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Structural Limitations of Religious/Moral Education in Japan

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Permitting religious education only in private schools, Japan's lawmakers sought to stay in line with both directives that of separation between state and religion and that of religious freedom as given by the post-war constitution. Clinging to legal issues while still demanding enforced value education the public discourse often ignores the deeper relationship between religious tradition and value education, furthermore it lacks acceptable value notions. Another problem is the way in which religious education is practiced. (Private) schools that exert "successful" influence on the values and moral convictions of their students do so not by means of classes on religion, but rather outside of class by contact with lived values through communal life. That is why many Christian schools continue to rely on the boarding school or dormitory system.

But while the notion of learning

through communal life has determined educational approaches of religious communities on a large scale, the underlying reasons and the consequences for religious education and education in general have not been thought through.

This paper attempts to combine some theoretical considerations with empirical findings in order to reveal misconceptions and structural limitations in practical approaches to religious education. In addition it suggests possibilities for overcoming them.

Seeing education as a communicative practice that takes place between an already educated (i.e. aligned) adult population and a yet to-be-educated (i.e. aligned) juvenile population, in which messages are sent, received and processed, I shall draw on the achievements of communication theory, esp. message effect research, and also on psychoanalytic discourse theory

(Lacan's theory of subjectivity) and response-centered psychoanalytic cultural criticism (Bracher).

Light from Communication Theory

Communication researchers today understand message comprehension and persuasion as "the joint product of incoming data with existing knowledge" (Berger, 79). They distinguish between basic message goals such as a) knowledge gain, b) attitude change, and c) on the spot consumption (stimulation). In the field of education a) and b) are of particular interest. The latest theories on b) attitude change also relate to a) knowledge gain and insist that "attitude change is rarely correlated with the acquisition of arguments [i.e. comprehension and retention] but is frequently related to the number of self-generated cognitive responses to messages. Persons who themselves generate more positive responses to the message are more persuaded by it; conversely, persons who generate more negative responses are less persuaded." (Berger, 79)

Among message effects we have to distinguish comprehension and retention as direct effects from persuasion as indirect effect. Although the "triggering of extant knowledge may [also] be responsible for the persuasive effect" (Berger, 80), we have to assess the impact of source credibility which can lead to persuasion even without sufficient message comprehension.

In the course of more detailed studies on persuasion the notion of "successful influence" has been redefined. A message can be seen as "successful" not only if it leads to changes in attitudes and behavior but also if it leads to the reinforcement of existing attitudes or the induction of resistance to future persuasion as well. (Burgoon,

131)

When attitude change is the goal of communication, the message can appeal to three different components of attitudes (Burgoon, 132): a) *beliefs*, i.e. notions of whether statements are true or false, b) *opinions*, i.e. notions of whether things are good or bad, and c) *values*, i.e. enduring notions of good and bad that control large numbers of behaviors. Among these beliefs are thought to be the most modifiable and values to be the least modifiable.

Questions for Japan

Now, what use can we make of these theoretical considerations for the case of religious education in Japan?

First of all, they raise the question of what kind of previous knowledge about religion students bring with them to classes? How is this prior knowledge activated in and outside classes, if it is activated at all?

Second, what is the goal of religious and moral education in Japan? How is this goal related to the goal of education in general? How is this goal put into practice?

Third, at which components of attitudes are the messages of religious and moral education directed? If we assume attitude change as the basic goal, how would we evaluate the credibility of sources in religious education?

Last, can religious or moral education in its present form be called "successful" in either of the above-defined senses? If not, how could "successfulness" be achieved? What role could religious education ideally play in schools?

Lacan's Four Discourse Structures

While the above considerations mainly focus on the side of the message sender the following considera-

tions are meant to further investigate the side of the receiver. In his theory of subjectivity Lacan describes four different discourse structures¹.

The so-called “discourse of the master” (Bracher, 59-65), which attempts to promote a particular philosophy or politics (i.e. a “way”) actually suppresses revolutionary or disruptive desires of subjects by the promulgation of already *fixed solutions or values*. Visible problems arise if the subject does not agree with the major master signifier(s)² of the discourse, i.e. the subject does not identify with the given goals. Such discourse serves the aims of governing and commanding a populace.

The second suppressive structure of discourse is the so-called “discourse of the university” (Bracher, 55-59), which is in fact a perversion of the discourse of the master. It serves the aims of educating and indoctrinating. Knowledge or a particular *system of knowledge* becomes the major master signifier and is communicated *as an end in itself* without revealing its underlying *raison d'être*.

In opposition to the two above-mentioned structures, the structure of the so-called “discourse of the hysteric” (Bracher, 65-68) allows for a certain degree of representation of the human subject. However, this representation is dominated by the speaker’s symptoms of *subjective division and alienation*. The speaker refuses to embody those master signifiers that are available in society, but instead of finding/creating new master signifiers on his own he demands acceptable master signifiers from others. This structure thereby serves the aims of resistance, protest or complaint.

Bracher’s Cultural Criticism

Referring to Lacan’s discourse structures Bracher attempts to advance a response-centered form of psychoanalytic cultural criticism. This criticism aims at empowering human subjects for change, in particular for a transformation of unrealistic self-images, which are seen as source of social tension. The theory suggests that social tension could be reduced if individuals were encouraged to create their objectives from inside themselves based on a thorough self-awareness instead of simply choosing attractive objectives from the cultural super-market irrespective of their real needs.

The only structure that allows for such transformative practice through analyzing, transforming and revolutionizing is the fourth structure, the so-called “discourse of the analyst” (Bracher, 68-73). It has the opposite structure of the discourse of the master: via an assumption/recognition of the subject’s own desires and his or her alienation and a subsequent *separation from given master signifiers* that originally caused the subject’s alienation the way is opened toward the *subject’s self-determined production of his own new master signifiers*. The analyst does not provide solutions, but helps the analysand to discover hidden desires in order to form his own master signifiers.

Questions for Japan

Again, these theoretical perspectives suggest considerations for the case of religious education in Japan.

First, we may ask, in what subject position students are put in education in general and in religious/moral education in particular? We will revisit Lacan’s discourse structures and try to identify the structure, which adequately describes the situation of stu-

dents at school.

It is for the purpose of overcoming current problems that we have to consider structural differences between the setting of public and private schools, on one side, and between education inside and outside of class i.e. as a part of communal life, on the other side. This paper suggests that structural differences in the student's subjectivity may be a/the reason for the higher level of "successfulness" in influence.

The final task lies in the utilization of successful factors of religious education in private schools for public schools combined with a positive formulation of the role of religious/moral education in Japanese public schools.

Religion's Bad Image Unchallenged

Now I shall try to answer the questions stated above for the case of religious/moral education in public and most private schools.

Except for what is called civil religion and primal religion; most Japanese students today have no personal experience of religious life. Nonetheless, they come to school with a more or less fixed picture about the nature of religion. This picture is, above all, a result of the influence of various mass media. Therefore it is no surprise that two thirds of them assert the dangerousness of religion (Inoue 2000, 11).³ The bad image of religion created by the AUM shock and 9/11 also reinforced the tendency among Japanese to deny any religiosity for themselves at all, resulting in a shift of Japanese self-portrayal from *syncretism* to *atheism* within the last two decades. Thus, the prior knowledge of students is conditioned by an extremely negative image of religion and a subsequent tendency to deny the religiousness of

factually religious activity (horoscopes, shrine visits, ancestor worship etc.).

A major problem of moral/religious education in Japan is that classes do not relate to this already given image of religion and teachers are even unaware of it (Inoue 1998, 243). Besides the religiousness of activities on the level of civil religion and primal religion, which are part of public school life, is unacknowledged.

In classes the abstract and knowledge-centered approach to teaching basic values fails to activate the students' prior knowledge about religion and hardly provokes abundant positive cognitive responses, except in the case of a very small minority of students who are already interested in abstract thinking.

Moreover, if a mostly media-based unconscious image of religion is elaborated by an equally intangible discussion of abstract religious/moral values then chances are high that the first experience of or involvement in tangible religious activity will fundamentally change the students' notion of religion. The proof of the pudding is in its eating.

Blinded by Globalization and Terror

Looking at the public discourse or even at scientific publications on contemporary education in Japan we find a) an abundant number of references to religious and/or moral education as well as b) the free use of religious termini to provide sociological explanations of current problems of education in general.

Regarding a) we can assert that the issue of religious and/or moral education has become a central focus in ongoing discussions concerning the revision of the Fundamental Law on Education (*kyōiku kihon hō*). This de-

velopment has to be seen in the context of efforts to create a new identity of “cultivated Japanese, who are living the global society based on Japanese traditions and culture”.⁴ But while religion is asserted as a part of Japan’s cultural past it is still denied importance for contemporary Japanese society.

The discussion of the Education Council⁵ shows clearly, that the importance of knowledge about religions is seen exclusively from two perspectives, that of globalization, i.e. to understand the events in other “more religious” countries, and from the necessity to save both individuals and society from unlawful acts and acts threatening the social security of the community taken by “pseudo-religious organizations” (*giji shūkyō dantai*) or “doctrinal groups” (*kyōgi shūdan*). Although such terminology will hardly find entry into the revised law it still reflects the general awareness of issues (*mondai ishiki*).

Examples for b) include the theory of the school’s decreasing “holiness” (Takikawa 1994, 1996, 1999 and Kanō) and Katō’s analysis of the soteriological dimension of the public discourse on education (Katō, 46) as well as slogans and terms like “Japan, resurrect [yourself]!” (*Yomigaere, nippon!*)⁶ and “trinity reform” (*sanmittai no kaikaku*)⁷, which are used in materials of the Education Council.

Religion Confined to Privacy

Legally the goal of religious and moral education in Japan is and will continue to be defined within the frame of the goal of education in general. According to the Fundamental Law, the goal of education consists in the development/perfection of the student’s personality (*jinkaku kansai*).

The basic duty of the school is to provide education, which relates in a balanced way to cognition, morality and physicality (*chi toku tai*). In addition emphasis is put on the creation of emotionally rich, considerate and strong personalities (*jōso yutaka na, omoiyari no aru, takumashii ningen zukuri wo susumeru*).

Despite the fact that the public discourse on education itself has taken on rather religious colors, the necessity/desirability of a religious education, which exceeds/transcends the aim of mere knowledge transfer (*chishiki kyōiku*) in the direction of sentiment development (*jōso kyōiku*), is still denied. This is due to the popular belief that religion and in particular religious sentiment constitutes an individual issue rather than a social issue. Although the Education Council asserted that the term *jōso* already includes “religious values that shape emotions”, i.e. it asserted that religious sentiment development is already included in the educational goal of creating “emotionally rich” (*jōsō yutaka na*) personalities, it also stated that “religious sentiment” (*shūkyōteki jōsō*) belongs to the realm of household education (*katei kyōiku*) and not to the realm of school education (*gakkō kyōiku*). Apart from the fact that the individualization of religion is a problematic hypothesis of secularization theory, we still have to ask if the Japanese government really can account for such an approach in the face of an alleged irreligiousness of most Japanese (households) and general insufficiency of household education diagnosed by the Education Council.

Disempowerment in Public

However, an analysis of legal foundations and the display of idealistic

notions reveal little about the reality of educational institutions. It has been the focus of another paper (Sonntag 2004) to provide an insider analysis of the problems of contemporary Japanese education. The findings of that study are in agreement with Yoneyama's analysis of the Japanese high school. She argues that the problems of the Japanese educational system are a result of the system's autocratic paradigm, which disempowers students and puts them "constantly under explicit and implicit threats from teachers" (Yoneyama, 245). Education in Japan can hardly be said to serve the ends of balanced personality development. In fact, it favors students who accept useless and boring "examination knowledge" and uncritical, teacher-centered classes.

Uniformation by Knowledge

Even though the maxim of the "schooling society" implies the goal of "knowledge gain", one really has to question the correctness of this assumption. In the experience of students, parents and some teachers the current educational system serves the goal of uniformation by uniformed knowledge; i.e. it serves the goal of "attitude change". Actually, there is nothing wrong with an educational system aiming at attitude change. But for one, decision makers in education should make admit, that the transferred knowledge is meant to foster the development of specific attitudes — including beliefs, opinions and values —, which means, in fact, to *consequently acknowledge the normative dimension of education*. And second, students should be allowed and enabled to choose for themselves which attitudes to take in result of their education.

As a matter of fact, not only the

current educational system but also the discussion about religious education in public schools is dominated by the term of "factual knowledge" (*chishiki*). If this dominance of "knowledge" would be restricted to public schools, then religious education would still have a chance in private schools. However, there are only very few private schools which question the overemphasized role of factual knowledge.

Targeting Beliefs

As part of the larger educational enterprise religious/moral education in particular is intended to appeal to the students' values. But nonetheless its educational message is structured in such a way that it appeals to the students' beliefs.⁸ By learning the true facts (*tadashii chishiki*) students are expected to become resistant against persuasion by groups that promote wrong facts. This argumentation can be found on both sides of the divide. In the case of public schools, this argumentation states the correctness of the facts taught at public schools, whereas religiously affiliated private schools feel the need to provide their own carefully screened knowledge about their religion to correct wrong assumptions taught at public schools. The emphasis on knowledge is additionally fostered by the exclusion of appeals to the students' emotions, which could be traced back to a specific religious tradition. (See discussion on *shūha kyōiku* and *jōsō kyōiku*.)

Teachers' Credibility

Due to this misconception of the educational goal on one side and legal restrictions on the other side problems of source credibility arise. Ethics/Morals teachers in public schools

are not allowed to represent a believer position; also they are poorly trained in a Religious Studies perspective. Besides teaching “facts” about religion they try to communicate supposedly fundamental religious values by letting students experience artificially created “awe-inspiring moments,”⁹ which must be again denominationally unaffiliated.

Under such conditions the teachers’ source credibility is rather low. They lack the authority of involvement as well as the authority of the scholar. Thus the only authority he has arises from his skilfulness in creating aesthetically appealing “moments” and from his given superordinate position within the educational system. But the latter one actually decreases his overall level of credibility in the eyes of students, since teachers are known to work for the system and not for the students.

The Elusiveness of Success

Although the preceding paragraphs seem to imply that religious/moral education is rather unsuccessful in public schools, I do not wish to propose such a bold evaluation nor would it be appropriate. Rather my intention is to raise greater awareness of the deeper dimensions of successfulness and its relation to persuasive goals and source credibility. Furthermore, there is a lack of empirical studies, which shed light on actual processes of religious/moral persuasion. Without more detailed inquiries into time, place and sources of religious/moral influence we can hardly make more than hypothetical statements about the successfulness of religious/moral education in schools.

Even the probably most comprehensive empirical study by Inoue’s research group provides only a very lim-

ited range of data. Disinterest in religion is mostly justified by or founded on the conviction that religion is either unnecessary or dangerous (Inoue 2000, 49/table 2). Regardless of personal commitment students who deny the dangerousness of religion more often assert the necessity of basic knowledge about religions (Inoue 2000, 62/table 19-2). But it becomes also obvious that even religiously affiliated schools fail to impart a sense for the necessity of religion in the contemporary world (Inoue 2000, 43/table 6).

In fact, the overview of periods of conversion (*kaishin*) shows little activity during middle and high school age. Most students are born into a religion or accepted it during primary school (Inoue 2000, 41/table 2). This picture seems to be supported by the fact that student believers predominantly name their parents or grandparents as basic influences, which led them to conversion.¹⁰

However, a considerable number also chose “other sources of influence” and “personal motivation” (Inoue 2000, 41/table 3). If we were to assert any influence of the schools’ religious education on conversion activity at all, we would have to locate it in this category of “other sources of influence”. Summarizing these results we can say that religious education during middle and high schools definitely does not positively support conversion activity.

This leaves the question of successfulness still open. If induction of resistance to religious messages were one of the goals it could still be called successful. But what about the goal of transferring (the correct) knowledge about religion? Seen from the perspective of a Religious Studies scholar, a respond rate of two thirds asserting the dangerousness of religion across

the board hardly speaks for successful knowledge transfer.

If, however, the goal of religious/moral education were not knowledge gain, but uniformation of attitudes toward religion, in particular the creation of an aversion against religion, then this respond rate would imply some successfulness. But in this case we would have to prove the impact of religious/moral education first, since this goal is easily reached by the mass media's style of coverage.

Governance, not Education

Usually we would expect Lacan's "discourse of the university" to represent the message transfer between teachers and students at school, since school is supposed to be about "knowledge". But as I have argued above, in the case of Japan, it is not "knowledge gain", but "governance" which is aimed at and achieved under the master signifier of "uniformity" alias "Japaneseness." The students' individual desires, fantasy and ideals are suppressed by a given set of features standing for the "Japanese (student)", which constitute the shape into which students have to grow. The only response expected from students is to conform themselves to already given values. Therefore it is the "discourse of the master" which represents the Japanese school environment. And the disempowered state of Japanese students, diagnosed by Yoneyama, is the direct result of the students' suppressed subjectivity.

Students who are locked in the "discourse of the master" will either comply or respond with a "discourse of the hysteric". In this way the aim of "governance" is achieved, but at the cost of leftovers (*ochikobore*), i.e. students suffering and sometimes dying

from school violence, bullying, school refusal and social emigration. But it is definitely impossible to develop individual diversity, creativity and skills in problem-solution etc. within this discourse structure.

If we compare Bracher's psychoanalytic cultural criticism and communication research concerning conditions for successful persuasion, we find the common assumption that (attitudinal) change must be based on self-generated positive responses. The "discourse of the master" of Japanese schools, however, allows for positive responses only if the students identify with the given master signifiers. Needless to say, that it is difficult to voluntarily agree with being governed and uniformed and left without means of self-expression. Identification with such educational goals seems very absurd.

Since the "discourse of the master" extends to all spheres (i.e. subjects of curriculum) in school, it also determines the general framework for religious/moral education. But precisely because religious/moral education relates directly to the students' values, the consequences of this regime are especially alarming. Under this regime the subject is predetermined to serve the goal of indoctrination of whatever point of view on religion(s) and morality — including the point of view of Religious Studies scholars.

Conclusions

The limitations of religious education in Japan as they have become obvious from the perspective of communication science and psychoanalytic cultural criticism so far can be summarized as follows.

Religious/moral education in public (and many private) schools almost

completely lacks the awareness for and activation of the students' prior knowledge on religion. Instead of relating to the students' experience in daily life it focuses on abstract notions, which are incorrectly communicated as fundamental values existing in all religions.

The approach to religious/moral education is based on a misconception of the goal of education in general. It ignores the normativity of education in general and of religious/moral education in particular.

Existing approaches as well as those currently discussed in the public discourse show a very problematic emphasis on "correct" (but often useless) knowledge. For one thing this emphasis is based on more general attitudes toward education, but in the case of religious/moral education it is additionally — and after all unnecessarily — fostered by discussions concerning the separation of religion and state. The emphasis on knowledge (*chishiki*) leads to the exclusion of experience (*jikken*) and emotional appeals.

Consequently religious/moral education appeals to the wrong components of students' attitudes. It aims to influence their values but the educa-

tional message is structured to appeal to their beliefs.

Low impact on attitudinal change also results from the teachers' low source credibility.

Furthermore, religious/moral education is dominated by the "discourse of the master", which inhibits a response-centered exploration of religion by students.

Attempts at problem solution would have to be aimed at overcoming these limitations. That is to say, that religious/moral education must account for students' experiences in daily life and be taught as a quest to the student's self. The student should be treated as a "seeker", not as an "observer". Communal life e.g. in boarding schools or dormitories allows for such an approach. If the structural advantages of communal life could be utilized for public schools, religious/moral education holds the possibility of overcoming the regime of the "discourse of the master". As a subject, which allows for an easier acknowledgment of its normative nature (e.g. in comparison to natural sciences), it could exert a transformative influence on the whole school environment by pioneering in experimentation with a new discourse structure.

Notes

1. Here I follow Bracher's discussion of Lacan's theory.
2. I.e. signifiers, which organize fragmentary experiences and language into a single totality and thereby play a major role in identification processes.
3. For detailed information on the

changing image of religion among Japanese students during the late 1990s see Inoue (2000).

4. http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/shin gi/chukyo/chukyo0/toushin/03061601/001.htm

Apparently, it is not enough to create "humans" (*ningen*) through

- education. When the Education Council calls for “Japanese” (*nihonjin*), the educational council of Kita City calls with the same particularistic approach for “Kita-people” (*kitakujin*). See *Kita-ku News* No. 1106 (November, 2004), 1.
5. The Education Council is commissioned to collect and organize opinions from experts as well as from ordinary Japanese in preparation for a restatement of the Fundamental Law on Education. http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/shingi/chukyo/chukyo0/gijiroku/002/030203.htm
 6. http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/shingi/chukyo/chukyo3/siryō/004/04120701/001/001.pdf
 7. http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/shingi/chukyo/chukyo0/gijiroku/001/05021501/012.pdf
 8. See definition of beliefs, opinions and values above.
 9. See Sugawara’s critique of the notion of “awe” (*ikei no nen*) in moral education (also included in J.M.J. 2005 Autumn).
 10. Due to different notions of religion the concept of conversion is rather inappropriate to map religiosity in the Japanese context. Nonetheless this argumentation has been included as an attempt to utilize the extremely limited data available for research on religious persuasion.

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