

*Trip to Tokyo*

The regular program was concluded with a trip to Tokyo from December 15 to 22 which was organized by Prof. Hayashi Tadayoshi, the ISJP-Coordinator. It consisted of the following program: Sightseeing in Asakusa and Akihabara; visit of the Risshō Kōsei-kai Headquarters, talks with their representatives, and a lecture on Risshō Kōsei-kai; attending a church service and a Christmas party at Tomisaka Christian Center; guided tour to the Yasukuni Shrine and its museum, with a lecture on the Yasukuni Shrine problem; guided tour in Kamakura.

During the stay in Tokyo, the following special lectures were held for the students: Prof. Takayanagi Shin'ichi (Sophia University) on the History of the Catholic Church in Japan; Dr. Peter Baeckelmanns (Oriens Institute) on Shingon Buddhism; Dr. Yamaguchi Satoko on Japanese feminist theology; Dr. Arai Jun on religious education in a multireligious society.

**Reports by ISJP-Participants***Insights into the Variety of Japanese Religions*

by Angelika Germann

From September 2007 to March 2008 I took part in the “Interreligious Studies in Japan Program” (ISJP) in Kyoto. In this report I will summarize some of my impressions of the study program, and relate how I personally benefited from this stay abroad.

Fortunately I had no specific expectations concerning the contents of the different courses of this study program when I went to Japan. Therefore I was open-minded to whatever would happen. The subjects of the courses were “Japanese Church History,” “Theology in Dialogue,” “Japanese Buddhism,” “Shinto and Folk Religion,” “Reading a Classical Buddhist Text” and “Japanese New Religions.” In the class on “Japanese Church History” we learned about the beginnings of Christianity in Japan in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It was exciting to find out how this revolutionary, complex religion, which was not introduced from China like Buddhism, was established in Japan. We learned about the enculturation of Christianity in a country which was not only linguistically but culturally, socially and mentally completely different from European countries. How to teach a new religion, which has just one nameless God who is one but triune, or details like the holy communion in a country where people do not have bread as daily food? Further, it was very interesting to study the subsequent history of the hidden Christians during the time of the closed country from the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as some aspects of present Christianity in Japan which has more than one hundred denominations.

In the course “Shinto and Folk Religion” we were taught about deities in mountains, trees, rivers and houses. It was very interesting to see how (omni) present Shinto is in Japan, and how closely related and interwoven it is with family-traditions, public holidays, architecture, in short, with the whole Japanese culture. In the class “Japanese New Religions” we were introduced to religions we had never heard about before. All these new religions have charismatic leaders and some have (for us) strange practices. They attract particularly young people who are searching for meaning in their lives. These new religious groups, which we would call “sects,” caught my interest. When we visited the headquarters and spiritual centres and attended the ceremonies of some new religions, such as Ōmoto-kyō, Tenri-kyō and Risshō Kosei-kai, we got concrete impressions of these religions. In discussions with teachers and believers we learned to better understand their teachings. This helped me to define my own theological point of view more clearly.

I was also amazed to learn that Japanese Buddhism is only one stream in Asian Buddhism and has itself many different schools. In the course on “Japanese Buddhism” we were introduced to its main features. And the lecture on one of the most important Buddhist texts, the Lotus Sutra, gave us a more concrete understanding of Buddhism than only the study of its history. This sutra has a story of a son, who left his home, became poor, and finally returned and asked his father for work, without knowing it was his father. The similarity of this story with Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son was intriguing. We had also the chance to talk with students at a Buddhist university where we learned a lot about their background and other details about Buddhism which are not written in textbooks. Fantastic opportunities were the discussions with priests of different Buddhist schools, as well as attending Zen-meditation and the ritual of continuous Nembutsu-recitation (*betsuji nembutsu*).

A very important part of the ISJP were the excursions which provided a variety of impressions and concrete insights in particular religions. Among others, these field trips took us to the “Vatican of Japan,” the most important temple of Tendai Buddhism on Mt. Hiei, to the ancient capitals Nara and Kamakura (near Tokyo), to the (already mentioned) headquarters of some new religions, as well as to the Heian Shrine, the main temple of Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism and the Museum for early Christianity in Kyoto. When we were in Tokyo, I was shocked and deeply moved by the visit of the museum belonging to the Yasukuni Shrine which almost glorifies the war. How is it possible to establish and keep such a museum? At least, some Japanese disagree with the former prime minister’s visit of this place where war criminals are admired

Above all, Kyoto was the ideal place to study. In a small space, this fantastic city presents an incredible spectrum of learning opportunities and invites you to discover and explore Japanese religions in all their diversity. In addition to the study-program I completed my study with an internship in a Japanese congregation near Tokyo for one month. The experience in this active congregation, combined with a home-stay in a Japanese family consisting of

Christians and Buddhists, was a splendid mixture between theoretical and practical learning.

This six-month stay in Japan was very rewarding for my studies as well as for me personally. I learned what it means to live in a country where it is not taken for granted to be a Christian or to enter into dialogue with other religions. This experience also challenged my own faith in a critical way. In conclusion, the insights into this completely different culture, and the perspectives beyond my own German horizon being opened up to the horizon of the land of the rising sun, were enormously rewarding for me. So I strongly recommend ISJP to everybody interested in the variety of world religions.

*A Short Report About my Studies at the NCC Study Center in Kyoto  
(September 2007 until March 2008)*

by Valentin Wendebourg

When I decided to study in Japan I felt a bit insecure about having given up my original plan to study at an American college and instead followed the few, but very enthusiastic teachers' advice to spend half a year at the NCC Study Center in Kyoto and study East Asian religions. Afterwards I have to say that it was for me one of the best decisions I had made so far.

One of the main reasons is the variety of the Interreligious Studies in Japan Program (ISJP), in which we participated. Taught by theologians, ethnologists, scholars of religious studies, Catholic priests and Buddhist monks as well as representatives of several "New religions," we received a clear impression of the Japanese religious landscape. Often these new discoveries caused deep discussions among us students so that we had to reconsider our own theological position concerning issues, such as the relationship between revelation and ratio or between mission and dialogue. By far the biggest challenge, and at the same time the most fascinating experience, was the encounter with the complete different structure of thinking mainly in Buddhist philosophy. Are "Western philosophy" and "Buddhist philosophy" complete contradictions? Does the Christian definition of God depend on Hellenistic philosophy or Jewish monotheistic point of view, or is it possible to explain the Christian Trinity in Buddhist terms? Motivated by Professor Mizugaki's lesson about the relationship between Christianity and Buddhism, such as Ariga Tetsutaro's "Hayatology" (a kind of Hebrew metaphysics), I decided to read more about it and then I wrote an essay about the teaching of *sumiyata* (emptiness) in the Kyoto School of Philosophy.

However, the lasting experiences I did not made in the library and its (still fascinating) books, but in the many personal encounters we had during the six months in Kyoto and elsewhere in Japan. Additional to the lessons, the ISJP-program offered a number of interesting fieldtrips to Buddhist temples, Shinto