

### 8. *Published reports on ISJP*

“Interreligious Dialogue Can Play a Key Role in the World at Large” by Martin Repp, published in *Risshō Kōsei-kai’s Dharma World* Vol. 31 (2004): pp. 17-19.

“Einübung in den Dialog mit ostasiatischen Religionen. Das ‘Interreligious Studies in Japan Program’ (ISJP) in Kyoto” by Martin Repp published in *Religionen im Gespräch* (RiG) Vol. 8 (2004): pp. 268-272.

Reports on ISJP in Japanese were published in the NCC Study Center’s newsletters, including one reviewing the experiences of ISJP during the first three years since its establishment.

### 9. *ISJP in the internet*

For more informations, especially on curriculum, application procedure, etc., please visit our new homepage [www.japanese-religions.jp](http://www.japanese-religions.jp).

Dr. Martin Repp  
Coordinator

## **Participating in the “Interreligious Studies in Japan Program” (ISJP) (Fall Semester 2004)**

Martin ENGELS

In my report on the “Interreligious Studies in Japan Program” (ISJP) at the NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions in Kyoto, I will first introduce briefly the general circumstances such as the living and study conditions, then present some observations concerning my internships, and finally give an evaluation of the program itself.

My living-conditions in Kyoto were extraordinary good. I lived in the assistant pastor’s apartment of the Rakuyo Church which is located at the southeast corner of the imperial palace park. Rev. Fugami’s and the congregation’s openness allowed me insights in urban Japanese church-life already during my studies at the NCC Study Center. After a lecture about the indigenisation of Japanese funeral traditions in class, for example, I was able to experience a Christian funeral in the evening of the same day at church. This close connection between theory and praxis was very good. During my stay, Rev. Fugami and his wife offered me help in many ways. They were largely responsible for the fact that I felt very much at home in Kyoto. In addition, it is also noteworthy that due to its long historical tradition and the vast amount of temples and shrines Kyoto may be one of the best places to run a study program like this. For me the necessity for a dialogue between religions in Japan became obvious quite soon since I lived at the Teramachi-dōri (“Temple street”), with a Shintō shrine and a Buddhist temple in my next neighborhood. This fact already was

encouraging for me to look for new perspectives within Theology.

I found study conditions at the NCC Study-Center in Kyoto very convenient and good, even though there is little space in its library. I have to mention not only the good collection of books on religions in Japan and the Center's central location in the middle of Kyoto, but especially its staff, who offered various helps at many occasions. Furthermore, in my opinion it is less the facilities which make this Study Center attractive, but more the relationships which are cultivated here with representatives of different religions. One thing I learned and experienced in my studies in Kyoto is, that mutual trust is probably the first and foremost basis to start a dialogue.

One of the main reasons, why I decided to participate in the ISJ-Program was to pursue Protestant theology from new perspectives and to learn about Asian religions. In Germany we find a growing amount of books, films and public lectures on East Asian religiosity, while at the same time the country has rapidly changed from a Christian to a multi-religious and multi-cultural society. With this motivation in the beginning, and taking influences of globalization into account, looking now back I am very satisfied with the Study Program. The "blend" of theoretical input through lectures and seminars and weekly-guided fieldtrips, combined with the possibility to end the program with an internship, is very good. The same has to be said to the composition of the subjects treated in class. Listening to the lectures of scholars engaged and experienced in inter-religious dialogue, and the discussions with them and the other ISJP-students, have been very fruitful. A strong point of this program is also the closeness of the scholars to their subjects. It provides the chance to learn about Buddhism from a Buddhist, or about Theology of Religions from a Catholic priest engaged in Buddhist-Christian dialogue for many years. The relevance the subjects have for the lecturers passed on to the students during the lectures. It was largely the dedication of most of the scholars that created a very good atmosphere for study and discussion. Of course I also have to admit that it is a very dense program with much new information in only a short time. Overall it was an interesting introduction to different subjects, which I now hopefully have the chance to go into a little deeper. In my opinion the only subject of the program that needs improvement is the Japanese language class, especially in respect to simple everyday conversation.

The two internships at the end of my studies completed my stay in Japan quite well. At first I stayed three weeks with Rev. Mimura at his church on Sado island, where I had the chance to get an insight view of a rural Japanese church with less than ten members and to experience life in the Japanese countryside. Accompanying Rev. Mimura during his pastoral visits, teaching some classes at an elementary school, giving a public lecture on the situation of young people in Germany followed by a stimulating discussion with the participants, taking part in a meeting of pastors in Niigata, and even volunteering for snow shoveling in Koide church after severe snowfall this winter, all these experiences showed me a different side of the reality of the Japanese church in it's context. Very different from this was my second internship in the German-speaking congregation in Tokyo. Here I

experienced German church-life and lifestyle in Japan with its difficulties and problems. Especially the contrast to the preceding internship was very interesting for me, especially in respect to the social structure of the congregation and its influence on church-life. During my internship Tokyo, the German pastor, who lives in Japan since six years, said after several conversations: "I have the feeling that you have a better insight and learned more about Japan during half a year than me during six years. I envy you that you had the chance to participate in this program." Indeed, I feel very fortunate that I had the opportunity to participate in ISJP, and I do hope that many other students will also have the chance to attend it.

The main hurdles to be taken though are in my opinion the question of scholarships and closely related the question of an affiliation of ISJP with a University. Without such an affiliation it is extremely difficult to receive any kind of scholarship or government support, at least in Germany. The high living costs in Japan, the flight, tuition fee, etc., pose problems for financing these costs for future applicants. Nevertheless I was lucky to be supported by a scholarship of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). In the upcoming interview there, together with the other scholarship recipients I will try to convince the LWF representatives to support future applicants and the ISJP.

Having made many new experiences during my studies and internships in Japan, and after being back now in Germany for almost two weeks, the question for me is: what is left when I continue my studies at the University of Heidelberg? How can I apply this big "bundle" of new knowledge and experiences gathered in Japan during these six months? Probably it is only possible to answer this question from a farther perspective in the future. But still, I have the feeling that learning about other religions, encountering their believers and having inspiring conversations and discussions, have shown new perspectives through which my personal horizon has been broadened. Furthermore, the importance of ecumenical hospitality, as I have experienced it in many ways, has become very clear to me. There arise great chances of mutual learning. Probably by learning about "other" religions I have learned much about my own belief. I am highly motivated to continue my studies of theology, now only with a different background.

In the end I would like to thank those who were involved in this program in different ways, especially our coordinator Dr. Martin Repp, as well as the Lutheran World Federation and the Evangelical Church of Rheinland which financially supported my studies quite generously.