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Evaluation of the ISJP

at the NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions in Kyoto 2003/4

1. Personal background and expectations

The way to evaluate a Study Program can only be very subjective, since it is related very much to one's own expectations and backgrounds. Therefore some short introductory remarks on that point: As a newly ordained pastor with some practical experience over the last two and a half years, I came to Japan much more with an interest in the practical religious issues of contemporary Japanese society than with a purely academical interest in theoretical concepts, historical developments and so on, although I am aware of the fact, that these things are interlinked with each other. But my aim was to find out, how the contemporary Japanese society works in religious matters and how Christianity had placed itself into this cultural and religious framework. Back in my mind there was also a slight hope to get some hints for spiritual practises and wisdom, that could be transferred to my work back home in the "West", since I felt some "unsolved business" about this aspect in my daily work for a Protestant Christian community. In this evaluation I try to point out in short, if and how these goals have been achieved or not during the program.

2. Description of the Programme

The Study Programme consisted of weekly lectures in the following subjects over a period of 4 months (September to December 2003) : Buddhism in Japan, Shinto, Japanese Church History, New Religions in Japan, Theology of Religions, a Japanese Language Course and a weekly reading of an important Buddhist text. Another continuing element were the weekly field-trips, some of which consisted of visiting specially selected Buddhist temples, Shinto shrines or headquarters of new religions, others more focussed on meeting people and interreligious discussions. An "extra" so to speak, was a one week study trip to Tokyo and Aomori, financed by the Tomisaka Christian Center.

3. Some practical Issues

The NCC Center, being a very small institute, with a very limited space, tried its best to support our studies and especially Dr. Repp was very helpful in organizing not only the programme as a whole but also our daily life and personal questions related to that. Since there are so many hidden traps for Westerners in Japan in-

volved in practical issues like housing, talking to state officials, traffic and so on, it would simply be impossible to run this program without an intermediary or coordinator, who is able to speak "both languages" and to bridge between the different frames of thinking and conduct.

As concerned to scholarships it must be said, that a minimum of at least 130- to 150.000 Yen, depending of the cost of housing, is required per month (currently about 1100 or 1250 Euro). It doesn't make a lot of sense, that students who come here with less support end up by sometimes not being able to visit temples or museums because they cannot pay the entrance fee. It's not just a rumour: Living is expensive in Japan!

4. Evaluation of the Programme

4.1 Appreciations

The program provided me with a very good overview about the historical development of the coexistence of the different religions in Japan. The unique "job sharing" of the different religious groups in Japan thus become clearer and provoked a lot of reflection about the right way of living together in a multireligious society.

The teachers' personalities, reaching from Catholic missionaries to Shinto priests or Tenrikyo followers also helped very much to grasp not only the theoretical side, but also the personal and more atmospherical aspect of each single religion that we came across.

A special atmosphere of concentration and learning was created by the class of Jan van Bragt about a profound contemporary Theology of Religions. The necessity for an interreligious dialogue on the basis of mutual understanding and acceptance on equal terms become even more obvious to me than before. For the 21st century the main purpose of interreligious encounters can certainly not longer be seen in making proselytes, although being a loyal witness to one's own belief is an essential part of the dialogue. In my view, interreligious dialogue should now be aimed on a mutual encouragement to overcome the shortcomings in living and organizing one's own religion through the critical dialogue with the others. The goal of such encounters cannot be a kind of unified "universal religion", but a deepened pluralism of religions.

The social functions of religion in a society become much clearer to me, too. Also the possible misleading and abuses of religious organizations could be seen in some of the very professionally managed New Religions as well as in the somewhat whitening more traditional mainstream buddhist schools or the Shinto organisation. It was interesting to see, that Christianity as a cultural pattern holds some fascination for young people in Japan as an exotic religion, just like Buddhism does in the West, although there is not much interest in the organized Christianity.

In regard to the spiritual dimension, I'd like to say, that it become very clear to me here in Japan, that the question of religious experience must be treated more intensely in my home church. Especially protestant churches seem to have a tendency to only talk about religious experiences and their fruits, but I feel, they must struggle harder to open up new ways and spaces to actually allow such experiences to take place in their midst. Methodological and technical advice from "the East" should not be neglected here, although a thorough transformation and "inculturation" into the western, Christian framework is a necessity, too.

It also become very obvious to me, that especially in a somewhat closed society as the Japanese, where everything seems to work mainly through personal relations and recommendations, the connections of the NCC Center were a necessity in order to touch more than the visible surface of society and religion in Japan. These connections existed in large scale and we students were provided with them and thus able "to sneak and peek" into locations and situations we otherwise would definitely have missed as foreigners

This is especially true for the various fieldtrips, e.g. to the new religion Tenrikyo, various Zen-temples and Shinto shrines, and the study trip to Tokyo and Aomori, that brought us into contact with the phenomenon of female shamanism as well as with "ordinary" pastors of the United Church of Christ in Japan (Kyodan) or the headquarter of Risshokoseikai, an important New Religion. These contacts, i.e. actually seeing and experiencing various religious activities and talking to officials or followers in their own surrounding, are definitely the most strongest part of the program, something, that simply cannot be learned by books and made it worth coming such a long way from Europe to Japan.

4.2 Some critical remarks and suggestions for the future of the program

The coordination of the involved teachers should be improved. They need to know better on which part in the process of the program they are involved and what they can expect at that certain stage from their listening students. Also they should be provided with information about the content of the two orientation weeks in the beginning.

I quite often felt, that the weight of the weekly lectures was put a bit too much on the historical side. It is definitely not uninteresting to hear about f.e. the various differences of Buddhism in the Heian and Kamakura period, but we sometimes got stuck too much in these vast issues and historical pictures where I would have liked to know more about the contemporary situation of Japan, the problems of post-modernization in regard to religions etc. I therefore personally would suggest a more phenomenological approach: The focal point being: what religious phenomena can be seen in contemporary Japan and then from there to ask for an additional historical depths or explanation when necessary. Of course some basic knowledge of Japanese history should still be provided (as it already is) in the orientation weeks.

Due to national holidays some of the fieldtrips, scheduled for every Monday, didn't take place. Since they are so important for the program, I would suggest expanding them and involving not only Martin Repp (whose workload already seems immense)

but also the other involved teachers. Why not letting them have one fieldtrip each instead of one of their lectures once in the semester?

5. Summa

I consider the ISJP Study Program an interreligiously important, theologically interesting and also personally enriching program. It seems quite unique for Japan and I am very thankful for having had the possibility of participating! Since I wrote these lines shortly after the first half of the program, time might hopefully bring up even more fruits of the program for me and my future work in my home church.

The critical remarks given above are therefore in no way meant to put the program in question, but want to propose some changes that might be helpful for the future and want to clearly encourage the related institutions and supporters to put (more) effort and financial support in this very rewarding program and the NCC Center itself.