Personal Diversity Experience As A Protestant Attending Prayer Services At A Mosque

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A Protestant Visit to the Houston Masjid of Al-Islam

As part of the diversity experience assignment, I visited the Houston Masjid of Al-Islam in Houston, Texas, on Friday, 6th April 2018. I spent about 3 hours there in total in what would be my first experience of being in an Islamic place of worship. Since growing up, I've always had Muslim friends at school and in the neighbourhood, and I always found them to be very nice and Inclusive people, contrary to how the media often portrays them (Shaheen, 2012).

When I received the assignment as part of my course, I contacted my friend Aaminah for it. Aaminah was delighted to hear that I wanted to visit the Mosque and made some arrangements for me by contacting the Imam before my arrival, informing him that I would be attending his Friday Sermon on the 6th. However, it was not necessary as, according to Aaminah, the Mosque welcomed any non-Muslims who wanted to come and observe the prayer service and listen to the recitation of the Quran or sermons. But I found it useful as I did not want to be seen as someone out of place.

The day I chose to visit the Mosque was Friday. It is a special day for Muslims in the week, when the Muslim community, men, women, and children gather to perform the congregational prayers at their local Mosque after listening to a Sermon. As I entered the Masjid, I saw that Muslim men and women sit and pray in segregation during the prayer, contrary to how we see in many Protestant prayer services. I had already heard about Muslim modesty and dressing traditions such as the Hijab (Pervez, 2015). I decided to dress conservatively, being careful not to upset their sentiments as I brought myself to the women's section of the Mosque. The Friday sermon had not yet begun. Aaminah had not arrived by then, so I was by myself, feeling a bit apprehensive and defensive, being a minority in the place. I had not worn any headscarves and could notice the women glancing at me and each other. I later came to know that Muslim women had relaxed dressing requirements when they were in their space, but because the Friday sermon, which is considered a part of the prayer, was about to begin, they still kept their headscarves and traditional clothing on. I could feel they had recognized that I was not a Muslim by then and was expecting someone to point out that I was not appropriately dressed for the occasion. Because of certain stereotypes that we have in our society, I even feared

someone would come up and ask me to leave.

Anxiety, Difference, and the Personal Defence of Religious Identity

I could feel myself being more defensive, making up hypothetical questions in my find and finding the right answers to respond to them in case anyone asked why I was there or why I dressed differently. I was also not expecting the diversity I had witnessed as more women began to show up. There were Muslims from all kinds of backgrounds, ethnicities, races, countries, and origins, contrary to my perceptions that Muslims are mainly from the Middle East or South Asia. With that kind of diversity, I was no longer feeling strange with regard to my race and ethnic background.

Until then, no one had said anything; they just came by and sat on the carpeted floor all around me, and soon, I felt myself becoming part of the community itself. A young African American woman sat by me and greeted me. She asked if I was new here as she hadn't seen me before, and I said yes. She did not inquire about my faith nor asked why I was dressed differently than the others. She smiled and welcomed me and went about with her prayers, which she kept reciting. A few minutes later, Aaminah showed up and sat beside me and introduced everyone to me that I was a non-Muslim colleague from the University and that I was there as part of my project. The women around me seemed quite jubilant and happy, and I saw almost everyone who heard Aaminah greet me with welcoming words and smiles.

Friday Prayer, the Imam's Sermon, and Community Life at the Mosque

The sermon started, and everyone became quiet as we all listened to the Imam speak. He talked about various issues in the community, such as the problems of young men being out on the streets, drug addictions, and other problems the community was facing and urged them to follow the ways of God as detailed in the Quran and the Traditions of the Prophet Muhammad. Islam does not prohibit Muslims from barring non-Muslims from the Mosque (Al-Munajjid, 1999). As a Protestant, I was listening very carefully to the sermon's words, and many of the theological concepts he discussed were already familiar to me. Growing up in a Protestant family, where attending Church on Sunday is the norm.

As the sermon finished, it was time for everyone to stand up for prayer. Muslims pray in the congregation, and they do a number of steps involving standing, bowing, and prostrating. As the prayer started, the women began to converge and stand side by side with one another. No one had asked me to leave, although I knew now that I was especially the odd one out at the time. Aaminah asked me if I wanted to join her in the prayer, but I excused myself and went to the back row, which

was empty. As I saw the women pray, I had mixed and discomforting feelings about it. At some point, I was driven to conform to the group so that I did not seem the odd one out. At another point, I felt like a stranger to their ways and beliefs, which I did not believe in. I did not understand why Muslims are so particular about following the exact traditions that they read in their holy texts, which are more than a millennia-old, and I began to wonder why men and women were segregated. Despite many similarities in religious teachings, I found myself questioning different aspects of their faith and beliefs even though I had not had much opportunity to discuss them with anyone.

My experience provided me with an insight into how it feels to be a minority within a group and how defensive and apprehensive one could get in such situations. If the members of the majority are more inclusive, welcoming, and less secretive or exclusive about themselves, such as how the Muslim women who attended the sermons made me feel. In a place where I was a total stranger, my feelings of apprehensiveness were, for the most part, mitigated, yet I still could not help but feel out of place. The exercise implied that it helped me empathize more with other minority members of the community at College. I understood that I might have to initiate breaking the ice, as feelings of apprehensiveness and fear can often come as a barrier to socializing properly (Courtney, 2016). The experience also helped me relate to many Muslims in the US, who are subjected to Islamophobia and hate by some groups, and how to be supportive of minorities when they have undergone an upsetting incident.

References

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