

Mira SONNTAG \*

## Christian Education in the Sign of the Covenant: The Case of Aishin High School in Western Japan

### Introduction

Forbidden in Japan's public schools, it is only in private schools of various denominations that religious education<sup>1</sup> becomes possible. While membership never cut across the 1% mark of the population, Christianity still managed to exert a broad influence on Japanese culture. The reason for this was the deep involvement of foreign missionaries in the establishment and maintenance of educational institutions, especially for women's education.<sup>2</sup> Concentration on education (and science as indirect ministries) rather than on direct evangelism and on women as the core target group was a result of the socio-political background of the Bakumatsu and early Meiji periods. Missionaries acting under the anti-Christianity edict against Japanese conversion until 1873 used education as much as a "tool" as the Meiji government did. Their attempts to enlighten the populace differed only in their goals and subsequent measures. "Mission schools" (*mission sukūru*)<sup>3</sup> provided high-level instruction for social groups that were discriminated by the public educational system. Although as a kind of indirect evangelism Christian education hardly yielded appropriate fruit, it certainly changed the social and economic face of modern Japan with the introduction of Christian feminism and the promotion of vocational education. Then, in the Taishō period, non-Christian Japanese educators absorbed originally Christian and humanistic approaches to reformed education contributing largely to Japan's first phase of alternative education.<sup>4</sup> But today most Christian schools are neither revolutionary in their

---

\* Ph.D. candidate, Tokyo University, Department of Religious Studies

1. Meant is education about religion(s) as well as education based on (principles of) a specific religion.
2. Women's education in Japan became a highly researched topic in the 1990s. Li Yuk Heung (1993), which is but one out of many related doctoral dissertations, is an introduction to the interrelation between Japanese women's education in general and Christian girls' schools.
3. "Mission school" denotes any form of school, which is in some way based on Christian values. There are about 620 Christian schools (from primary school to universities) in Japan, i.e. 1,2% of all Japanese schools, 7% of all private schools, and 67,4% of all private religious schools are Christian schools.
4. Christian influence resulted from Christian thinkers e.g. Kant and Rousseau on whose ideas these attempts at new liberal education were based. See Ushida Tadasu (2002).

teaching methods nor especially religious. Their Christianity has become a commodity standing for the idea of internationalization, which serves the longing for Western culture. In the face of shifting political priorities toward Asia instead of Europe and America it is, however, doubtful how long such a type of Christianity can be maintained as a marketable commodity.<sup>5</sup>

### The aim of this study

When focusing on specific educational institutions, previous studies on Christian education have mainly used historical approaches that emphasize founders and founding spirit.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, the aim here is to clarify the current state of Christian education in Japan. Within the limited scope of a single case study I would like to show how the people involved in Christian education evaluate Japan's educational landscape, define their own goals and methods in reaction to perceived problems and how their efforts are in turn regarded by the non-Christian educational world.

This paper is based on qualitative empirical research in a Christian high school, established in 1988 by the Non-church Movement (*Mukyōkai*)<sup>7</sup> in Shimane prefecture. Officially claiming denominational freedom the school is internally dominated by the Non-church fraction especially in regard to religious education. While it was established to counterbalance the deficiencies of the Japanese educational system and while it has attracted a large number of “problem children” the school rejects the idea of special treatment. It is not based – in contrast to most of the alternative school projects<sup>8</sup> today – on granting its students more freedom. Instead it emphasizes self-imposed restrictions. *Yakusoku*, which means the biblical

---

5. See Yuki Hideo (1997).

6. Therefore publications like the *History of Christian Education in Japan* often consist of a volume on individuals (*jinbutsuben*) and another volume on thoughts (*shichōben*). See Kirisutokyō Gakkō Kyōiku Dōmei (1977). From time to time scholars also comment on the gap between founding spirit and contemporary praxis of Christian schools and propose measures “toward better educational practices,” which in fact aim at stronger religious commitment of educators. See Machida Ken'ichi (2000).

7. The term Non-Church Movement refers to a tradition in Japanese Christianity founded by Uchimura Kanzō (1861-1930) during the Meiji period. Following Dokuritsu Gakuen in Yamagata prefecture and Ainō Gakuen in Mie prefecture Aishin is the youngest school emerging from this tradition. As the ultimate model for all three schools Sapporo Nōgakkō (Sapporo Agricultural College, today Hokkaidō University) can be given. During his time as a student at this boarding school Uchimura converted to Christianity. Later the whole outline of the school became the basis for his idea of the ideal educational institution. Uchimura's educational approach is often summarized by his words: “What you have to read is the Bible. What you have to study is nature. And what you have to do is work.” Quote from Kirisutokyō Aishin Kōtō Gakkō (2002: 18).

8. I am not referring to military-style private schools specializing on truants, which have caught the eye of the media with news of abuse. They are not alternative, since they simply amplify the already existing situation of public schools beyond the usual degree of cruelty.

covenant as well as any worldly promise or agreement, is the key term of the schools philosophy.

Through interviews<sup>9</sup> with teachers, students, parents, and supporters as well as with outside educators and through participation in the boarding school's daily life a complex mosaic of differing identities evolved. The diversity of their respective views can hardly be fully represented by the official narrative<sup>10</sup> of the school's foundation. Work on this project is in progress, and I hope to include more schools in the future.

My motivation to conduct this study is rooted in previous work on the Non-church Movement and my interest in the ambiguous role of Christian education in Japan. But it was also urged by the public discourse on education currently conducted in Germany. After scoring badly in international tests<sup>11</sup> evaluating learning abilities, Germany is now looking to more successful countries like Finland and Japan for models to emulate. In this context Japan<sup>12</sup> which is still often criticized as a too collective nation, suddenly reaches idol status for educational reformers.

However, this rather one-sided notion stands against the perceptions of students, parents and educators in the idolized country.<sup>13</sup> Japan is struggling with its third educational reform in response to growing problems of bullying (*ijime*), school refusal (*tōkō kyōhi*, or *futōkō*), social withdrawal (*bikikomori*), school-related violence (*gakunai bōryōku*) and juvenile crime (*shōnen hanzai*), heavily debating the new concept of "liberal education" (*yutori kyōiku*) and proposed changes (among others) to § 1 of the Fundamental Law on Education (*kyōiku kihonhō kaisei*).

The Japanese never paid more attention to the crisis of their children, which is perceived first of all (or even exclusively) as a crisis of education. While the unsustainability of its present form is widely acknowledged, problems continue to cost human lives.<sup>14</sup> Violence by students is still increasing, but not only student's

9. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 teachers and 11 students (with audio recording), an intuitive questionnaire with the same 11 teachers and all students (respond rate 32 %), and a qualitative written survey with all parents (respond rate 56 %, 65 % of which came from female parents). A 17-day-long participant observation was conducted in May 2004.

10. For official accounts see the school's publications: Kirisutokyō Aishin Kōtō Gakkō (2002), the periodical *Aishin*, and Tonomura Tamihiko (1994).

11. Finland reached the highest cross sectional score in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2000, followed by Japan, which leads in mathematics. Latest results and commentaries can be accessed via the program's website ([www.pisa.oecd.org](http://www.pisa.oecd.org)).

12. Looking up to Japan opinion makers often favor full-time-schools (*zennichi gakkō*) and the abolition of school year repetition without any in-depth consideration or even questioning of the advantages of a high rate of learning ability for society and/or its industry.

13. For an inside view of an ordinary high school refer to Yoneyama Shoko (1999). The following summary in the text is partly based on this book.

14. Yoneyama lists many lethal accidents, but less destructive cases can be constantly found in daily newspapers.

behavior also their attitude toward study is troubling. Students are running away from classes by dropping out (*chūtai*) or inner emigration leading to the ‘collapse of classes’. Although Japanese students have reached highest ranks in mathematics almost 50 % of them “dislike math.” Also with regard to other sciences a combination of highest achievements and lowest motivation has become the characteristic feature of Japanese students. Despite attempts to incorporate new approaches to learning ability students are still weak in critical thinking, problem solution, and self-expression.

The apparent problems are the result of the disempowered state of students, “who are constantly under explicit and implicit threats from teachers.”<sup>15</sup> Without relation to future educational prospects all students are put under the same educational pressure. They are expected to silently accept their subordinate role within the extremely rigid hierarchical structure of (esp. high) schools. School rules authorize power and allow for violence by teachers under the name of ‘corporal punishment.’<sup>16</sup> But using their duty of student assessment, teachers also have the power to convert not only attainment, but students’ behavior as well into academic opportunity. The students’ disempowered state, i.e. their dependency on teachers turns peer relationships into competition and surveillance. Here conformism works as the most effective means of control. Students themselves check and punish each other for the slightest deviation from “normal.” Besides they are put into a position to ‘benefit’ only if they accept boring and alienating “examination knowledge” and uncritical, teacher-centered classes. In total it must be concluded that the “Japanese paradigm of education makes it difficult for them to live, for them to maintain life, let alone to enjoy it.”<sup>17</sup> Many students attest that “school is a battle field.”<sup>18</sup>

Thus with my paper I would like to present the perceptions of insiders to the Japanese educational system instead of the usual outside perspective, which is palliated by the educational discourse and latent Japanophilia of another country.

### A short outline of Aishin High School

Christian Aishin High School is located about 700 km west of Tōkyō, and lies about 6 km from the next supermarket (Gōtsu) in the middle of the woods of Shimane prefecture on a hill overseeing the Japanese sea. Absolute isolation from the outer world was the proclaimed aim<sup>19</sup> of the founders. The day starts at 6

---

15. Yoneyama Shoko (1999: 245).

16. The idea that “corporal punishment equals education” is wide spread not only in schools that reached the headlines of the media with “deaths within normal practice.” Physical punishment (*taibatsu*) is widely believed to be necessary among teachers and parents alike, even though the School Education Law of 1947 prohibits it.

17. Yoneyama Shoko (1999: 247).

18. Therefore it is not surprising that Kitano Takeshi’s movie “Battle Royale” has found a big audience.

19. The offer of cheaper land and already existing facilities at a different location closer to the

o'clock for the school's 57 students and their teachers with radio calisthenics and preparations for breakfast. Students take turns in preparing all three of the day's meals themselves. The delicious meals certainly rank high on Aishin's "Top Ten Advantages list." Like all other meals breakfast starts and ends after exactly 30 minutes with a prayer. After breakfast 50 minutes are set aside for cleaning up, preparing for class or practicing piano. During this time the teachers of the school already gather for their first service of the day, reading from the Bible, praying and singing one or two songs. The morning service is held by teachers. Classes are held from 9 to 12:30 and from 13:45 to 15:25. Each class has its own very bright classroom and moves to other rooms only for special subjects. Dinner starts at 6 pm. Those who prepare it usually spend most of the otherwise free afternoon on preparations. And twice a week students engage in various work groups, preparing preserved foods, baking bread, producing soaps, potpourri or recycled paper, breeding chicken and ducks, experimenting with ecological agriculture, maintaining the flowerbeds or repairing broken equipment. Following dinner another service is held, this time conducted by the students themselves who choose a Bible verse and tell the others what they found important during the last weeks. Usually the evening meeting finishes just in time to allow for a rush to the observation deck or to the top of the "Eternal Rest Hill"<sup>20</sup> from where one can witness a spectacular sunset over the Japanese sea. But as soon as the sun has set, students must go back to their rooms and enter into a two-hour period of silence where they are not even allowed to talk to their roommates. This period of silence is meant for class preparation or independent study. Bedtime is at 11 pm. The schedule changes for Saturdays and Sundays, since there are no classes, but with Sunday service and school activities on Saturday morning (twice a month), little time is left for free disposition. All of the above-mentioned activities are compulsory for everyone, except for the teachers' attendance at meals. Many other classes are offered in addition, e.g. courses on pottery, drawing, calligraphy, choir, hand bell etc. It was therefore quite difficult to interview students due to their strict schedule.

Since the school understands itself as a Christian school, school regulations<sup>21</sup> demand from the students that they 1.) seriously study the Bible and search for truth, 2.) do not drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes or tell lies, and 3.) faithfully fulfil their duties and keep the agreements (*yakusoku*)<sup>22</sup> of the school and the dormitory. These

---

city was refused "taking into account the risk of conflict due to a peculiar educational policy that is based on the Bible." See Tonomura Tamihiko (1994: 39).

20. On the hill stands a small chapel-shaped building which contains the bones of Tada Masakazu, co-founder of the school, and of a graduate of the school who was killed in a car accident.
21. The school regulations and agreements are included in every promotional pamphlet.
22. If agreement (*yakusoku*) is one key term of the school's philosophy, another one is encounter (*deai*). Students change rooms 9 times in 3 years, sharing double rooms usually with a student of a different grade. Also the seating order at meals changes once a week. Fieldtrips to places like Hiroshima, Okinawa or Korea necessarily include encounters with people affected by the events of World War II.

additional agreements include attendance at all services, maintenance of a natural (uncolored) hairstyle, abandonment of accessories and overly fashion-minded clothes as well as of television, cell phones, comic books, magazines and tape recorders (for half of the year). Washing has to be done by hand and students are not allowed to meet alone with a student of the other sex or to visit the dormitory of the opposite sex. While the school regulations cannot be challenged, the agreements (*yakusoku*) are subject to students' discussion held once a year and have already been slightly changed in the past. They are therefore seen as self-imposed.

### Background of Aishin teachers, students and parents

The school employs only Christian teachers. However, it is difficult to prove that somebody is a Christian, especially if being baptized does not count. Since the school's leadership lies in the hands of Christians from the Non-church Movement who reject church sacraments, employment decisions are based on the principal's acknowledgement of proper Christian spirit and sense of calling in the applicant's personality. Apparently, principals at times also suggest that somebody might be called by God to persuade him or her to work at Aishin. The community of teachers consists of a hard-core minority of Non-Church Christians mostly in their 50s and 60s. The majority, however, is made up by very young teachers in their 30s, mostly fresh graduates from Christian universities with little or no teaching experience. While the older generation lives on the school's premises together with their families the young teachers are predominantly unmarried. They come from various denominations and are largely unfamiliar with the Non-church style of Christian life. Low remuneration, lack of opportunity to find a partner, inability to adapt to the Non-church life style as well as mental and physical exhaustion are the reasons why the fluctuation rate among young teachers is very high.

Students come from all over Japan, mostly from the countryside, and an average of 46 % comes from Christian homes.<sup>23</sup> They have an average of 1,9 siblings. The average monthly family income is 450.000 Yen (equivalent of 3400 Euro), which is a middle income for a family with one child, but not much for a family with 3 or 4 children. If the age difference allows it, there is a strong trend to enroll more than one child of a family at Aishin. My survey has found that half of the children faced problems like bullying (*ijime*) or insufficient learning ability (*gakuryoku fuzoku*) during middle school. One fifth stopped going to school at least for some time, mostly during their middle school years. According to one teacher, there is one child per class who enrolled because he/she dislikes his/her family. But more problematic are those who were sent by their parents against their will, which means, in effect, a violation of the school's policy to enroll only children who come

---

23. Unofficial statistics provided by the school principal based on the last 6 years. Answers by the parents in my own survey indicated 55 % Christian parents for 2004. 24 % of the parents have no religion, 17 % are Buddhist and 3 % belong to a new religious movement. (One parent stands for one family.)

with self-commitment.<sup>24</sup> Such background-related problems cut across the whole spectrum of religious affiliations. The rate of parents holding a university degree is about three times above average.<sup>25</sup> This rate tells little about the factual intellectual achievement of parents, but it might hint conformity with the social norms of the “Schooling society” (*gakkō ka shakai*) and a subsequently high determination to send their own children to a university. After all, existing problems are solved by an unnecessary attendance of school.<sup>26</sup> Parents who send “problem children” regard Aishin as the only school that can help their children; and 6 out of 13 parents described it as the ideal high school. An intuitive questionnaire with the students shows exclusively positive opinions about the school and their life as an Aishin student. The students nevertheless talk about various problems in the interviews, but as they state themselves, they start to see suffering or unpleasant experiences as a plus, once they have entered Aishin’s little world.

### Evaluation of the Japanese educational landscape

While I have collected a large amount of data on the school and intend to analyze it from various perspectives in the coming months, the focus of this paper lies on how teachers and students of Aishin as well as parents evaluate the educational landscape in Japan and which counter-measures they propose or take in regard to the problems they see. For this analysis I extracted the opinions of these three groups separately, sorting them by asking “What is wrong?,” “Why is it wrong?,” and “Who is doing wrong?” In a second step, I looked for common interpretations among the groups and asked why they would share a certain opinion. Since Aishin’s advantages as given by the three groups can be thought of not only as the proclamation of a distinctive school identity but also as a hint to problem solution, I have linked these advantages to the perceived problems of Japanese education, asking “What does Aishin offer as an answer to these problems?”

The results of this analysis show that there is a group of perceived problems.<sup>27</sup> which the three identity groups share, however with each participant group retaining its own perspective on the problem and especially its own target group for (implicit and explicit) accusations.

---

24. Besides representing a violation of the school policy, the tolerance of such cases is a serious threat to the school’s claim of alternative education. Refer to the “Conclusions” of this paper.

25. According to Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (2002: 461-2) an average of 20 % women and 30% men in the age group between 45 and 54 hold a university degree. In contrast 70% of female Aishin parents and 77% of male Aishin parents graduated from university. (These numbers resemble only the parents who responded to the survey.)

26. Compulsory education does not include high school, though the social norm demands its attendance.

27. Refer to the list of perceived problems given at the end of the paper.

Problem A is an example: At its base is the question of **freedom, control and power in a mass educational system**. Teachers complain about the bad manners of the students and accuse parents of insufficient household education. Students experience measures of the school against rebellious behavior as too drastic and complain about teachers who keep them under surveillance instead of protecting them. Parents bemoan the improper reaction of teachers and schools to problem children as well as somewhat individualistic children, who are often forejudged as extreme.

It is no surprise that children and parents appear to be on the same side in this confrontation. Studies have shown that parents often change their opinion about educational principles when their children turn out to be problem children, deciding that they have to protect them against outside critique and accept them when society fails to do so.<sup>28</sup>

Problem B belongs to the same group: It derives from **changes in the Japanese value system** during the last 50 years. The current high school generation does not engage in studying with the same career ideals as their parent generation did. The post-war educational system has yet to propose new and above all convincing values for the current generation. Therefore parents criticize the lack of motivation on the students' side, the students feel a lack of orientation – with two thirds not knowing what is expected of them – and link this lack of orientation to the new directive of “liberal education” (*yutori kyōiku*), whereas the teachers of Aishin lament the overly material orientation and loss of soul in students. As Christians they see this problem as a consequence of the secular world's value system.

Problem C which addresses **approaches to learning ability** also belongs to this group: Aishin teachers and parents share the criticism that life in common high schools is centering around rote learning (*tsumekomī*), preparation for entrance examinations (*juken benkyō*) in cram schools (*juku*) and club activities. Both groups of participants see the reason for this problem in perverted educational goals as expressed in the terms “grade index education” or “importance of deviation value” (*bensachi jūshi*).<sup>29</sup> But students still tend to accept this style of education as a given precondition for high learning ability. They fear that “liberal education” might turn them into idiots.

Problem D – **existentiality of education** – logically belongs to this group as well, but only parents expressed their view that students cannot feel alive in a normal high school. I assume that Aishin teachers and students are simply feeling so much alive that they forgot to comment on this point.

---

28. The activities of most parent support groups lead into this direction, since as long as parents continue to put pressure on their children e.g. in the case of truancy, the children are unable to find a place to survive not only at school but also at home. Kanō sees one central task of the sociologist of education in searching for ways to protect the life sphere of children (*ikirareru kūkan*). (Kanō Yoshimasa 2001: 14–15)

29. ‘Deviation value’ refers to an IQ based statistical method of expressing a student's attainment in relation to the average attainment of all students. Average is set at 50 points. List of necessary deviation marks for entrance to universities (sorted by discipline) can be found on the Internet.

Then there is a group of problems that unifies two of the identity groups in their opinion. In Problem E – concerning the **quality of imparted knowledge** – students and teachers take it for granted that normal high school education does not teach the really important knowledge. For teachers, such a statement would probably mean too much of a self-critique. They did not comment on this point.

In Problem F – relating to **class content** – teachers and students share the wish for classes about Japanese politics, social problems or the Japanese educational system. In their experience common schools exclude any topics that might necessitate a self-critical attitude. It is Aishin's specialty to offer such classes, and part of the students has enrolled at Aishin for exactly that reason.

On the other hand problems G – **organization of mass education** – and H – **teacher-student-relationship** – unite students and their parents. Here both are on the receiving end of the Japanese educational system claiming that the supplier side is responsible for the uniformity of the system as well as for the lack of personal contact and response to every single individual. It is symptomatic that students define human relations at school mostly as teacher-student-relationships. As Yoneyama pointed out, the relationships between teachers and students, as a matter of fact, determine relationships between students as well. The most heatedly discussed problems of Japanese education are hidden under the category of “problems with human relations” (*ningen kankei no mondai*). When Aishin students explained problems or reasons for truancy at middle school they frequently referred to “human relations.” They could not find “trustful relationships” or were ignored for being immigrants to the town. While students did not hesitate to name “truancy” (*futōkō*) which is the result of extreme problems with human relations at school, they rarely used the word “bullying” (*ijime*) to name a symptom of problematic relations. This does not mean that it rarely occurred. Yoneyama refers to a survey<sup>30</sup> among university students, in which 60% of them (going to school between 1988 and 1993) reported to have witnessed ‘excessive *ijime*’ and 17% had themselves experienced being the victim of ‘excessive *ijime*’. Agents, victims, and witnesses of bullying are all locked within the same system, which demands silence about *ijime*. On one side, talking about *ijime* makes it worse at ordinary schools. But then talking about it also becomes increasingly difficult with government regulations about what represents *ijime* in terms of a legal definition. It is difficult to estimate in how far Aishin students suffered from *ijime*. Even parents sometime seem not to know, asserting that their child had “problems with human relations” at school but presuming that “these problems supposedly did not go as far as *ijime*.”

And finally, problem I shows that the **financial burden and responsibility** for education lies in Japan exclusively on the shoulders of the parents. They are the only ones who complain about the waste of money and time in education.

Summarizing the complaints about the Japanese educational system in the words of my informants one could say: “[The Japanese educational system is like] putting people on a conveyer belt, packing them and delivering them when time has

---

30. Yoneyama Shoko 1999: 181.

come.”<sup>31</sup> “One is not perceived as a human being. One is a stranger above all, and there is no recognition at school for what kind of family background a certain child might live in.”<sup>32</sup> “Ordinary schools concentrate on the principle of competition. They encourage students to strive for marks that are higher than those of a classmate even if just by one point.”<sup>33</sup>

### Aishin’s counter-measures

Now I want to summarize how Aishin approaches these problems and tries to provide a better school environment.

#### Agreements (*yakusoku*) and discussions (*hanashiai*)

As mentioned above Aishin attracts a high percentage of problem children, among them children who skipped middle school for longer periods. But in marked contrast to other schools that were specifically established for such children, Aishin insists on rules for communal life. Through dorm life students experience these rules as a necessity of communal life, but this necessity is also authorized by the Bible, which tells about God’s covenant with humanity as well as about many binding promises among people. Disruptive individuals are constantly reminded not only by teachers but also by their peers – students see it as a positive skill to become able to remind and warn others – but at the same time they receive attention and acceptance as human beings, their opinion is being heard as the opinion of everybody else is (*hanashiai*).<sup>34</sup> In addition, teachers take efforts to increase awareness among parents for household education.

#### Holistic personality development (*zenjinkaku keisei*)

The lack of orientation in ordinary schools is met with a fixed value system that stresses human relations and intercultural understanding. As a Christian school Aishin High School pursues holistic education based on the Bible. For students (and not only for the Christians among them) it is an important part of their Aishin identity to know that more than 3.000 people are constantly supporting the school with prayer. The question “How are you going to live?” is omnipresent and the level of reflexivity is kept high through the institutions of evening meetings (*yūkai*) and discussions (*hanashiai*). In the experience of parents and students “Aishin is a world with different values.” Holistic education means to explore one’s abilities beyond the usually very limited understanding of IQ and also beyond the so-called “sunny sides of life.” As a teacher said “We want

31. Voice from a parent.

32. Voice from a student.

33. Voice from a teacher.

34. Agreements are not achieved in a simple majority vs. minority style of democracy. They must result from everybody’s opinion.

students to become poor (*mazushii*) and go to dirty places (*kitanai tokoro*) where others don't want to work." Dirty work is an inherent part of Aishin life, since students have to clean the cesspool and an oil trap for liquid waste twice a week as well as the chicken house.

#### Autonomy (*jishu*) and life skills (*ikiru chishiki*)

The solution to problem C practically also leads to the solution of problem E: To provide useful and important knowledge study is connected with everyday life. Although students will rarely come into the position again to operate cesspools or oil traps and provide for their meals working on the field or in the stable – except if they decide to become farmers – in doing so they have adopted an autonomous life style. Autonomy is the main criteria for intellectual development as well: During the three years at Aishin students are expected to concentrate on finding out for themselves what is important for them. By the rule of the period of silence (*chinmoku no jikan*) the school provides best conditions for independent study. Students (and their parents) assert that their learning ability has increased although this increase is not necessarily reflected in grades. As one teacher concludes: "[Aishin's] educational goals are achieved mostly through life outside the classroom and through life in the dormitory."

#### Living the now (*ima wo ikiru*)

During my stay at Aishin I could witness that the students feel very much alive and happy. (Although in the case of some teachers the feeling of exhaustion might prevail.) Close contact with nature and the isolation from the secular world outside the community allow for concentration on one's own existence. Aishin students live in the "now" instead of cramming for entrance examinations. They work hard with their own hands to provide for their daily life. Also mechanical equipment is limited to a minimum. This does not mean that the school raises technophobes, but the use of technical appliances always has to be based on necessity. Students can use computers and the Internet in classes or for study projects, they can also rent CDs and Videos but only after being granted permission. Besides the school has very efficient technology to support an ecological life style.

#### Truth (*shinri*) and critical thinking (*kangaeru chikara*)

As previously mentioned another of Aishin's specialties lies in providing classes and extra-curricular activities on issues such as peace, war responsibility and the educational system. Fieldtrips e.g. to Hiroshima or Okinawa are well prepared in advance by means of a several-week long special study focus. Discussions on educational matters are part of the society classes. Students watch for instance the film "Dead Poets' Society" – the Japanese title of the movie translates into "Living the Now" (*Ima wo ikiru*) – ; the class lets students reflect on notions of education and freedom, evaluating at the same time their own school environment. (Part of my data consists of notes from these classes.)

Freedom (*jiyū*) and Aishin style (*Aishin rashisa*)

The uniformity of ordinary high schools is avoided by the abolition of school uniforms and fancy clothes alike, but also by the maintenance of a distinguished Aishin “face” associated with “cheerful eyes” (*kireina me, akarui me*) and “free minds” (*kangaekata no jiyū*). As one student said: “The main point of Aishin students’ identity is that there is no such thing as an Aishin student’s identity. Everybody is different.” Or, in the words of another student: “[Being an Aishin student] means not to care for things like clothes or so. It means being one’s true self.” Emphasis is put on individual diversity.

Encounter (*deai*)

Small numbers, dormitory life and the 24 hours availability of teachers prevent any lack of personal contact or individual response. The interaction with teachers outside the classroom is experienced as being based on the teachers’ Christian faith. Friendliness, tolerance and understanding are attributed to this faith rather than to their personality as such. For the contact between students their mutual insight into their respective family backgrounds is a big advantage in a society that more and more tends to hide personal background for fear of social contempt should problems arise. Many say that Aishin is “a place where one can learn the difficulty of human relationships,” but this difficulty and subsequent suffering is always regarded as a positive experience. *Ijime* does not exist at Aishin. Without taking refuge to legal definitions to prove its non-existence, there is a fundamental difference between “problems with human relations” experienced by students at middle school and those they experience at Aishin. *Ijime* denotes unreasoned and hopeless destructive relationships anybody might have to face. The “difficulty of human relations” at Aishin arises from a constructive attempt to live together in diversity, i.e. it directly arises from everybody’s individuality. Also it is not hopeless.

Responsibility (*sekinin*)

Responsibility is central to school life, but with regard to the school’s financing it assumes a very definite form. The school’s efforts to minimize costs as much as possible allows for very low tuition fees in comparison to other private schools. The foundation funds were raised by collection campaigns. Most of the equipment was donated, and every class of graduates makes a farewell gift to the school. Furthermore a scholarship fund system for financially weak families was incorporated. Again summarizing in the words of my informants, Aishin is “a way out of Japan’s mainstream educational system”<sup>35</sup> and “a place where everybody cooperates and moves together.”<sup>36</sup> “[Aishin] is the fruit (crystallization) of many prayers by people who wish to raise personalities which God will like and which are needed by other people.”<sup>37</sup>

---

35. Voice from a parent.

36. Voice from a student.

37. Voice from a teacher.

## Aishin's case in the context of the public discourse on education

This paper would be incomplete without situating the critique and counter-measures of Aishin activists in the context of the broader educational discourse in Japan. In how far do the problems voiced here overlap with the public opinion? Did they omit or miss problems out that are discussed elsewhere? If so, how is such omission related to Aishin's self-definition? Are only problems raised to which Aishin is able to offer a solution?

Of course, it is impossible to give these questions due respect within the limited frame of my paper. The public discourse on education is a topic for monographs; therefore I will not even try to summarize it. Instead I will confine myself to some preliminary remarks about correlations between Aishin's approach and the general reform agenda. Detailed information concerning proposed changes to the Fundamental Law on education can be found on the Internet.<sup>38</sup>

In a hearing before the Education Council (Chūō Kyōiku Shingikai) Nakanishi Terumasa from Kyoto University argued that currently occurring discussions on a new Fundamental Law on Education are not as much directed at the young generation of students as they voice a more general discontent with "today's Japanese society, politics and role models provided by adult individuals." They might signal one of the phases of social decline industrialized countries already had to face repeatedly throughout their history. He insists that a reform of the educational system must start with the regeneration of the notion of the "nation state."<sup>39</sup> Similarly Noi Ryōji from Nagoya University – after pointing out that

---

38. Check the "Fundamental Law on Education Reference Room" on the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology's website ([www.mext.go.jp/b\\_menu/kihon/index.htm](http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/kihon/index.htm)). Here you will find protocols of hearings (including the whole presentations of speakers invited) and lists of anonymous proposals relating to various topics divided into "positive" and "negative" opinions depending on the overall direction of discourse. It is interesting that proposals concerning religious education were not categorized in this way since "the preliminary report [Education Council] did not provide fixed intentions." Also the protocols of the hearings provide mostly information on university education, since the invited representatives are predominantly university professors. For an English overview see Roesgaard, Marie H. (1999).

39. In Nakanishi's opinion the current Fundamental Law on Education does not allow the people to discuss or rethink the state. He sees this problem as the "Achilles' heel of Japan's security." Interestingly, he combines his demand with a critique of Christian "otherworldliness." The correlation of a search for transcendental "truth" with the search for peace in the preamble of the law is supposed to have led to an understanding of peace as something otherworldly, something which is unachievable in this world. But since the search for truth and peace is propagated as a means to ensure Japan's existence as a democratic and cultural nation/state (through education), the transcendental notions of truth and peace also excluded the state from real-life consideration. Although he makes an interesting point here, the Japanese lack of critical attitude towards the state is certainly not the fault of Christianity. In the opposite, a critical attitude toward the state is a considerable part of Japanese Christian identity. His call for a new national

education cannot function properly without being based on the trinity of educators, educated, and environment – stated, that “in today’s education the problem is not about the children, but it is about the environment.” When browsing through the hundreds of anonymous opinions it becomes obvious that the inclusion of hitherto rather unrelated institutions like the local community and households into the enterprise of education is highly desired. Many demand to establish directives for household education (*katei kyōiku*) by insertion of a special article into the Fundamental Law on Education. However, it remains unclear in how far the law can be used to influence the adult populace who is supposed to have already developed into proper citizens. It appears to me that the new notion of life-long learning, which is also to be established with the new Fundamental Law, will serve as a rationale for the state’s intrusion into individual opinion making processes extending beyond the range of compulsory schooling.<sup>40</sup>

Though Aishin teachers frequently refer to insufficient household education, as a matter of fact, being a boarding school Aishin releases parents even more from their responsibility for the education of their children. Except for very few (though impressive) cases, the questionnaire showed little awareness of parents to be involved in the education of their children. Most parents merely express their trust in the educational policy of the school or their fervent support by prayer. Looked at closely, Aishin takes the opposite approach in comparison to the public discourse.

The need for a reformulation of the law is often explained with shifting values. Sporadically members of the decision making part of adult society also admit that current problems occurred because they themselves adhered too stubbornly to the values of their own generation, i.e. to the values taught in post-war education. This acknowledgement to have ignored value changes<sup>41</sup> inside society still does not include even a hint that post-war education as such might have failed. In what sense am I suggesting that it failed? Regardless of the idealistic outline of the Fundamental Law on Education, the goal of post-war education was to ensure Japan’s economic recovery. According to Yoneyama, the Japanese education paradigm switched back to “autocratic” in the mid-1950s after a short truly democratic phase in the immediate post-war years. But even those students subjected to “democratic” post-war education were encouraged by parents, who

---

consciousness is ambiguous; it could be read as a call to critical control of the state by its citizens, but combined with his critique of “Christian” otherworldliness it will rather serve nationalistic goals putting stress on pride instead of critique.

40. This is not to deny the necessity and usefulness of life-long learning as such, but to question the origin of driving forces in such extended learning processes. Adult education should be individually motivated autonomous self-study.

41. During the past decades there was a strong trend to explain problems of truancy, violence and inner emigration as related to the individual psyche, which could be fixed by the establishment of a school counselor system. But (reported) numbers have even increased after its establishment. Now sociologists of education have started to explain such problems with value changes affecting the whole society and resulting in the school’s loss of meaning as a “holy space” which was supposed to lead from the here into a bright future. For details see Kanō Yoshimasa (2001: 5-23).

gave their best for Japan's economy as the new samurai class (i.e. the white collar *sarariman*). The parents themselves were raised to give honor to the Imperial Rescript on Education (*kyōiku chokugo*). Although the occupation forces abolished the rescript immediately, few Japanese questioned the appropriateness of its content (though not its previous usage). Therefore its Confucian values persisted for decades until the affluence of the bubble years finally started to destroy them. But it is for sure that things – including values – change. And while post-war education on the level of outside appearance was so busy with proving that Japan had changed, it failed to nurture the ability to adjust to future changes in students.

With Christian schools the situation is a priori different. Since Christianity has no base in the Japanese society, schools – as long as they care to communicate Christian values – have to relate the values they teach to the values of the surrounding environment in some way. Parents of Aishin students described them as fundamental values that transcend constantly changing *zeitgeists*. Also the school's self-presentation includes the confrontation of transcendental (or at least anachronistic) "truth" with "human thought" bound to its time. To assert whether Aishin can actually provide access to such a truth or not, would mean a value judgment not appropriate to this paper. But with this claim and education based on this claim it stimulates increased awareness of differing priorities and their respective limitations. It is for the peculiar relation of Japanese Christians to their society that Christian education includes, although not everywhere to the degree of Aishin high school, a constant rethinking of one's identity as a Christian and Japanese and of one's relation to the state. The demands to provide for the development of a Japanese identity (*nihonjin no aidentiti*) and for patriotism (*aikokushin*) through education, as raised widely in the public discourse, seem rather narrow-minded in the light of a more critical Christian consideration of these terms.

Aishin also takes a different course with regard to two more items of the educational reform agenda. While proposals for the new law stress the necessity of cooperation of schools and local communities, Aishin – as well as the other two Non-church high schools – relied for 15 years on isolation from secular society. The consciousness of being based in enemy territory<sup>42</sup> might have been the reason for this isolation. Rather than seeking support from immediate neighbors, the school compensated the lack of integration by support from a nationwide scattered community through prayer. This situation is now changing and the school is trying to develop more contacts to the local community<sup>43</sup> so that one can assert a trend of converging interests.

The opposite trend, however, is occurring with Aishin's priority on elite training. The schools founding spirit included a rather big share of aspirations to

---

42. When comparing Non-church schools to other Christian schools isolation seems to be a distinguishing feature. Perhaps it can be traced back to the later Uchimura's establishment of his "own kingdom in Shinjuku" and his conviction to work in enemy territory.

43. Shimane prefecture is traditionally a deeply Buddhist area. And there are no Christian churches around.

elite education. Aishin was meant to raise individuals who are able to carry Japan's future. The names of Aishin's dormitories still tell this spirit – one being called “the salt of the earth” – , and some parents voiced similar aspirations combined with the critique that Aishin does not recruit enough well-motivated and gifted students. But seen on the whole, students and teachers at Aishin are not filled with such spirit. They predominantly deny the idea that Aishin may have an impact on Japanese society. The impact they see is restricted to the individual life of the students. At the same time – after an overkill of critical voices from activists trying to save the leftovers (*ochikobore*), i.e. students suffering from bullying, school refusal and social emigration – the public discourse rediscovers the necessity of elite training after 50 years of standardized education (*ga'itsutekina kyōiku*) out of fear, or recognition, of an ability gap between Japan and other industrialized nations. Although international test results on student attainment contradict such a perception, Japan has to fight a brain drain of the intellectual elite to Western universities.

### Aishin's own problems

So far we have examined the progressive potential of Aishin to solve problems apparent in other public and private schools. But it would be naive to conclude that Aishin itself is free of troubles. Most of the school's problems arise immediately from its self-definition. They are the problems of any small community (*chiisana shakai*), which tries the balancing act of involving people from diverse backgrounds into an ideologically loaded project of a small interest group (*mokuteki dantai*) via channels – in this case education – which usually do not demand a particular ideological commitment.

First, there are the **tensions between believers of various denominations** inside the school. Since denominational affiliation differs according to age groups,<sup>44</sup> this problem is somewhat disguised as a generational conflict. Young teachers, who feel the need to support their spiritual life with worship and prayer in a holy space of the kind they knew before, are not satisfied with the mind-heavy style of Non-church Christianity. Some also raise objections to the content of service, especially against statements of religious tolerance that acknowledges other religions as equal ways to reach the truth. They wish to have a specially trained person – perhaps a chaplain – who would be less infected with the worldliness of the school's daily affairs and could therefore accomplish a spiritual tightening (*seishintekina hikishime*) of its community. The school's founder Takahashi Saburō and his closest associate Tada Masakazu whom students used to call “Tada-jiichan” (Grandpa Tada) once exerted such an influence, but Tada has died and Takahashi has not visited the school for 8 years due to physical instability after a car accident. Right now the school has no spiritual leader. Nor does it have a separated “holy” space to be used only for service and prayer. Service is conducted in a big multi-

---

44. See section on teachers' and students' background.

purpose hall. The young teachers that come from various churches also lament the lack of rituals (sacraments).

On the other hand, the older generation of teachers finds it hard to communicate the essence of the school's founding spirit to this younger generation. Young teachers often leave before they can even get a grasp of it. Needless to say, that the founding spirit is naturally less important for those who were not involved in the process of foundation. But its different priority leads to suspicion inside the teaching community. Though all share the same faith trustful relationships are seen as problematic due to differing opinions.<sup>45</sup> Tensions between Non-church and Church fractions are most apparent among teachers. But if we take into account the extremely tiny portion of students with a Non-church background it seems inevitable that tensions exist also between students and some teachers. Based on interviews with students it is difficult to say how central this problem is to them, but young teachers think that students struggle too much with spiritual issues, i.e. issues emerging from the incompatibility of spiritual traditions.

Second, **psychological stress** is extreme for all at Aishin. Student numbers<sup>46</sup> have been sinking over the last few years, so that the community living there does not exceed 100. But still it is difficult to be alone. All meals have to be taken together with the whole group and living in a single room is not permitted. Due to responsibility for many activities outside of class and 24 hours availability to students the physical as well as mental burden on teachers is especially heavy. Young teachers are given only a short period of vocational adjustment and are put in charge of a class already in their second year. On the other hand, they receive little support. Having no mentor and absolute freedom in class design they must struggle on their own in finding out how to improve teaching style and class content. Fear of exposure keeps them from asking colleagues for help.<sup>47</sup> Less successful teachers also have a difficult standing in communal life. Their double identity of being a Christian and a teacher seems to work in the way that their positive achievement on a personal and professional level is seen as an affirmation of their Christian faith, while insufficient professionalism cannot be compensated by deeper religiosity.

Explaining Aishin's positive potential for problem solution I have mentioned the high level of reflexivity in daily life. Such reflexivity certainly is essential for education stressing "the meaning of life." But it also cannot be denied that it exerts psychological pressure. Due to the school regulations students cannot express

---

45. Though distrust might exist on both sides, it was explicitly named only by a teacher of the older generation.

46. Various reasons are given for this decline e.g. sinking birth rates. One teacher even resumes that Aishin has lost its special task within the educational landscape since public schools have taken up many aspects of Aishin's reform agenda. On the other hand, Aishin could definitely recruit more students with more emphasis on PR and advertisement. So far the news of Aishin is spread predominantly by word of mouth.

47. There seems to be only one teacher who lets students evaluate classes; and monitoring of other teachers' classes is uncommon.

themselves by outer appearance. These regulations are not meant to oppress individual diversity but individuality in outer appearance is seen as superficial, while the word – the verbal expression of one’s opinion – is seen as the real mediator of inner individuality. Most parts of school life stress the importance of the word.<sup>48</sup> The pressure of being expected to express one’s self combined with the emphasis on verbal expression leads to an overly reflexive daily interaction. As one student complains, “people think too much about what others say, they cannot encounter each other without wondering what the other wanted to express with his/her words.”

Psychological stress also results from the expectation to comply with the school’s approach of self-restriction. There is no punishment system in case of resistance, but since nobody can even temporarily hide at Aishin, the constant pressure by warnings and discussions could be evaded only by inner emigration or by quitting school all together.

Another psychological problem arises from the claim to maintain a community without vertical (i.e. hierarchical) relations (*jōge kankei*)<sup>49</sup> that allows students “to create a base for healthy family life.” While the latter claim is originally directed at relations between the sexes it also expresses the school’s functioning as a second home for many students. Though students find a second home here, teachers rarely see themselves as substitute parents, not even as friends, but clearly as teachers in their relation to the students.

Japan has long been characterized as a vertical society (*tate shakai*) where relations between its members are defined in terms of vertical dependency and horizontal exclusion. Though Japanese society has changed enormously during the last decades, the “vertical society” is still a topos of the Japan discourse (*nihonjinron*).

While Aishin sets out to break with the vertical tradition it still retains the value of authority. It seeks to prevent hierarchical relations between students but teaching itself rests on an unquestioned hierarchical authority of the teacher. This already ambiguous approach is further complicated by the notion of “healthy family life.” In this way, students experience at Aishin relations<sup>50</sup> they will hardly be able to experience again in their future lives within the Japanese society. The high fluctuation rate of young teachers adds instability to the students’ attempt to build

---

48. Still one has to appreciate the existence of work for students. In contrast, students of ordinary schools are often completely freed from physical work at school and at home.

49. The school aims at “friendship cultivated through [communal] life in which sex and grade are unimportant.” This friendship is to “become a lifelong asset.” See the promotional pamphlet “Shinri wo motomete,” 3. The ideal of friendship instead of hierarchical relations can be traced back to Uchimura Kanzō. However, he too was unable to realize it. Instead he is thought of today as somebody who indigenized Christianity by giving it the traditional (confucianist) structure of a master-disciple-relationship. Uchimura’s dependence on friends and his ideal of friendship is one of the red lines that lead through John F. Howes’ yet unpublished opus, see Howes, John F. (Forthcoming).

50. Kanō calls them “diagonal relations” (*naname no kankei*). Problems arise when the age gap between both partners becomes too small. See Kanō Yoshimasa (2001: 15).

human relationships in their second home. This year the bewildering chaos of models for human relations resulted not only in the demand of students from the third grade to be addressed by juniors in “polite language” (*keigo*),<sup>51</sup> but also in the surprising decision to allow this claim.<sup>52</sup>

The third group of problems can be traced back to Aishin’s **seclusion from the outside world**. Seclusion is efficient with regard to secular media that are not allowed inside the school. But accepting students – especially non-Christian students – also means to let in secularized individuals. Parents bemoan teachers’ insufficient reaction to “kids that still breath the air of contemporary society.”<sup>53</sup> Especially older teachers who see the school compounds as a kind of refuge within enemy territory cannot cope with students inside who wear signs of the secular world (accessories etc.). Sincere (religious) motivation clashes with rebellious children and creates a gap between religious ideals and reality even inside the secluded commune. This gap is not necessarily only a gap between religiously highly motivated teachers and less religious students. There are also students who lament a lack of strictness to follow the school’s ideals. And those who seek the advice of the school’s counselor predominantly suffer from this gap.<sup>54</sup>

Another problem is given in the **extreme spectrum of learning ability and determination** of Aishin students. Aishin refuses both to be an “examination preparation school” (*jukenkō*) and/or a special school for “problem children.” Also learning ability is not seen as a value in itself. Therefore Aishin offers limited support for students who wish to take entrance examinations as well as for students who cannot easily adjust to the common classroom style of teaching. Though teachers definitely provide individual advice, some students still feel that they do not have enough classes, but rather too much freedom (*yutori*), which is why they cannot improve their learning ability.

In the case of Aishin the **financial burden** is not only heavy for parents, but also for the school. The school managed to raise foundation funds by collection campaigns in order to start a school with “zero loans.” But with sinking application

---

51. *Keigo* assign various linguistic levels to social rank.

52. The major reason for this decision on the teachers’ side was the wish to provide sufficient preparation for the student’s future social life. However, the use of socially structured language is not at all common in other high schools. And this alignment with secular values contradicts the school’s anti-mainstream self-assertion. Students told of their difficulty to deal with the language problem. Since they are not used to it, they feel now restricted in their interaction with seniors.

53. One parent formulated the problem in terms of a theological spirit vs. flesh argumentation: “There is a gap between mind and factual body. The body is the body of children before coming to Aishin. I think, it is possible to cultivate the mind temporarily inside of Aishin. But the body is built taking many years, and the body cultivated by the current social environment is not as solid as the body of previous Japanese generations. (It is impossible to create also the body within 3 years.)”

54. The counselor supposes that teachers might suffer similar problems due to varying degrees of religious commitment and motivation inside their community. But they do not ask for counseling.

numbers it is hard to provide for running costs. From the very beginning facilities were erected only after enough money was accumulated. While Aishin is actually better equipped than especially older public schools, students still think the school's facilities are insufficient.<sup>55</sup>

As stated above, this paper is concerned with the present situation of Christian education in Japan and therefore did not include details on Aishin's history. But since historical continuity is central for Aishin's identity and any deviation from the original course must be justified, I want to close this section with some remarks on problems that can be seen only in retrospect. Today there are only two teachers at the school who witnessed the school's history from its very beginnings. The **propagation of the school's founding spirit** has become one of their major tasks. Naturally they find it increasingly difficult to communicate this spirit. On the other hand, younger teachers assume that Aishin has fulfilled its original mission, since common schools today have already incorporated many of Aishin's special features. For them, to sustain Aishin as a progressive model within the Japanese educational landscape might necessitate a re-definition of its mission.

Another problem of the historical existence of any institution is that it becomes increasingly **rigid**. After the school's 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, officials repeatedly stated that the school's foundation/pioneering phase has come to an end. But this kind of statement already implies the assumption that the school's essential outline has been fixed. While the school's regulations concerning daily life were constantly developed during the foundation period, the very institution of their regular discussion to consider changes is now turning into an institution of collective acceptance of already given rules. As one teacher said: "More and more rules are simply checked, but not thought over." The possibility of change constitutes an enormous motivation to determine and express one's individual opinion. If things cannot be changed, why should one bother at all? Observing the trend towards rigidity at Aishin on one side, it is no wonder that the same teacher asserts a decrease in students' ability to express themselves on the other side.

### Is Aishin Christian enough to be called Christian Aishin High School?

This is a question I asked everybody at Aishin and which also relates to the fundamental task of my study, that is of finding out what the notion of "Christian high school education" in the current situation means and how it is practiced. Opinions vary based on different interpretations of this term. Some students regard a Christian school to be a school for Christians, and therefore disagree, but especially Christian students are happy about the opportunity to get in contact with non-Christian life styles and worldviews.

For most of the teachers the criteria are shared Christian belief among all

---

55. Perhaps, such critique is based on the assumption that Aishin as a "private school" must be better equipped.

teachers, the fact that everybody attends morning and Sunday services and that Bible classes are obligatory.

Parents predominantly see Aishin as a Christian school, but above all they associate holistic personality development and missionary purpose with it.

Seen from my perspective, the school is indeed Christian, but not for its employment of Christian teachers or for its obligatory Bible classes and services or for its educational ideal of holistic character development, but first of all because it authorizes the secular order of keeping promises in daily life with the rhetoric of the biblical covenant. In this way the school guarantees a distinctively Christian approach. The same can be said of the model for holistic character development, which is given in the personality of Christ.

### Aishin's critique of Christian schools in Japan

I introduced Aishin as a school founded to raise a "No" to the pitfalls of the Japanese educational system. But as a matter of fact Aishin's very existence also is a critique of other Christian schools in Japan. While the Christian personnel of other Christian schools is usually limited to the school's principal and those who teach classes on Christianity, all three high schools founded by the Non-church Movement manage to recruit their full faculty from among Christians. Also compulsory attendance of Sunday, morning and evening services are very uncommon among other Christian schools. These two aspects were frequently referred to in the interviews, though never as a critique of other Christian schools, but rather with an expression of modest pride.

Taking into account Yuki's evaluation of Christian schools today, it becomes clear, that Aishin differs also from another point of view: Under the application of "Christian-principle education" instead of "Christian education," he states, "Christianity is present among other things; it takes its place alongside other subjects; there are Christian activities and there are other activities. But these 'other things' have almost no connection with Christianity."<sup>56</sup> That is to say, that in most Christian schools Christianity is not only denied the function of a precondition to real education, but is, in fact, absolutely unrelated to most of the school's educational activities.

In contrast, at Aishin study is not only connected to everyday life, but everyday life itself is constantly interpreted in Christian terms. The key terms of Aishin's counter-measures against problems of other schools echo the Protestant tradition. Although students and teachers alike stated that they rarely talk about their Christian belief outside of Bible classes or services, both sides still experience their interaction – for better or worse – as a witness to the teacher's faith.

Yuki (1997: 168) also criticizes that most Christian schools have forgotten about the main task of private educational institutions, namely to raise

---

56. Yuki Hideo (1997: 168).

“independent-minded citizens who stand on their own feet.” Instead of taking a critical stance toward the “system whereby they are ‘allowed’ to operate by permission of the authorities; they tag along tamely with instructions from the city office; they actually think their school standard is improving if it comes to resemble a State school even a little.” In general, this critique does not apply to Aishin, but judging solely on the base of its curriculum and regular extra-curricular activities, it may seem that critical thinking is directed always at the “usual suspects” i.e. at the same problems (war-responsibility, peace constitution, ecology). Also the reason one teacher gave as an explanation for why it was impossible to make students think about “how they are going to live” to a satisfying degree reveals a sort of ready obedience to state directives: Supposedly, the Monbushō regulations for the curriculum are too demanding to allow for further extra-curricular activities.

The few critical voices among parents lament phenomena in other Christian schools which Aishin is able to evade: the loss of Christian ideals or principles, their bondage to social environment, insufficient Christian staff, tendency towards an overlarge school (*manmosu ka*), priority of money (commodification), and development into cram schools (*juken kō ka*) that foster the overestimation of student achievements (*gakugyō seiseki shugi*). The critical voices either explicitly hold up Aishin as an ideal or speak of complete resignation and find it doubtful if the Christian message leaves any traces at all within the educational system.

However, more responses show a positive evaluation of the contribution of Christian schools to the Japanese educational system. Christian schools are said to raise conscience for meaningful life, i.e. for a purpose of living (*nanraka no tame ni ikiru*) and to send many students into welfare work. One parent attested Christian schools to be a good anti-force to a rather rightist government putting more emphasis on internationalization than on (nationalistic) Japanization. They are supposed to be worth their high costs since they offer effective (*kōritsu no takai*) and strict (*kibishii*) education while at the same time “chaos rules under the name of ‘freedom’” in other schools. Somehow in contrast to this strictness, they are said to allow for free and individual (*kosei no aru*) development. Also Christian schools are seen as the place where many people touch the Bible for the first time and where children can adopt an altruistic spirit through holistic personality development. They provide a chance to become aware of human friendliness and warmth through contact with religion. For some parents Christian schools do not have any special features in comparison with public schools or they are just one out of many choices for higher education.

The prevalence of positive evaluations of the *current* role of Christian schools can be rounded out by opinions regarding their *desired* role in the Japanese educational system. Here the wish for teaching Christianity not only on a knowledge-level but above all as a “education of heart that can be experienced by practice” (*jikken de taiken suru kokoro no kyōiku*) is voiced. Christian schools are expected to focus on the individual and on close human relationships before thinking of world peace and internationalization. Also they should create an environment and curriculum within which everybody can accept the otherness of each other. Christian

education should be practiced as the living together (human co-existence) of children and adults with their respective life styles, in which teachers propose through their own experiences and lifestyle a meaning and a way of real life. These wishful expectations hint that Christian schools are plagued with similar problems as public schools. Only they are able to better hide them under attractive slogans.

Seen on the whole, Aishin's self-positioning in the educational landscape of Japan is rather ambiguous. The school clearly distances itself from public schools, but while it functions in many regards as a critical antipode to other Christian schools it is very cautious not to place itself outside the community<sup>57</sup> of Christian schools. This ambiguity is apparent in the school's publications where the connection of the school to the particular tradition of the Non-church Movement is revealed only to those knowing the names of Mukyōkai leaders. It seems that the inner appearance of Aishin, which is dominated by Mukyōkai reasoning, does not quite fit the outer self-presentation of the school as an *inter*-denominational institution. May be, this ambiguity is a result of Mukyōkai's struggle to define its own movement: Since they do not like to regard themselves as a denomination, they might have the illusion to have built a *non*-denominational school. However, within the school they *function* as a denomination, which controls the spiritual life of community members belonging to other denominations.<sup>58</sup> It appears to me, that a more conscious self-definition in either direction – either distinctly (and openly) Mukyōkai or consequently ecumenical – could help to prevent tensions currently existing in the school.

## Conclusions

In her comparison of Japanese and Australian education, Yoneyama concludes that “Japanese education represents an autocratic paradigm of education, while Australian education represents a combination of democratic and autocratic paradigms.”<sup>59</sup> She still asserts the existence of democratic approaches in Japan but providing democratic education means a “battle against the system.” Following her argumentation, democratic education is characterized by equal student-teacher relationships, which are based on mutual trust and respect. Discipline is reached by persuasion of and negotiation with students and not by corporal punishment. School rules are limited to a minimum of basic principles; also they are not imposed upon the students. Study is interactive and includes cooperative learning. Students are able to participate in decision-making. And with less hierarchical teacher-

---

57. Aishin is a member of the Education Association of Christian Schools in Japan (Kirisutokyō Gakkō Kyōiku Dōmei) and relies on this organization for recommendation of its students to universities.

58. Teachers from other denominations often suffer not being able to attend Sunday services (including sacraments) of the style they were used to due to their obligation to participate in the school's service.

59. Yoneyama Shoko (1999: 73).

teacher relationships there is more equality among them. Democratic education is said to promote individuality and the strength of each student. Its main orientation points toward diversity, and it tries to achieve de-alienation. As stated above, it is the full opposite of what ordinary Japanese schools represent today.

Checking the above given criteria for the case of Aishin it becomes obvious that the school actually represents an alternative approach in the educational landscape of Japan, first of all by working under the democratic paradigm instead of the autocratic one. It is for this reason that Aishin can bypass problems of ordinary schools. In how far other Christian schools also provide democratic education would have to be analysed in further studies. Nevertheless, Aishin's democracy is seriously threatened e.g. by the tolerance of forced entries, the tendency towards rigidity school regulations, and by solving problems of authorization with the imposition of stratified – and thereby stratifying – language.

Constituting such a contrast to ordinary schools, Aishin could be a place that helps “problem children” to recover from previous bad experiences and to find a new sense of subjectivity. But as a precondition it would have to openly acknowledge their students' problematic background and to support a constructive management of experiences like bullying or school refusal. Especially dangerous to the alternative standing of the school are hidden similarities with the established version of education: To keep silent about bullying means a similar threat like those mentioned above. Aishin remains not completely silent about such problems. In contrast to ordinary schools, which deal (if at all) with the topic of bullying only on the very abstract level of education about human rights, classes at Aishin discuss it within the (still broad) frame of social criticism. But this is not enough. Bullying must be approached on the level of personal responsibility as well. Everybody who keeps silent is responsible for maintaining the status quo: those who bully others, those who get bullied, and those who witness but do not interfere. Being a school where bullying does not exist, Aishin seems to provide the best chance for combining social critique with self critique in coming to terms with past experiences.

The acknowledgement of Aishin as a democratic school brings us back to the introductory chapters of this paper. In Yoneyama's opinion, the current problems of Japanese education are a result of the system's autocratic paradigm. The only time when the democratic paradigm of education ever reached predominance was in the immediate post-war years. During these years educators and education were filled with the spirit of the Fundamental Law on Education of 1947.

But how does Christian education relate to the spirit of the Fundamental Law? Generally speaking, this spirit is known to be democratic and liberal. But some people boldly suggest it is Christian: Inoue<sup>60</sup> states that Christianity and new religious movements “felt favored” by the law, and thereby explains the prevalence of Christian schools among private religious schools in Japan. But he links this privilege only to the freedom of religious education. Sekikawa<sup>61</sup> points to parallels

60. Inoue Nobutaka (1998: 222).

61. In an interview conducted August 20, 2004. He relates this fact to the (Catholic) Christian faith of Tanaka Kōtarō, a legal expert who was minister of education in post-

in the law and in educational policies of Christian schools to suggest that the Fundamental Law on Education might in fact be a Christian Law on Education. If we compare § 1 of the law<sup>62</sup> with the educational goals of Aishin we find similar phrases stressing notions of fulfillment of personality (*jinkaku no kansei*), truth (*shinri*), righteousness (*seigi*), responsibility (*sekinin*) and independent spirit (*jishūteki seishin*). Only the addition of the words “We practice holistic education based on the Bible in an environment of small student numbers and obligatory dorm life” exceeds the demands of the Fundamental Law on Education. The question is how to distinguish between democratic and Christian elements in the law. On a dogmatic level the distinction seems easy. On the level of common sense, it seems even easier, since democracy is usually perceived as an achievement of non-Christian civilization. But then again it is no secret that the Bible itself contains a considerable share of Hellenistic thought.

As a matter of fact, politically it is impossible to acknowledge the Fundamental Law on Education as a Christian law, unless with the intention to attack it and demand its reformulation. But for Christianity (and for Christian schools) in Japan the *historical* question of how much it contributed to the law’s content is secondary. More important is the question what it can *currently* contribute to its environment. Christian education, which stands for “internationalization,” hardly represents a distinct voice within an educational landscape where everybody and the government more than everybody else cries for internationalization. On the government’s political agenda, “internationalization” serves as a fashionable form of nationalism to ensure the Japaneseness of the Japanese.<sup>63</sup> But Christian schools which relocate the “outside world” with fancy, Western style campuses and foreign teaching staff into the “homeland” of Japanese build upon the same distinction between Japanese and non-Japanese. Admittedly, they provide a place for Japanese to escape requirements of Japaneseness. However, such escape is pricey and therefore hardly accessible for everyone. In contrast, a Christian school, which actualizes the democratic qualities of its Christianity throughout the whole pedagogical approach, becomes a force for social change rather than for preservation of the status quo.

Yoneyama finds hope for Japanese education in a movement of school deniers,

---

war Japan and who is responsible for the existence of a Fundamental Law on Education outside of the constitution. The term “fulfillment of personality” can be directly traced back to Tanaka, but also besides this he had strong influence on the content of the law. However, not all of his proposals were accepted – he wanted to allow religious education in public schools, which would exceed the limits of knowledge transfer into the direction of a “cultivation of religious sentiment” (*shūkyō teki jōsō no kan’yō*). For a partly discussion of this problem see Suzuki Minako (1991), 7–20 and the articles continuation in the next two volumes (vol. 27, 83–99 and vol. 28, 1–25). See also footnote 28.

62. “Education shall aim at the full development of personality, striving for the rearing of the people, sound in mind and body, who shall love truth and justice, esteem individual value, respect labor and have a deep sense of responsibility, and be imbued with the independent spirit, as builders of peaceful state and society.”

63. See chapter 7 “Self-Orientalism Through Occidentalism” in McVeigh, Brian J. (2002).

which – if it could grow – “will come to mark the beginning of a new ‘post-war’ period – marking the beginning of the end to the war within schools, the war against children.” Aishin is small, but it represents the same hope. Ironically, this hope has also been inscribed into legal documents for almost 60 years. Therefore the challenge – and here I share Yoneyama’s opinion – is not a reformulation of the Fundamental Law, but it “involves nothing less than reversal of the ‘reverse-course’ of the mid-1950s, the dismantling of the legislative constraints which repealed the spirit of the 1947 Fundamental Law on Education.”<sup>64</sup>

---

64. This and above quote from Yoneyama Shoko (1999: 249).

Table of perceived problems:

| Teachers criticize:<br>↓  | Students criticize:<br>↓   | Parents criticize:<br>↓   | Aishin's counter-measures:<br>↓           |
|---|--|---|---|
| <b>A: Freedom, power, and control in mass education</b>           |  |   |   |
| Bad manners   | Surveillance instead of protection                               | Inadequate reaction to problems                                   | Self-imposed restrictions and discussions |
| <b>B: Realization of value-system in education</b>                |  |   |   |
| Material orientation, loss of soul                                | Lack of orientation  | Lack of motivation  | Holistic personality development          |
| <b>C: Approaches to learning ability</b>                          |  |   |   |
| Too much stress on entrance exams, cram schools and rote learning | Fear of decreasing learning ability                              | Too much stress on entrance exams, cram schools and rote learning | Autonomy and life skills                  |
| <b>D: Existentiality of education</b>                             |  |   |   |
|   |  | Loss of feeling to be alive                                       | Living the now                            |
| <b>E: Quality of imparted knowledge</b>                           |  |   |   |
|   | Useless knowledge instead of important insights                  |   | Autonomy and life skills                  |
| <b>F: Class content</b>   |  |   |   |
| Lack of classes on politics, social problem, educational issues   |  |   | Truth and critical thinking               |
| <b>G: Organization of mass education</b>                          |  |   |   |
|   | Uniformity of Japanese schools                                   |   | Freedom and Aishin style                  |
| <b>H: Teacher-student-relationship</b>                            |  |   |   |
|   | Lack of personal contact and response to every single individual |   | Encounter                                 |
| <b>I: (Financial) responsibility</b>                              |  |   |   |
|   |  | Waste of time and money   | Responsibility                            |

## References

- Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung. 2002. *Grund- und Strukturdaten 2002*. Berlin: Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung.
- Howes, John F. (Forthcoming). *Uchimura Kanzō: Independence and Japanese Christianity*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Inoue Nobutaka 井上順孝. 1998. “Jōhō ka jidai ni okeru shūkyō kyōiku: Gendai nihon no jōkyō” 情報化時代における宗教教育 – 現代日本の状況 (Religious education in a computerized age – The situation in present Japan). In: Kokusai Shūkyō Kenkyūjo 国際宗教研究所編. *Kyōiku no naka no shūkyō* 教育の中の宗教 (Religion in Education). Tokyo: Shinshokan, pp. 214-231.
- Kano Yoshimasa 加野芳正. 2001. “Futōkō mondai no shakaigaku ni mukete” 不登校問題の社会学に向けて (Towards a sociology of the problem of school refusal). *Kyōikushakaigaku Kenkyū* 教育社会学研究 vol. 68: 5-23.
- Kirisutokyō Aishin Kōtō Gakkō キリスト教愛真高等学校. 2002. *Inori ni sasaerarete: Aishin jūnen no ayumi* 祈りに支えられて – 愛真十年の歩み (Supported by Prayer: Ten years of Aishin). Gōtsu: Kirisutokyō Aishin Kōtō Gakkō.
- Kirisutokyō Gakkō Kyōiku Dōmei キリスト教学校教育同盟, ed. 1977. *Nihon kirisutokyō kyōiku shi* (jinbutsu hen / shichōhen) 日本キリスト教教育史 (人物篇・思潮篇) (A History of Christian Education in Japan (Leading Figures / Central Ideas)). Tokyo: Sōbunsha.
- Li Yuk Heung. 1993. *Women's Education in Meiji Japan and the Development of Christian Girls' Schools*. Ph.D. thesis, University of Hong Kong.
- Machida Ken'ichi 町田健一. 2000. “Kirisutokyō gakkō kyōiku no arikata ni kansuru kenkyū: Rinen oyobi kyōshi kyōiku no saikō” キリスト教学校教育のあり方に関する研究 – 理念および教師教育の再考 (What the education of Christian schools should be—Towards better educational practices). *Kirisutokyō Kyōiku Ronshū* キリスト教教育論集, vol. 8: 87-102.
- McVeigh, Brian J. 2002. *Japanese Higher Education as Myth*. New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc.
- Roesgaard, Marie H. 1999. *Moving Mountains: Japanese Education Reform* (Acta Jutlandica 73:1, Humanities, No. 71). Aarhus University Press.
- Suzuki Minako 鈴木美南子. 1990-1993. “Sengo kaikaku ni okeru shūkyō kyōiku to shinkyō no jiyū (1-4)” 戦後改革における宗教教育と信仰の自由 (一～四) (Religious education and freedom of belief in post-war reformation (Part 1-4)). *Ferris Joshi Gakuin Daigaku Bungakubu Kiyō* フェリス女学院大学文学部紀要, vol. 25: 1-23; vol. 26: 1-22; vol. 27: 83-99; vol. 28: 1-25.
- Tonomura Tamihiko 外村民彦. 1994. *Minna de tsukutta chiisana gakkō: Aishin Kōkō monogatari* みんなでつくった小さな学校 – 愛真高校物語 (The Small School We Created Together – A Narrative of Aishin High School). Tokyo: Kyōbunkan.

Ushida Tadasu 牛田匡. 2002. “Nihon ni okeru shinkyōiku no keifu” 日本における新教育の系譜 (The genealogy of alternative education in Japan). *Kyōikugakka Kenkyū Nenpō* 教育学科研究年報, vol. 28: 57-66.

Yoneyama Shoko. 1999. *The Japanese High School – Silence and Resistance*. New York: Routledge.

Yuki Hideo. 1997. “The Future of the Christian School: Is Christianity a Marketable Commodity?” *Japan Missionary Journal* vol. 51, no. 3: 166-171.

[www.pisa.oecd.org](http://www.pisa.oecd.org)

[www.mext.go.jp/b\\_menu/kihon/index.htm](http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/kihon/index.htm)

