

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 *sumyata* (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

shrines, headquarters of new religions as well as to traditional Japanese houses. Overwhelmed by the Japanese hospitality we could see in life what we had learned in theory. Our admiration for the religious tolerance we encountered with most of our hosts sometimes led us to the limits of our Western logical capability. Our surprise about the peaceful coexistence of Shinto rites, Western weddings and Buddhist funerals in one person's life, or the self-representation of Oomoto-kyo as a monotheistic, pantheistic and polytheistic religion at the same time, made it clear to us that we had to study East Asian religions and thinking more profoundly. Fortunately the lessons on the history and actual situation of Christianity in Japan provided us with sufficient examples to understand that we were not the first to struggle with such kind of intercultural encounter. Here we were confronted with questions such as the enculturation of Christianity since the Jesuit mission in the 16th century.

The study of Japanese religions, however, was only one part of our program in Japan. In fieldtrips and personal experiences and encounters we learned a lot about Japanese culture, reaching from the tea ceremony to *manga*. Kyoto as the cultural heart of Japan offered the ideal background for encountering all kinds of traditional Japanese culture, including architecture, music, festivals (*matsuri*), and so on. The one-week trip to Tokyo added some completely different aspects of Japanese specialties, such as the Yasukuni shrine or the modern world of Akihabara. Moreover, I even did not miss the chance to live for some time in the countryside. Probably the complete opposite to Tokyo was my internship in a Christian parish on Sado Island, where I experienced four interesting (and really cold) weeks in January. Here I learned also a lot about Japanese political challenges as well as about social issues, especially in rural areas.

In conclusion I can say that these six months of participating in the Interreligious Studies in Japan Program in Kyoto offered an enormously wide range of new cultural and theological impressions. The combination of intensive studies in classroom and in daily life as well as warm personal companions contributed to an exceptional time of studies in Japan.