Visit to a Mosque

Following the “Visit My Mosque” initiative of the Muslim Council of Britain, the Madina Masjid Mosque in Batley was open on Sunday 7/2/16. Two Friends from Wooldale Quaker Meeting attended.

We were shown to a car parking space and then to the entrance by a friendly welcoming young man, and then another helped to put our shoes in a rack. There were drinks and dates available for us.

We were just in time for Zohar, mid-afternoon prayer. The mosque is new, broader than it is long. There are no internal obstructions. The roof trusses are transverse, and mostly covered by ceiling panels. The mihrab or semicircular recess is directly opposite the door and is large enough to accommodate the minbar or raised platform. The entire floor is covered by a sumptuous carpet. That, with restrained patterns on the ceiling panels and in the leading of the windows is the only decoration. There was some calligraphy over the mihrab.

Before and after the formal prayer individuals were praying privately and moving separately. In the formal prayer the Imam chanted briefly at intervals and everybody moved together. Throughout the formal prayer individuals entered and joined in neat rows. Young people were included, even small children, but all boys.

After Zohar we visited the adjacent school, Madrasah Islamiyah. This is a large day school for more than 800 pupils, laid out on three floors. There is a triple height entrance hall and a triple height worship space overlooked by galleries on the upper floors. The worship space is used by the girls.

There are carpets throughout, those in the public spaces are sumptuous, and those in the classrooms are plain. They are all kept scrupulously clean. There are separate floors and staircases for boys and girls. The children are aged from 5 to 16 or 17.

There were demonstrations of chanting of the Koran in Arabic, with spoken English translations. The notes used in the chant are at the chanter’s discretion, and chanting is regarded as a gift.

Some young children had come in on their day off to demonstrate the learning of the Arabic alphabet. They are encouraged to speak loudly and clearly, to help them to learn, and to gain confidence. They did indeed speak with piercing intensity. There are about 17 to a class.

Older classes were also shown, concerning memorising the Koran, which could be done in two years, but which involved getting up at 6:00am and learning before school, taking a brief look at what was to be examined by the teacher, and doing more work after school until 8:00 pm. There are about 10 in this class. Memorising the Koran does not mean that they understand it, but to have one who has done this gives prestige to a family. One, having left school, was training to be an Imam.

We heard nothing about Maths or Science. We were invited to inspect the curriculum, but I did not want to put myself in that posture. They expect their pupils to become professionals, so a full curriculum might be assumed.

They described themselves as a young organization. There is a Muslim Federation, but they are autonomous.

In the final session a verse from the Koran was chanted and translated: Allah is one. I have no cause to dispute this, for Allah is a name not for a God but for God.

We were told of studies into how people get their information on faith groups. 97% get it from newspapers. They examined the reports in newspapers and found that 85% of this information was untrue or distorted. In checking the internet for this paper I came across media attitudes to this very initiative as of a desperate attempt to repair a bad image, rather than the hospitable sharing which it was.

Certainly I would not expect to be taken to task for Northern Ireland, or the Inquisition, or the Crusades, and by the same token un-Islamic activities of groups like the Taliban cannot be laid at the door of an independent British Muslim organisation. This needs to be looked at on its own terms.

So what did I see? I saw no oppressed women. One niqab had a white skin behind it, but it did not prevent us from exchanging a smile. One dad was there lovingly carrying his little daughter on his shoulder. Some formalised but apparently meaningful hugs were exchanged between men. I accidentally brushed shoulders with a group of women in the tour of the Madrasah, and the warmth that was shared as a result was unmistakeable. Even if I have questions in my mind, there was a fervour about the place which made it refreshing to be in, and which made my visit more than interesting: it was a blessing.

The visit concluded with a delicious buffet.  Another lovely smile was shared with a young man in this. As Allah is outside as much as inside I led off with my right foot when leaving.

This was my second visit to a Mosque. The other was to Hanfia Masjid in Huddersfield on a Kirklees Faiths Forum event. The fervour, simplicity, friendliness, hospitality, good behaviour of children, and feeling of having been on holy ground were common to both experiences.  I have thought much about it since. How curious that two beautiful Mosques should be found close to each other in West Yorkshire. Isn’t it likely that there are beautiful Mosques all over the country? Then isn’t the media campaign a major crime against humanity? I begin to think that Muslims should not be tolerated. They should be acknowledged, esteemed and admired. They cannot be welcomed as visitors, for they are part of British life and have been for a long time. Their contribution to the economic life of the country is obvious. Now I see a little of their inestimable contribution to its Spiritual well-being.