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TLEE 342 Sec. 1

Henning

Cultural Reflection Assignment

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I grew up in a home that was very religious. I attended a Christian church every Sunday since I was born. My parents encouraged me to go to youth groups, which I did in middle school, and to participate in other various Christian related activities such as weekend camping trips with the church. I have never experienced another religious service before. I have however, always had a curiosity towards the Jewish faith being the foundation of Christianity. I decided to look into a Jewish service to attend. I found a synagogue in DeKalb and contacted them to ensure it was all right for me to attend their service. They were very welcoming, and I attended their service at ten o’clock AM Saturday, November 13, 2010. The service lasted roughly two hours and I stayed afterwards to ask questions and participate in a special prayer which was accompanied by a toast of wine.

In the church and faith I grew up with, service is held on Sunday mornings. The service is conducted in English, and most of the time the people sit and listen to the pastor give his sermon. In this Jewish service however, it was held on Saturday morning and they only meet once a month. Compared to the large congregation of about 200 people in my family’s church, this congregation only had about 10-15 people. Another difference was their Rabbi was a woman as compared to the pastor, who is usually a man, and holds a Christian service. The books used by the congregation open from right to left and read from right to left as compared to the books we are typically used to reading. The books provided the words written in Hebrew in both the Hebrew letters and in letters that we were able to be read. Even though they were provided in this way, I still had no clue as to how to read the words. I followed along with the English however. Most of the service is conducted in Hebrew which was fascinating to listen to. I had never heard it spoken before and it made me glad to know this ancient language is still used in the services. The service began with the congregation singing chants and songs along with the Rabbi and what seemed to be her assistant who was a man that did many of the readings in Hebrew. This singing portion lasted for about 50 minutes. Compared to my Christian church, we would start off the service with songs as well, but it would only last about 15-20 minutes. Furthermore, in my church the music was accompanied by instruments but in this service, all the music was purely vocal.

Next the Rabbi asked for two volunteers from the congregation to come open the arc. I quickly learned that she was referring to a large, wooden cabinet that resembled a wardrobe that was located behind the Rabbi on a platform. Two young men volunteered to open the doors which displayed Hebrew markings. Inside the doors were two more doors that were made of screen which they slid open. Inside were what looked like two scrolls that were around three feet in length (one slightly bigger than the other) adorned in silver shields and bells. The ornaments resembled incense burners. The Rabbi asked the boys to be seated and she took out the larger of the scrolls and continued to walk through the congregation. The members would touch their books to the scroll and kiss it as she walked passed. Also, the people would turn and face the scroll at all times when the Rabbi would walk around the room holding it. The rabbi returned to the front of the room and opened the scroll on a large podium. She asked for volunteers to come read passages. She explained the passages were about a story from the Torah, the Jewish book similar to the Christian Bible, which talked about love. Many people from the congregation came to the front and read from the Torah in Hebrew. I noticed two differences from a Jewish service and a Christian service at this time. I have never witnessed people from a Christian congregation able to come read to the rest of the church before. Also, the Bible is written as a collection of books. The pastor will have the congregation turn to a certain book and chapter to follow along. The Torah is written in a format that has a different lesson for each service. For example, a service’s readings may be a collection of different stories from throughout the Torah instead of having to jump around to different parts of a book.

The Rabbi put away the large scroll in the same fashion as she took it out, walking through the congregation and people touching their books and kissing them as she passed. Next the Rabbi asked for prayer requests. People would say the names of people in need and the congregation would respond with “aheim”. The service ended with the singing of a few more songs and a final prayer.

Even though a Christian service and a Jewish service are very different, I noticed few similarities. In both services the Rabbi or Pastor will ask for prayer requests where the congregation is able to voice the names of people they would like prayer for. Also, at the end of the service, I participated in a special prayer that was accompanied by a small glass of wine. This I thought was similar to taking communion in a Christian service.

After the prayer with the wine, the Rabbi asked if I had any questions. A few others and I asked how old were the scrolls and what they were, and why the books open the opposite way of what we were used to. The Rabbi explained the scrolls could be around 100 years old but she was not sure as to how old the scroll she used was. She said a synagogue may use the scrolls until they simply cannot be used anymore or until they fall apart. She also said the paper was made of cow hide to allow the scrolls to last longer. She then explained that the other smaller scroll inside the arc was another part of the Torah. This allows for the Rabbi to find other passages easier than having to unroll the other Torah to find a passage that could be at the other end. She said this might take fifteen minutes and two Torahs might be used to keep the congregation from waiting. She further explained that the books open in this way because that is the way the Torah is written and how Hebrew text is read, from right to left as opposed to left to right.

I truly found this experience insightful and educational. I was able to practice a different culture and learn in a “hands on” approach. The people of the congregation were very warm and welcoming which was very appreciative. At the end of the service, it was very evident that this was a close community of friends. They discussed upcoming festivities and parties they would be having with the synagogue and were all very involved in each other’s lives. I learned this Jewish community was very close and were very open to newcomers into their congregation. After having this experience, I think it would be very important for my own class to learn about a Jewish service. If I happen to have a Jewish student in my classroom, I will be very encouraging in having them share what a service is like for them as compared to a Christian service for the rest of the class to learn. I think it would also be very beneficial if I could acquire a Rabbi or a member of the congregation to come give a presentation on their faith for my future classes. I think it is also important that around the winter holidays a teacher does not just talk about Christmas. Hanukkah happens around this time as a well. It is important for young students to know about the different cultures and their holidays as well. I will incorporate lessons on Christian and Jewish holidays along with Kwanza for example, which also happens in the winter months.

When we analyzed the different culture posters in class that showed how different cultures live, it showed us how people value things in many different ways. It taught us to look at cultures and learn that people have different preferences for what is important. Like this activity, visiting the Jewish synagogue showed me how different cultures experience their faith. It is evident that religion is held together by fellowship and the acceptance of others in your community or congregation. This is an important viewpoint to keep in mind when becoming a teacher. A classroom is a community, similar to a congregation, where students must feel welcome and important by their peers and teacher. This cultural experience as truly made this viewpoint clear for my future as a teacher.