

### *Summary*

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

## **PERSONAL EXPERIENCES IN KYOTO AND JAPAN**

by Simon Paschen

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

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

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

possibilities for proving the skills of cross-cultural encounter were given. What could help to avoid communication problems? I think, better skills of the Japanese language would definitely would have helped. If I had stayed longer in Japan, I would have put stronger emphasis on learning Japanese. But right from the beginning it seemed to me as if it would not be possible to reach sufficient language skills. At least, after some time had passed, I was able to communicate with the help of some crucial phrases. Therefore, today I would like to say to all concerned: "Thank you very much!" for the countless efforts in helping me and us to build a bridge with Japan. We were helped by translations of the sermons in the church and the English lectures in class, but also in practical questions and needs. Thank you for all your patience and help!

Back to the program. Of course I can only present some of its aspects. Besides all the different and interesting lectures on Shinto, Buddhism, theology of religions, church history and Japanese theology, it was mainly the fieldtrips to several religious organizations which broadened my horizon. I remember the visit to Soka Gakkai in Osaka where we talked with some representatives. They introduced themselves and provided some information about their organization. For me this meeting was the first "official" interreligious meeting I ever attended. Formerly I mostly met people of other beliefs occasionally or without any real purpose. But this changed with the visit to Soka Gakkai. We also visited the Tenri-kyo headquarters in Tenri and stayed overnight. There we had discussions with students of the Tenri seminary. We also visited the beautiful city of Nara. Concerning other encounters, I often remember our trip to Arashiyama where we met Thomas Kirchner. His talk on Zen-Buddhism was very interesting because of his Western, American background and his long experience in Japan. Last, but not least, our trip to Kyushu together with Ichikawa Sadataka has to be mentioned. We visited Fukuoka, Nagasaki and the Catholic Center for Prayer and Interreligious Dialogue on Shinmei-zan. Here we encountered in a way the spiritual dimension of interreligious dialogue. Set in a very beautiful landscape we spent a nice time together with the fathers and sister, and we had also time to be silent. I could continue for quite a long time to report about other trips and meetings. It all had one thing in common: it offered a very realistic and human approach to other faiths. Definitely one could not learn this from book. I am grateful for all those opportunities.

After Christmas and New Year I went to Sado-Island. Here I visited Rev. Mimura Osamu and his wife Arai Mari who is an assistant pastor there. My first impressions when I arrived at the church here was: The area around is marked by a beautiful landscape. The pastor's house is located very close to the sea. Only a few kilometers away there are high mountain ranges on both sides of the island, which reach a height of 1000 meters and more. On the highest mountain is a base of the Japanese Self Defense Force. Nowadays, a number of people feel threatened by North Korean military forces, I was taught. The first week on the island was mainly filled with visiting different people. Between the encounters with members and visitors of the church we also had time to discuss different aspects of church-life as

well as of life on Sado-Island. Rev. Mimura introduced me to issues like “depression among the people on the island” or of widespread “living as singles.” One of our island trips lead us to Aikawa, a tomb of Christian martyrs, the houses of Korean forced workers. and the gold mine.

In the first week I also visited a junior-highschool where I held two lessons. The kids nearly ran into me and wanted to shake hands one after the other. No matter where I went, I felt warmly welcomed. After we had attended a meeting of people concerned with ecological problems, I travelled to Niigata on the main island in Japan. I stayed at the Sanjo-Church where I met Nishikawa Kosaku, a pastor of the same age like me. The next days we spent snow shoveling at different churches because the snow had already reached a hight of three to four meters. Therefore, the roofs of the churches had to be cleared from the heavy snow. After more than two weeks, I returned to Kyoto. In the beginning of February I flew back to Germany.

Before I came to Japan I had several questions, and after I had spent some time here I had even more questions. The discussions were often hard, sometimes I could not see a way to get closer to the opinion of others. But finally I also found personal answers to some of my questions. In the end, the time here was both challenging and enriching. I personally would put it like this: Studying in Japan means being personally enriched by being existentially challenged. All the reported events and encounters will belong to my very precious memories of the time in Japan. I want to thank thoss very much, who facilitated such a time with such experiences for me. Hopefully we will meet again some day.