

Reeling from Religion
Toyama National College of Maritime and Technology 4th year
Yui UEDA

What is religion to you?

What is religion to me?

I was in the United Kingdom as an exchange student last year. My host school was a Christian school. When I heard about my school, I was a little nervous because I'm not a Christian. I thought all the students in the school were Christian, but in fact I was wrong, some students weren't Christian. According to the school rule, we had to worship at least three times a week, I took part in it with my friends. However, because all students weren't Christian, I found some students who didn't take it seriously. For example some were sleeping, some didn't sing, some were just talking with their friends, and some skipped worships completely.

One day we had a discussion on the situation. One of my friends said, "I am not a Christian so I don't like to join worships." Another student responded to this saying "As we are old enough to decide which school to go to, you should have known the meaning and rules of this school. So I think you should come to worships and join us." My friend responded "why should I? I chose this school for studying!"

Many opinions were exchanged and I was surprised that everyone was so serious, and discussed religion very actively. This was unnatural because I've never experienced a discussion on religion in my school in Japan. Through the discussion I was able to feel how IMPORTANT religion is in the UK, and it made me think, well then... who am I? What do I believe in?

Several weeks later, after taking part in worships regularly, and actively singing songs and saying "amen", a different friend asked me "why do you take part in worship activities?" This time, I replied, "Because... as an exchange student, I want to have various experiences." She didn't seem to understand me, and I began to question my participation and my religious beliefs again. Before I came to the UK, I checked "Buddhist" in the religion section of the application, yet I look forward to Christmas, a Christian custom. On New Year's Eve I go to the temple to ring the bells, a Buddhist custom, and on New Year's Day I go to the shrine, a Shinto custom. As an exchange student I took part in Christian worships, and in Japan I participate in Christian holidays and when I die I will be put in a Buddhist grave. My answer about worship may have confused my friend but for me and probably many Japanese, Christian and other religious holidays like Easter and Valentines are celebrated not for the religious content but rather for their festive nature. Generally speaking many Japanese don't practice Buddhism seriously. For this reason, Japanese celebrate non-Buddhist holidays without reservation or concern about their religious ties. As a result many people may see Japanese as strange because of their rather flexible attitudes.

Having returned to Japan, I realized how little I know about religion. I know religion is one of the biggest issues in the world. But unlike people in the UK who are exposed to religion from a very young age, and discuss religion with passion, Japanese, due to their lack of exposure, will have a hard time participating in such a discussion. This has nurtured my desire to learn more about religion.

My journey to understand religion hasn't finished yet, but In conclusion, I think that in today's world, there are a lot of Gods and each God is very important for each believer. I think all Gods that are worshipped should be equal in value. So we must understand and respect all Gods regardless of our religion. Only THEN can we truly understand and respect all humans.