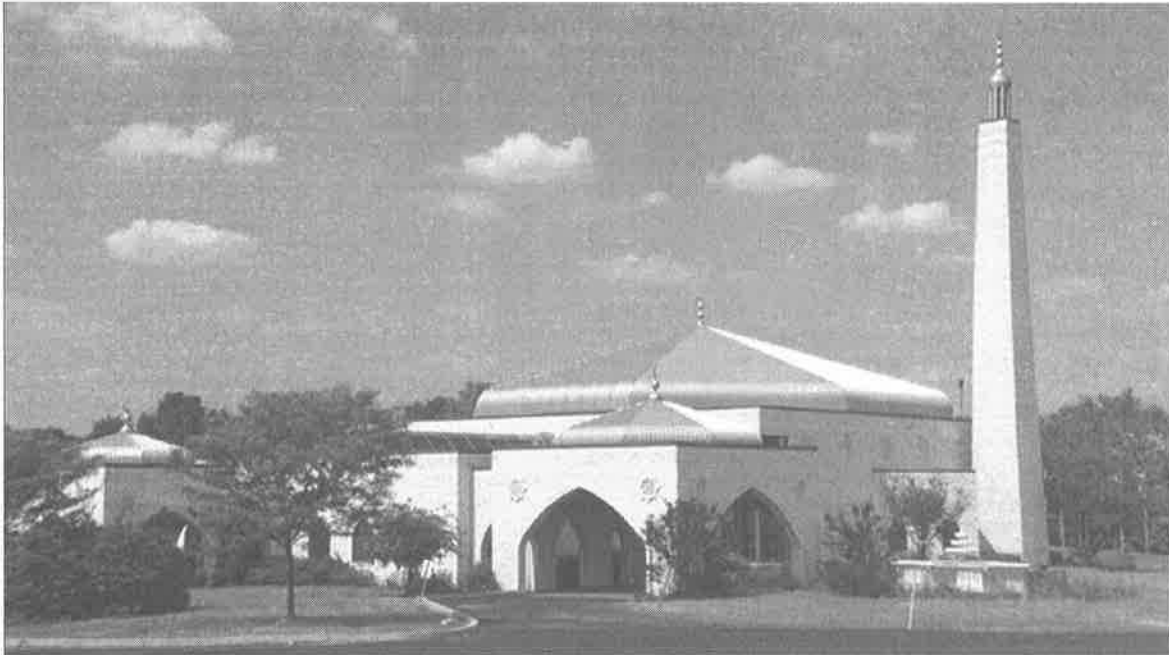


My visit to the Islamic Center of Greater Cincinnati

by Benjamin Knoll | Apr 4, 2017 | Featured | 0 comments



This semester I'm team-teaching a class with a sociologist friend on American political and religious identity. As part of the class we recently took a field trip to the Islamic Center of Greater Cincinnati. Our hosts were wonderful and spent several hours giving us an introduction to Islam, a comprehensive tour of the mosque and community center, and answering our many questions about how they live out their faith in their daily lives.

As someone who was raised in the Mormon tradition, I very much related to them as they explained to us what it's like to grow up and be part of a religion that few people in their community understand or have much background knowledge with. They went out of their way to emphasize how they're just as American and just as "normal" as everyone else in the community. I noticed that they tried to use Christian words to "translate" their faith tradition into terms that most Americans would understand (terms like "church" or "Sunday School", for instance). I had a variety of flashbacks to my missionary days when I employed similar strategies to explain my native Mormon tradition to my fellow Americans who perceived both Mormonism and Islam as unfamiliar as they would Baha'i or Zoroastrianism.

I felt I was speaking to kindred spirits when they explained to us even though there are more than one billion Muslims around the world they're popularly perceived be one monolithic,

homogeneous entity. They wanted to stress that while they all may identify as Muslims, there is a wide variety of ways in which Muslims around the world, and even in the U.S., understand and express their faith. I definitely could relate: most Americans think the same thing about Mormonism. I also felt right at home when they talked about how they sponsor activities throughout the week that youth are invited to and encouraged to attend (more or less their version of Mutual!) and how they'll sometimes do potlucks after services so that members of their community can get to know each other better (Linger-Longers!).

I was especially fascinated as they explained their views on the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad. As they explained it to us, Muhammad was an uneducated rural visionary who received a revelation from the Angel Gabriel which later became a sacred, unifying text of the tradition. This text was then used as proof of the Prophet's divine commission. After all, how could a young, uneducated, rural man produce such marvelous revelations? As our hosts explained, even the local poets of the time could not produce writings that matched the revelations in the Qur'an in their eloquence and power. I once again had flashbacks to my missionary days when I also frequently told a story of a young, rural visionary who received a sacred text from an angel which was proof of this prophet's divine commission, and how critics were unable to produce a revelation on par with those that came from this prophet.

It made me angry when our hosts told us about how they have personally been on the receiving end of side comments at the grocery store comparing them to terrorists. It made me angry to hear about how they avoid doing their ritualistic prayers at airports because they don't want to frighten anyone because doing so might lead someone to think that a terrorist attack is about to begin. It made me angry to think about how someone can be elected President of the United States on a campaign strategy of demonizing and fear-mongering of this devout and faithful religious group, and that two-fifths of the U.S. currently supports banning future immigration of this faith's adherents.

At the same time, I'll admit that it was difficult for me when they explained the role of women in Islam. As they explained, men and women are 100% equal in Islam despite the fact that women aren't permitted to serve as imams and that women pray in a different room or at the back of the room in the mosque during worship services. Their explanation for the latter was simply that women pray in the back so that the men don't look at women bending over and become sexually distracted. I used to believe and even promote similar types of rationalizations about the role of women in the Mormon tradition. I no longer have much patience for those kinds of explanations in my own religious tradition and so it was difficult for me to be completely persuaded by similar types of rationalizations in another conservative religious tradition. I wrestled with this for a while. Part of me wanted to respect and admire the beliefs and prevailing norms in a fellow minority religious tradition, but another part of me had a hard time being persuaded by rationalizations that put women in a "separate but equal" situation because of the uncontrollable sexual appetites of men. It was especially interesting to me when one of the women leading our tour explained that she personally would be okay with women serving as imams, but that religious culture is slow to change and Islam is no exception. I was thinking: "yep, I hear you!"

The more I learn about other religious traditions, the more I've come to see that many of things that are challenging for me in my native religious tradition (Mormonism) are often not unique

at all to Mormonism but rather are common to most conservative religious traditions including Evangelical Christianity, conservative Catholicism, conservative Judaism, and Islam. Those with progressive political or theological sensibilities in those traditions often have the same types of struggles common to many in the Mormon tradition. This has not only helped me have greater patience with many things in contemporary Mormonism, and also helped me see my own native religious tradition more clearly within the wider patchwork of the world's religious mosaic. Perhaps most of all, it has helped me identify with and have greater empathy and understanding for those of other faith traditions, especially those love and honor their native traditions but find themselves somewhat at odds with the prevailing norms, culture, and priorities of the tradition.

For those in the area, the Islamic Center of Greater Cincinnati is open for visits and tours. They are wonderful hosts fantastic neighbors who make our community a better place. I encourage you to stop by and learn more.

Photo credit.

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Benjamin Knoll

Benjamin Knoll is a political science professor at a liberal arts college in central Kentucky. He's a married father of three girls.

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