

I made two visits to [a] Leeds [mosque]. The first was on Monday 21st November 2011 and the second was on Tuesday 6th December 2011.

My personal background in the situation is that having attended both a faith (Jewish) primary and secondary school, I had never studied Islam before, nor had any real dialogue with people of the faith. Visiting [the mosque] was my first real encounter with Islam. I felt that that I was impartial and had no firm assumptions.

The 2001 census showed that there are 21,394 Muslims in Leeds making it the second largest religious group after Christian. I interpreted the vastness of the Mosque to serve as a symbolic focal point to the large prominence of Islam in the area. Before [the mosque] was built it used to be a Church which had been abandoned for many years this shows the changing religious demography of the area. Previously, another Mosque had fulfilled the needs of the local Muslim community, this was founded in the early 1970s by converting two houses into a mosque. However, as the Muslim community increased around the area, this space was unable to accommodate all the attendees.

My initial point of enquiry was to explore the relationship between the sacred and the mundane in Islam. More broadly speaking, I was interested in exploring the nature of religion in general. I hoped to gain an affirmative definition of the sacred and mundane as I found the concepts often referred to but never well defined. The way in which I would achieve my goals would be by focussing on the meaning and use of religious items and symbols within the Mosque as well as how the Mosque is a sacred building. I chose this theme because I was acutely aware of the possibility of inferring generalised or stereotyped conclusions about the religion (i.e. by exploring something like gender). I was cautious to avoid this from happening as best as I could and I felt that the topic that

I had chosen, was the one where I could draw the most impartial conclusions. However, during my visits I felt that my awareness of this gave me a timidity which prevented me from wanting to carry out further research, such as interviewing attendants. I chose an interview setting to conduct my research as I felt that it was the most fitting to the theme and I recorded both interviews using a dictaphone. In any case if I had wished to observe a prayer service, I do not think that I would have been able to due to the fact that all the participants worshipping were male in the mosque at the time I was invited to come.

On my first visit, I arrived at around 4pm when I went to the Islamic art exhibition. When I had contacted the Mosque to arrange a time to visit, they told me to come to the exhibition as it was open to the wider community. This was an interesting example of cross-cultural exchanges whereby people of different religions are able to interact with each other. As I went toward the end of the day and on the last day of the exhibition, the room very empty and quiet, it was only me and a few other women viewing the exhibition who also weren't of the faith. The exhibition displayed mainly calligraphic art of passages and quotes from the Qu'ran. There were also informative posters which were there to teach people about the religion. Although I did look round the exhibition, it was not a very significant feature to my visit.

I encountered a problem in my methodology as I wasn't sure who would be the correct person to interview, my eagerness to speak to someone meant that I didn't fully clarify which position he played within the institution before I started interviewing him. From what I later understood, his role was in assist open days and giving tours, due to his age I inferred that he was retired and was probably involved with the mosque voluntarily in

his spare time. As his did not play a religious role within the mosque, I was unaware to the extent of his credibility as the information which he imparted could have been no more than his own perception on things. However, due to my lack of knowledge about the religion, I adopted the method of 'neutrality and methodological agnosticism... [relying] on insider accounts without evaluating their truth or falsity'¹.

On my first visit, I was surprised by the aesthetic nature on the building as I was not expecting it to be so decorated. I found the calligraphy and the colours very artistic and visual. The man who I interviewed said that this was to sanctify the worship as God likes beauty because He is beautiful. The carpet which was blue and gold was to represent the heavens which are blue and gold is one of the most precious things on this earth is gold. He explained that the immaculateness of the Mosque is because in Islamic thought to make a connection with God everything needs to be clean and pure. I was able to glean some understanding about the relationship between the sacred and the mundane. The man explained that the lineated rectangular floor serves to show that everyone had their own space on the floor in which to pray. This was to symbolise that everyone prays next to each other to remove any kind of status or hierarchy and to show that no one has superiority over others regardless of who they are. The man explained that when praying everyone is equal before the eyes of the Lord.

The first man talked to me about the Mosque's appearance and features whereas the Imam was able to explain to me about their religious significance.

¹ Knott, K. (2005). Insider/Outsider Perspectives. In J. Hinnells (Ed.), *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religions*. London/New York: Routledge, p. 245

The first interview took the form of an semi-structured interview whereby I had some guideposts as to what I would be asking, although no real definitive questions and it consequently had an open ended character where the interviewee was able to answer on his own terms. I felt that the broad nature of enquiry allowed me to go off and explore tangents. However, although helpful and assisting, I felt the interviewee was frustrated about this form of interview and my use of improvisation and he asked me a number of times if I could clarify what I wished to find out.

On my second visit, I was able to obtain an interview Imam after their evening prayer service. For this visit, I had a clearer understanding of what I wanted to ask. I arrived early and waited outside the Mosque by the entrance until they had finished praying and it was okay for me to enter. When their service had finished and the men exited the mosque and passed by me I felt quite awkward and out of place due to the clear differences of age, gender, dress, religion and ethnicity and was intensely aware of my outsider status. Furthermore, I didn't know what was the proper etiquette between genders and wasn't sure if making eye contact was deemed inappropriate. The men were a variation of ages, although I'd estimate that the average age was around 40. Many of them were dressed in religious attire wearing tunics.

I had to wait a while to speak to the Imam as he was advising a young man over a potential marriage partner who the man was explaining came from a different religious background to him and had different religious views. His discussion with the Imam was about how he could reconcile their differences in order to continue dating. Their

discourse took place in an informal² and intimate setting. My own role in this process was passive and detached, I was told to sit on the chair at the back of the room to wait to speak to the Imam. I was thus able to hear the whole conversation. I found the fact that they didn't mind me sitting in the room rather odd due to the nature of the conversation, however I presumed that the individuals involved didn't mind this as I had a detachment from both them and the subject matter. The situation that I witnessed showed that the Imam was closely involved with personal aspects of his community's lives and that his role was to give advice. The Imams availability to stay behind after their prayer time to talk to the man and then to me illustrated the flexibility of his routine to meet the demands of his congregation. This was also shown by the fact that I left the mosque at around 8:45pm, one hour and fifteen minutes after the conclusion of the evening service.

I was expecting there to be lots of religious symbolism and was surprised by what I thought to be a very minimalist environment. The Imam explained that a purpose built mosque only has three key features: the arch where the leader of the prayer stands called a mihrab, minarets (towers) and a dome. In the room for prayer, other than the mihrab, the only other religious symbolism which I found was strings of beads hung up on the walls, the Imam informed me that this was to help people count how many times they have chanted the name of God whilst they are praying.

² Although I drew this conclusion due to them sitting on the floor. As this was natural to the participants it may not have been an informal setting for them.

The Imam explained that the Mosque is a holy building as the building belongs to God and that the people in possession of it are just looking after it. The dome is to show that it is a supreme building, to differentiate it from others. However, he also explained that whilst it is preferable to worship together in a mosque, a Muslim is not restricted to just a mosque and is able to pray in different locations, thus I did not fully understand why the mosque was considered a sacred building and I was unable to differentiate the Mosque from everyday life. From further reading I read that ‘the world is one vast mosque or “place of prostration” and every phenomenon in the world owes a debt to God by bowing down before him.³ Thus I understood that worship is not just relegated to the private sphere but there are opportunities everywhere for the mundane to be elevated to a more sacred status. Elevating the mundane was not confined to particular times and places.

In attempting to explore the theme, my conclusions were rather inconclusive. I was faced by the interconnectedness of the sacred and the mundane and, as a result of this I was unable to garner affirmative definitions of the concepts. The Imam explained to me that “there is not a comprehensive concept of worship, everything you do with the right intentions can be an act of worship”. Whilst attending a mosque may be considered a more sacred in the act in the sense that it is something which is done purely for God, he explained that things considered mundane such as eating and sleeping can be as holy as someone reciting the Qur'an if done in the way that

³ Mahmutcehajic, R. (2006). *The Mosque: The Heart of Submission*. Place: Fordham University Press, p.

Mohammed did as both can result in people being rewarded.

I also attempted to explore how ‘sacred space [is]… set apart from ordinary, profane space’⁴. One observation was the removal of shoes before one enters the mosque as a sign of respect. The first man I interviewed explained that Muslims are also required to clean themselves as the cleansing of the body reflects mirroring the impending cleansing of spirit (which takes place five times a day through prayer). Washing one’s self is also viewed as the proper way of presenting one’s self before God in order to make sure that one is ready to be received by God, from this I inferred that one’s body could be considered a sacred space. The interviewee explained that ‘man is just an object standing on the face of the earth but his spirit is in line with God.’ The direction of the building is a sacred space as the mihrab which indicates the direction of prayer which is towards Makkah.

If done again, I think I would have perhaps explored another theme rather than the sacred and the mundane. I feel that the fieldwork setting would have been better suited to a theme in which I could have made more use of observational data. In retrospect, I can see that my aim to gather definitive definitions of the sacred and the mundane was too unattainable and idealistic. It would have been interesting to focus more on the nature of leadership and the hierarchical structure within the religious institution.

⁴ Knott, K. (2005). Geography, space and the sacred. In J. Hinnells (Ed.), *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religions*. London/New York: Routledge, p. 479

- Knott, K. (2005). Insider/Outsider Perspectives. In J. Hinnells (Ed.), *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religions*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Knott, K. (2005). Geography, space and the sacred. In J. Hinnells (Ed.), *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religions*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Laureau, A. (1996). *Journeys through Ethnography: Realistic Accounts of Fieldwork*. Oxford: Westview Press.
- Mahmutcehajic, R. (2006). *The Mosque: The Heart of Submission*. Place: Fordham University Press.
- May, T. (2001). *Social research: Issues, methods and process*. Buckingham: Open University Press.