

'Faith in the World' Prize 2011

Winner: Middle Category (ages 16-17)

Jade Jackman

Why should other religions talk to each other?

The doors close. You are now amid a jumble of people, who are as well matched as quickly grabbed sweets in a young child's bag of pick n' mix. The only thing these people have in common is the shared experience of this tube carriage. You sit down, it's fairly stuffy, but after all it is summer.

Out of the corner of your eye you notice a pair of tanned hands scrawling over a tube map. You flick your eyes upwards. You take in his scruffy black beard, the black hair growing out of a once shaved head, a moon and star tattooed on his upper arm, his bulky looking rucksack jammed firmly between his legs, and his deep set black eyes. You take a sip of water, but the freshness you expected does not come and instead nerves begin to trickle down your throat. His hands are still gliding over the tube map. The tube lines remind you of the multi-colored wires, which intertwining to form a wiring loom. There are suddenly more Northern Lines than you have ever seen before, the black lines remind you of the black, printed headlines bearing the date '7/7' and titles such as 'London's day of terror'. You know you are wrong to feel like this, but his appearance seems to justify the suspicious feeling in your stomach that will not shift, and the looks of slight concern from your fellow passengers do not discourage you.

He steps out the train, you murmur a Hail Mary, you have never had a close relationship with a Muslim before but you have read about Islamic Fundamentalism and Extremists in well-regarded newspapers that have so much more knowledge than you do. Why should you feel any different?

Above, is a composite scenario created from the experiences of my contemporaries and the stereotypes that can cloud the rationality of the best of us. Our media does not necessarily seek to indoctrinate us but can easily influence our opinions and give us marginally biased knowledge from which we base our opinions on. As anthropologist Elizabeth Poole reported, the media has 'superseded other institutions in the cultural production of knowledge.' The

majority of today's younger generation in the United Kingdom seems to associate terrorism with Islam due to the events that have happened in our own country and America, where as our predecessors' would perhaps link the word to the IRA instead. However, the moderates, and even many fundamentalists, of their religion condone these 'Islamic' terrorists, especially the leaders who orchestrate the attacks. Why would somebody, with no religious inclinations, know that Osama bin Laden was not a graduate of an Islamic university, meaning that he contradicts and discounts a lot of his own teachings from an Islamic perspective, and that it is not mainstream Islam that dictates his actions?

Although an extreme example, the propaganda used against the Jews in 1930s Germany portrays how vital communications between religious groups are. It may be difficult to comprehend in our culturally sensitive society that people could be so easily led to believe such ludicrous statements but, due to manipulation of the media and distinguishing them with the yellow Star of David, they were slowly ostracized and brutally forced from society. German children were raised in fear of Jews, taught that the blood of a Christian child was needed for Passover. This fear instilled by the Government quickly escalated, especially in the impressionable minds of the young, and became second nature. This attitude became so innate that one young girl even wrote, "People are so bothered by the way we're treating the Jews. They can't understand it, because they are God's creatures. But cockroaches are also God's creatures, and we destroy them."

This is relevant because it shows how the debasement of one religious group can be used by the intolerant to cause the total segregation of certain cultures from the community and ultimately results in heinous genocide. While there was social integration, participation in the economic, intellectual and political life or a Jew taking the position of the local doctor and still the demand for bagels from Jewish bakeries, it would be harder to create the mythical monstrosities and portray them all as followers of a religion that allowed 'ritualistic murder', as people continued to share experiences and have emotional attachments. This meant the circulating rumors that were encouraged to create fear could not be dispelled, as there was no interaction to prove otherwise. As H. P. Lovecraft says in 'Supernatural Horror in Literature', "... the oldest and the strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown'. So if a religious group becomes the 'unknown' due to stunted interaction, the slight preconceptions you have can mutate into reality, creating stagnation.

Why would a student who had simply been taught the clinical terminology to gently sweep through their Religious Studies examination feel any emotional response, even if they have achieved some understanding of the religious concepts? People of different religious denominations should talk to each other because religion is based on faith, which is

emotional. The best way to articulate emotion is through discussion with another person you know and have learnt to respect. These discussions will create longer lasting empathy because, if one understands and appreciates the beliefs of a friend, you are more likely to find their beliefs plausible. This relationship will establish a deeper lasting understanding; you would be inclined to justify their beliefs to others as you would have some experience of their faith. Therefore, you will have a developed personal link and be able to appreciate both ends of the spectrum, which is valuable as it is a quality that makes you more open-minded. From this position you are given the ability to choose, giving you a choice and experience of creating your own opinion.

Whilst people of different religions are often part of the community you live in, sharing the same daily routine as you and similar life experiences, they are not simply defined by their religion alone and are more approachable. Not only is communication between different religions important, but it also seems different religions embracing society is crucial. So people are aware that religion can be a way in which to partially define you, but isn't the only a component to who you are. However, on the other hand, the balance between society and people's independent beliefs must also be retained. People cannot be taught this, otherwise it would slowly develop into everyone being taught to be moderates in order to co-exist in a society that is tolerant and politically correct. It may be more peaceful but less diverse. The passionate interaction of religions has inspired works of art, music and literature that have added to the elaborate nature of our cultures.

Personal discovery is another reason why different religions should converse. Many of us make assumptions, for example, over of the wearing of the hijab; we think it is a tool used by men in order for them to demonstrate control over their women. However, many girls have the option to wear it or not, and chose it on the grounds of empowerment so that they are not simply judged on their looks and can escape being sexualized by society around them. Although it is often used in the first context, we should not assume other women do not have the choice. It is essential that all religions talk to each other on a basic level as it will dispel the slight prejudices or stereotypes we are brought up with, as the things we think we know turn out to surprise us the most when we learn that we are wrong. Hopefully the element of surprise will be retained and subtly remind us of our previous assumptions before next passing judgment over someone's beliefs, without having to be taught by institutions to do so. Faith is not something that is, necessarily, rational. You cannot teach someone to appreciate it; the way to gain appreciation of religion is from seeing how important it genuinely is to people and the best way to gauge the importance of something is from hearing about it from someone you have learned to value as an equal.

If appreciation through conversation cannot be achieved, we should aim for doubt, even in our own religions. It is plausible that we should be afraid of infallible faith; it could be argued that certainty is the basis of fundamentalism in all religions. All of the world's religions could constructively harbour more doubt, which can be gained from realising impracticalities, similarities and differences between religions. Doubt would lead us to question why we believe what we believe and therefore why do we do what we do; these questions could transform into self-justification. Self-justification in the same manner as proof reading a 'finished' essay allows you to discover mistakes that you had previously made and alter them accordingly. The ability to doubt yourself would lead to a more open minded society as people questioning their views is important, and doubt can be easily sparked from one casual, but well placed comment whilst talking to a neighbour of another religion or a fellow passenger on the tube.