

Report

# 10<sup>th</sup> U.S.-Japan Youth Forum

~Religion and Culture  
in the Modern World~



**Youth Forum JAPAN**

# The 10<sup>th</sup> U.S.-Japan Youth Forum

~Religion and Culture in the Modern world ~

## *Outline*

Since its foundation in June 2005, the U.S.-Japan Youth Forum has been well received as an opportunity to hear the voices of our future leaders. The last Youth Forum marked our 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and we were especially honored to have H.I.H Princess Takamado as our special guest again.

Last year's theme was "Religion and Culture in the Modern World", and panelists from six different countries with different backgrounds: Japan, America, China, Singapore, Iran and Germany, joined the discussion. Exchange of views evolved around what the impact would be if religion were to be taken away from each panelist's life, and what role religion can play in contribution to peace. Even though every person had a different opinion and thing to say, we came to the conclusion that religion has the potential of becoming a mutual, common language.

In today's world, many tragedies seem to be occurring due to lack of understanding towards others' beliefs. Many people find it extremely uncomfortable to talk about this "tense" subject. We are very proud to have had the opportunity to talk on this theme, and we can say with confidence that the most important thing in the modern world is to talk. To have discussions. We now have many means of exchanging opinions with people around the globe, and now is the time to make full use of it.

## *Forum Outline and Program*

**17:30 Forum (MC: Nobuhiro Morita)**

Panel Discussion and Q&A (Led by moderator: Moe Hashimoto)

Panelists: China, Germany, Iran, Japan, Singapore, United States

**19:30 Remarks: H.I.H. Princess Takamado**

**20:00 Reception: Buffet dinner**

Entertainment (songs by Asako Amanuma with Sakurako Katayama [piano] )

**21:15 Closing**

# Reflection

Moderator     Moe Hashimoto



This year's topic for the Youth Forum was *Religion and Culture in the Modern World*. This is an extremely important subject in our world today where religion seems to be clashing against each other causing conflict. At the same time, this is a very big and vague topic, and being a moderator for the panel discussion was a challenge for me.

With panelists from Japan, China, Singapore, Iran, Germany and America, the meaning of religion for each individual person was vastly different. Some answered that they only became aware of religion in certain events during the year. For some, religion was a means of bringing family together. On the other hand, some couldn't imagine religion being taken away from their life; as it was already a part of their identity. As a Japanese irreligionist, it was interesting to learn how people accepted religion in different ways. We often receive information about religion from the media, but hearing actual opinions from students of my own age was a precious experience.

We also talked about how religion can contribute to peace in the discussion. Even though each panelist believed in different religions to different extents, the discussion gave me hope for the future. I got the feeling that the most important thing to do is to talk. To talk freely and to accept other's ways of thinking. This, I believe, is what is lacking in our current society. Religion is considered as a "taboo" subject and people try to avoid the topic itself. Avoiding this topic is easy; we can stay in our "comfort zones" by doing so. However, once we come out of those zones and start expressing ourselves, we come to realize that getting to know each other's perceptions of religion is in fact interesting. It may be different from your own perception, but each person has a reason behind how they think and learning from this can enlighten your way of thinking. As we reached in our discussion, religion has a potential of bringing this world together instead of dividing it. We, the young generation need to think and openly talk about this subject in order to achieve this.

I cannot forget Princess Takamado's words: "We need to put ourselves in others' shoes." Using our imagination and respecting each other's beliefs isn't all that difficult on a daily level. Even though the topic is big, putting ourselves in others' shoes is the simplest way to achieve peace through religion. If I hadn't participated in this forum as

a moderator, I would have remained indifferent toward this topic. I am thankful that I got this chance to actually think and become interested in this important topic, and I hope to apply this to the future.

## *Panelist*

### China     Siqi Wang



This experience was refreshing for me. It is fine to say you are super religious or total atheist in this event. Getting to hear other countries' young people talking about religious issues in this era opened up my mind, especially when the discussion moved from how religions are related to the inner side of people towards how religions can contribute to solve the modern problems. Such an angle encouraged to look at many social problems in a new way. Besides, Princess Takamado's speech was so deep and kind. I feel honored having the chance to hear her speech. I do hope such enlightening and interesting event could continue and I look forward for next year's topic.

### Germany     Christian Goehlert



The 2014 U.S.-Japan Youth Forum 'Religion and Culture' was a very instructive opportunity to discuss issues concerning religious experience and the cultural contexts it is rooted in from a number of emic and etic perspectives that ran the gamut from quantitative and evidence-based empirical views on socio-cultural as well as socio-economical trends both on the micro- as well as the macro-societal level all the way to reflections on the performative aspects of embodied practice and the creation of religious meaning in interactive – and intersubjective – processes that bridge the perceived gap between text-based interpretation of traditional value-systems and the re-conceptualization of religious action and thought within cultural flows and counter-flows.

The selection of panelists incorporated a broad spectrum of approaches towards the study of religion and religious phenomena, and allowed for a productive discussion that broadened my view on the role of religion in the globalized world of the 21<sup>th</sup> century and allowed be to connect not only with the some of the scholars who will undoubtedly

end up shaping the way the discussion of this role will play out in the future, but also with interested non-scholars from the audience who provided a fresh and exciting counterpoint to the presentations as well as to the debate in general.

It is only through the direct exchange of views and opinions between both scholars and non-scholars grounded in these contexts that a broader understanding of the processes at work is to be achieved, but this understanding would be meaningless if wasn't shared with the public at large. The Youth Forum – both the presentations and the final panel discussion – were an invaluable step towards this end. Keeping the venues of dialogue that this forum has opened between young researchers from a variety of fields and backgrounds available and accessible is of vital importance. I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude towards the organizers, panelists and staff members who made the forum possible.

### Iran    Fatemeh Givi



Participating in the 10<sup>th</sup> US-Japan Youth Forum as a panelist was a special experience for me. In this event, religion and culture in the modern world were discussed. Having panelist from diverse cultures and with different backgrounds, indeed has made it unique event.

Panelists introduced existing religions in their own country from various dimensions. For me, hearing panelists' viewpoint on religion in the modern world, brought about a profound perception of different attitudes toward religions. The most important aspect of the event both for the panelists and for the audiences was to practice to have dialogue among different religions, which is seriously needed in today's modern world. In addition, for me the event was a great opportunity to learn more about Japanese rich culture and religion.

Panel discussion also was a noteworthy part of the event. It was very interesting to hear different opinions about religion. Talking about religion contribution to peace, as well as considering what is missing in today's modern world, enabled the participants to think of their role to make this happen. Through the discussion I realized the importance of tolerance and harmony in order to achieve peace in modern world. I learned if religion becomes a medium for a mutual respect among people, it can make a valuable contribution to peace. Furthermore, questions from the audiences both in the Q&A section and during the supper, indicated that how the audiences were interested in the discussion. This shows that such events will be well received and is required in today's society.

## Japan Isshu Fujii



In the previous, Youth Forum Japan it has reached 10th anniversary. I was honored to take part in such event as a panelist. Although, “Religion” was difficult and sensitive topic to discuss with many ideology and thoughts compacted in same atmosphere, we were able to come across many interesting ideas in our minds to share with students and many other audiences from variety of background.

Religion was historically though as a key for peaceful world, however with rise of ISIS and other radical organization, biased broad casting of media, crimes related to religious organization led to negative outcome of religious images. One of the purposes for YFJ to hold forum with theme of “Religion” was to tell the world that each country or religion doctrine might be different, mutual understanding can be achieved if people are willing to share and listen to others. As panelist representing Japan and related religion Shinto and Buddhism, it was hard to collect and handle mass of information including Japan’s complicated history of religion and organize it in a form that is easy or audience and even for myself to understand.

## Singapore Fong Chun Wai



Being part of the US-Japan Youth forum that took place in the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan was a great learning experience. By interacting with the other panelists, each from a different country, I was exposed to a great deal of cultures, opinions and beliefs. This helped broadened my mind to the diversity that exists around the world, particularly when approaching a sensitive and controversial topic such as religion. The topic religion might be delicate, but the panelists coming from various countries had a fruitful discussion about religion and how it might contribute to peace. As everyone came from a different background, there were many different religions and plenty of ideas to talk about them. Not only were the religions different, the way each panelist approached the idea of religion differed from person to person. From this, I learned the many different ways of approaching a topic as ambiguous as religion. Some took philosophical approaches to it, some looked at it from a historical point of view, and some offered a societal outlook and the impact religion has on people.

From this, I learned how important it was to embrace diversity, and to understand each other. Despite the various approaches and beliefs, there was a single theme throughout the forum, which was mutual respect borne out of understanding each other. The moderator hoped to achieve this by transforming religion into a kind of "mutual language", but some of the other panelists argued that embracing diversity is key to peace. Differences in culture and religion should be something that is celebrated rather than avoided, and with regards to that, having a "mutual language" or common understanding. That said, there was also a proposal from several of the panelists that it might be good to look for common traits and values among the different religions and focus on that to seek global morality and peace.

The questions posed by the audience were also eye-opening as they forced the panelists to think from different angles. The mention of bias in Japan on religion, with regards to one of the presentations, showed how there still remained unfair portrayals of religions or new religions in the Japanese media, for example the emphasis on religious crimes. Such negative impact is not restricted to merely the Japanese media - in the West, there is also an other-ing of religions that put a "foreign" religion in an "us against them" position. Education, as argued by the panelists, plays a huge role in getting the different believers of religions to understand each other and thus respect diversity, but it can also be used against religions.

There was also mention of religious schools, and the panelists responded by explaining rather than shutting them down, they should encourage the religious schools to open up by sending their students to study about other religions rather than be confined to a single set of beliefs. As one of the audience pointed out, the Vatican has been opening up by inviting leaders of other religions to come and pray together - something that was unheard of decades ago. Rather than be narrow-minded, it may be a good thing for globalization to open up the religions to each other and encourage sharing rather than drawing clear borders.

Religion, as the esteemed Her Imperial Highness, said, is a narrowing concept, but belief is a wide concept. Learning from each other, opening ourselves up to exposure to different cultures and religions rather than confining ourselves to our individual beliefs, might serve as the key to peace and progress. Only by understanding and respecting each other can the world begin to move forward, especially in an area as contentious as religion. This is the message that pervaded the 10th US-Japan Youth Forum, and I take great pride and honor to have learned a lot from it.

## United States     Mark Bookman



Taking part in the 10<sup>th</sup> annual US-Japan Youth Forum was truly a wonderful experience and one that I will continue to treasure for the rest of my life. Seldom does the opportunity arise for any academic to commune with like-minded scholars in an open forum where any and all who wish to observe may not only bear witness to the wide array of transcultural and interdisciplinary discourses that mark their craft but also participate in the pragmatic reorganization of those discourses towards a common goal: peace.

Perhaps my fondest memory of the eve of our panel presentation was a brief private exchange with Her Imperial Highness Princess Takamado prior to our photo opportunity. During the brief 10-minute interlude between the completion of our panel discussion and our gathering for photos I was fortunate enough to hear the princess' understanding of the 'problem' of religion that, shockingly, mirrored my own understanding of religious discourse. Moreover, I was able to briefly explain to the princess my current research agenda (namely, that concerned with Shingon Buddhism) after a series of inquiries on her behalf and even received a few recommendations for places I might visit in Kyoto.

My interaction with the other panelists was extraordinarily pleasant and truly served to elucidate the meaning of academic collaboration. Whether discussing a host of philosophical quandaries in online chat-rooms or meeting in person to discuss logistics and stylistic intentions I found that our conversations were always quite productive; a particularly impressive feat in the face of such evident cultural diversity. With regard to the content of our presentations itself, I felt that our topics of interest not only stemmed forth naturally from our respective cultural heritages but also served to actualize an artificial collage of sorts portraying the global religions landscape, thereby imparting form to an otherwise intangible series of relationships and allowing our audience to position themselves inside the world of transcultural discourse. While I found myself concerned initially due to the sheer number of pre-panel meetings which, compared to previous academic conferences I had taken part in, was rather high in frequency, I am delighted to report that from my perspective the event could not have run smoother.

Thank you again for providing me with this excellent opportunity. It was truly a once-in-a-lifetime experience that I will continue to cherish for days to come.



# Special Thanks

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