


Visiting the other children of Abraham

What to expect at a
synagogue or mosque



Back in the 1970s, when I first began exploring the diversity of the world's religions, I read a lot of books. I did that because there weren't many Hindus, Muslims, Jews, or Buddhists in my hometown of Corvallis, Oregon. The American religious landscape was less complex back then.

Today, we live in a more diverse religious environment. Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims are no longer people who live "over there" but are our neighbors and part of the fabric of American life. In 2008, studying another faith means cultivating personal relationships with the parents of my kids' classmates or the Information Technology director at the software company in town.

Visiting non-Christian houses of worship is an easy way to learn about another faith tradition. Well, it's easy if you approach the visit with an open mind and an awareness of the potential problems an interfaith encounter can bring.

One of the biggest barriers to interfaith sharing is the firm belief we bring to the dialogue. To put it bluntly, it's difficult not to assume an air of superiority, to feel that *my* religion is the best of faiths. Sure, my Hindu or Jewish friends have perfectly fine religions, but their religions do not express the fullness of God's will for humanity as found in Christianity. And my dialogue partners

likely hold the same thoughts about their faith vis-à-vis Christianity. For all believers, this attitude of religious superiority remains a handicap in pursuing a deep and creative interfaith dialogue.

The difficulty we face in dialogue stems from the very nature of religion. Because religion takes the believer into realms of salvation and ultimate meaning, the stakes are much higher and the emotions much stronger than, say, my political choice for president. This sense that my religion is better than yours has been expressed clearly by Pope Benedict in his controversial pronouncement (available on the Vatican website) that non-Catholics are "in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of means of salvation."

What Pope Benedict expresses openly is, I suspect, what most of us believe quietly to some degree: My faith provides the fullest expression of God's purpose and will. That said, there is a counterbalancing view that God works through all creation and all religions, and that in our global village we must become more fluent in the languages of many faiths. In his book *Christianity and the World Religions* (Doubleday, 1986), Catholic theologian Hans Kung boiled it down to two essential points: We must come to recognize that truth and untruth run through every faith tradition, and there can be no peace in the world until there is peace among religions.

Kung suggests recognizing that we may believe in the absolutes of our own faith tradition, but at the same time we should acknowledge how our understanding remains limited, relative, and open to mistakes and the need for change. Meeting with believers from other religions is a wonderful means of shedding light on just what we do believe and how our beliefs can be deepened, expanded, questioned, and tested.

Visiting a synagogue

I love going to synagogue. In my town we have two vibrant Jewish communities — Reform and Renewal — both led by brilliant rabbis. I am always touched by the warm bonds of affection apparent between members of the synagogue and extended toward guests. Entering synagogue feels just like a welcoming family experience. That sense of family and tradition is palpable in acts of love such as the kissing of one's fingers and then touching the plaque placed in the sanctuary in memory of a deceased parent or child.

Synagogue is the most common name for a Jewish spiritual center. It is the Greek translation of the Hebrew *beit kneset* (house of spirituality). Orthodox and Chasidic Jews often prefer *shul* to synagogue, while Reform Jews also refer to their place of worship as the Temple.

Every synagogue has four common elements.

1. There is at least one Torah — the Hebrew Bible, which contains the first five books of the Old Testament — written in calligraphy on a parchment scroll.
2. The Torah scroll is housed in an Ark, a beautiful wood cabinet placed at the front of the sanctuary.
3. The sanctuary is oriented so that prayers are said facing Jerusalem.
4. Above the Ark is a lamp called the *ner tamid* (eternal light), which remains lit at all times to represent the eternal presence of God.

Christians will find synagogue services familiar yet wonderfully different. There are hymnbooks to follow, the rabbi usually provides a meditation or rabbinic teaching, there's lots of music. Yet the experience of a *shabbat* service reflects the uniqueness of Jewish spirituality. It's hard to characterize this spirituality succinctly, but for me it has to do with the openness of the Jewish people to the fullness and richness of life — life in its highest and

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best moments right along side its darkest dimensions. Jews know the pain of exile and persecution, culminating in the Holocaust (*Shoah* in Hebrew). But they also know the beauty of their psalms and sacred texts, great literature, music, art, science, and spirituality.

It is this ability to look life straight in the eye that makes Jewish spirituality so vibrant. The stories from Jewish scripture and history provide endless food for thought on the complexities of life and guide us to search for meaning in what often looks like a meaningless world.

But back to synagogue services. Here are some aspects of attending synagogue to be aware of:

- Appropriate dress for synagogue is what you might wear to church or to a business meeting. Renewal congregations are often more casual in attire, however, so it's always good to check with your host or the synagogue's information person before attending.

- Depending on the congregation, a visiting man may want to don a *yar-mulke* (skullcap), and a visiting married woman should wear a head scarf. Again, check with your hosts regarding such expectations.

- Stand when the Ark housing the Torah is opened and remain standing until it is closed. Sometimes in Reform synagogues the Ark remains open during a part of the service when the congregation may be seated. In this case, the rabbi usually announces that you may be seated.

- In Orthodox synagogues, men and women are not seated together.

- There are some occasions in Orthodox and Conservative services when only some people stand — for example, during the *kaddish* (mourners' prayer) — when only those mourning or commemorating the anniversary of a loved one's death stand.

I highly recommend attending your local synagogue during High Holy Day services. Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Passover services are beautiful and moving ceremonies that will enrich and deepen your understanding of Judaism.

Visiting a mosque

In post-9/11 America, nearly everything about Islam is contested and controversial. Many Muslims feel their faith is under attack from influential quarters, and especially from conservative political and religious sources. Televangelists

Franklin Graham and Pat Robertson have made disparaging comments about Islam, as have countless national and local talk show radio and television commentators, politicians, and columnists.

In short, many Americans have uneasy feelings about Islam and Muslims. Yet despite all of this, Islam continues to grow in America, with reports indicating increases in attendance at mosques and steady conversions to Islam from all sectors of American society. Books on Islam are bestsellers, and the poetry of Rumi, a thirteenth-century Persian-speaking scholar-mystic who lived in what is now Turkey, remains quite popular.

Given this background, a visit to your local mosque is perhaps fraught with more theological tensions than a visit to a synagogue or Buddhist temple. American mosques also have their fair share of internal controversies. Until recently, funding for many mosques came from rigid Saudi Arabia-based religious foundations.

Ibrahim Hooper, director of communications for the Council on American-Islamic Relations, told me that "today any funding of mosques from foreign sources is carefully scrutinized. This just is not an issue anymore, as funding for American mosques now comes mainly from local fundraising efforts."

Another hot button issue for American Muslims is the role of women in the Muslim community and especially at mosques. Mosques, like Conservative synagogues, segregate women and men during religious services. Some mosques go so far as to require separate entrances, and then wall off women believers from men so that there is no interaction during prayer. This has led many Muslims, both men and women, to question their participation in mosque services. Today, only 15 to 20 percent of American Muslims attend mosque regularly.

Some groups are trying to change the culture of American mosques. Several national organizations have joined together



to publish the booklet titled “Women Friendly Mosques and Community Centers.” This widely disseminated work, based on solid scholarship, challenges all mosques in America to create more equitable sacred space for all Muslims.

So, what can you expect at your visit to a mosque? First, the basics:

A mosque is the place of worship for Muslims. The English word comes from the Arabic word *masjid*, which means the place of prostration or prayer. The primary function of the mosque is as a house of prayer. It is also a place for study and the place where major festivals are celebrated. The prayer hall (*musalla*) of a mosque is oriented so that when believers face the *mihrab*, a niche in the wall, they will be facing Mecca while praying.

You’ll immediately notice something different about a Muslim prayer hall compared to a church or Jewish temple. The space is open, with no seating, except for some chairs at the back of the hall for those who require them. This is because the Muslim practice of prayer is a moving meditation, where the supplicant calls on God through a series of movements. The praying Muslim bows, kneels, and touches the nose and forehead to the ground. When believers pray this way together, this invocation to God is a powerful experience.

Muslims say five prayers daily. These are referred to as *salat*, or ritual prayer. These prayers are most often said outside of the mosque, at home or at work. Muslims gather on Friday for group *salat* and to hear a sermon from the mosque’s *imam*, or leader, or from a knowledgeable scholar of Islam. Muslim clerics are, like rabbis, scholars of religious law and do not perform sacred rites as do Christian ministers. In Islam there are no human intermediaries between the individual and God.

As a visitor to a mosque, you will likely want to observe the prayer as opposed to joining in, as it is complicated

To learn more

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Wayne Dosick, *Living Judaism: The Complete Guide to Jewish Belief, Tradition, and Practice*. San Francisco: HarperOne, 1998.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*. New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1976.

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Sachiko Murata and William Chittick, *The Vision of Islam*. New York: Paragon House, 1995.

Karen Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History*. New York: Modern Library, 2002.

Huston Smith, *The Illustrated World’s Religions: A Guide to Our Wisdom Traditions*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2008.

Hans Kung, *Christianity and the World Religions: Paths to Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism*. New York: Doubleday, 1986.

Paul Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue & Global Responsibility*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995.

in its movements and is recited in Arabic, the sacred language of Islamic scripture, the *Qur’an*. Every Muslim learns enough Arabic to recite basic prayers and to make the declaration of faith, known as the *shahada* — *la ilaha illa’llah, Muhammadan rasulallah* (there is no god but God and Muhammad is the Prophet of God). There is no rule against non-Muslims performing the prayer, but you should do so only if you feel you can participate sincerely in the practice.

Jews, Christians, and Muslims share many beliefs while differing on key teachings. It is important not to gloss over the theological diversity, but it is also important to keep sight of those beliefs that unite the children of Abraham. I have been inspired by meeting members of the Abraham Reunion, an interfaith organization based in Jerusalem that brings together Jews, Muslims, and Christians. These lovers of the light work tirelessly to promote common values and peace in the Holy Land. One thing they have found is

that the most effective form of interfaith dialogue is not theological discussion or debate but the sharing of festivals, holy days, and religious ceremonies.

Menachem Froman, an Orthodox rabbi living in the Occupied Territories and friend to Hamas spiritual leaders, says it is time for the children of Abraham — Jews, Muslims, and Christians — to build together a network of life among one another so that peace/shalom/salaam will have a chance to repair this world.

Your visit to a mosque, synagogue, or temple is a practical way to help build bridges of peace. ✉

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