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Evaluation Of The „Interreligious Studies In Japan“
Report Spring Semester 2003

Subjects: Science of Religion, Catholic theology, Archeology and Byzantine Art history

1. Evaluation in general:

The following notions are given as first reflections after finishing the ISJP which I really appreciate as a whole. By giving a solid introduction in the Japanese culture and a basic knowledge of religions in Japan, the classes offer a broad perspective for a deeper understanding of Japanese culture and religions.

When I arrived in Japan my interest was mainly related to Japanese aesthetics. Yet, during my very first weeks in Japan I recognized that the theoretical „frame“ I had been looking through in Germany did not fit the Japanese reality at all and very quickly I decided to change my concepts. By leaving behind my concepts and all the categories I used to work with including their intended contents behind I prepared myself to be as open-minded and unintentional in my perception as possible.

Right now, I am very thankful to experience that any kind of cultural frame-setting is to be highly requested and that a deep and thorough approach and understanding of the subject really needed to be mirrored and re-viewed within its own perception.

The participation in the study program „Interreligious Studies in Japan“ at the NCC Center gave an indispensable contribution to the process of finding a more differentiated and even also critical approach to my research field. By learning about Japanese culture and religion within a very broad and contextual frame the classes really gave the option for a more comprehensive and detailed understanding. The teachers of the courses were highly motivated and gave a profound insight in their respective field. I really appreciate the use of visual aids like video tapes, books, photos or objects of arts, and the useful prepared papers as well as the very helpful advices concerning further reading.

The very well equipped library of the NCC offers an excellent possibility for further studies. In addition we got access to the superb libraries of the Japan Foundation, the Italian School of East Asian Studies, and of L'Ecole Francaise d'Extreme-Orient in Kyoto.

In addition to the lectures the immediate experience of religious life given by fieldtrips to a broad variety of Buddhist temples, Shinto shrines and headquarters of New Religions were very helpful.

Surpassing the mere classroom wisdom, the NCC Center offered us the chance to meet representatives of several religions and to participate directly in inter-religious dialogue. This contextual approach (e.g. encountering insiders or joining ceremonies) opens a perspective towards a way of understanding that only theoretical lectures could not transmit. This option in particular is one of the great advantages for participants in the NCC Center program. The NCC Center's affiliations open many doors which otherwise might have been closed.

The last semester at the NCC Center gave me many new experiences. Not only related to the perspective of studying but also concerning my own understanding of Christianity.

The possibility to leave behind the personal and well-known background of what is called *kokoro furusatsu* and to re-view oneself from the outer perspective of a different cultural background may draw/put a new light on what belief and faith might mean.

2. Evaluation of the administrative part

2.1. NCC Study Center's office:

I received much help in every respect. Not only concerning technical advices about using the computers and internet, copying papers, using the fax or contacting persons or institutions but also in giving advices and informations referring to the library (e.g. informations about magazines or journals which are held by the library or newly received books).

2.2. The Coordinator:

The Coordinator did a great job by always making sure that everything is going on well. He did everything to support our research-interests and to arrange contacts with several scholars or people who are experts in the theme we are engaged in. He assisted us not only in the time of the program, but also in organizing our daily life in Kyoto (finding accomodation, helping us at the registration office, etc.).

3. Evaluation of the classes

3.1. In respect to the curriculum:

Participating in the ISJP we learnt what was proposed for this semester. We got a broad and profound approach to the issues of every subject. It was also possible to tackle issues concernig our own perspective of research interest in relation to the corresponding theme.

3.2. In respect to the teachers and their teaching methods:

The teachers were highly qualified and really motivated. For the classes we got several materials or prepared papers putting together the most important items.

3.3. In respect to interaction with the teacher:

The interaction between the teachers and the students was given by the very first moment because of the specialized approaches in respect to the themes. According to their study-fields the teachers acted as direct mediators between their subject and us (e.g. speaking about Folk Religion or Popular Buddhism, the teacher gave an approach throughout his own field-research.) Therefore the lessons were in general very lively.

3.4. In respect to the contextualized teaching perspective:

The teachers are all living in Japan.

This implies a direct and immediate approach to the subject which can be valid by everyday experience (e.g. some of the teachers are at the same time Buddhist- /Christian priests and scholars). Therefore teaching is not only reduced to theoretical knowledge but is enriched and profit according to its contextualization.

4. Evaluation of the fieldtrips:**4.1. General perspective**

As mentioned above, the contextualization of theory and practice came together in the living experiences we made during the fieldtrips. They contained a kind of potential which certainly cannot be reached by sitting in the classroom.

5. Evaluation of the living conditions

The Coordinator helped us to find not too expensive accomodation, which is otherwise difficult in Kyoto.

6. Improvements and Criticism

I think, the improvement of the financial support must be taken quiet seriously. Living costs and accomodation in Japan are really high.

Personally, I could not have participated without a scholarship. Insufficient funding will, unfortunately, only make this high quality program available for people with money.

7. The future of ISJP

I think the bearing of the ISJP concerning cultural-interchange, studying and inter-religious education is really high. The approach of this program is rather unique from the perspective of its perception. In a world of globalization and increasing estrangement it will undoubtly become more and more important to offer courses in interreligious studies to make people aware and sensitive to the new claims.

To prepare people for a real encounter with the challenges in a multireligious world will be a high aimed goal must be the ultimate goal for our century, and to achieve this the ISJP is obviously an indispensable contribution .

Facing and learning about Japanese Christianity within a religious plural environment and experiencing interreligious dialogue with members of other religions offer a great chance to think about the own culture and religion in a new light.

To re-perspective Christianity from another cultural environment offer the option to think what inner and original meaning of Christianity constitutes.

Kyoto, 16. 07. 2003