

As Salamu Alaykum or Peace be Upon You

Monday October 21, our book study group had the privilege of visiting the beautiful **Baitun Nur Mosque** in NE Calgary. The name means “house of light” and it is the home of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community.

At 48,000 square feet, the Mosque was the largest in Canada when it was consecrated in 2008. I would like to share a little of our experience there.

We were welcomed by a gracious young imam, one of three at the Mosque. After leaving our coats and belongings in the library, he invited us to visit the worship space before prayers began. We women adjusted the scarves covering our hair, and all of us removed our shoes before entering the carpeted prayer hall. It was a huge room, the high ceiling and absence of furniture adding to the sense of vastness. The only real adornment was an enormous chandelier, suspended from the large dome. Entering, I felt a sense of humility.

As we stood around the imam, we were full of questions including: What training did it take to become an Imam? Where did the women worship? and Did they have difficulty getting their young people to attend?

Quick answers for a couple of these questions: The women prayed in another space we did not visit, which has a screen projecting from the prayer hall. In our reflections afterwards, many ladies agreed we would like to have the opportunity to join and to speak to the women, to help us better understand this separation during worship.

And, yes, the Ahmadis, too, have to work hard to entice their youth to attend. In fact, they have a gym in the Mosque and organize youth activities which end just in time for prayers! Holy Envy!

We were invited to enjoy refreshments in the social room, while the Imam gave an interesting presentation about Islam. We also learned about the Ahmadiyya Community of Muslims, who believe Hadhrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the founder of their community in 1889, is the Mahdi or Messiah. For this belief, they could be persecuted in some Muslim countries such as Pakistan. So they appreciate the religious freedom in Canada.

The Imam also reminded us that our two faith traditions have a common Abrahamic history, and that Jesus is also part of Muslim theology. In answer to Eldon's question, “Do you believe that your God is my God?” he smiled and answered, “Yes, I do,” confirming what was in the hearts of a number of us.

Ahmadis also have an equal interest in interfaith dialogue and in working towards peace. Our host stated categorically that people perpetrating violence in the name of Allah were not true Muslims.

Learning of the outreach their members practise, in our community and around the world, both in service and financial aid, was a moment of Holy Envy. It was their youth who went and cleaned up Olympic Plaza after our New Year's Eve festivities, for example.

The call to evening prayer took us back to the prayer hall. This time, the room was set with a few rows of chairs in the front left-hand side for older worshippers, as well as a line of chairs for us, set behind the rows of men, some of whom were already at their prayers.

I heard someone ask his friend quietly who we were. "Oh they are Christians who are visiting." This was the first time I was aware of being identified as "a Christian", and realized that, there, as warmly as I was welcomed, I was "the other."

It made me wonder how often I might have inadvertently caused people from different cultures or faith traditions to feel "Other".

Once in our places, I felt somewhat uncomfortable as a woman, invading the space of these men, watching as they went through the various postures of their prayers. We received some startled looks as new people came in, and I appreciated their generosity in taking our presence in their stride, and moving on with their own worship, hopefully as if we were not there. It was kind of them all to allow us the possibility of observing to learn more about them and their faith.

Back in the social room after prayers, the Imam invited us each to take a gift package of two books: *The Life of Muhammad*, and *World Crisis and the Pathway to Peace*, the latter written by the current head of the worldwide Ahmaddiya Muslim Community.

It was a fascinating evening. We were grateful to have been welcomed so graciously and with such generosity. I learned so much and there is so much more to learn.

If you are piqued by Holy Curiosity today, like we were as we read Holy Envy and enjoyed our visits, if you would like to learn more about the Ahmadiyya Muslim faith, I suggest you check out the Baitun Nur website, where you will also find pictures of this beautiful mosque.

Thank you.