

Vicente M. Bonet, ed. *Religion in the Japanese textbooks*, 3 vols. Tokyo: Enderle Book Co.

Vol. 1: *Religion in the Japanese textbooks of ethics and society*, by Fernando M. Basabe. 1973. 161 pp.+3 foldout pages. ¥ 1,650 or US\$ 8.00.

This book can be characterized as an extensive content analysis of textbooks on ethics and society currently in use in Japan's middle schools and high schools, with particular attention to the treatment accorded the subject of religion.

Religion has to be treated with some circumspection in Japanese school curricula, for the postwar Constitution, clearly establishing religious freedom and separation of church and state, makes it clear that religious education is not allowed in public schools. The Fundamental Law of Education, based on the Constitution and articulating the basic principles and purposes of education, states that "the attitude of tolerance towards religion and the position of religion in social life shall be respected in education. Schools run by national or local government shall not conduct religious activities such as religious education for any particular religion." Thus religion can be taught objectively, as a matter of historical reality or as a system of thought, but inculcation or indoctrination of any religion has to be avoided. The problem is that teaching and preaching are easier to distinguish in theory than in practice. The consequence of these regulations concerning religious education is that religion is taught to students as a piece of information, and they take it only as such - nothing more.

A cross-national survey on the thinking of youth in eleven countries, conducted by the Bureau of Youth Problems of the Japanese Government, indicates that the percentage of religious believers among Japanese youth is the smallest of all the countries surveyed (least: Japan, 18.9%; second least: Sweden, 41.1%; third least: Britain, 64.9%). Various surveys of attitudes toward religion among youth, including one survey in the book under review, show that a majority of Japanese students have a positive and appreciative attitude toward religion in

its social function as a remedy for man's sufferings and pains. But when young people are asked whether they take religion as a matter of personal decision and commitment, a high percentage of negative responses is forthcoming. This is a characteristic feature of the religious consciousness of Japanese youth.

The author surmises, therefore, that there must be some correlation between the contents of the textbooks or the ways religion is taught and these attitudes of Japanese youth toward religion. In the final paragraph of the book he comes to the conclusion that "it is not pure coincidence that there is a high correlation between the image of religion as taught by the textbooks, on the one hand, and the attitudes of university freshmen toward religion on the other. This is the most that we can state as the result of this research." This is a bold hypothesis. It cannot be considered established until more returns are in, but even at this stage it remains an interesting and illuminating hypothesis for us to consider.

Through careful comparative analysis of the contents of different textbooks dealing with religions and religious thought-systems, the author is enabled to specify a number of shortcomings common to many of the textbooks. These shortcomings are as follows:

- (1) All the textbooks stress the functional and pragmatic nature of religion, but fail to place sufficient emphasis on religion as a search for transcendental reality or ultimate meaning.
- (2) Religion tends to be treated as a relic of the past. In some cases "the emergence of modern thought is treated as a liberation from religion and, often, even as a liberation from God."
- (3) What remains of religion may be equated with the principles of an atheistic humanism. The transcendental religious elements underlying democratic humanism receive little attention, with the result that "it would not be surprising if Jesus Christ were to be praised for his revolutionary doctrine of equality and love for one's neighbor at the same time that Feuerbach is lauded for asserting that it is not God who created man but man who creates God."
- (4) A negative attitude toward institutional religion is evident. Thus religion tends to be treated as a matter of mood or feeling only, and the idea suggested is that "established and organized religions are prejudicial to man, and run counter to the spirit of freedom of man and against an authentic religious faith." Sociological realities deriving from religion tend to be neglected in favor of a one-

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sided emphasis on the interiorization of religion.

- (5) The Middle Ages are explained in negative and simplistic fashion. The religious aspects of the Reformation are glossed over and emphasis given only to “those aspects which, in the opinion of the authors, harmonize with the Renaissance spirit and which are most important to the emergence of modern thought.”
- (6) With regard to Greek philosophy and Christianity, the former is presented as a thought-adventure of great attractiveness, its religious aspects being ignored, whereas the presentation of Christianity indicates a failure to assess it correctly.
- (7) Seemingly objective presentation of the thought of all the major philosophers may result in total syncretism and reinforce the essentially relativistic spirit of the Japanese. To the extent that this occurs, the practical result will be an advocacy of tolerance— but a degenerate, principle-less form of tolerance.

With these penetrating observations, the author challenges the Japanese and their religious mentality. Some readers of this book may wish to point out that the author’s contention of bias in the textbooks is weakened by his own possible bias as a Catholic. Nonetheless, the undertaking remains a unique one with distinctive merit as a contribution to interreligious and intercultural dialogue.

Moreover, there is in Japan a strong tendency to assume that separation of church and state means total and mutual indifference. But the ways religion is dealt with in Japanese textbooks may unwittingly give more support to atheists and people of no religious affiliation. This book is a warning against such a tendency and prompts us to reconsider not only the meaning of separation of church and state but also the way to teach about religion in Japanese public schools.

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