

Sample student submission

Visit to Place of Worship

On April 17, Aaron and I went to the Islamic mosque on 48th street to visit an evening prayer service. This is the building of the Islamic Center of Oklahoma City. Because we were going on a Tuesday, we did wonder on the way as to whether there would be anyone there other than the Imam and ourselves. Thus, we were quite relieved to pull into the parking lot and see eight other cars.

After going into the Mosque and removing our shoes in the entry way, Aaron and I went to the Imam's office. When we greeted him and introduced ourselves, he was very welcoming and open to our observing their prayer service. Before prayer he gave us a tour of the building and explained a little of what we would see during the prayer time.

At about the halfway point of our tour, a gentleman's voice came over the sound system saying something in Arabic. The Imam told us this was the call to prayer. He said that in Muslim countries, the mosques would have large speakers on the outside of the building so that this call would be heard all over the city. Many Mosques have four spires around the central building. Before the advent of electronic sound systems, heralds would stand in those spires and give the call to prayer.

We sat in the back in order to observe the prayer service. As they prepared to start, all the men present stood together foot to foot in a line. The Imam stood just in front of this line. Since this was the evening prayer time, they recited a formal prayer, though the Imam informed us that Islam does have a place for informal prayers, or prayers of supplication.

The entire service was in Arabic. It began with the Imam singing the opening half of the prayer. After this, all the rest of the men sang the same "chapter" of the prayer in response. After this opening chapter, the people all bent at the waist and the Imam sang another part of the prayer. After this, the Imam left a space of silence. He told us later that this was a time in which the people may repeat what he had just sung although such repeating is not necessary. Then everyone bowed prostrate and prayed another long line of the prayer, with a corresponding silence. They repeated this process a second time and then the prayer time was over.

Having just visited an Eastern Orthodox service, this Muslim prayer service was not nearly as outlandish as it might otherwise have seemed to us. Indeed, I reflected that if perhaps we would use more liturgical prayers in our own prayer services, along with our extemporaneous prayers, our services would be more focused.

After the prayer the Imam asked us into his office so he could answer any questions we might have. He was very kind and responsive to all of our questions. After a time, our conversation turned to the tragedy at Virginia Tech. He admitted to us that, along with grief and shock, he initially felt a sense of fear that the shooter might have been Muslim and was relieved when he found that this boy was not. He said that it is sad, but whenever they hear of these sorts of things, they are afraid that the person responsible may have been Muslim, and this would be had for all of the American Muslims.

One thing I noticed, as I compared this experience to what one would see and experience in a Nazarene congregation, was that the men gathered for the Muslim service were of quite diverse backgrounds. Of the twelve or so in attendance, the majority were

Arab. However, there were also some black people and at least one or two white men. This was interesting. It made me curious as to what there was in this religion that appealed to these various groups. Also, those who were not Arab seemed to be of the "hard" working class. In talking with a few of the men, I gathered that the Arab men were the most well-educated of the gathering. I am not indicating this had anything to do with the participation of those of other ethnic background; it is merely an observation.

During the service, there were several young boys in the mosque. About halfway through the prayer, they began to stir. The oldest was maybe five years old. They began to run and play and make a good amount of noise. Yet, this did not seem to faze any of the men. They merely allowed the children to play while they continued praying. This focus on the prayer and away from the children was interesting. The fathers made no effort to quiet the boys whose activity I thought would have detracted the adults from their prayers. This is unlike Protestant churches, where parents usually are expected to remove loud children at the expense of their own worship.