

Markus Goebel

EVALUATION OF "INTERRELIGIOUS STUDIES IN JAPAN" (2003)

1. Evaluation in general:

After studying Japanese religions for two semesters I have finished the complete program "Interreligious Studies in Japan" at the NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions. The second semester was an important supplement for what I have learnt in the first semester. The main focus of every particular subject was different compared to the curriculum of last year:

The classes of Buddhist studies in the semester 2002 provided lectures about the early Japanese Buddhism (the Nara sects), -the Rinzai Zen school and the Jodoshu sect. In the semester 2003 we had the chance to get an insight mainly in the history and teachings of the Soto Zen school, Jodoshinshu and Shingon Buddhism. To get a real picture of the life and religious practices of Shingon we had the unique opportunity to make our main excursion to the head monastery of the Shingon sect at Mount Koya. Not only that we got a superb guidance on the Mount Koya by one of the head monks, but also we were allowed to observe as special guests (students of the NCC) some ritual services, which are famous on Mount Koya. I appreciated that we were introduced to the philological work on important writings of Japanese Buddhism, especially to the Tannisho (Jodoshinshu) but also to the Shobogenzo (Soto Zen). The teachers of the classes of Buddhist studies were concerned to explain us the main problems of Japanese Buddhism on a high level.

While we got in the last semester an outline of the history of Christianity in Japan, we went this year deep into the world of Japanese theology and philosophy. In excellent lectures we were introduced to the main models of Japanese theology. By this we could learn about the struggle of the Japanese theologians to work out a theology that took both, Japanese culture and Christian systematic thinking, into account.

Trying to figure out the problems religions have to face, when they meet each other in their diversity was the main concern of the "Interreligious Dialogue" class. Having studied the basics of "Theology of Religions" in the last semester, we were now engaged in the practical matters of the interreligious encounter. The teacher imparted us to his broad knowledge he made by "living" the dialogue for many years.

In the "New Japanese religions" class we could hear about certainly one of the most important issues concerning Japanese religions nowadays: studying the New religions of Japan and their influence on the modern Japanese society. While getting an overview on this issue in the semester 2002, in the interesting lectures of this semester our studies were brought up to date with the newest scientific results in this fields. Being able to see the differences of New religions according to the traditional Japanese religions, we made fieldtrips to Oomoto, one of the

representatives of a Shinto New religion, and to Shinyoen, which has adapted elements of Japanese Esoteric Buddhism.

A Folk religions class was provided instead of the Shinto class from last year. It gave us again another fascinating approach on Japanese religions, which could be described roughly from two sides: On the one hand side we learnt how religious elements from outside of Japan (like Taoist symbols) were transformed into the Japanese culture, on the other hand side we were introduced which role religion plays in the daily life of the common people of Japan (from the countryside of Hokkaido to the island of Okinawa).

All in all we were taught by highly qualified teachers who guide us to a deep understanding of Japanese religions from different perspectives. In the main lectures we learnt about the variety of the religions of Japan concerning the special subjects. But this knowledge was always be connected with a greater context. Already in the introduction classes we got an idea of how Japanese religions must be seen in the mirror of Japanese history, literature and society; moreover we have learnt how our own cultural background influences our perception of the religions of another culture (cross - cultural - understanding). To experience this on a practical level in this semester again we visited many religious places in Japan and had living discussions with their representatives.

In the one year I studied at the NCC Study Center for the Study of Japanese Religions I had the chance to get an outstanding encounter with the variety of Japanese religions, an encounter, which significantly in the future will enrich my personal understanding of religion in general. I am grateful that I got the opportunity to attend the courses at the NCC and want to thank everybody of the teachers for what I learnt from them.

Evaluation of the administrative part:

2.1. NCC Study' Center's office:

I only can repeat what I said in the last semester: We always received friendly help and support from everybody -without exception! I think every guest of the NCC should acknowledge the important daily work of the staff in the office (without it the NCC could certainly not survive).

2.1. The Coordinator:

Without the self - sacrificing commitment of the coordinator the NCC program "Interreligious Studies in Japan" could never take place. Because of his competence and experience the ISJP was able to develop. The program did not take place in a vacuum, but in a for students, who come from abroad, foreign culture with a foreign language. Therefore it is necessary that they are accompanied by a coordinator, who has years of experience in this country, who has the proficiency to speak Japanese and who knows about the difficulties and problems foreigners have to face from the standpoint of a foreigner. This accompany were offered to us by the coordinator of the ISJP in an excellent way.

Evaluations of the classes:

3.1. - in respect to the proposed curriculum:

In the courses of the last semester we already could get a compact knowledge in a short period of time. Now in this semester it was completed by adding new interesting issues (see

evaluation in general). The curriculum of both semesters complement each other and provide a overall picture of the landscape of Japanese religions.

3.2. - in respect to the class facilities

As in the last semester I appreciated that I could use regularly the well - equipped library of the NCC for personal studies. Since more and more students will sooner or later be attracted to come to Japan for attending the ISJP, the NCC could probably face the problem of being not able to provide enough study facilities for the students (for example desks, computers, internet access etc.)

3.3. - in respect to the teachers and their teaching methods

We participated in classes of qualified experts. Most of the lectures were clearly structured, so that an effective learning process could start to move. The friendly atmosphere, which was created in the classroom, gave us the right motivation for our studies.

I really appreciated the idea of getting an approach on Japanese religions from different standpoints, concretely speaking from a philological, historical, philosophical and theological point of view.

3.4. - in respect to the interaction with the teacher

According the interaction between the teachers and the students I have to stress again that the teachers make much time for us to give us exact explanations on every particular issue and to answer our questions, even after the lessons.

4. Evaluation of the fieldtrips:

4.1. - from a general perspective

In this semester we made many interesting fieldtrips to Buddhist temples (for example Byodoin in Uji, Tenryuji in Arashiyama), Shinto shrines (for example Fushimi Irian jinja, Kamogamo jinja) and centers of Japanese New religions (for example Oomoto, Shinyoen). In all of them the coordinator took care for us in a marvellous way by organizing the whole trip (arranging meetings with the representatives of the particular religions, making for us translations, providing us with important materials). The main fieldtrips lead us to the temples of Mount Koya and to the famous shrine of Ise. Both of them will be for us certainly unforgettable, because of the unique experiences we could make there as students of the NCC.

4.2. - in connection with the teaching in the classes

The fieldtrips are one of the important elements of ISJP. By going on fieldtrips we really got the living supplement for what we learnt in the classroom. The combination of theory and praxis gives the ISJP its outstanding quality.

5. Evaluation of the living conditions

5.1. - in respect to accommodation

I lived in a house together with other foreigners on the foot of the Mount Hiei. Sure, it was not Kyoto Plaza, but I enjoyed to live there, - near a place, which has historical importance for the development of Japanese Buddhism. I can support the idea giving the next students of the NCC the chance to live in an typical Japanese city house.

5.2. - in respect to financial support

I have to thank everybody, who made it possible that I received a scholarship. Thus, I could attend the second semester of ISJP. I have to emphasize how important it is, that ISJP will find support for their students from abroad in the future.

6. Evaluation about the bibliography

In the bibliography the most important books for every particular research issue is mentioned. It is an indispensable instrument for sound studies.

7. Improvements and Criticism

The distribution of the lectures should if possible be reconsidered: Most of the classes should better be hold at the beginning or in the middle of the week. Since certainly the concentration decreases towards the end of the week, it is not to recommend having the highest quantity of lectures on Friday.

I would not propose to add more classes to the ISJP; the students, who are coming to Japan for the first time need also time for their own, in which they have the chance to get to know a glimpse of the daily life of Japan by themselves. As well everybody must have enough time for deepen the topics of the lessons by carrying out studies by himself.

It was a great idea to add one class, where we got a philological introduction to a Japanese religious text. This should by all means be continued:

Additional topics

Japanese religions and culture offer so much interesting fields that there could always be topics one can find to add. But as mentioned above there must also always be enough time and space that students have the opportunity becoming a little bit part of the daily life here in Kyoto.

It is not recommendable to fill up every free space with new topics. The only thing I would suggest is to extend the introduction classes; for "newcomers" it might be important to get a good fundamental knowledge about the cultural and historical basics of Japan. In this framework eventually the "Interreligious studies" will take place.

The future of ISJP

Even if I have to repeat myself: I made many positive experiences with ISJP by being allowed to get a deep insight into the religions of Japan. Throughout my year at the NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions I was forced many times to change my perception on religions. This was a work in progress in which my understanding of religions could develop in a positive way. Therefore I see an undeniable importance in a program like ISJP and I only can hope that this importance will more and more be recognized by students and scholars in the fields of religion in the future.

Kyoto, 22. 07. 2003