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Mustafa Center: “A Trip to the Mosque”

by Rachel Friske

After my first field trip, I enjoyed having a tour guide to take me through the experience. I asked my friend Abdul, who is Muslim, to accompany me to a mosque, so I can see what the Islamic culture and beliefs are like and how they are taught and worshiped. However, Abdul did not want to visit his family mosque, he wanted to go to a new service he has not experienced yet. After some online research, Abdul and I chose the Mustafa Center, located at 6844 Braddock Rd, Annandale, VA 22003.

Knowing little to nothing about the Islamic culture and its beliefs, I decided to do some research before attending the service with Abdul. For starters, Islam is a religion of mercy, tolerance, generosity of spirit, inner peace, and tranquility. For a fifth of the world's current population, Islam is a way of life that is found around the world. Due to this, Islam may slightly differ from culture to culture, yet they all consider themselves to be Muslim, follow specific beliefs, and all worship the same God, one God, Allah. By following the Quran and the five pillars, Muslims achieve peace, truth, and happiness.

The Quran is a complete record of the exact words revealed by God. Followers are expected to memorize its entirety, all 114 surahs (chapters). In summary, it is the principle source of every Muslim's faith and practice. It deals with everything that may be of concern to the human life, including: profound spiritual

wisdom; religious doctrine and ethics; and worship and law. However, its basic theme is the intimate relationship between God and his creatures. At the same time, the Quran provides guidelines for a just and good society, proper human conduct, and equitable economic practices.

The five pillars of Islam are the basis of Muslim life and are the foundation upon which the faith itself stands. The first and foremost of which is the testimony: “There is no deity except God; Muhammad is the messenger of God.” The second pillar is the daily ritual prayers, or Salah. These prayers are performed five times a day, everyday, and are a direct link between the worshipper and God. The third pillar is charity, or Zakah. Everything belongs to God; thus, obligatory charity and cutting back balances encourages both purification and growth. Zakah is a unique concept, compared to other forms of giving, in that it redistributes the wealth of society could effectively eliminate poverty and world hunger altogether. The fourth pillar is fasting in the month of Ramadan, an essential part of being a Muslim. Muslims fast from dawn until sunset, abstaining from food, drink, and marital relations. Fasting is not only beneficial to ones health, but it also engenders empathy for those less fortunate. However, fasting is mainly a method of self-purification, spiritual discipline, and self-restraint. By withholding oneself from certain worldly comforts, no matter for how long, the fasting person is able to focus on

the purpose in this life by constantly being aware of God, and realizing the importance of their final destination, the after life. It is a special time for Muslims everywhere; a time for clearer reflection and heightened spirituality. The fifth and final pillar is pilgrimage, or Hajj. Over two million people, from all corners of the globe, go for Hajj each year, making it the largest gathering for peace, worship, and unity known to humankind. Hajj also provides a unique opportunity for people of different nations and cultures to meet one another and share similar beliefs.

As we pulled into the parking lot, the white building stood out compared to its surroundings. It was very traditional looking with a light-green dome in the center, two domed minarets on each side, an arch entrance portico supported by columns, and blue tiles with Quranic inscriptions. As we walked into the two-story building, the first floor consisted of offices, classrooms, a library, gathering hall, and restrooms. When we followed the other members up the stairs to the second floor known as the musallaa (prayer hall), Abdul warned me that the men and women separate for prayer. Walking into the woman's section of the mosque, we were required to remove our shoes upon entry. My attention was immediately drawn to the beautiful chandeliers hanging above and a niche in the wall in the shape of an arch (Mehrab) where people sat on the floor, placed their heads on the ground, and faced to pray. Inside, the mosque was very clean but it wasn't just one big room like a church, instead there were a few hallways that led into separate rooms. In the prayer room, I walked in and was directed to sit down on the carpet along a line that kept us in straight rows. Before the main prayer, I noticed the Muslim women around me doing multiple

prayers. After a few moments went by, I heard the speakers around the room come to life with a man speaking Arabic. Though I never saw the man or could even understand what he was saying, he spoke from the speakers for more than twenty minutes. After the man preached in Arabic, all the woman got up to get ready for their main prayer. I could see why they bent down at the knee first, then to their head. To me, it symbolized that not only were they willing to acknowledge their God as their creator, but to completely submit themselves to him and his will. After the prayer was over, many began leaving immediately, but there were a few that remained sitting, praying. As I was leaving the mosque, I found Abdul waiting for me towards the entrance of the stairs. He smiled and said, "Wasn't what you expected, right?" It was such a simple service and everyone was so nice and respectful. Outside, I noticed that people were not actually rushing towards their cars, but many people were standing and socializing outside. Everyone seemed to be having a wonderful time; kids were running around, the elders were speaking to groups of youngsters about life, politics, and school. It was a very different change of pace seeing that the service was nearly dead silent.

After I asked Abdul questions and discussed my experience and my confusion about some parts of the service, he explained that being a Muslim does not mean that one has to give up their regional culture or family traditions, but means adopting the principles of Islam to better one's life and to attain to peace and security for the afterlife. Muslims, similar to other faith groups, believe that this life is a "temporal realm", to be viewed as a preparation ground for what is to come after. The afterlife comprises of resurrection, the Day

of Judgment, and either a blissful paradise or a blazing hell. God says in the Quran, "Every soul shall taste death. And you will be given your dues on the Day of Judgment. Only the one who is removed from the brink of Hellfire and admitted into Paradise has achieved ultimate success; and the life of this world is nothing but a material illusion" (Quran 3:185). •

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