

2021 Kan'ichi Asakawa Award
Student Paper Contest for International Understanding and Exchange
High School / Highest Award

Insights into diversity through the issues of Islam

IRIOKA Nanaha, Second Grade

Fukushima Prefectural Aoi High School

As globalization continues, the number of visitors to Japan from abroad is increasing every year. However, there have also been problems involving foreign nationals such as hate speech. In June, an incident occurred where a Muslim woman from South Asia and her three-year-old daughter were wrongfully questioned by police officers from the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department. It happened when the daughter was playing on a slide. A man who was nearby assumed his son was kicked and complained against the innocent woman and her daughter. The officers who rushed in said, "I bet you kicked him," and "You want us to believe you really can't speak Japanese?" in an overbearing manner. Moreover, despite the man's constant discriminatory remarks, including "foreigners are not worth living", the officers did not try to stop him. They then took the Muslim mother and daughter to the police station and voluntarily interrogated them for many hours. The police divulged their address, names and other personal information to the man without their consent. The three-year-old daughter is now suffering from PTSD.

While Japanese people are generally tolerant of Westerners, we tend to discriminate against other foreigners. We can see a similar case in the incident of Wishma Sandamali, who died at an immigration facility in Nagoya. She came to Japan from Sri Lanka with dreams; however, she was taken to the immigration facility after overstaying her visa. Even though she complained of feeling unwell, she died without getting medical treatment. Here, you can easily see that people regard illegal immigrants as criminals and have prejudice against them.

Around the same time, I read an essay in my modern Japanese class titled "Islam Kankaku", which is about the Islamic sense of value. At the beginning of the class, our teacher asked us about our impressions of Islam. Many of the answers were negative such as, "It's scary", "It's not safe" and "They're terrorists". I also felt that Islam was a strict religion at that time. I saw the results of a survey that Gifu City conducted in 2011 regarding the attitudes to foreigners. 64.6% of the respondents thought, "Islamic teachings are strict" while 58.6% said, "Islam means conflict and crimes".

Nevertheless, as I read the essay more and study about Islam, I noticed that I myself had an

unconscious bias against it.

One presumption was that 'Islam equals Middle East', and another one was that, 'Muslims are terrorists'. The Middle East is indeed the cradle of Islam, but Muslims can be found around the world such as in Indonesia and North Africa. In particular, Islam is predominant in Indonesia with almost 90% of the people believing in it. Among the countries in the African continent, North Africa is where many Muslims are mainly concentrated. There are also about 100,000 Muslims in Japan. In terms of the number of followers, Islam is the second largest religion after Christianity.

There are Islamic terrorist groups including the Islamic State; however, needless to say, people do not commit acts of terrorism just because they are Muslims. Many Muslims support Islamic Revival Movements which call for a return to the fundamental ideals of Islam, but they are not terrorists. They believe that social unrest caused by economic stagnation and the widening gap between the rich and the poor should be resolved by having the society return with the original ideals of Islam. In exceptional cases, a handful of people have interpreted that in order to realise this ideal society, they are allowed to carry out terrorist attacks. Terrorists uphold jihad to justify their own actions. Jihad is translated as 'holy war' and means struggle in the way of Allah. It is said that martyrs or those killed in jihad can go to paradise unconditionally. It is true that many consider Islam to be a strict and devoted religion because of these terrorists, but if you study it more, you will know that it is a religion kind to the socially vulnerable and is based on pacifism. Prophets are not recognised as divinity and will always be human beings. All Muslims are equal and the concept of Zakat, or charity, is to help the needy.

It is impossible to have a good relationship with foreign nationals while having a prejudice against them. What can we do to eliminate bias and promote cross-cultural understanding? I believe it is important to first actively try to experience diversity and respect people's differences, then learn from them. People tend to judge things by their own standards and too much of it can lead to ethnocentrism which focuses on one's own ethnicity and culture. An increasing issue of hate speech in Japan and the rise of nativism in Europe are some of the examples. This is not just a matter applicable to a few racists and xenophobes, but we need to be more aware of the implicit bias that we all have. Ramadan is one of the reasons why I felt Islam was a strict religion. In reality, there is flexibility by allowing the elderly and children 10 years of age or younger to be exempt from it and those who are ill or soldiers can change the period of fasting. Also, I have heard that Ramadan is actually the most enjoyable time of the year. Relatives and friends visit you more often than usual and you can talk with them until late at night. Cities become vibrant, TV specials are aired, and the list goes on. This made me change the way I see Ramadan. On the contrary, the natural way of eating raw food in Japan can cause a misunderstanding among non-Japanese, as some may think, "Japanese people's taste for raw fish and eggs is strange". It is important to understand that there are many different cultures and values in the world and accept them.

Learning about history can also change people's perspectives. As we study why, when, where and how it happened, we will get the right knowledge and prejudice will disappear. There have been many wars in the Middle East partly because British intervened with the issue of the Holy Land between Arabs and Jews. It is wrong to attribute those conflicts to "Islam". It has more to do with historical backgrounds than with the characteristics of the religion. We need to learn the past and truly understand the reasons.

Just several days after the multiple terror attacks in Paris, a Muslim man stood blindfolded in a square in Paris. A sign beside him read: "I'm Muslim, but I'm told that I'm a terrorist. I trust you, do you trust me? If yes, hug me." The attacks were still fresh in Parisians' memories, yet the people who saw the sign stepped up one by one to embrace the man. This is a heartwarming story. As this man said terrorists are just terrorists and Muslims do not kill people for no reason. On top of all that, I admire those people who showed respect to the man standing in front of them as a human being. I feel bad that I once had this biased image and thinking that "Islam sounds scary".

Many different kinds of people live in this world. We are moving towards an era where there will be more interactions with foreign nationals and diversity will become more essential. It is important to start with knowing the differences of people and then gradually understand them. The basic concept of Tokyo 2020 Olympics was "diversity and harmony". We want to make this world a better place where people acknowledge other people's differences and connect with each other.