

---

Vol. 2: *Religion in the Japanese textbooks of world history*, by Vicente M. Bonet. 1973. 186 pp. 27-page appendix. ¥1,650 or US \$8.00.

*Religion in the Japanese textbooks of world history* is a companion to two other volumes in a series on *Religion in the Japanese textbooks* undertaken by some Jesuit priests and faculty members at Sophia University. One reason given for this endeavor is to help with the "study of the

present educational situation and its problems," but two other reasons cited seem more important as motives. The authors hope that the three volumes will improve the accuracy of the treatment of religion by Japanese textbook writers and also help to explain why contemporary Japanese are so skeptical of religion. The study grew from the dismay precipitated by an earlier inquiry into the religious attitudes of 6,180 Japanese college students, the results of which were published and discussed in F. M. Basabe et al., *Japanese youth confronts religion* (Tokyo: Sophia University, 1967). The questionnaires used in that study revealed that 56.2% of the youths felt religion to be unnecessary for those who "have self-confidence" and that 50.2% believed religion to be not really necessary for people satisfied with life.

A report of this nature was most disturbing to the Christian community in Japan, and of much interest to all students of contemporary Japan. To answer the question of why so many Japanese students are atheists and indifferent to religion the Jesuit Fathers rightly supposed that a partial answer could be found in the textbooks that students read. The volume reviewed here stemmed from the hope that much light might be shed on the problem by examining how religion and religious sects are treated in junior and senior high world history textbooks. Prof. Bonet's method is to analyze eight junior high and twenty-eight senior high world history textbooks which he divides into A and B categories. The "B" textbooks, being more detailed in their treatment of religion, are discussed and footnoted carefully in the body of the text, whereas the "A" and junior high textbook references to religion are simply organized by topic and religion in an appendix. It would have been helpful if the method used had been explained more clearly and if the share of the market each textbook enjoys had also been indicated.

Students of Japan not familiar with the mechanics surrounding textbook publication will be surprised to learn that most are written (though often in only a formal sense) by professors from prestigious Japanese universities and that the Ministry of Education's direct control over content is minimal. Bonet notes that of forty-six main authors of the textbooks in category "B," twenty-four are University of Tokyo professors. In view of the fact that the Japanese Teacher's Union and Ienaga Saburō have leveled serious charges of censorship against the Ministry of Education, we are not prepared for Bonet's comment that the Ministry's guidelines for world history textbooks

cover only five pages and that “nothing is said about the viewpoint to be taken in those explanations, the length and depth of their treatment, or the way these topics should be dealt with.” But more of this point later.

Something needs to be said about the quality of the editing of this book. The text and the translations of textbook content and titles should have been put into a more felicitous style. Some will object that the text is dull, and admittedly it is difficult to create a lively style because of the nature of the material, but a good editor could have saved Father Bonet from such mistakes as the following: (1) “How should history education be at senior high school,” (2) “In any period of history men experience tensions, anxieties and fears of all kinds, born of their straddling along through life,” and (3) “Among the settlers [in America] there were many tradesmen dealing in furs, noblemen, and Jesuits....”

Bonet’s conclusion is that Japanese world history textbooks do play a contributory role in the skepticism and indifference of Japanese youth to religion. He shows that religious sects are generally so treated as to make it appear that all of them decline into formalism, that they have been used by and cooperated with those in power, that religions are the enemy of humanism and the development of science, and that religions tend to become absolutist and exclusivist. Bonet also objects that in the accounts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, discussion of religions is almost entirely preempted by the study of nations and non-Christian humanism. Naturally Father Bonet has a keen interest in the specific treatment of Catholicism. He is keenly disappointed.

The Catholic Church fares badly at the hands of the Japanese textbook authors. In general, the authors are kind to Catholicism only in its earlier years when it manifests a characteristic attributed to all religious sects at an early stage, namely, to oppose the oppression of the state, the injustices of the contemporary society, and the formalism of the existing dominant religion. From that point on, Catholicism is seen to be synonymous with absolutism and dogmatism. In contrast, Protestantism, particularly early Protestantism (with the exception of Anglicanism and the English Reformation) is treated favorably as “authentic Christianity” and as a movement to free men. Bonet believes the textbook authors are guilty of treating the more egregious violations of Catholic teachings as the norm rather than as aberrations.

Professor Bonet's objection to some misstatements, distortions, and misconceptions is often well founded. The textbooks treat Francis of Assisi as a rebel and Erasmus only as a severe critic of the Church; moreover, they neglect to point to beneficial aspects of the Church in the Medieval age or to its humanism in the second half of the nineteenth century.

These textbook messages constitute a bitter pill for Christians who like to think of the liberation of mankind by Christianity. It must be something of this bitterness and disappointment that leads Bonet to make some strong negative criticisms in the conclusion. He accuses the Ministry of Education of a nefarious role despite its rather innocuous "guidelines." His argument is that the Ministry's certification of textbooks has led textbook authors to follow already sanctioned interpretations "in order to win the approval of the Ministry." This is a serious charge which also seriously challenges the integrity of textbook authors.

Professor Bonet does not leave such an assertion to deductive logic. He argues that the monotonous similarities of interpretation found in the textbooks stem from one of two causes. Either the similarities stem from the poor quality of scholarly historical research in Japan or from the expediency of providing interpretations with which textbook authors do not themselves agree but which they incorporate in order to sell textbooks. Such conclusions, Bonet writes, "would not say much in favor of the authors and of the circumstances that forced them to such a twofold stand." This broadside attack not only should be counterproductive in winning souls and influencing Japanese intellectuals, but also seems uncharacteristic of the sophisticated, tolerant, and kind treatment of Japan and the Japanese which I have found to be typical of friends among Sophia University's Jesuit community.

A more fruitful and accurate assessment of organized religion would be to grant that its human administrators all too often have erred and been absolutistic, dogmatic, and exclusivist. The failure of Christians to acknowledge these charges ignores the historical past, but even worse divides the intellectual community.

Some Japanese scholars have been too selective in their treatment of religion (not to mention other areas), but to accuse them of expediency, sloppy scholarship, and deliberate distortion is to ignore the fact that they sincerely believe their analyses and interpretations correct. Each age is blinded by its own prejudices and ideologies. Japa-

## REVIEWS

nese scholars are just emerging from a period of overwhelmingly pervasive Marxist ideological influence. They also live in an age of democratic aspirations and scientific positivism. The textbooks reflect this environment. Organized religion in such a milieu is a natural target and suffers accordingly. A lighter touch by Bonet would have been more productive of dialogue with Japanese scholars.

Harry WRAY  
Professor of History  
Illinois State University