

The Door to Tolerance

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit…” Muttering these words, I clumsily made the sign of the cross with my hands. A month had passed since I transferred to this Catholic all-girls school in London, but I was still baffled by its weekly Mass, when all students gathered in the school Chapel and listened to a sermon that sounded like pure gibberish to me. As my classmates knelt gracefully on the pew kneeler and began praying, I mulled bitterly about what they were wishing for. For me, a regular Japanese girl, praying to a God was a peculiarity. And so when I grudgingly knelt with the others and closed my eyes, I did not have the slightest expectation that my skeptical and condescending attitude to religion would transform to tolerance and respect in less than a year’s time.

Growing up in Japan was a unique experience in terms of religion, even if I had not realized it during my childhood. Although a great majority of Japanese people celebrate Christmas with zeal, visit Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples on New Year’s Day, and pray to some unidentified “Kami-sama” during adversities, these habits are derived from culture and not religion. In fact, we are alarmed by the notion of religious identity. I remember being frightened by the strange ladies who came knocking at my door, inviting

me to join their ritual. I remember watching a news of a terrorist attack in some distant country, and vaguely thinking that religion drives people crazy. Therefore, I felt like an alien when I moved to London and entered a Catholic school; the ease with which my classmates loved God was utterly inconceivable.

My distrust of religion must have been obvious, for one girl tried to confront it. Her name was Isabella, and as a devout Catholic who regarded religion as a natural part of her life, she found my mild atheism unfathomable. “Why don’t you believe in God?” she asked me briskly one afternoon, when we were ambling on the school field. I can still recall her electric blue eyes reflecting my bamboozled face, and how I responded with a question that had been growing inside me: why do you believe in God, then? This interaction started off a friendship that changed how we both perceived the world. Isabella taught me hymns and prayers, and through listening to her recitals of the Bible and stories of God guiding her, I gradually realized that Christianity was a crucial part of her identity and that denying it was disrespectful. In return, I described to Isabella the tepid relationship most Japanese people have with religion, and it was a pleasant surprise to see understanding dawning on her beautiful eyes. When we shared our snacks during playtime, we also shared our beliefs. When we visited each other’s houses for sleepovers, we witnessed foreign culture. When we hugged tightly on the day I was departing for

Japan, we knew that no matter the disparity between our backgrounds and beliefs, we were friends for life.

Now that I am reflecting on my experience in London, I realize how fortunate I was to be able to discard my stereotypes about religion at a young age. In Japan's homogeneous society, people often consider religion as foreign, dangerous, and beyond understanding, as I once did. Sadly, this intolerance exists all over this planet, and is applied to not only religion but to essentially anything people do not understand. It plagues the current world in the form of hate speeches, ethnic cleansings, and sheer prejudice. The interaction I had with Isabella gave me a friend, but it also gave me the open-mindedness that I believe is vital to create a world where differences are respected. However, even as I write this, I know that I still have not freed myself from unconscious biases. Therefore, I am striving to confront these biases through actively learning about others' opinions and communicating my own, and I hope that one day, I can again aid someone in opening the door to a world of tolerance. [685 words]