

Christina Yost



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So, a Christian Seminary Student Walks into a Mosque...

By Christina Yost

I went and visited a mosque a couple of weeks ago as part of a class assignment where we were supposed to visit a congregation or faith community different than our own. Where specifically we visited was left open, but underlying the site visit was the purpose of having those in the class visit a context where we may be the “other.” The idea was not to go to the sister congregation up the street, but, for instance, if one was in a monoracial or ethnic church, then he or she might go visit a congregation that was of a different race or ethnicity or, perhaps, multiracial or ethnic. I chose to visit a mosque during *jummah* prayer. I had been to a mosque during Friday prayer before, just over two years ago, while on a college trip to Chicago, so I thought it would fit the project perfectly.

What I didn’t expect was how strongly I realized, as I pulled into the parking lot of the mosque by myself, how much I really felt out of my element. When I visited the mosque in Chicago, it was in the company of fourteen other people from my college. We had already been at the mosque that morning, learning more about Islam before we attended prayer. I was in a different context for sure, but I was in a group, so the experience of being other didn’t register quite as strongly as it did as I pulled into the parking lot, exited my car, and began walking towards the entrance to the mosque.

This wasn’t my religious tradition. I didn’t know the prayers, and I had never been to this particular place before. I remember being most nervous not about anything personal, but about the possibility of disrespecting the mosque or the prayer unintentionally. This visit may have come about as the result of a class project, but this was a religious

community of people who cared deeply about their faith, and I wanted nothing more than to be respectful of that and not in any way do something to disrespect or devalue their tradition.

As I entered the building, however, my state of being was completely different from the nerves and overwhelming sense of being the “other” that I had been feeling in the parking lot. The hospitality they shared with me was excellent: warm greetings, helpful guidance, and an eagerness to make me feel welcome, all the things you would imagine great hospitality to be. It put me at ease, and once that happened, I was back in my element.

Sure, it wasn't the context I was used to, and I still didn't know the prayers, but I had a wonderful experience observing the worship and talking with a woman from the outreach group afterwards. And the prayer itself was absolutely beautiful and spiritual. The seamless transitions between English and Arabic, the beautiful sounds of the Arabic recitations of the Qur'an, the way everyone moved together during prayer...the strong spiritual connectedness and community among those gathered reminded me of what I had experienced and what I had enjoyed the most when I went to *jummah* prayer at the Chicago mosque.

As I drove home that afternoon, I remembered why interfaith relations and dialogue are so important: we get to have these experiences, where we interact with people from different religious traditions and experience their living tradition, rather than relying on a textbook or word of mouth to communicate those experiences.

I went to the mosque for a class assignment, but came away with an experience much deeper and much more meaningful. Our religious traditions aren't just something in a book or the worship spaces themselves, but real living traditions with real people and beautiful expressions of the divine. When we can share that with each other, across denominations and traditions, and be in dialogue and relationship with one another, it is something beautiful in and of itself, something that one can attain by going to these different spaces and experiences with an open heart and mind.

So, a Christian seminary student walks into a mosque, and as it would turn out, learns something about it and about herself, and has a great time doing so.