

THE POSSIBILITY OF EDUCATION ABOUT RELIGIOUS CULTURE IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

I *Recent Argument on Religious Education in Japan*

Arguments on religious education suddenly became quite active in Japan in the latter half of the 1990s. It is apparently the influence of the Sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway by core members of Aum Shinrikyo (presently Aleph) in March of 1995². Not a small number of people were shocked as many young students (including those who had studied natural sciences in graduate programs) joined the group; some of these students also participated in the attack. Therefore, some intellectuals claimed that the incident was probably a result of the present inadequate education on religious matters at schools.

Though there is no positive proof regarding this claim, the topic of religious education came to be discussed often and some asserted the necessity of an even more intensive introduction of religious education into public schools. Until that time, arguments regarding religious education in public schools were a kind of taboo. The chief proponents of the introduction of religious education in public schools were some politicians of the Liberal Democratic Party, along with Shinto and Buddhist priests.

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² Aum Shinrikyo was a Japanese new religion established by Shoko Asahara (real name Chizuo Matsumoto) in 1986. The group changed its name to Aleph in 2000. Some followers have remained as members even after disclosure of the group's criminal activities.

In this case, religious education primarily means the inculcation of religious sentiment³. Here I should explain that the following three categories are usually used in discussion of religious education in Japan. The first is education concerning knowledge about religions or religious knowledge, the second is the inculcation of religious sentiment, and the third is sectarian education.

In spite of their continual calls for the introduction of the inculcation of religious sentiment, it is clear that proponents have not been able to present effective pedagogical methods.

As a matter of fact, the introduction of inculcation of religious sentiment into public schools is quite unrealistic for the following reasons.

1. Because discussion on the inculcation of religious sentiment has not been made in public schools in postwar Japan, teachers are not at all trained for this matter.
2. Although there are some materials for teaching religious sentiment used by religious schools, there are few such materials for public schools.
3. There are almost no attempts to reasonably explain the necessity of this education to society, in spite of the existence of a strong social anxiety or even resistance to it⁴.

While a full realization of the inculcation of religious sentiment in public schools seems to be unrealistic, some attempt should be made when considering the present social conditions concerning religion. Therefore, I have proposed the introduction of education about religious culture in public schools. Here I first show why I have thought of this idea. Then I refer to the relationship between education about religious culture in Japan and similar pursuits in other countries including the study of religion in the US, the UK and other countries.

The following discussion is mostly based on the results of our research surveys since 1990. In 1990, I established the project at the Institute for Japanese Culture and Classics (IJCC), for the purpose of researching religious education in Japan. About ten members researched forty religious schools, mostly junior and senior high schools. It became apparent that about two thirds of religious schools are Christian⁵, about one fourth are Buddhist, and 4 or 5% are new religions. Shinto schools are quite rare.

³ In the discussion of religious education in Japan, inculcation of religious sentiment is generally understood as education that cultivates a mind of respect for life, or fostering a feeling of awe toward nature and gratitude toward ancestors.

⁴ In recent Japan, the term *shūkyō* ("religion") tends to be associated with rather negative images mostly due to scandals and financial problems that have unfolded within a significant number of religious groups.

⁵ It might be thought an interesting fact that about two-thirds of all Japanese religious schools are Christian in orientation, given that only one percent of the Japanese population is Christian. It must be remembered, however, that most students entering Christian schools do not express much interest in the religious background of the schools.

On the other hand, a questionnaire survey for college students was carried out by the IJCC project in 1992. We were able to get about four thousand respondents from thirty-two colleges and universities. Then, we carried out nine questionnaire surveys from 1995 to 2007 through the collaboration of the IJCC project and the JASRS project. In these questionnaires, some entries were included asking students' opinions on the introduction of religious education. As it is quite difficult to conduct research at public schools, the results of the questionnaires are helpful for getting information from those who graduated from public schools.

In the middle of the 1990s, just before the Aum incidents, the IJCC project started research surveys in Korea with the assistance of Korean scholars. We exchanged views with each other by holding several meetings and symposia in Korea and Japan. It gradually became apparent that Japan and Korea share communal problems concerning religious education in public schools, although there are differences in the countries' legal systems and other conditions. I got the idea of "religious culture education" during this collaborative research with Korean members.

The IJCC project also invited those who had studied religious education from the viewpoint of pedagogy. As a result, the project realized collaboration on this topic between religious studies and pedagogy⁶. This was quite helpful in the comparison of the Japanese situation with those of other countries.

II On former discussions on religious education in postwar Japan

Before introducing the discussion on religious culture education, I will briefly sum up the points of arguments on religious education until now. Discussions on religious education in Japan have a specific aspect in that they have always been connected with evaluations of the state Shinto system in prewar Japan. Shrine Shinto functioned as a kind of national religion in those days. Especially from the 1930s to 1945, when Japan was in war circumstances, veneration at Shinto shrines was used for the purpose of full-scale national unity. The Grand Shrine of Ise was the chief object of veneration because ancestral spirits of the Emperor family were enshrined there. Similarly, the function of Yasukuni shrine as the place where deceased soldiers' souls were enshrined was emphasized. This situation covered all classrooms, from elementary schools to universities.

The situation changed drastically due to the Japanese defeat in the Second World War. The religious education in the post-war period has been based on two basic principles: the separation of Church and State and religious freedom; both of them are

⁶ Research by Takekazu Ehara and other members were particularly helpful to our project. Ehara published *Public Education in the World and Religion* in 2003.

clearly indicated in the Constitution. While religious education at religious schools was approved full-scale, religious education in public schools was strictly limited. The legal principles and educational administration were arranged in the following process.

In October of 1945, just after the defeat in the war, the Ministry of Education issued the directives that sectarian education and religious rituals could be carried out if not during normal school hours at schools established by a religious group. However, they were permitted under the following conditions.

1. Not to prevent the religious freedom of students.
2. To announce clearly that they carry out sectarian education and specific religious rituals.
3. To take care to not impose a heavy burden on students in cases of religious practices.

Then, the Basic Law on Education was enacted in 1947 and Article 9 of the law referred to religious education. The attitude of religious tolerance and the position of religion in the social life shall be valued in education. The schools established by the state and local public bodies shall refrain from religious education or the activities for specified religion. Moreover, the Notification of the Vice-Minister of Education was issued in 1949 concerning treatment of religion at primary and secondary education. The points are the followings.

1. Not to organize visits to religious facilities for the purpose of attending prayers, religious rituals or festivals, in cases of national and local national schools.
2. Although it is admitted to use religious materials for the necessity of study and education, it should be observed that a specific religion might not be evaluated nor denied.

However, people are free to organize religious groups outside of school hours. These principles were not applied to private schools.

These basic policies on religious education, which were decided during the several years after the end of the war, have been maintained until now. Therefore, people are quite free to carry out sectarian education in religious schools, while such topics as those relating to religious problems are avoided in public schools. Only education regarding religious knowledge has been taught at public schools. Education regarding religious knowledge means teaching about the historical development of major religions, the ideas of their founders, and the characteristics of their thought.

Under this situation, arguments concerning religious education in public schools have been concentrated on the inculcation of religious sentiment. As to this type of education, the point of the debates is whether or not it is possible to suppose such

religious sentiment does not necessarily depend on a specific religion. No solution has been found as to this matter.

III Arguments since the 1990s

Apart from these discussions, boundaries between knowledge education, inculcation of sentiment and sectarian education are ambiguous at the level of actual school classes. Even in cases of knowledge education, teachers could not ignore emotional aspects or sectarian explanations of a religion at all if they try to explain the ideas of its founder in terms of modern society. So the distinction between knowledge education and sectarian education, for example, depends on whether teachers and students are concerned with them mostly in order to obtain knowledge for examination, or in order to learn basic matters for their future spiritual life. Accordingly, substantial knowledge education in a public school might be more effective for deepening insight into religious matters than superficial sectarian education in a religious school.

Most arguments on religious education after the Aum incident don't seem to take the actual situation in schools into consideration. Those who intend the introduction of the inculcation of religious sentiment usually put stress on the weakening of morality and ethics among younger generations. On the other hand, those who express caution against this education, are often fearful of returning to the circumstances of the pre-war period. As to this, opinions among religious organizations seem to be divided. Shinto priests and some Buddhist priests support the introduction of this education. Yet some Buddhist priests and most Christians have a rather negative attitude.

Adding to the introduction of the inculcation of religious sentiment, a few journalists and scholars claim even the necessity of the introduction of anti-cult education.

While disputes on religious education are prevailing, the revision of the Basic Law on Education proceeded rapidly by the inauguration of Abe cabinet in 2006⁷. It was revised as early as December of 2006. The article concerning religious education was transferred to the fifteenth, with a small moderation in the first sentence as follows.

The attitude of religious tolerance, a general learning regarding religion and the position of religion in the social life, shall be valued in education.

The words "a general learning regarding religion" are added. It means the revision does not intend the introduction of the inculcation of religious sentiment into public schools but the introduction of education similar to religious culture education.

⁷ Shinzo Abe, a strongly conservative politician, was long eager to change the Japanese educational system, and initiated the Education Rebuilding Council just after he became Prime Minister.

IV The possibility of religious culture education

As mentioned above, the introduction of the inculcation of religious sentiment is quite problematic on many points. Even parents who hope to send their child to a religious school do not do so for religious reasons in most cases. They usually choose it for other reasons, such as the percentage of students who advance to higher education, or the policy of educating well-mannered students. It is certain that the introduction of the inculcation of religious sentiment itself will bring about strong feelings of caution among teachers and parents in public schools.

Therefore, it is more realistic to consider a new way of being released from the deadlocked situation. From this perspective, the introduction of religious culture education into public schools has been presented. Then, what is the content of this religious culture education? It is roughly defined as education that basically puts stress on the study of religion, considering the present religious situation in society, and adding some factors of religious sentiment if necessary. More concretely, it seeks to deepen comprehension of religious culture in other countries as well as that of students' own religious culture.

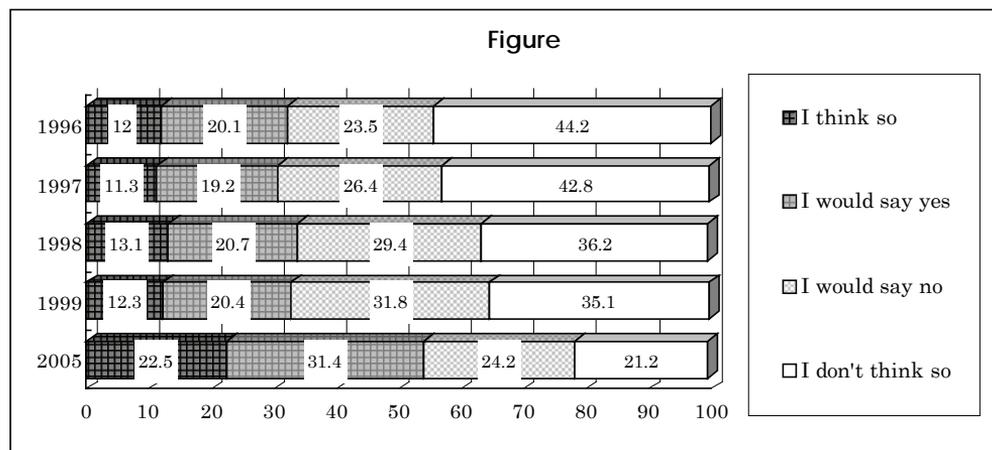
Religious culture education satisfies the following three points, which would be taken into consideration when discussing the possibility of teaching religious matters in public schools.

1. It should remain within the limit of constitutional and legal permission.
2. It should be supported by the majority of the population.
3. It should be possible to realize from the viewpoint of the infrastructure of the present school education in Japan.

As to the first point, religious culture education accords with the ideal of the Basic Law on Education. Considering the point of the revision in 2006, it might be even be recommended to implement. It also produces no problem when judged by Constitutional principle.

Relating to the second point, I will show some helpful data. The joint questionnaire surveys of the IJCC project and the JASRS project set the entry "Do you think that more basic knowledge about religion should be taught by senior high school?" The same question was set continuously four times from 1996 to 1999. The results show that between 11% and 13% of the respondents answered: "I think so," and about 20% answered "If you had to say which one, I would say yes," so that about one third of the respondents were positive to this question. However, when we changed the question to "Do you think that more basic knowledge about religions in the world should be taught by senior high school?" then 22.5% of the respondents answered

“I think so” and 31.4% answered “I would say yes”. That is to say, more than the half of the respondents answered positively.



Moreover, we changed the question again in 2007 to “Do you think that it would be better to learn basic knowledge about world religious cultures, including Japanese ones, by senior high school?” An interim result of the survey shows that about eighty respondents answered positively to this question.

I will show another collection of data. An Internet site named “e-woman”⁸ where online votes on six themes are carried every week, exists. I was sometimes asked to be a survey caster. Last year I proposed to make a survey on the necessity of religious culture education inclusive of public schools. The result showed that 79% of the total 988 respondents replied “yes.”

I feel that the majority of Japanese might think proper religious culture education is necessary in the contemporary world. At the same time, I am convinced that the term “religious culture education” is much acceptable than “religious education,” when one intends to promote the study of religion in public schools, at least in Japan.

As to the third point, the infrastructure of education system, it would be most useful to form new networks for this purpose among religious schools, scholars related to this field, and others. For the purpose of publishing useful teaching materials, including textbooks, scholars in such fields as comparative religion, sociology of religion, cultural anthropology or folklore, can collaborate.

⁸ <http://www.ewoman.co.jp>

V Religious culture education in Japan and the study of religion in several countries

Finally, I refer to how our discussion on religious culture education is connected with endeavors regarding the study of religion carried out in the U.S., the U.K., Australia, and other countries. I especially put focus on the same social background among them. In spite of large cultural differences between Japan and Western countries, many common elements exist. They also apply to many other countries. They are summed up as follows.

- (1) The influence of globalization.
- (2) The influence of information age, especially that of the Internet.
- (3) The “cults” problem.

(1) In the process of globalization, religious cultures and organizations of various origins are co-existing within a society to a much greater extent than in the past. As Japan has maintained relatively high cultural integration, most Buddhist rituals and Shinto rituals have been usually understood as a kind of social custom rather than as religious practices. However, international marriages increased since the 1980s, and foreign laborers increased since the 1990s.

Presently foreigners who live in Japan amount to about 2 million people, including seven or eight hundreds of thousands of laborers. While the ratio of foreign laborers is presently only one percent, a relatively small number compared with Germany, France or England, it will surely increase in the future. Though the increase of the number of the Japanese who live overseas is gradual, it is over one million in 2005.

As for international marriages, the ratio of international marriage to the whole number of marriages in Japan was above 1 % in 1982. Thereafter, it was over 2 % in 1987, over 3 % in 1989 and over 5% in 2004.

In 1986, then Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone described Japan as a racially homogenous nation and faced strong criticism, mainly from Ainu indigenous people. Looking back this incident from now, his announcement was released just when Japan was confronting the rapid process of globalization.

As a result of this progressive globalization, the cultural diversity of Japan is deepening. This demands religious culture education at schools. It is thought that as the globalization process produces a situation of religious diversity, religious culture education or its equivalent would be required in many countries. One of the main aims of religious cultural education is to reduce cultural conflicts in this age of globalization.

(2) The information age was realized by a broad utilization of the Internet system. In Japan, the rate of the Internet utilization went over 10% in 1998, over 20% in 1999

and over 50% in 2002, amounting two thirds of the population in 2005, especially near 90% in the ages of twenties. The Internet has become the most important tool for obtaining information among the young generations.

There exists a huge amount of religious information on the Internet. The results of the joint research of IJCC project and the JASRS project show that interest of students in religious sites is quite low. However, they seem to show stronger interest in such sites that are concerned with divination, occult information or spiritual matters. Moreover, there are innumerable sites that are difficult to judge as religious or non-religious. The proper information literacy education of religious matters is required much more than before in this situation. This also is a global issue⁹.

(3) The final point is the so-called "cults problem." This is closely connected with diversification of religious activities and tendency of statelessness in some religious movements. In Japan, many new religions occurred in the process of modernization since the middle of the 19th century. Most of them are based on traditional religions of Shinto, Buddhism and Shugendo in terms of teachings and rituals. On the other side, since around the 1970s, movements began to appear that had little connection with these traditional religions. I call this type of new religions "hyper religions"¹⁰. Aum Shinrikyo can be regarded as one of this type. Some of the so-called "cult" groups belong to "hyper religion." It is extremely difficult for teachers of junior and senior high schools to explain properly these new types of religious groups in a classroom.

Therefore, we should conclude that effective realization of religious culture education is difficult, if each teacher or a single school try to carry out. Establishment of networks is required for this purpose among the state, local governments, institutionalized religions, and scholars of religious studies as well as secondary schools. Probably a sort of the central agency is also required to make this system function well. As to the construction of such networks, we need to compare with the many examples in various countries.

Concluding the presentation, I put stress again on the point that religious culture education seeks more to defend against troubles caused by the present social conditions in the world than to present some excellent model of religious values to students.

⁹ The result of the questionnaire was published in English as Inoue Nobutaka, *Japanese College Students' Attitudes Towards Religion: An Analysis of Questionnaire Surveys from 1992 to 2001*, (Tokyo: Kokugakuin University, 2003).

¹⁰ For the concept of "hyper religions," see Inoue Nobutaka, *Contemporary Japanese Religion*, (Tokyo: Foreign Press Center/Japan, 2000).

Summary

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THE POSSIBILITY OF EDUCATION ABOUT RELIGIOUS CULTURE IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

In Japan, religious education is usually divided into three categories; education *about* religions or religious knowledge, education to inculcate religious sentiment, and sectarian or confessional education. Education *about* religion can be taught at public schools, while confessional education is prohibited. Long discussions have been held regarding the inculcation of religious sentiment in postwar Japan. Some insist that it should be taught even at public schools, and others oppose this claim mainly based on the reflection of the influence of State Shinto in the prewar period, when the state and religion (Shrine Shinto) were deeply interconnected.

The Basic Law on Education was revised in December, 2006, soon after the inauguration of the Abe cabinet. The article concerning religious education was moderated slightly with the words “general learning regarding religion” added to the sentence. However, as Japanese society has tended to avoid discussions on religious education in the postwar period, it might be quite difficult to establish a new education plan based on the former perspectives, especially regarding the inculcation of religious sentiment.

The idea of education in religious culture has been introduced to seek for a new perspective on the problem. This perspective aims to promote a deeper understanding of the Japanese people’s own religious culture, as well as that of foreign nations. According to this plan, such religious education could be introduced even at public schools. Surveys and other research data from in recent years indicate that religious culture education would be far more acceptable to people, including students, than education for the “inculcation of religious sentiment.”

Moreover, in the age of globalization, this type of religious education seems to be necessary for countries other than Japan as well. As a matter of fact, similar attempts can be observed in the U.S., the U.K., Australia, and other countries. These nations seem to share the following common problems: influence of globalization, influence of the information age (especially the Internet), and the “cults” problem.

Key words: Basic Law on Education in Japan, inculcation of religious sentiment, religious culture education, separation of Church and Religion, State Shinto.

Резиме

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МОГУЋНОСТ СТИЦАЊА ОБРАЗОВАЊА О ВЕРСКОЈ КУЛТУРИ У ДРЖАВНИМ ШКОЛАМА У ЈАПАНУ

У Јапану, верско образовање обично се дели у три категорије: а) образовање које се односи на упознавање религија, односно знање о религијама; (б) образовање које се односи на усађивање верских осећања; и (в) уже верско или конфесионално образовање. Док се образовање које се односи на упознавање религија, односно знање о религијама, може изводити у државним школама, конфесионално образовање је забрањено. У послератном Јапану вођене су дуге дискусије у вези са усађивањем верских осећања. Неки инсистирају да оно треба да буде извођено у јавним (државним) школама, док се други томе супростављају сматрајући то за последицу утицаја државне шинто религије из предратног периода када су држава и вера (шинто храма) биле дубоко повезане.

Основни закон о образовању је био ревидиран у децембру 2006. године, убрзо после инаугурације Абеовог кабинета. Релевантни члан овог закона је био донекле ублажен додавањем речи „опште образовање у вези са религијом“. Међутим, с обзиром на то да су се у јапанском друштву у послератном периоду обично избегавале дискусије о верском образовању било би врло тешко усвојити нове образовне планове на основу ранијих перспектива, посебно када је реч о усађивању верских осећања.

Идеја о увођењу образовања о верској култури у државним школама представља покушај стварања основе за решавање поменутог проблема у Јапану. Њен основни циљ је да се код јапанског становништва унапреди дубље разумевање сопствене верске културе, као и страних верских култура. У складу са овим предлогом, ова врста верског образовања би могла бити уведена и у државне школе. Испитивања јавног мњења и други подаци из истраживања последњих година указују на то да би образовање о верској култури јавно мњење, укључујући и студенте, било далеко прихватљивије од „усађивања верских осећања“.

Штавише, у добу глобализације, чини се као да је ова врста верског образовања неопходна и у другим земљама, а не само у Јапану. Заправо, слична настојања се јасно могу уочити у САД, Великој Британији, Аустралији и другим државама. Сматра се да се ове земље суочавају са истим проблемима. То су: утицај глобализације, утицај средстава масовне комуникације (посебно Интернета) и проблем „култова“.

Кључне речи: Основни закон о образовању у Јапану, усађивање верских осећања, образовање о верској култури, раздвајање цркве и државе, државна шинто религија.