Encountering Religion on University Study Abroad

Amanda Kira

Yokohama National University

For many Japanese university students, English language study abroad (SA) programs are their first encounter with non-Japanese ways of thinking and talking about religion. A questionnaire about the experiences and attitudes of Japanese university students regarding their observations of and communication about religion while on SA programs with a duration of 4-6 months in England, the U.S., New Zealand, Australia, and Canada was distributed at a private university in Tokyo. The 42 responses were translated, coded, and interpreted using thematic analysis. Common themes included students' experiences talking about religion in classes and with the host family as well as their developing understanding of differences in the approaches to religion between Japan and their host country. It was concluded that religious literacy is an important aspect of cultural competence that sending institutions should take into consideration when preparing Japanese students for SA.

多くの日本人大学生にとって語学留学は、日本人とは異なる思考や発想に触れる機会となるが、その最たるものは宗教に関連するものである。それが斯かる学生にとって意識された宗教との初めての邂逅だったりすることは多い。本稿は東京にある私立大学で行なった留学時の宗教経験と宗教へのリアクションに関するアンケートの報告である。42人のアンケートの回答は英語に翻訳の上、コード分けされ、主題分析の方法を用いて読み解かれた。そこから看取された共通のテーマは、語学学校の授業の中や現地のホストファミリーとの間でなされた宗教に関連したディスカッションや会話の経験、日本と留学先の社会における宗教へのアプローチ方法の違いとその差異への洞察である。しかし、宗教リテラシーは異文化理解能力の重要な要素の一つであるから、語学留学に学生を送り出す大学側は、学生の宗教リテラシー強化も留学準備カリキュラムの中で考慮すべきである。

When students go on study abroad (SA), foreign religions go from sets of abstract concepts to up-close, salient phenomena and from simplified textbook explanations of pure forms of world religions to interactions with practitioners who relate to, identify with, or borrow from the symbols of those traditions in diverse ways. For Japanese students, the difficulty of understanding the religion they observe in their host countries is compounded by differences between the roles of religion in Japanese culture and in the host country and the general lack of religious literacy among the Japanese public (Yamanaka, 2013). This exploratory study investigated ways Japanese university students on SA encountered religion and how their understanding of religion and attitudes toward talking about it impacted their relationships with people in the host country. A questionnaire was devised to collect students' observations, experiences, and comfort levels regarding communication about religion while on SA. From 42 completed questionnaires, a limited yet multifaceted picture emerged, revealing that these experiences prompted students to think about religion in ways they would not have without SA.

Background

Two factors contribute to gaps in Japanese university students' religious literacy—the ascribed roles of religion in Japanese society and the ways in which religion is introduced, if at all, in the public education system.

Most Japanese people tend not to identify with a particular religious sect (Ishii, 2007), and Japanese shrines and temples provide come-as-you-are services with little to no requirement that people invest in their cosmologies or understand the mechanics of rituals (Nelson, 1996; Tanabe & Reader, 1998). Reader (2016) noted that *shukyo* (religion) is "an ambivalent term in common parlance" (p. 201). Most Japanese claim to be "*mushukyo*" (no religion); however, this should not be equated with the western concept of atheism or an opposition to religion and participation in religious rituals (Ama, 2005). Viewing Japanese religion through Davie's (2007) category of vicarious

religion (where paid experts perform religious ritual on behalf of and with the approval of the general population), LeFebvre (2015) argued that *mushukyo* is claimed by people to express their "normal" participation in Japanese religion, neither rejecting religion nor possessing specialized knowledge about it. In this way, religion is simultaneously close and distant to most Japanese. Despite self-identifying as *mushukyo*, most Japanese participate in rituals at shrines or temples throughout the year, actions they describe as acts of devotion or merely cultural observances (Nelson, 1996). Furthermore, as in most developed nations, participation in institutional religion in Japan is being supplanted by a trend towards individual spirituality (Shimazono, 2012). In this context, it is expected that many Japanese students lack general knowledge about both domestic and foreign religion.

Since the removal of religious education from the curriculum by The Fundamental Law of Education of 1947 (amended in 2006, http://www.mext.go.jp/en/policy/education/lawandplan/title01/detail01/1373798.htm), discussion of religion is largely absent in schools. Shibata (2005) observed that "religious education as a whole has been quarantined from instruction, not to mention from the official school curriculum" (p. 80). Public schools may include general knowledge about religion in courses on history or logic but limited instruction has left many people without religious literacy (Yamanaka, 2013). Although students may have opportunities to study religion at Japanese universities, a survey of courses found them either vulnerable to elimination for budgetary reasons or neglecting important themes like interreligious conflicts and dialogue (Fujiwara, 2005). Japanese public education at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels devotes limited time and resources to instruction about religion.

Limited instruction on religion is accepted as the norm in Japan. During SA, however, gaps in religious literacy affect students' participation in classroom discussions and ability to recognize and respond to mission-driven outreach. For many, SA is their first time to travel abroad alone or with peers. They are dependent on SA programs for room and board, education, and the basic information needed to navigate an unfamiliar society. Lack of religious literacy may be irrelevant to some experiences but also may affect communication in various contexts.

Methodology

Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) is an approach to data collection that rejects hypothesis testing. Instead, two concepts, *constant comparison* and *theoretical sampling*, guide the approach to qualitative data collection, with surveys and interview questions adjusted throughout the process based on ongoing review of results. Researchers are not committed to a line of inquiry; instead, research questions are developed in response to issues that emerge through this process of data collection. Considering the complex, personal nature of religion, a grounded theory approach was adopted for this study. The wording of survey questions was developed by conducting qualitative interviews, coding results, and piloting a questionnaire utilizing language commonly used by Japanese university students (Kira, 2015). The questionnaire for this study was updated by repeating that process.

This revised survey was distributed to students in the Faculty of Foreign Studies at a private Japanese university in Tokyo during the 2014-2015 school year. Respondents had returned from overseas language study programs lasting 4 months to 1 year in England, the United States, Canada, Australia, or New Zealand. Forty-two students completed the first two sections (five yes/no questions and four Likert-scale items) and 33 responded in Japanese to the third section, an open-ended question. Students willing to participate in follow-up interviews were asked to provide email addresses.

Responses were collated then analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) is a methodology of data analysis (not research approach) applied across data sets compiled from qualitative (or combined qualitative and quantitative) research methods with the goal of identifying common themes in participants' speech that reveal their socially constructed realities. Inductive and deductive analyses are often combined. Inductive analysis describes closely reading data for patterns and categories that emerge naturally in the social setting of a qualitative study. In deductive analysis the researcher imposes conceptual categories from prior research and existing theory onto the data set. Through careful coding, researchers choose emergent themes to construct an interpretative analytic narrative that may or may not require reporting the entire data set.

Results and Discussion
Yes/No Questions

Respondents circled *yes* or *no* regarding possible experiences during SA (see Table 1). Asked if they observed people engaging in religious-like activities, 69% indicated *yes*. Fifty-two percent confirmed that they had been asked about their personal religion by their host families and 40% had been asked about it in their classes. The experience of being approached by a person seeking to instruct them about a particular religion was indicated by 45% and at least 29% had been invited to a religious facility.

Table 1. Answers to the Yes/No Questions

Question	Yes	No
Did you observe someone performing a religious activity while you were on SA?	29 (69%)	13 (31%)
Were you asked about "the religion you believe in" by your host family?	22 (52%)	20 (48%)
Were you asked about "the religion you believe in" by someone at your language school?	17 (40%)	25 (60%)
Even though you didn't ask, did someone approach you to talk about or teach you about their religion?	19 (45%)	23 (55%)
Were you invited to visit a religious facility such as a church or a mosque, etc.?	12 (29%)	30 (71%)

Likert-Scale Items

Respondents rated four Likert-scale items about interactions in the host country on a 5-point scale (see Table 2). To the statement "I actively/positively participated in discussions about religion in my host country," 16 students chose a level of disagreement, 13 were neutral, and 13 indicated a level of agreement. To the item "I did not feel uncomfortable during discussions about religion," 11 strongly or somewhat disagreed with the statement, nine chose neutral, and 22 strongly or somewhat agreed. To the statement "In my observation, people in my host country talked about religion more than Japanese people," 22 agreed, 11 could not say, and 10 disagreed. To the statement "Apart from my language level, I found it difficult to describe Japanese religion," 23 agreed, 12 chose neutral, and seven disagreed.

Table 2. Responses to the Likert Questions

	Completely disagree	Somewhat disagree	I can't say either way	Somewhat agree	Completely agree
I actively participated in discussions about religion in my host country.	10	6	13	9	4
I did not feel uncomfortable during discussions about religion in my host country.	3	8	9	13	9
In my observation, people in my host country talked about religion more than Japanese people.	8	2	11	11	10
Apart from my language level, I found it difficult to describe Japanese religion.	1	6	12	14	9

Open-Ended Questions

The open-ended question—"Write a detailed explanation of your impressions and reflections regarding religion while in your host country including any experiences you had or things that you learned"—garnered 32 answers. Answers were handwritten in Japanese and ranged in length from 19 to 273 characters. English translations were prepared by this author.

The expectation that gaps in the religious literacy of Japanese university students on SA would be evident in their accounts of and reflections on interactions they had with people in their host countries informed the analysis. Though not rejecting word counts, thematic analysis prioritizes language choices of respondents that best capture themes most meaningful to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2012). At this initial stage, codes were imposed based on the type of encounter described—*Seeing, Learning, Talking,* and *Attending*. These categories formed a hierarchy of interaction from least to

most in-depth; no responses in this data set reported religious conversion. In the second stage of coding discussed in the next section, the amount of detail provided in answers corresponds to the level of interaction in these initial categories. Within each category impressions of the mediating role of religion in communication range from positive to negative.

Seeing was chosen to describe seven answers that were short, surface-level blanket statements about religion in the host country with no clear indication that students had talked to the people they observed. Answers were sweeping declarative statements like "England was a country of Christians," "I thought all Americans belong to a religion," or "There were absolutely no religious sorts of things [in New Zealand]."

Learning was chosen to label eight answers that went further in reporting what the student had learned but that did not describe specific interactions. These answers demonstrated that students thought about what religion is and how it affects practitioners' lives. The frequent invocation of "different" stood out in this category. Respondents commented on differences in food restrictions, dress, or ways of thinking that were "completely based in their religion." There were reports of learning about differences among adherents of the same religion and in the level of engagement with religion shown by people from other countries compared with people in Japan.

Answers grouped under *Conversing* described interactions where religion was the topic of conversation. A majority of the 12 responses stated or implied that conversations had been conducted in an atmosphere of mutual respect. Most respondents had been interested in learning about religion from casual conversations or class discussions. One student remarked that conversations about religion were an opportunity to "deepen friendships." Three students described conversations with members of their host families.

Six students wrote about attending religious services (including a student whose answer was divided and placed in two categories because it recounted both conversing with Muslims and going to a Christian church). Of these answers labeled *Attending*, four indicated that the student was taken to the service by the host family and one had gone with friends. These experiences were described variously as "fresh," "good," having left "an impression," and "slightly scary." The remaining answer did not indicate with whom the respondent went and only described what occurs at a synagogue without conveying the student's reactions or reflections.

Themes Across Categories

Answers were initially categorized according to the reported level of engagement. Next, themes related to students' experiences were identified across categories.

Classroom

Being asked about their religion during language classes was a fairly common experience, with 40% of students confirming it. Many students who attended high school in Japan were taught by Japanese instructors who share a common view of religion or foreign EFL instructors who tend to actively avoid the topic of religion (Foye, 2014). Respondents noted times religion was discussed during class. Likewise, the classroom was the site of observations of people practicing religion, an experience confirmed by 69%.

In *Learning*, there were observations of students praying or wearing veils. A significant portion of *Conversing* responses described experiences in classrooms or with friends in school settings. Although some did not clearly indicate conversations had taken place during class time, most noted that the experience of learning about different religions had been interesting.

In class discussions, students heard firsthand accounts of the role religion plays in other societies and in individuals' daily lives. A student wrote, "The person I observed doing religious activities at the school [in England] wasn't as surprised as I thought s/he would be when I told her/him Japanese people have no religion." Another student wrote, "We felt talk about religion [in England] was interesting and our friend who was an adherent of Islam also seemed to be intrigued by us who don't believe in anything." They noted the impassive or intrigued reactions other students had when Japanese students described themselves as having "no religion." For the first time, students were asked to explain their religious identity without reference to a shared understanding of Japanese religion and *mushukyo*. Details about discussions were not given but students were likely called on to describe Japanese religion. For students with vague understandings of their religious roots, these questions prompted reflection on religion.

Comparisons Between Japan and the Host Country

Every category contained answers comparing religion in the host country with religion in Japan. The wording of the Likert-scale items, particularly Items 3 and 4, seems to have influenced these responses. In *Seeing*, one student expressed that at Christmas Christians in England positively participated in a manner "different from Japan." Although it is common for Japanese people to visit a shrine or temple at New Year's, this student

perceived something fundamentally different in the approach to seasonal events in England but did not elaborate.

A response in *Conversing* reported, "I found that among Japanese people there are many people who do not have an understanding toward religion. There were many foreigners who had awareness of the religion they believe in. In conversations about religion, I could only listen." In this case, language was not the only barrier to joining the conversation. Rather, a lack of understanding toward Japanese religion left this student with insufficient information to contribute. As religion is generally not discussed in classrooms in Japan in either Japanese or English, students likely lack both basic concepts and English vocabulary. Fourteen respondents chose *somewhat agree* and nine chose *strongly agree* to the Likert item, "Apart from my language level, I found it difficult to describe Japanese religion." In addition, only 13 students expressed any level of agreement with the statement "I actively participated in discussions about religion in my host country." These responses indicate Japanese students' limited religious literacy may inhibit their participation in discussions about religion.

In addition, students noted that people in their host countries were more likely to discuss religion than people in Japan. Twenty-one students affirmed the statement, "In my observation, people in my host country talked about religion more than Japanese people." The student who attended an Anglican church service with her/his English host family remarked, "Unlike Japan, I felt that religion and everyday life fit together on a daily basis." At every level of contact with religion in the host country, students found that the role of religion in daily life, the intensity and frequency of religious practice, and the openness with which people talked about religion were all different from Japan.

Host Family

The host family played a central role in some encounters with religion. Students reported conversations with their host families about dietary restrictions and religious origins of cultural customs. This is not surprising because 52% confirmed they were asked about religion by their host family in the yes/no section. There was a notable increase in mentions of the host family corresponding to the hierarchy of categories from the first coding; the lowest two levels of contact, *Seeing* and *Learning*, contained one mention each, *Conversing* included three, and responses labeled *Attending* had four relatively detailed descriptions of communicating about religion with the host family. Under *Seeing*, the respondent simply wrote the host family had no religion. In *Learning*, the answer stated the host family had their own religion but s/he did not consider it strange or unpleasant.

The responses labeled *Conversing* included more details about interactions. A student wrote, "Because of my host father's religion, I did not eat pork at his house [in England]. He and my host mother had different religions, so I sometimes got to talk about religion at mealtimes." In daily life with host families, they realized the family's attitude toward religion often differed significantly from their own. One student reported that her/his English host family did not talk about religion as much as her/his friend's English host family who were Muslim. Another student reported extensive interaction with a Muslim friend in England. Reflecting on information gained in those conversations, s/he remarked that members of the host family were not members of a religion and so had no dietary restrictions.

Answers in *Attending* deserve special attention because four of the six responses concerned the host family's instrumentality in a visit to a religious gathering. As only 29% of respondents had been invited to a religious facility, the number of responses indicating the invitation was extended by the host family is significant. Three responses in particular illuminate students' understanding of their roles within the host family. A student wrote, "My host family [in England] were Anglican, and I got to go to church with them. It started with prayer and flowed into singing songs. I wasn't particularly interested in it, but because it is an experience that I can't have elsewhere, I went to church and it was fresh." Although this student had not previously desired to go to church, s/he nonetheless accepted the host family's invitation. S/he did not actively seek the experience, but s/he evaluated it positively and it enhanced her/his experience of the host country. Another student wrote,

> More than other host families, my host family [in New Zealand] proactively took me along on days off. They went to celebrate Christmas and other Christian holidays. At church, they drank red wine (?) while calling it something like God's blood, and I received naan but I didn't eat it. Because I do not belong to a religion, there were many surprising experiences. At church, everyone was seriously (?) engaging with religion so I had a slightly scary impression.

Unlike other responses in this data set, this student inserted question marks in parentheses throughout her/his report. The whole experience appears to have been unfamiliar and s/he revealed limited resources to understand Christian ritual, to interpret the actions of the Christians s/he observed, or to ask them about the meaning they ascribed to their actions. The student's appraisal of the level of devotion of the Christians was also marked as inconclusive. Considering the passive nature of conduct expected from participants in most Japanese rituals (Nelson, 1996) and the desire to assert a normal (i.e., nonspecialist) level of engagement with religion by identifying

as *mushukyo* (LeFebvre, 2015), this student lacked a framework to understand the active, knowledgeable participation of congregants. The scary impression remained, undoubtedly influencing her/his feelings toward the host family for the remainder of the stay. Another student wrote that attending church in England with the host family made it "extremely difficult" to talk with them about religion.

Conclusion

SA was the first point of contact with foreign religions for many respondents. As one student remarked, "I knew there are various religions in the world, but as a result of SA [in America], I experienced that firsthand." Due to limitations, it is impossible to make generalizations from this study about the relationship between religious literacy and Japanese university students' SA. However, this study yielded insight into students' developing understanding of differences between Japan and the host country and between themselves and their host families and classmates.

In grounded theory, detailed theories are developed from extensive, recursive collection of data about how participants' relationships function and construct their reality (Suddaby, 2006). This paper was exploratory, limited by sample size and the brevity of answers, and coding was not confirmed independently. Subsequent versions of this questionnaire should incorporate themes and language that emerged from analysis of this data set. Future surveys should also include more questions to permit a larger variety of responses in the first two sections and encourage more detailed answers in the third. Written Japanese was chosen for data collection, but students' experiences happened in English. Accounts of specific exchanges and how students expressed terms like *mushukyo* and their knowledge about Japanese religion in English would add another dimension. Another issue for future research is to examine case studies of students who report having been actively targeted for religious conversion while on SA, particularly by their host families.

The experiences reported here can inform predeparture curriculum development. Because religious interactions can significantly impact on students' impressions of the SA experience, sending institutions should consider whether students in their programs would benefit from explicit instruction in religious literacy. Instruction regarding conceptual and linguistic tools will help students to both recognize and talk about religion in their host country in order to improve their SA experiences.

Bio Data

Amanda Kira is a lecturer at Yokohama National University. <kiraynu@gmail.com>

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