

GHANA

I was blessed with the opportunity to study abroad over the summer in Ghana. This country in West Africa boasts a peaceful religiously diverse community that consists of about 70% Christians, 17% Muslims, and a mix of traditional religious traditions, Hindus, and Jews. Growing up in Atlanta, Georgia, and studying abroad in Fukuoka, Japan, while in high school gave me a sense of familiarity with religious traditions outside of the Southern Black Baptist Church that I was raised in, but what was unfamiliar to me was the level of religious tolerance I found in Ghana. This level of tolerance would forever shape my beliefs.

Admittedly, I was never the most devout member of my Baptist Church. I was one of those kids that had to be dragged out of the house on Sunday mornings. My mother would “encourage” me to participate in church plays, attend Bible Study on Wednesdays, and church on Sunday morning. After 18 years of attending church with my parents, I think it’s safe to say that I was well grounded in Christianity. Although attending church felt more like a chore than it should have, I was always impressed with the community that my church created. I watched in awe as church members celebrated the success of others as if it was their own, prayed for the well-being of others, and mourned together in times of sadness. As time progressed, I began to grow curious as to the type of community of other religious faiths.

Studying abroad in Fukuoka, Japan, would be my first chance to really dive into the faith of others. As a 10th grader, I was selected as one of 15 students to serve as a “Student Ambassador” for the Atlanta Public School system. This program placed me in the household of a Japanese family for two weeks in an attempt to learn the day-to-day experiences of a typical Japanese family. I was able to go to school with my host sisters, go to family reunions with my family, and more importantly, attend Buddhist religious services. I went into this trip blind – not fully knowing what to expect, and with very little skills in the Japanese language, I found myself simply going through the motions and not absorbing any real substance. While I learned a lot about the culture and history of Japan, I was only able to take in small chunks of information about the religion of my host family. However, I was able to see how families from across the region came together for certain holidays, the importance of communal prayer/meditation, and how the Buddhist religion brought my host family together.

In the U.S., I felt as if religious groups are more segregated which causes us to not interact with people of faith groups different from our own. Speaking of religious beliefs in the workplace is nearly taboo and not appreciated in many work-related situations. While I was able to learn to appreciate religious differences by living in a religiously diverse city such as Atlanta, Georgia, I often felt as if religious differences were more tolerated than accepted. However, in the small town I lived in during my stay in Ghana, it was normal to see a church and a mosque located next door to one another – a rare sight in the U.S. It was also common to see Christians working side-by-side with Muslims during the workday. This allowed me to see how believers of different faiths worked together during the week to achieve a common goal. In the small fishing town of Cape Coast, Ghana, citizens had to work together despite differences in religious beliefs to achieve a common goal. This impressed me.

While in Ghana, I was able to study with a Methodist Minister and an Islamic Imam (preacher) as well as meet individuals that subscribe to the indigenous religious beliefs of that region. My time with these Ghanaians gave me further insight into each faith group. Classmates of mine dubbed me “Pi” after the character from the popular book “Life of Pi” that sampled different religious groups on a daily basis for the purpose of learning. I was able to learn the central tenets of each faith, understand the similarities between the three faiths, and [discern] the differences between the groups. For three days out of the week, I would work closely with these religious leaders, not only meeting with them one-on-one but also

attending their religious services. My job was to simply learn as much of the history of the religion in that country, what its members believe, and how that belief system affected its members. I attended Jummah (Islamic Communal Prayer) on Fridays, went to church on Sundays, and spoke with believers of other faiths during the week. I found it easy to study religions by going to the different religious services of each group. However, I believe that the true works of each religion is performed by its believers during the week, not simply on the one day of communal worship.

From my study abroad experiences, I was able to redefine my own faith by discovering what was truly important to me. After observing how so many different religious groups could live together in peace, I began to focus on the similarities of each faith. I learned from my observations that regardless of religious beliefs, the common theme shared between each religious group is to bring together a community of like-minded individuals. While at the surface, these religious groups seem vastly different from one another due to a belief in a higher power or a certain cosmic order, each of the Abrahamic Religions, as well as many of the Eastern Religions, urge their believers to give back to the community. This is what I found to be the most important finding during my study and one of the guiding principles that shape my understanding of religious diversity to this day.

After my study abroad experience, I brought my findings back to the States. While a student at Davidson College, I began to work closely with the Diversity Coordinating Committee of the Student Government Association, a group that promotes and celebrates the diversity of the students of Davidson College. I would regularly attend meetings of the Hillel (the Jewish Student Association), the Muslim Student Association, Interfaith, and Intersivity to better understand the needs of the members of each group. I owe my appreciation of religious diversity to the five weeks spent in Cape Coast, Ghana. I owe my understanding of various religious faiths to the men that guided me on my journey for knowledge during my five weeks in Ghana. Looking back on my childhood, it amazes me how the kid that would have to be forced to go to church on Sundays could turn into a person that has an unquenchable thirst for world religions.