

*Media Reports*

*Kyoto Shinbun* published an article about ISJP on Nov. 29, 2005 (evening edition) in Japanese, entitled “Learning from the coexistence of religions in Japan — Studies of European students of theology in Kyoto.” In its *Dokumentationsbrief Ostasien 03/2005 (Der Weg der Götter – Im Dialog mit Japans Religionen 1)* EMS published reports by the previous ISJP students Christiane Banse, Heinrich Busch, Martin Engels, Michael Fröhlich, Verena Kuttich, and Philipp von Stockhausen. These contributions were delivered at an Eastasian-German Encounter meeting in Bad Boll in March 2005. The title of the reports is “Lernen in Begegnung — Das Interreligiöse Studienprogramm in Ostasien — Teilnehmende berichten.”

## Reports by Participants of the ISJP Fall Semester 2005

### REFLECTIONS ON THE INTERRELIGIOUS STUDIES IN JAPAN PROGRAM (ISJP)

by Constantin Plaul

#### *Introduction*

My time here can be structured into two main periods, (1) the study program and (2) the internship. The beginning of the stay consisted of two weeks of free time, in which we were able to adjust to the new surroundings. Following the 10 week study program, and before the internship, we enjoyed another period of three weeks, to use as we wanted. The four week internship concluded the formal part of the program.

#### *Study program*

In the following I would like to concentrate on the personal benefits I have gained from this program. Being provided with some knowledge in different areas of the study of Japanese religions gave me a basis from which to start understanding Japan. This, of course, is quite a general remark. So what does it mean? To me coming to Japan meant not only being a student in the field of religious studies, but it was also the personal challenge of entering a new culture and being forced to deal with it. The Japanese society is quite different from the Western or European one. When talking to people, reading the newspaper or looking around in general, there are many things which differ strongly from those that we are used to in our normal context. In Japan, people often belong to more than one religion — something that is not as usual in Western cultures. Some public debates seen in the media, such as the Yasukuni-Shrine or the Okinawa problem, also appear foreign to Europeans, although the

issues at the core may be actually quite similar. Also the subtle forms of social behavior one has to adapt to are here sometimes unlike those of Western cultures.

In this respect, dealing with Buddhism, Shinto, new religions and Christianity in Japan softened the otherwise sometimes seemingly strange elements. It was not always easy for us to be here. Even if the stay was always interesting, fascinating and often really nice, there were also some exhausting moments. Especially the language barrier made it difficult in some cases. In addition, being forced to meet differences in culture and organization of human existence, which at the first glance could seem impenetrable, was quite challenging. In this context, it was of great help to learn about the various religions in Japan. I always understood it as a kind of mirror through which I could view the Japanese mentality.

To sum it up, the challenges alone were not so much the new religious concepts I learned about, but more the life in Japan in general. In contrast to exchange students of other subjects, our encounter with Japan through the NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions was focused on that side of human existence where ultimate questions play a role. Especially in this respect, the whole program is well-adapted for my theological studies in Germany. Not only does it fit, it also adds new aspects, new perspectives, new focuses and new questions. My time in Kyoto helped me to reconsider the question about the relationship of religion and state in general, and of Christianity and democracy in particular. A comparison of both the historical developments of Germany and Japan and the contemporary situations of both countries can help one to learn something about the interdependence of state and religion via its expression in each of these cultures.

Additionally, another important point of the program at the Study Center was the interdisciplinary approach. The opportunity to meet scholars from distinct disciplines was a good chance to broaden our academic horizon. I think, having teachers from many different fields — theology, anthropology, religious studies, philosophy — made me rethink about the role of a theologian or theology.

### *Internship*

Starting in the beginning of January, I spent nearly four weeks for an internship in Okinawa. The minister, who advised me and organized my stay, said in one of our first email exchanges: “People here say: ‘From Okinawa one can see Japan well.’” The special role of Okinawa as a part of Japan on the one hand, but as a culture in its own on the other, gave me a new insight on Japan — a more critical one. The main problems in Okinawa are the military bases and Okinawa’s relationship to Japan. It was interesting to me that in maybe 90 percent of the cases when I was in a group of people the first question always was: “What is the public opinion in Germany towards war?” The second question, then, was connected to the German reunification. In both cases it is easy to see where these specific interests come from.

### *Summary*

This study program is a great chance for students from abroad to discover totally new terrain and through that to get a healthy distance to their own cultural commitments. In relativizing ones own pre-assumptions one can, maybe, become a little bit more tolerant in respect towards other ways of life: on the inter-personal, on the cultural and on the religious level. And herein my experiences overlap with the aim of the whole study program: what makes inter-religious dialogue possible on the first hand is an attitude of acceptance towards other people as such, and tolerance in relation to their different standpoints.

## PERSONAL EXPERIENCES IN KYOTO AND JAPAN

by Simon Paschen

In the following report I want to travel back to the beginning of the study program (ISJP) and then — step by step — focus on some of my experiences I collected in Kyoto and other places in Japan. For this purpose I mainly concentrate on such experiences which belong to my lasting memories.

I arrived in Kyoto in the beginning of September. It was still hot — very hot! Not used to a climate like that Constantin Plaul and I tried to behave like Japanese as much as possible in a totally foreign environment. Sometimes we were lucky, sometimes we failed. It was the time of first impressions, first sightseeings and shorter or longer discussions about our experiences. It also was the time of theological encounter with Constantin Plaul. And right before the study program really started I realized that not only the inter-religious but also the inter-Christian encounter would play a big role within the learning process here in Kyoto. We got used to life in the international student dormitory “Haus der Begegnung” in Kyoto. I finally think that the conditions of living together there and the general setting provided a very helpful and useful background for the study program. Thus, from the beginning there was not only theoretical learning, but also the daily-life encounter with foreign cultures and other religions. We also began to visit the sunday service at Rakuyo Church where we were warmly welcomed by Rev. Fugami and the church members. Once, we helped also at a bazar. For this event the interior setting of the church was changed to make place for a kind of “small market.” I also remember some important parts of the sermons, the candle light-service at Christmas, as well as our trip to Mt. Hiei with Rev. Fugami.

Concerning these and other social connections, not at every stage I could say: “Ok, everything is going fine!” Sometimes I had to face communication problems. But in the end, I would like to put it the other way around, namely positively: Facing one’s own communication abilities and also some lacks of abilities, other