. Japan is struggling with its third educational reform in response to growing problems of bullying (*ijime*), refusal to attend school (*tōkō kyōhi*, or *futōkō*), social withdrawal (*hikikomori*), school-related violence (*gakunai bōryoku*) and juvenile crime (*shōnen hanzai*). The public is debating the new concept of 'liberal education' (*yutori kyōiku*) and proposed changes to the Fundamental Law on Education (*kyōiku kihonhō kaisei*), especially its first article.

The Japanese have never paid more attention to the crisis of their children, which is perceived first of all as a crisis of education. While the unsustainability of Japanese education in its present form is widely acknowledged, problems continue to cost human lives. Violence by students is still increasing. Not only students' behaviour, but also their attitude toward study is troubling. Students are running away from classes by dropping out (*chūtai*) or by inner emigration, leading to the 'collapse of classes.' Although Japanese students have reached the highest ranks in mathe-

matics, almost 50% “dislike math.” Also with regard to other sciences a combination of highest achievement and lowest motivation has become the characteristic feature of Japanese students. Despite attempts to incorporate new approaches to learning ability, students are still weak in critical thinking, problem solution, and self-expression.

The apparent problems are the result of the disempowered state of students, “who are constantly under explicit and implicit threats from teachers” (Yoneyama, 245). Without relation to future educational prospects all students are put under the same educational pressure. They are expected to silently accept their subordinate role within the extremely rigid hierarchical structure, especially in high schools. School rules authorize power and allow for violence by teachers under the name of ‘corporal punishment.’⁵ But using their duty of student assessment, teachers also have the power to convert not only attainment, but also students’ behaviour into academic opportunity. The students’ disempowered state, i.e. their dependency on teachers, turns peer relationships into competition and surveillance. Here conformism works as the most effective means of control. Students themselves check and punish each other for the slightest deviation from what is ‘normal.’ In general they are put into a position to ‘benefit’ only if they accept boring and alienating ‘examination knowledge’ and uncritical, teacher-centered classes. Therefore it must be concluded that the “Japanese paradigm of education makes life difficult for them, hard to maintain, let alone enjoy” (ib.247). Many students attest that “school is a battle field.”

Here I present the perceptions of

insiders to the Japanese educational system instead of the usual outside perspective, which is palliated by the educational discourse and latent Japanophilia of another country.

The Daily Schedule

Christian Aishin High School is located about 700 km west of Tokyo and lies about 6 km from the nearest supermarket in the middle of the woods of Shimane prefecture on a hill overlooking the Japanese sea. Absolute isolation from the outer world was the proclaimed aim of the founders (Tonomura, 39). The day starts at 6 o’clock for the school’s fifty-seven students and their teachers with radio callisthenics and preparations for breakfast. Students take turns in preparing all three of the day’s meals themselves. The delicious meals certainly rank high on Aishin’s “Top Ten Advantages list.” Like all other meals breakfast starts and ends with a prayer and lasts exactly thirty minutes. After breakfast fifty minutes are set aside for cleaning up, preparing for class or practicing the piano. During this time the teachers gather for their first service of the day, reading from the Bible, praying and singing one or two hymns. The morning service is held by teachers. Classes are held from 9 to 12:30 and from 13:45 to 15:25. Each class has its own very bright classroom and moves to other rooms only for special subjects.

Dinner starts at 6 pm. Those who prepare it usually spend most of the otherwise free afternoon on preparations. Twice a week students engage in various work groups, preparing preserved foods, baking bread, producing soaps, potpourri or recycled paper, breeding chicken and ducks, experimenting with ecological agriculture,

maintaining the flowerbeds or repairing broken equipment.

Following dinner another service is held, this time conducted by the students themselves who choose a Bible verse and tell the others what they found important during recent weeks. Usually the evening meeting finishes just in time to allow for a rush to the observation deck or to the top of the "Eternal Rest Hill" from where one can witness a spectacular sunset in the Japanese sea. But as soon as the sun has set, students must go back to their rooms and enter into a two-hour period of silence where they are not even allowed to talk to their roommates. This period of silence is meant for class preparation or independent study. Bedtime is at 11 pm.

The schedule changes on Saturdays and Sundays, since there are no classes, but with Sunday service and school activities on Saturday morning (twice a month), little time is left for free disposal. All of the above-mentioned activities are compulsory for everyone, except for the teachers' attendance at meals. Many other classes are offered in addition, e.g. courses on pottery, drawing, calligraphy, choir, and hand bell. It was quite difficult to interview students due to the strict schedule

Rules and Agreements

Since the school understands itself as a Christian school, school regulations demand from the students that they 1) seriously study the Bible and search for truth, 2) do not drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes or tell lies, and 3) faithfully fulfil their duties and keep the agreements (*yakusoku*) of the school and the dormitory. These additional agreements include attendance at all services, maintenance of a natu-

ral (uncolored) hairstyle, abandonment of accessories and overly fashion-minded clothes, as well as of television, cell phones, comic books, magazines and (for half of the year) tape recorders. Washing has to be done by hand and students are not allowed to meet alone with a student of the other sex or to visit the dormitory of the opposite sex.

While the school regulations cannot be challenged, the agreements (*yakusoku*) are subject to students' discussion held once a year and have already been slightly changed in the past. They are therefore seen as self-imposed.⁶

The Teachers

The school employs only Christian teachers. However, it is difficult to prove that somebody is a Christian, especially if being baptized does not count. Since the school's leadership lies in the hands of Christians from the Non-church Movement who reject church sacraments, employment decisions are based on the principal's acknowledgment of proper Christian spirit and sense of calling in the applicant's personality. Apparently, principals at times also suggest that somebody might be called by God to work at Aishin.

The community of teachers consists of a hard-core minority of Non-Church Christians mostly in their fifties and sixties. The majority, however, is made up of teachers in their late twenties and thirties, mostly fresh graduates from Christian universities with little or no teaching experience. While the older generation lives together with their families on the school's premises, the young teachers are predominantly unmarried. They also come from various denominations and are largely unfamiliar with the Non-church style

of Christian life. Low remuneration, lack of opportunity to find a partner, inability to adapt to the Non-church lifestyle as well as mental and physical exhaustion are the reasons why the fluctuation rate among the young teachers is very high.

The Students

Students come from all over Japan, mostly from the countryside, and an average of 46% come from Christian homes.⁷ They have an average of 1.9 siblings. The average monthly family income is 450,000 Yen, which is a mid-level income for a family with one child, but not much for a family with three or four children. If the age difference allows it, there is a strong trend to enrol more than one child of a family at Aishin.

My survey has found that half of the children faced problems like bullying (*ijime*) or insufficient learning ability (*gakuryoku fuzoku*) during middle school. One fifth stopped going to school at least for some time, mostly during their middle school years. According to one teacher, there is one child per class who enrolled because they dislike their family. But more problematic is the case of those sent by their parents against their will, which means, in effect, a violation of the school's policy to enrol only children who come with self-commitment. Such background related problems cut across the whole spectrum of religious affiliation.

The Parents

The rate of parents holding a university degree is about three times above average.⁸ This rate tells little about the actual intellectual achievement of parents, but it may suggest conformity with the social norms of the

'schooling society' (*gakkō ka shakai*) and a subsequently high determination to send their own children to a university. After all, existing problems are in one sense 'solved' by resort to further unnecessary schooling.⁹

Parents who send 'problem children' regard Aishin as the only school that can help their children; and six parents described it as the ideal high school. An intuitive questionnaire with the students shows exclusively positive opinions about the school and their life as an Aishin student. The students nevertheless talk about various problems in the interviews, but as they state themselves, they start to see suffering or unpleasant experiences as a plus, once they have entered Aishin's little world.

Opinions of the Three Groups

While I have collected a large amount of data on the school and intend to analyze it from various perspectives in the coming months, the focus of this paper lies on how teachers and students of Aishin as well as parents evaluate the educational landscape in Japan and which countermeasures they propose or take in regard to the problems they see. For this analysis I extracted the opinions of these three groups separately, sorting them by asking "What is wrong?" "Why is it wrong?" and "Who is doing wrong?"

In a second step, I looked for common interpretations among the groups and asked why they would share a certain opinion. Since Aishin's advantages as given by the three groups can be thought of not only as the proclamation of a distinctive school identity but also a solution to problems, I have linked these advantages to the perceived problems of Japanese education,

asking “What does Aishin offer as an answer to these problems?”

The results of this analysis show that there is a group of perceived problems, which the three identity groups share, however with each participant group retaining its own perspective on the problem and especially its own target group for (implicit and explicit) accusations.

Freedom, Control and Power

Of the problems shared by all three groups, the first concerns the question of freedom, control, and power in a mass educational system. Teachers complain about the bad manners of the students and accuse parents of insufficient household education. Students experience measures of the school against rebellious behaviour as too drastic and complain about teachers who keep them under surveillance instead of protecting them. Parents bemoan the improper reaction of teachers and schools to problem children as well as somewhat individualistic children, who are often forejudged as extreme.

It is no surprise that children and parents appear to be on the same side in this confrontation. Studies have shown that parents often change their opinion about educational principles when their children turn out to be problem children, deciding that they have to protect them against outside criticism and accept them when society fails to do so. The activities of most parent support groups lead into this direction, since as long as parents continue to put pressure on their children e.g. in the case of truancy, the children are unable to find a place to survive not only at school but also at home. Therefore one central task of the sociologist of education consists in search-

ing for ways to protect the life sphere of children (Kano, 14-15).

Changing Values

Another problem derives from changes in the Japanese value system during the last fifty years. The current high school generation does not engage in studying with the same career ideals as their parent’s generation did. The post-war educational system has yet to propose new and above all convincing values for the current generation. Therefore parents criticize the lack of motivation on the students’ side, the students feel a lack of orientation — with two thirds not knowing what is expected of them — and link this lack of orientation to the new directive of “liberal education” (*yutori kyōiku*), whereas the teachers of Aishin lament the overly material orientation and loss of soul in students. As Christians they see this problem as a consequence of the secular world’s value system.

Approaches to Learning Ability

A third problem concerns approaches to learning ability. Aishin teachers and parents share the criticism that life in public high schools centers on rote learning (*tsumekomī*), preparation for entrance examinations (*juken benkyō*) in cram schools (*juku*) and club activities. Both groups of participants see the reason for this problem in perverted educational goals as expressed in the terms “grade index education” or “importance of deviation value” (*hensachi jūshi*)¹⁰. But students still tend to accept this style of education as a given precondition for high learning ability. They fear that “liberal education” might turn them into idiots.

Education out of Touch with Reality

A final problem regarding the exist-

tentiality of education logically belongs to the problems shared by the three groups, yet only parents expressed their view that students cannot feel alive in a normal high school. I assume that Aishin teachers and students are simply feeling so much alive that they forgot to comment on this point.

A second group of problems unifies two of the identity groups in their opinion. With regard to the quality of imparted knowledge, students and teachers take it for granted that normal high school education does not teach the really important knowledge. For teachers, such a statement would probably imply too much of a self-critique. They did not comment on this point.

With regard to class content, teachers and students share a wish for classes about Japanese politics, social problems or the Japanese educational system. In their experience common schools exclude any topics that might necessitate a self-critical attitude. It is Aishin's specialty to offer such classes, and some of the students have enrolled for exactly that reason.

No Trust in Human Relationships

Two problems that unite students and their parents are the organization of mass education and teacher-student relationships. Both parents and students are on the receiving end of the Japanese educational system and they claim that the supplier side is responsible for the uniformity of the system as well as for the lack of personal contact with and response to every single individual. It is symptomatic that students define human relations at school mostly as teacher-student relationships. As Yoneyama pointed out, the relationships between teachers and students, as a matter of fact, de-

termine relationships between students as well. Apparently the most heatedly discussed problems of Japanese education are hidden under the category of "problems with human relations" (*ningen kankei no mondai*). When Aishin students explained problems or reasons for truancy at middle school they frequently referred to "human relations." They could not find "trustful relationships" or were ignored for being immigrants to the town. While students did not hesitate to name "truancy" (*futōkō*) i.e. the final result of extreme problems with human relations at school, they rarely used the word "bullying" (*ijime*) to name a symptom of problematic relations. This does not mean that it rarely occurred. A survey among university students states that 60% (going to school between 1988 and 1993) witnessed 'excessive *ijime*' and 17% had themselves experienced being the victim of "excessive *ijime*" (Yoneyama, 181). Agents, victims, and witnesses of bullying are all locked within the same system, which demands silence about *ijime*. On one side, talking about *ijime* makes it worse at ordinary schools. But then talking about it has been made increasingly difficult also by government regulations about what represents *ijime* in terms of a legal definition. It is difficult to estimate how far Aishin students suffered from *ijime*. Even parents sometime seem not to know, asserting that their child had "problems with human relations" at school but presuming that "these problems did not go as far as *ijime*."

Financial Burden and Responsibility

This final problem is raised by parents only. The financial burden and responsibility for education rests exclusively on their shoulders, and they

are the ones who complain about the waste of money and time in education.

Summarizing the complaints about the Japanese educational system in the words of my informants one could say: “[The Japanese educational system is like] putting people on a conveyor belt, packing them and delivering them when time has come” (a parent). “One is not perceived as a human being. One is a stranger above all, and there is no recognition at school for what kind of family background a certain child might live in” (a student). “Ordinary schools concentrate on the principle of competition. They encourage students to strive for marks that are higher than those of a classmate even if just by one point” (a teacher).

Now I will summarize the counter-measures, which Aishin is taking in its approach to these problems in order to provide for a better school environment.

Agreements and Discussions

As mentioned above, Aishin attracts a high percentage of problem children, among them children who skipped middle school for longer periods. But in marked contrast to other schools that were specifically established for such children, Aishin insists on rules for communal life. Through dorm life students experience these rules as a necessity of communal life, but this necessity is also sanctioned by the Bible, which tells about God’s covenant with humanity as well as about many binding promises among people. Disruptive individuals are constantly admonished not only by teachers but also by their peers—students see the ability to remind and warn others as a positive skill—but at the same time they receive attention and

acceptance as human beings. Their opinion is heard just as is the opinion of everybody else. Agreements (*yaku-soku*) are achieved in discussions (*hanashiai*), but not in a simple majority vs. minority style of democracy. They must evolve as a consensus from everybody’s opinion. In addition, teachers make efforts to increase awareness among parents for household education.

Holistic Personality Development

The lack of orientation in ordinary schools is countered with a fixed value system that stresses human relations and intercultural understanding. As a Christian school, Aishin High School pursues holistic education (*zenjinkaku keisei*) based on the Bible. For students (and not only for the Christians among them) it is an important part of their Aishin identity to know that more than 3,000 people are constantly supporting the school with prayer. The question “How are you going to live?” is omnipresent and the level of reflexivity is kept high through the institutions of evening meetings (*yūka*) and discussions (*hanashiai*). In the experience of parents and students “Aishin is a world with different values.” Holistic education means to explore one’s abilities beyond the usually very limited understanding of IQ and also beyond the so-called “sunny sides of life.” As a teacher said “We want students to become poor (*mazushi*) and go to dirty places (*kitanai tokoro*) where others don’t want to work.” Dirty work is an inherent part of Aishin life, since students have to clean the cesspool and an oil trap for liquid waste twice a week as well as the chicken house.

Autonomy and Life Skills

Aishin’s alternative approach to

learning ability practically also leads to the solution of the problem the quality of imparted knowledge. In order to provide useful and important knowledge (*ikiru chishiki*) study is connected with everyday life. Although students will rarely come into the position again to operate cesspools or oil traps and provide for their meals working on the field or in the stable—unless they decide to become farmers—in doing so they have adopted an autonomous life style. Autonomy (*jishu*) is the main criterion of intellectual development as well: During the three years at Aishin students are expected to concentrate on finding out for themselves what is important for them. By the rule of the period of silence (*chinmoku no jikan*) the school provides best conditions for independent study. Students (and their parents) assert that their learning ability has increased although this increase is not necessarily reflected in grades. As one teacher concludes: “[Aishin’s] educational goals are achieved mostly through life outside the classroom and through life in the dormitory.”

Living the Now

During my stay at Aishin, I could witness that the students feel very much alive and happy. (Although in the case of some teachers the feeling of exhaustion might prevail.) Close contact with nature and the isolation from the secular world outside the community allow for concentration on one’s own existence. Aishin students live in the ‘now’ (*ima wo ikiru*) instead of cramming for entrance examinations. They work hard with their own hands to provide for their daily life. Also, mechanical equipment is limited to a minimum. This does not mean that the school raises technophobes, but the use

of technical appliances always has to be based on necessity. Students can use computers and the Internet in classes or for study projects; they can also rent CDs and videos but only after being granted permission. The school has also very efficient technology to support an ecological life style.

Truth and Critical Thinking

As previously mentioned, another of Aishin’s specialties lies in providing classes and extra-curricular activities on issues such as peace, war responsibility, and the educational system. Fieldtrips, e.g. to Hiroshima or Okinawa are well prepared in advance by means of a several-week long special study focus. Discussions on educational matters are part of the society classes. Students watch for instance the film “Dead Poets’ Society” (Japanese title, “Living the Now,” *Ima wo ikiru*); the class lets students reflect on notions of education and freedom, evaluating at the same time their own school environment.

Freedom and the Aishin Style

The uniformity of ordinary high schools is avoided by the abolition of school uniforms and fancy clothes alike, but also by the maintenance of a distinguished Aishin “face” associated with “cheerful eyes” (*kireina me, akarui me*) and “free minds” (*kangaekata no jiyū*). As one student said: “The main point of Aishin students’ identity is that there is no such thing as an Aishin student’s identity. Everybody is different.” Or, in the words of another student: “[Being an Aishin student] means not to care for things like clothes. It means being one’s true self.” Emphasis is put on individualistic diversity.

Encounter

Small numbers, dormitory life and the 24 hours availability of teachers prevent any lack of personal contact (*deai*) or individual response. The interaction with teachers outside the classroom is experienced as being based on the teachers' Christian faith. Friendliness, tolerance and understanding are attributed to this faith rather than to their personality as such. For the contact between students their mutual insight into their respective family backgrounds is a big advantage in a society that more and more tends to hide personal background for fear of social contempt should problems arise. Many say that Aishin is "a place where one can learn the difficulty of human relationships," but this difficulty and subsequent suffering is always regarded as a positive experience. *Ijime* does not exist at Aishin. Without taking refuge in legal definitions to prove its non-existence, there is a fundamental difference between "problems with human relations" experienced by students at middle school and those they experience at Aishin. The difficulty of human relations at Aishin arises from the constructive attempt to live together in diversity, i.e. it arises directly from everybody's individuality.

Responsibility

Responsibility (*sekinin*) is central to school life, but with regard to the school's financing it assumes a very definite form. The school's efforts to minimize costs as much as possible allows for very low tuition fees in comparison to other private schools. The foundation funds were raised by collection campaigns. Most of the equipment was donated, and every class of graduates makes a farewell

gift to the school. In addition, a scholarship fund system for financially weak families was incorporated.

Again summarizing in the words of my informants, Aishin is "a way out of Japan's mainstream educational system" (a parent) and "a place where everybody cooperates and moves together" (a student). "[Aishin] is the fruit (crystallization) of many prayers by people who wish to raise personalities which God will like and which are needed by other people" (a teacher).

Aishin in the Wider Discourse

In a hearing¹¹ before the Education Council, Nakanishi Terumasa from Kyoto University argued that currently occurring discussions on a new Fundamental Law on Education are not so much directed at the young generation of students. Rather they give voice to a more general discontent with "today's Japanese society, politics and role models provided by adult individuals." Many call for directives for household education (*kaitei kyōiku*) by insertion of a special article into the Fundamental Law on Education. It appears to me that the new notion of life-long learning, which is also to be established with the new Fundamental Law, will serve as a rationale for the state's intrusion into individual opinion making processes extending beyond the range of compulsory schooling.

Though Aishin teachers frequently refer to insufficient household education, as a matter of fact, being a boarding school Aishin releases parents even more from their responsibility for the education of their children. Except for very few (though impressive) cases, the questionnaire showed little awareness of parents of being involved in the education of their chil-

dren. Most parents merely express their trust in the educational policy of the school or their fervent support by prayer. Looked at closely, Aishin takes the opposite approach in comparison to the public discourse.

The need for a reformulation of the law is often explained with reference to shifting values. Sporadically members of the decision making part of adult society also admit that current problems occurred because they themselves adhered too stubbornly to the values of their own generation, i.e. to the values taught in post-war education. This acknowledgment of having ignored value changes in society still does not include even a hint that post-war education as such might have failed. In what sense am I suggesting that it failed? Regardless of the idealistic outline of the Fundamental Law on Education, the goal of post-war education was to ensure Japan's economic recovery. As Yoneyama points out, the Japanese education paradigm switched back to the "autocratic" in the mid-1950s after a short truly democratic phase in the immediate post-war years. But even those students subjected to "democratic" post-war education were encouraged by parents, who gave their best for Japan's economy as the new samurai class (i.e. the white collar *sarariman*). The parents themselves were raised to give honor to the Imperial Rescript on Education (*kyōiku chokugo*). Although the occupation forces abolished the rescript immediately, few Japanese questioned the appropriateness of its content (though not its previous usage). Therefore its Confucianist values persisted for decades until the affluence of the bubble years finally started to destroy them. But inevitably values change. And while post-war education

on the level of outside appearance was so busy with proving that Japan had changed, it failed to nurture the ability to adjust to future changes in students.

With Christian schools the situation is a priori different. Since Christianity has no base in Japanese society, schools—as long as they care to communicate Christian values—have to relate the values they teach to the values of the surrounding environment in some way. Parents of Aishin students described these as fundamental values that transcend a constantly changing zeitgeist. Also the school's self-presentation includes the confrontation of transcendental "truth" with "human thought" bound to its time. It is not for me to decide whether Aishin can actually provide access to such truth or not. But education based on this claim stimulates increased awareness of differing priorities and their respective limitations. Christian education includes, although not everywhere to the degree of Aishin high school, a constant rethinking of one's identity as a Christian and Japanese and of one's relation to the state. The demands to provide for the development of a Japanese identity (*nihonjin no aidentiti*) and for patriotism (*aikokushin*) through education as raised widely in the public discourse seem rather narrow-minded in the light of a more critical Christian consideration of these terms.

Aishin also takes a different course with regard to two more items of the educational reform agenda. While proposals for the new law stress the necessity of cooperation of schools and local communities, Aishin—as well as the other two Non-church high schools—relied for 15 years on isolation from secular society. A consciousness of being based in enemy territory might

have been the reason for this isolation. Rather than seeking support from immediate neighbors, the school compensated for the lack of integration by support from a nationwide scattered community through prayer. This situation is now changing and the school is trying to develop more contacts with the local community so that one can assert a trend of converging interests.

The opposite trend, however, is occurring with Aishin's priority on elite training. The schools founding spirit included a rather big share of aspirations to elite education. Aishin was meant to raise individuals who are able to carry Japan's future. The names of Aishin's dormitories still declare this spirit—one being called “the salt of the earth”—and some parents voiced similar aspirations combined with the criticism that Aishin does not recruit enough well-motivated and gifted students. But on the whole students and teachers at Aishin are not filled with this spirit. They predominantly deny the idea that Aishin may have an impact on Japanese society. The impact they see is restricted to the individual life of the students.

At the same time—after an overkill of critical voices from activists trying to save the ‘dropouts’ (*ochikobore*)—the public discourse is rediscovering the necessity of elite training out of fear/recognition of an ability gap between Japan and other industrialized nations. Although international test results on student attainment still contradict such a perception, Japan already has to fight a brain drain of the intellectual elite to Western universities.

Aishin's Own Problems

So far we have examined the pro-

gressive potential of Aishin to solve problems apparent in other public and private schools. But it would be naive to conclude that Aishin itself is free of troubles. Most of the school's problems arise immediately from its self-definition. They are the problems of any small community (*chiisana shakai*), which tries the balancing act of involving people from diverse backgrounds in the ideologically loaded project of a small interest group (*mo-kuteki dantai*) via channels—in this case education—which usually do not demand a particular ideological commitment.

Denominational Tensions

First, there are the tensions between believers of various denominations inside the school. Since denominational affiliation differs according to age groups, this problem is somewhat disguised as a generational conflict. Young teachers who feel the need to support their spiritual life with worship and prayer in a holy space of the kind they knew before are not satisfied with the mind-heavy style of Non-church Christianity. Some also raise objections to the content of service, especially against statements of religious tolerance that acknowledges other religions as equal ways to reach the truth. They wish to have a specially trained person—perhaps a chaplain—who would be less infected with the worldliness of the school's daily affairs and could therefore accomplish a spiritual tightening of its community. The school's founder, Takahashi Saburō, and his closest associate, Tada Masakazu, whom students used to call “Tada-jūchan” (Grandpa Tada) once exerted such an influence, but Tada has died and Takahashi has not visited the school for almost a decade due to

physical instability after a car accident. Right now the school has no spiritual leader. Nor does it have a separated “holy” space to be used only for service and prayer.

The older generation of teachers finds it hard to communicate the essence of the school’s founding spirit to this younger generation. Young teachers often leave before they can even get a grasp of it. The founding spirit is naturally less important for those who were not involved in the process of foundation. But their different priorities lead to suspicion within the teaching community. Though all teachers share the same faith trustful relationships are seen as problematic due to differing opinions. Young teachers think that some students also struggle, too much, with issues arising from incompatibility of spiritual traditions.

Psychological Stress

Second, psychological stress is extreme for all at Aishin. Student numbers have been sinking over the last few years,¹³ so that the community living there does not exceed 100. But still it is difficult to be alone. All meals have to be taken together with the whole group, and living in a single room is not permitted. Due to responsibility for many activities outside of class and 24 hours availability to students, the physical as well as mental burden on teachers is especially heavy. Young teachers are given only a short period of vocational adjustment and become form masters already in their second year. On the other hand, they receive little support. Having no mentor and absolute freedom in class design they must struggle on their own in finding out how to improve teaching style and class content. Fear of exposure keeps

them from asking colleagues for help. Less successful teachers also have a difficult standing in communal life. Their double identity of being a Christian and a teacher seems to work in the way that their positive achievement on a personal and professional level is seen as an affirmation of their Christian faith, while insufficient professionalism cannot be compensated by deeper religiosity.

Explaining Aishin’s positive potential for problem solution, I have mentioned the high level of reflexivity in daily life. Such reflexivity certainly is essential for education stressing “the meaning of life.” But it also cannot be denied that it entails psychological pressure. Due to the school’s agreements students cannot express themselves by outer appearance. These agreements are not meant to suppress individual diversity, but individuality in outer appearance is seen as superficial, while verbal expression is seen as the real mediator of inner individuality. Most parts of school life stress the importance of the word. The pressure of being expected to express one’s self combined with the emphasis on verbal expression leads to an overly reflexive daily interaction. As one student complains, “people think too much about what others say, they cannot encounter each other without wondering what the other wanted to express with his/her words.”

Psychological stress also results from the expectation of compliance with the school’s approach of self-restriction. There is no punishment system in case of resistance, but since nobody can even temporarily hide at Aishin, the constant pressure by warnings and discussions could be evaded only by inner emigration or by quitting school all together.

Another psychological problem arises from the claim to maintain a community without vertical (i.e. hierarchical) relations (*jōge kankei*) that allows students “to create a base for healthy family life.” While the latter claim is basically directed at relations between the sexes it also expresses the school’s functioning as a second home for many students. Though students find a second home here, teachers rarely see themselves as substitute parents, nor even as friends.

Japan has long been characterized as a ‘vertical society’ (*tate shakai*) where relations are defined in terms of vertical dependency and horizontal exclusion. Though Japanese society has changed enormously during the last decades, the ‘vertical society’ is still a topos of the Japan discourse (*nihonjinron*).

While Aishin sets out to break with the vertical tradition it still retains the value of authority. It seeks to prevent hierarchical relations between students but teaching itself rests on an unquestioned hierarchical authority of the teacher. This already ambiguous approach is further complicated by the notion of “healthy family life.” In this way, students experience at Aishin relations – so-called “diagonal relations” (*naname no kankei*) (Kano, 15) – they will hardly be able to experience again in their future lives within the Japanese society. The high fluctuation rate of young teachers adds instability to the students’ attempt to build human relationships in their second home. This year the bewildering chaos of models for human relations resulted not only in the demand of students from the third grade to be addressed by juniors in “polite language” (*keigo*), but also in the surprising decision to allow this claim.¹⁴

Seclusion from the Outside World

A third group of problems can be traced back to Aishin’s seclusion from the outside world. Seclusion is efficient with regard to secular media that are not allowed inside the school. But accepting students – especially non-Christian students – also means letting in secularized individuals. Parents bemoan teachers’ inadequate reaction to “kids that still breath the air of contemporary society.” Especially older teachers who see the school compounds as a kind of refuge within enemy territory cannot cope with students inside who wear signs of the secular world (accessories etc.). Sincere (religious) motivation clashes with rebellious adolescents and creates a gap between religious ideals and reality even inside the secluded commune. This gap is not necessarily only a gap between religiously highly motivated teachers and less religious students. There are also students who lament a lack of strictness to follow the school’s ideals. And those who seek the advice of the school’s counselor predominantly suffer from this gap.

Broad Spectrum of Learning Ability

Aishin refuses both to be an “examination preparation school” (*ju-kenkō*) and/or a special school for “problem children.” Also learning ability is not seen as a value in itself. Therefore Aishin offers limited support for students who wish to take entrance examinations as well as for students who cannot easily adjust to the common classroom style of teaching. Though teachers definitely provide individual advice, some students still feel that they do not have enough classes, but rather too much freedom (*yutori*), which is why they cannot improve

their learning ability.

Financing

In the case of Aishin the financial burden is not only high for parents, but also for the school. The school managed to raise foundation funds by collection campaigns in order to start a school with “zero loans.” But with sinking application numbers it is hard to provide for running costs. From the very beginning facilities were erected only after enough money was accumulated. While Aishin is actually better equipped than especially older public schools, students still think in comparison with other private schools that the school’s facilities are insufficient.

Maintaining the Founding Spirit

Historical continuity is central for Aishin’s identity, and any deviation from the original course must be justified. Today there are only two teachers at the school who witnessed the school’s history from its very beginnings. The propagation of the school’s founding spirit has become one of their major tasks. Naturally they find it increasingly difficult to communicate this spirit. On the other hand, younger teachers assume that Aishin has fulfilled its original mission, since common schools today have already incorporated many of Aishin’s special features. For them, to sustain Aishin as a progressive model within the Japanese educational landscape might necessitate a re-definition of its mission.

Rigidification

Another problem of the historical existence of any institution is that of rigidification. After the school’s tenth anniversary, officials repeatedly stated that the school’s foundation/pioneering

phase has come to an end. But this kind of statement already implies the assumption that the school’s essential outline has been fixed. While the school’s regulations concerning daily life were constantly developed during the foundation period, the very institution of their regular discussion to consider changes is now turning into an institution of collective acceptance of already given rules. As one teacher said: “More and more rules are simply checked, but not thought over.” The possibility of change constitutes an enormous motivation to determine and express one’s individual opinion. If things cannot be changed, why should one bother at all? Observing the trend of rigidification at Aishin on one side, it is no wonder that the same teacher asserts a decrease in students’ ability to express themselves on the other side.

Aishin Christianity

“Is Aishin Christian enough to be called Christian Aishin High School?” This is a question I asked everybody at Aishin, as I sought to find out what “Christian high school education” in the current situation means and how it is practiced. Opinions vary based on different interpretations of this term. Though some students think a Christian school is one for Christians only, most Christian students are happy to have the opportunity of contact with non-Christian life styles and world-views. For most of the teachers the criteria are shared Christian belief among all teachers, the fact that everybody attends morning and Sunday services and that Bible classes are obligatory. Parents predominantly see Aishin as a Christian school, but above all they associate the school with holistic personality development and mis-

sionary purpose.

Seen from my perspective, the school is indeed Christian, though not for the above given reasons. It is Christian because it sanctions the secular order of keeping promises/agreements in daily life with the rhetoric of the biblical covenant. In this way the school guarantees a distinctively Christian approach. The same can be said of the model for holistic character development, which is given in the personality of Christ.

Aishin's Critique of Christian Schools

I introduced Aishin as a school founded to raise a "No" to the pitfalls of the Japanese educational system. But as a matter of fact Aishin's very existence also is a critique of other Christian schools in Japan. While the Christian personnel of other Christian schools is usually limited to the school's principal and those who teach classes on Christianity, all three high schools founded by the Non-church Movement manage to recruit their full faculty from Christians. Also compulsory attendance of Sunday, morning and evening services are very uncommon among other Christian schools. These two aspects were frequently referred to in the interviews, though never as a critique of other Christian schools, but rather with an expression of modest pride.

Taking into account Yuki's evaluation of Christian schools today, it becomes clear, that Aishin differs also from another point of view: Under the application of "Christian-principle education" instead of "Christian education," he states, "Christianity is present among other things; it takes its place alongside other subjects; there are Christian activities and there are other activities. But these 'other things'

have almost no connection with Christianity" (Yuki, 168). That is to say, that in most Christian schools Christianity is not only denied the function of a precondition to real education, but is, in fact, absolutely unrelated to most of the school's educational activities.

In contrast, at Aishin study is not only connected to everyday life, but everyday life itself is constantly interpreted in Christian terms. The key terms of Aishin's counter-measures against problems of other schools echo the Protestant tradition. Although students and teachers alike stated that they rarely talk about their Christian belief outside of Bible classes or services, both sides still experience their interaction — for better or worse — as a witness to the teacher's faith.

Yuki also criticizes that most Christian schools have forgotten about the main task of private educational institutions, namely to raise "independent-minded citizens who stand on their own feet." Instead of taking a critical stance toward the "system whereby they are 'allowed' to operate by permission of the authorities; they tag along tamely with instructions from the city office; they actually think their school standard is improving if it comes to resemble a State school even a little." In general, this critique does not apply to Aishin, but judging solely on the base of its curriculum and regular extra-curricular activities, it may seem that critical thinking is directed always at the "usual suspects," i.e. at the same problems (war-responsibility, peace constitution, ecology). Also the reason one teacher gave as an explanation for why it was impossible to make students think about "how they are going to live" to a satisfying degree reveals a sort of ready obedience to state directives. Supposedly,

the Monbushō regulations for the curriculum are too demanding to allow for further extra-curricular activities.

The few critical voices among parents lament phenomena in other Christian schools which Aishin is able to evade: the loss of Christian ideals/principles, their bondage to social environment, insufficient Christian staff, mammothization (*manmosu ka*), priority of money (commodification), and development into cram schools (*juken kō ka*) that foster the overestimation of student attainment (*gakyō seiseki shugi*). The critical voices either explicitly hold up Aishin as an ideal or speak of complete resignation and find it doubtful if the Christian message leaves any traces at all within the educational system.

However, more responses show a positive evaluation of the contribution of Christian schools to the Japanese educational system. Christian schools are said to raise conscience for meaningful life, i.e. for a purpose of living (*nanraka no tame ni ikiru*), and to send many students into welfare work. One parent attested Christian schools to be a good anti-force to a rather rightist government putting more emphasis on internationalization than on (nationalistic) Japanization. They are supposed to be worth their high costs since they offer effective (*kōritsu no takai*) and strict (*kibishii*) education while at the same time “chaos rules under the name of ‘freedom’” in other schools. Somehow in contrast to this strictness, they are said to allow for free and individual (*kosei no aru*) development. Also Christian schools are seen as the place where many people touch the Bible for the first time and where children can adopt an altruistic spirit through holistic personality development. They provide a chance to

become aware of human friendliness and warmth through contact with religion. For some parents Christian schools do not have any special features in comparison with public schools or they are just one out of many choices for higher education.

The prevalence of positive evaluations of the *current* role of Christian schools can be rounded out by opinions regarding their *desired* role in the Japanese educational system. Here the wish for teaching Christianity not only on a knowledge-level but above all as a “teaching of the heart that can be experienced in practice” is voiced. Christian schools are expected to focus on the individual and on close human relationships before thinking of world peace and internationalization. Also they should create an environment and curriculum within which everybody can accept the ‘otherness’ of each other. Christian education should be practiced as the living together of children and adults with their respective lifestyles. These expectations suggest that Christian schools are plagued with the same problems as public schools, only they are able to better hide them under attractive slogans.

Seen on the whole, Aishin’s self-positioning in the educational landscape of Japan is rather ambiguous. The school clearly distances itself from public schools, but while it functions in many regards as a critical antipole to other Christian schools it is very cautious not to place itself outside the community of Christian schools. This ambiguity is apparent in the school’s publications, in which the connection of the school to the particular tradition of the Non-church Movement is revealed only to those knowing the names of Mukyōkai leaders. It seems that the inner appearance of

Aishin, which is dominated by Mukyōkai reasoning, does not quite fit the outer self-presentation of the school as an *inter*denominational institution. This ambiguity may be a result of Mukyōkai's struggle to define its own identity. Since they do not like to regard themselves as a denomination, they may have the illusion that they have built a *non*denominational school. However, within the school they *function* as a denomination, which controls the spiritual life of community members belonging to other denominations. It appears to me that a more conscious self-definition in either direction—either distinctly (and openly) Mukyōkai or consequently ecumenical—could help to overcome the tensions currently existing in the school.

Conclusions

In her comparison of Japanese and Australian education, Yoneyama concludes that “Japanese education represents an autocratic paradigm of education, while Australian education represents a combination of democratic and autocratic paradigms” (Yoneyama, 73). She still asserts the existence of democratic approaches in Japan but providing democratic education means a “battle against the system.” Following her argumentation, democratic education is characterized by equal student-teacher relationships, which are based on mutual trust and respect. Discipline is reached by persuasion of, and negotiation with students and not by corporal punishment. School rules are limited to a minimum of basic principles; also they are not imposed upon the students. Study is interactive and includes cooperative learning. Students are able to participate in decision-making. And with less hierar-

chical teacher-teacher relationships there is more equality among them. Democratic education is said to promote individuality and the strength of each student. Its main orientation points toward diversity, and it tries to achieve de-alienation. As said above, it is the full opposite of what ordinary Japanese schools represent today.

Checking the above given criteria for the case of Aishin it becomes obvious that the school actually represents an alternative approach in the educational landscape of Japan, first of all by working under the democratic paradigm instead of the autocratic one. It is for this reason that Aishin can bypass problems of ordinary schools. How far other Christian schools also provide democratic education would have to be analysed in further studies. Nevertheless, Aishin's democracy is seriously threatened by the tolerance of forced entries, the rigidification of the school's agreements, and by solving problems of authorization with the imposition of stratified—and thereby stratifying—language.

Constituting such a contrast to ordinary schools, Aishin could be a place that helps “problem children” to recover from previous bad experiences and to find a new sense of subjectivity. But as a precondition it would have to openly acknowledge its students' problematic background and to support a constructive thematization of experiences like bullying or school refusal. Especially dangerous to the alternative standing of the school are hidden similarities with the established version of education, notably in how the bullying is addressed. In contrast to ordinary schools, which deal (if at all) with this topic only on the very abstract level of education about human rights, classes at Aishin discuss it

within the (still broad) frame of social criticism. But this is not enough. Bullying must be approached on the level of personal responsibility as well. Everybody who keeps silent is responsible for maintaining the status quo: those who bully others, those who are bullied, and those who witness but do not interfere. As a school in which bullying does not exist, Aishin seems to provide the best chance for combining social critique with self-critique in coming to terms with past experiences.

In Yoneyama's opinion, the current problems of Japanese education are a result of the system's autocratic paradigm. The only time when the democratic paradigm of education ever reached predominance was in the immediate post-war years. During these years educators and education were filled with the spirit of the Fundamental Law on Education of 1947. This spirit is known to be democratic and liberal. Some people boldly suggest it is Christian: Inoue (222) states that Christianity and new religious movements "felt favored" by the law, and thereby explains the prevalence of Christian schools among private religious schools in Japan. But he links this privilege only to the freedom of religious education. Professor Sekikawa from Nihon University points to parallels between the law and Christian educational policies to suggest that the Fundamental Law on Education may in fact be a Christian Law on Education (interview in August, 2004). If we compare §1 of the law to the educational goals of Aishin, we find similar phrases stressing notions of fulfillment of personality (*jinkaku no kansei*), truth (*shinri*), righteousness (*seigi*), responsibility (*sekinin*) and independent spirit (*jishūteki seishin*). Only the addition of the words "We

practice holistic education based on the Bible in an environment of small student numbers and obligatory dorm life" exceeds the demands of the Fundamental Law on Education. The question is how to distinguish between democratic and Christian elements in the law. On a dogmatic level, the distinction seems easy. On the level of common sense, it seems even easier, since democracy is usually perceived as an achievement of non-Christian civilization.

As a matter of fact, politically it is impossible to acknowledge the Fundamental Law on Education as a Christian law, unless with the intention to attack it and demand its reformulation. But for Christianity (and for Christian schools) in Japan the *historical* question of how much it contributed to the law's content is secondary. More important is the question what it can *currently* contribute to Japanese society. Christian education, which stands for "internationalization," hardly represents a distinct voice within an educational landscape where everybody and the government more than everybody else cries for internationalization. On the government's political agenda, "internationalization" serves as a fashionable form of nationalism to ensure the Japaneseness of the Japanese (McVeigh, chapter 7). But Christian schools build upon the same distinction between Japanese and non-Japanese when they merely relocate the "outside world" to the "homeland" of Japanese with fancy, Western style campuses and foreign teaching staff. Admittedly, they provide a place for Japanese to escape the requirements of Japaneseness. However, such escape is pricey and therefore hardly accessible for everyone. In contrast, a Christian school, which ac-

tualizes the democratic qualities of its Christianity throughout the whole pedagogical approach, becomes a force for social change rather than for preservation of the status quo.

Yoneyama (249) sees hope for Japanese education in a movement of school deniers, which—if it could grow — “will come to mark the beginning of a new ‘post-war’ period—marking the beginning of the end to the war within schools, the war against children.” *Aishin* is small, but it represents the

same hope. Ironically, this hope has also been inscribed into legal documents for almost 60 years. Therefore the challenge—and here I share Yoneyama’s opinion—is not a reformulation of the Fundamental Law, but it “involves nothing less than reversal of the ‘reverse-course’ of the mid-1950s, the dismantling of the legislative constraints which repealed the spirit of the 1947 Fundamental Law on Education.”

Notes

1. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 teachers and 11 students (with audio recording), an intuitive questionnaire with the same 11 teachers and all students (respond rate 32 %), and a qualitative written survey with all parents (respond rate 56 %, 65 % of which came from female parents). A 17-day-long participant observation was conducted in May 2004.
2. For official accounts see the school’s publications: *Kirisutokyō Aishin Kōtō Gakkō* (2002), the periodical *Aishin*, and Tonomura Tamihiko (1994).
3. Finland reached the highest cross sectional score in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2000, followed by Japan, which leads in mathematics. Latest results and commentaries can be accessed via the program’s website (www.pisa.oecd.org).
4. Looking up to Japan opinion makers often favor full-time-schools (*zennichi gakkō*) and the abolition of school year repetition without any in-depth consideration or even questioning of the advantages of a high rate of learning ability for society and/or its industry.
5. The idea that “corporal punishment equals education” is wide spread not only in schools that reached the headlines of the media with “deaths within normal practice”. Physical punishment (*tai-batsu*) is widely believed to be necessary among teachers and parents alike, even though the School Education Law of 1947
6. If agreement (*yakusoku*) is one key term of the school’s philosophy, another one is encounter (*deai*). Students change rooms 9 times in 3 years, sharing double rooms usually with a student of a different grade. Also the seating order at meals changes once a week. Field-trips to places like Hiroshima, Okinawa or Korea necessarily include encounters with people affected by the events of World War II.
7. Unofficial statistics provided by the school principal based on the last 6 years. Answers by the par-

- ents in my own survey indicated 55 % Christian parents for 2004. 24 % of the parents have no religion, 17% are Buddhist and 3 % belong to a new religious movement. (One parent stands for one family.)
8. According to Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (2002), 461-2 an average of 20 % women and 30% men in the age group between 45 and 54 hold a university degree. In contrast 70% of female Aishin parents and 77% of male Aishin parents graduated from university. (These numbers resemble only the parents who responded to the survey.)
 9. Compulsory education does not include high school, though the social norm demands its attendance.
 10. 'Deviation value' refers to an IQ based statistical method of expressing a student's attainment in relation to the average attainment of all students. Average is set at 50 points. List of necessary deviation marks for entrance to universities (sorted by discipline) can be found on the Internet.
 11. www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/kihon/index.htm
 12. In the end, Nakanishi's critique is directed at Christianity, which supposedly exerted an undesirable influence on the Fundamental Law on Education. When he calls for the regeneration of the notion of nation state as basis for educational reform his nationalist objectives become clear.
 13. Reasons given for this decline are sinking birth rates and increasing dispensability of Aishin after improvements in public schools. But the most confining factor seems to be the restriction of PR to word-of-mouth recommendation.
 14. This decision was explained with the wish to provide sufficient preparation for the student's future social life. However, the use of socially structured language is not at all common in other high schools. And this alignment with secular values contradicts the school's anti-mainstream self-assertion. Students told of their difficulties: Since they are not used to it, they feel now restricted in their interaction with seniors.

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