23 Dismantling the East–West Dichotomy

But what happens with Religion?

Peter Ackermann

Shared experiences and lifestyles in the East and the West, on the one hand, and careful observation of the details of how people in both East and West cope with life, on the other, will certainly lead us to discover and even emphasize that East and West have much in common that has gone unrecorded for far too long. Here, however, I wish to focus on the question of differences, possibly raising doubts about whether I had altogether understood the title of this book.

My point is that the perspective with which we approach a culture largely decides whether we are going to create a dichotomy or not. I have chosen the topic of religion as one which (as I will discuss) both on the face-to-face level as well as in its historical dimension and the narratives this has brought forth cannot fail to generate baffling discoveries of difference. To dismantle the East–West dichotomy by assuming that these differences could be easily bridged would actually lead to its eventual reinforcement through stubborn ignorance and projections of 'we-are-all-good-friends' romanticism. However, if what we seek is not difference but the carefully traced evidence of how and why notions and values develop, and pursue our question within a framework of communicative competence and minimum power differential, then, I maintain, the abstract perspective of dichotomy between East and West is broken down into an understanding of life histories as shaped in a reciprocal way on the one hand by social and cultural values (with their respective contextual and cultural histories), and, on the other, by the struggle for individual stances.

Discovering narratives through encounter

We surely all have experienced closeness, held common interests, and shared views when interacting with persons socialised in Japan. At the same time we have certainly also discovered ourselves forming our thoughts in relation to a narrative about the organisation of material, social and spiritual life that appears to puzzle our partner, and we have probably noticed that on both sides we are drawing from a different 'reservoir' of explanations, justifications and legitimisations for our viewpoints.

Anyone sensitive to the fact that 'culture' contains elements that can, but others that must not and/or cannot easily be negotiated, will not expect concrete interaction to dissolve differences. If kept up, however, interaction will as a rule also not cement or even establish dichotomies. Rather, interaction will provide the frame for seeking and discovering a shared awareness of differences.

With the aim in mind of creating just such a frame I have been involved with bringing together persons from Japan and Germany in a subsection of a Swiss research project, 'Rituals and ritualisation in families. Religious dimensions and intergenerational references', organised by the Department of Theology at the University of Berne.[1]

For the Swiss side, the concept 'religious dimensions' required clarification, but as I will show, this step was not nearly as complicated as trying to get the group of Japanese (aged 20–45) to participate in the project. The literal translation into Japanese of 'religious dimensions' was not difficult, but it was another matter getting across what we were altogether interested in, and why we thought the question worthwhile.

The interest of the Swiss side in 'religious dimensions' proved to be inseparable from their interest in the change – or loss – of the role of the institution 'church', and in learning more about the ongoing processes in which the younger generation demands autonomy to structure, interpret, reinterpret and also reject overt 'religious dimensions', especially once a couple has to decide on how to raise and educate their children. What, however, were 'institutional' or 'private' religious dimensions for the Japanese participants, and what did they associate with the very idea of religion?

For the Japanese participants, the narrative about autonomy from an institution called 'church' was impossible to understand. This was even true for the one Christian member of the group. Therefore, so as not to get the discussion locked in the explanation of institutions whose function and authority could not be compared at this point, we avoided mention of 'Christianity', 'Buddhism' or 'Shinto'. Instead, we looked for reactions to the question: 'Where and when do you recall having sought, or having been taught to seek, some kind of communication with an invisible being, power or force?'

The fastest and most distinct reactions came from those who reckoned the relationship with the ancestors (*go-senzo-sama*) to be important to them, or at least, as they had observed, to their parents, grandparents, or members of (generally rural) communities.

The type and time of 'communication' with the ancestors varied somewhat in form from answer to answer. Frequently, reference was made to visits to the family grave, particularly at *o-bon* (the summer Buddhist festival of the dead) or *o-higan* (the equinoctial week in spring and autumn). Other answers revolved around the concept of *o-sonae* or *sonaemono* (offerings at the home altar, *butsudan*). The home altar was strongly associated with the offering of water, rice or other objects (mainly food), as well

as with the kindling of incense and lighting of candles. Mostly, no deeper thoughts were given as to what these activities were for and how they might affect personal well-being, but the recollections were intense enough to enable precise description. Two persons, however, answered gravely: 'Food is offered because the ancestors are hungry.'

The home altar, at which photographs of the ancestors were recalled, could be a place to turn to in times of distress. Here, in particular, you could inform (*hōkoku*) the ancestors about your daily life, and could turn to them to expose your feelings and utter wishes.

Some persons also made reference to little shrines (*kamidana*) for deities at one or several places in the house, and the need to keep these tidy. However, although the deities could be revered by joining one's hands before the *kamidana*, they evidently did not require the same degree of attention and 'communication' as the house altar.

If the ancestors played such a central role as transcendent 'communication partners', then how did the Japanese understand the deities, Buddhas or Bodhisattvas, which were revered in temples and shrines and served by special 'priests', and which the Swiss/German participants perceived to be the true Japanese representations of religion?

The answers suggested that these 'religious' institutions were understood to provide services and favours in exchange for a 'prayer' (intensively wishing something) or maybe a sum of money. However, they were described as places one went to 'quite privately' for 'personal problems', and they did not appear to have the integrative force that developed when people gathered before a family altar, where a sense of commitment arose to adhere to principles and obey rules.

So far I have touched upon the most clear-cut positions put forward. To the Swiss/German participants the Japanese stances were unexpected and brought out dimensions of 'religion' that had been largely outside all expectations. However, if we now take the idea of dismantling simple East–West dichotomies seriously, it is essential to pay closer attention to the concrete individuals involved in the exchange of information.

Observing the helpless looks on both sides it had become clear how limited the arsenal of conceptual cornerstones was for persons in one specific geographical, historical and cultural context to construct their narrative about the means and possibilities for coping with life.

On the other hand, it was also becoming clear that no individual could be fully equated with his or her cultural context, but merely that he or she was relating to, and in a sense also struggling with, a cultural frame. On the Japanese side, most had some knowledge about the house altar and 'communication' with the ancestors, but no two persons followed the same pattern of presenting this knowledge. Some could not even picture the idea of having an altar for the ancestors in their home. Unexpectedly for the Swiss/German side, however, this stance appeared far removed from dogmatic deliberations, and after some thinking two participants saw nothing unusual

about perhaps setting one up later in life. 'Where was consistency with belief and conviction?', the Swiss/German side asked.

One member of the Japanese group argued that as she followed the teachings of Nichiren (1222–82),[2] it was not easy for her to understand the symbols and perform the rituals expected of members of other schools of Buddhism, with which she was not acquainted. She therefore felt stronger social and emotional ties with the people of her own 'community'.

In direct personal encounters persons who clearly do not fit a 'pattern' in a cultural context must never just be classed as 'less important'. Therefore, instead of using fictitious 'mainstream' representatives to create dichotomies it is certainly more fruitful to take a particularly close look at each individual's 'small' narrative – especially when it seems to contradict any 'pattern' – and become aware of the mechanisms by which these relate to the 'larger' or 'relatively more mainstream' narratives around them.

Returning to the discussion of what the Japanese side recalled as 'communication' with the invisible, the second most important key word after 'ancestors' was 'showing gratitude'. Possibly, the strong link between 'religion' and 'gratitude' can be explained by the fact that *dōtoku* (morals, stressing as they do the importance of being grateful) is a school subject and as such a kind of equivalent to 'religion'.[3] 'Gratitude' was described not only as a required basic attitude in everyday life, but was also considered a key term for structuring a person's relationship with the transcendental sphere. This, however, was explicitly declared not to be the realm of a creator-god, but of many known and unknown contemporary and historical others, whose efforts are the source of our life.

Gratitude could be shown to a deity that had responded to a request, but, basically, the feeling of gratitude was addressed to parents, ancestors, and one's own or one's ancestors' social networks, mostly regional or national in character. As one Japanese participant exclaimed emotionally in discussion with the Swiss/German group, 'The idea of feeling gratitude towards a God never crossed my mind; "Creation" is a question of sex, and enjoying life is always thanks to one's parents and those who work for us.'

When, in the course of the seminar, the Japanese participants visited Swiss regional churches and met with the local clergymen they were surprised by the presence and the authority of the church both as edifice and as institution. At the same time, they were quick to note that in spite of a mostly critical, even hostile, stance taken against 'religion' the village clergyman was respected as a kind of social welfare worker, visiting the old and the sick, discussing questions of marriage with the young, or encouraging parents who had problems with their children. As one Japanese participant exclaimed, 'I thought a clergyman just recited complicated texts from the Bible', possibly reflecting his image of a Buddhist priest.

Difficult to understand for the Japanese participants was the emphasis on belief, even though the term (*shinkō*) is common in Japanese. What, for instance, was the city clergyman trying to tell us when he spoke of how God

revealed himself to the Israelites because they believed, but did not do so to the Babylonians, who did not believe? It was understood that to believe brought peace of mind, but belief in whom or what? After some time of thinking, the question was inevitable: 'Why believe in fairy tales?' Although Japan is full of stories about miracles,[4] somehow the idea of believing did not fit the Japanese image of the 'West'. Their dichotomy was beginning to break down.

Why believe? We had reached the theodicy problem: Why, if God has created us and loves us, is the world full of misery? Yet at this point even our East German participants, brought up in a strictly atheist context, recalled that belief in a godly plan was somehow a traditional element of the 'West' to give people hope and hold.

Turning to Japanese materials that dealt with 'religion',[5] they were not structured around the concept of 'belief'. Rather, they gave advice for situations like marriage or funerals, or discussed the education of children, referring to 'religions' as frames containing differing options of how to act 'properly'. By contrast, and to the Japanese participants' astonishment, Knaur's *Family Encyclopedia* – strictly secular in nature – contains a distinct chapter on 'religion', giving no instructions, however, for doing anything 'properly'. Instead, it speaks of the option of introducing 'religion' to one's children to give them 'more to life', i.e. something that 'cannot be discussed in the context of technical rules and instructions.' This 'more to life' is described as the awareness that 'God loves us, and therefore has sent us his son Jesus to suffer with us and give us hope.'

Judging by the somewhat bewildered Japanese reactions, there is as much a narrative behind the idea of 'religion' found in Knaur's *Family Encyclopedia* as there probably is behind the structure of body-language we were shown on videos of parents interacting with their children before putting them to sleep. We could see intensive face-to-face, eye-to-eye and touching interaction, almost as if – as one Swiss member put it – the parents were acting in place of, or imitating the role of, the personified God. This prompted the Japanese to remark: 'I have never seen such interaction. I can only think of a mother reading a book or singing a song until the child falls asleep.'

How far is religion 'tradition', and how far is it a dimension drawing on traditional concepts but subjective in nature in the sense that it needs to be 'activated' within each individual through personal faith? This question lay at the root of the narrative of the Swiss research group that obviously wanted to find out whether and in what form religion was still 'alive'. It was clear that 'alive' here meant the opposite of 'tradition', that is, something existing only because the individual subject has developed a conscious, individually shaped relationship to it.

In the course of our seminar, the Japanese participants had been exposed to numerous scenes and objects that related directly or indirectly to the teaching of the Christian church. In a detailed report one participant

interpreted this teaching as 'tradition', and therefore assumed that the reason these scenes took place, and the objects existed, was that they were naturally being passed on for the sole reason that they belonged to tradition. Accordingly, no 'problem' was expected to underlie religion, as no conscious, individually shaped relationship to it was expected. The Japanese stance was perhaps epitomised in the answer given to our final question posed at the end of the seminar, 'When once *you* have children, is there anything spiritual you would tell or teach them differently from the way your parents did?' The reaction was a somewhat puzzled, unanimous 'No!'. The Swiss/German participants of the research project 'Rituals and ritualisation in families. Religious dimensions and intergenerational references', trying to understand the dynamics of Japan's young generation's interpretation of 'religion', were left with the uncomfortable feeling that they had not got anything of the urgency of their interests across to the Japanese.

Discovering narratives through history

Investing in time, money, organisation and language competence to enable the encounter of two cultural 'worlds' and set in motion the unstoppable process of reciprocal learning is, I maintain, more rewarding than the fixing of dichotomies. At the same time, we should always note that behind what we see and hear in an encounter there is always a hidden narrative, a historical dimension: a personal history, a contextual history (the history of the context in which an individual has been socialised), and – on regional, national, language, confessional, etc. levels – a cultural history, through which these socialisation processes have been funnelled.

We are calling for a deeper understanding of both the Christian and the Japanese world's narratives, and not creating a dichotomy, if we state that Japan's cultural fabric has not grown out of the problems and questions struggled over in the Christian world, even though it has been decisively formed by the integration of certain end-products of these struggles as they stood at the end of the nineteenth century.

It is essential to understand the process we call 'modernisation' as one that did not take place in Japan, because Japan's intellectual struggles occurred outside the framework of a society struggling, among other things, with the tension between God-centred versus man-centred organisation of life.[6] Therefore, Japan's struggles also occurred outside the tensions and dynamics of 'secular' versus 'sacred', or of the search for the role and responsibility of the individual specifically as the creation of a creator-God. Individuality in its Christian world context developed not as the notion of an individual path to salvation and integration, but was shaped to an important degree by ideas about a last judgement or a godly plan.[7] Following from this, the concept of the right, and even the duty, to make use of an individual stance or will, be it in the search for new and intellectually devised forms of overcoming extreme 'individuality', or in notions of love as

the emotional attachment of two individuals 'made for each other', could not develop out of the Japanese narratives about life.

When will we at last understand that this is not a list of Japanese defects, but a call for those involved in intercultural communication to become aware of the impact of, and establish a stimulating exchange between, two different narratives meeting?

When Japan began to understand itself as a 'nation' that needed 'national' institutions, it adopted cornerstones of the frameworks for these as it found them in the Christian world. Thus it began its own struggle for interpretation of the Christian world's central concepts like 'religion'. The official stance, however, taken in 1872, did not follow from a narrative dealing with tensions between the idea of a secular society on one hand, and the will to maintain a Christian view of man on the other. Rather, it proclaimed that 'teachings', whatever they may be, should not disrupt the social order. This concept was soon to manifest itself in terms like *seikyō* (the teachings of the correct order of the world), standing hierarchically above 'religion'.

'Religion' (*shūkyō*), as seen by its supporters, was a term claimed by Buddhists and (Japanese) Christians alike. The latter frequently associated it with a person's 'inner principle', thus sparking ideas about 'inner freedom' as a precondition for *bunmei* ('enlightened civilisation'). This line of thinking could not have arisen in the same way in the Christian world, where Christianity was not being 'introduced', and 'great deeds of great men' would not have been perceived to follow from an adoption of Christianity as provider of inner freedom.

What separates the 'West' from 'Japan'[8] is rooted in a different reference system for the struggles of ideas, and consequently a different narrative that marks an individual's life strategies. In addition to taking seriously the narratives of individuals as they unfold in situations of encounter I therefore think it essential that we also place these narratives into the historical perspective of their personal, contextual and cultural frameworks. Japan on the one hand, and the Christian world on the other, are certainly two distinct frames of reference in which ideas have developed in distinct ways. However, rather than dwell on East–West dichotomies we had better invest our time, money, organisation and language competence to understand how these frames have shaped the individuals and societies they have included, and to structure new fields of interaction in which shared knowledge of differences can form the starting point for the development of future interlocking life histories.

Notes

1 The involvement with the research project encompassed mainly preparatory discussions with mixed Japanese-German student groups April-June 2004, a joint 4-day seminar in Switzerland in June 2004, as well as numerous follow-up discussions with the participants and with other mostly younger persons in Germany and Japan. The minutes of the meetings, reference materials produced by the Swiss organizers and individual summaries by the participants have been consulted for this paper.

2 'Nichiren' may or may not stand for congregations with distinct 'in-group' ties, but I will not go into speculations because the person concerned preferred to stay vague.

3 Except in Christian schools, where 'religion' itself is part of the curriculum.

4 *Engi* stories, recounting the history of a temple and the reasons why a visit to it is worthwhile.

5 Mainly *Kankonsōsai* books, freely translatable as 'Instructions for formal occasions'.

6 If we pick up the idea of struggles on the Japanese side we could point to the Edo period schism between a more dynamic narrative about values focusing on local, indigenous deities (key word: National learning/Kokugaku), and a more static narrative focusing on the maintenance of the principle of social order as a reflection of the order of the universe (key word: Neo-Confucianism/Shushigaku).

7 Having said this, we should nevertheless be very careful not to overlook differences in teachings and emphasis between Christian churches and confessions.

8 To what extent Japan is in line with broader East Asian narratives cannot be discussed here. Edo period popular instruction books leave no doubt that conceptually Japan saw itself as rooted in the East Asian *sankyō* (Three Teachings), Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism (or, in place of the latter, the Way of the local deities).

First published 2006
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

Typeset in Times New Roman by
Talylor & Francis Books
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Antony Rowe Ltd, Chippenham, Wiltshire

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN10: 0-415–39738–3 ISBN13: 978-0-415–39738–4 (hbk)
ISBN10: 0-203–96869–7 ISBN13: 978-0-203–96869–7 (ebk)

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Essays in honour of Jan van Bremen

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