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Religion 345  
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April 8, 2003

*The Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship*

Early Sunday morning I arrived at the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship attempting to tie a scarf around my head so that none of my hair was showing when I met a small woman who said hello and then assisted me with my scarf. This was my very first encounter with someone at the Fellowship and my first inclination that I was going to be welcomed into the community. Throughout the entire meeting and worship service at the Fellowship, the members were more than willing to answer any and all of my questions and to explain to me how and why certain activities were taking place. Overall, it was an interesting experience in which I was able to learn a great deal concerning a religion new to me.

After the removal of shoes and the head covering, it was time to enter the meeting room. The setup of the space and the decorations along the walls were intriguing. The room itself was about the size of a large classroom, with the seats arranged as if they were in an auditorium and a small, elevated platform was positioned in front of the chairs. At the rear of this platform there was a green armchair, which later I found was where Bawa sat while teaching the members, and an elaborate drawing above it on the wall. Throughout the duration of the meeting, no one sat in this chair. Instead, those who were speaking sat in front of the chair on the floor. It was as if the chair was sacred, similar to the crucifix for Catholics. Just as the crucifix symbolizes the death of Jesus, the messenger of God, the chair represents Bawa, the representative of the Prophet Muhammad.

Once the meeting began, a recitation of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen's own words was given by one of the elders in the Fellowship, who sat in front of the chair and faced the other members. The two discourses read dealt with the concepts of parenting and living as a teenager. Although I found these readings interesting, I was curious as to why the members were listening to the writings of Bawa, a mere teacher, and not the words of the Prophet Muhammad. It seemed as if the people were worshipping and praising Bawa throughout the meeting, treating him as though he were a higher being, as if all that he had taught were the truths of the world. There was no speaking of the Qur'an or the Prophet, only of Bawa and how much he had done for the Fellowship and how much he had taught them about religion, life, and spirituality.

The last event of the meeting itself was watching a video of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen speaking to the children of the Fellowship on living according to God's laws. From this video, I was able to learn some interesting information. First of all, Bawa never learned to speak English when he came to America. Instead, there was always a translator with him. Also, there were many children who were part of the Fellowship even from the very beginning. Although they were supposed to be listening to what Bawa was teaching them, it was obvious that they were acting just as any other child would, appearing bored and restless after only a few minutes of the discourse.

At the end of this video, the call to prayer was announced over a loud speaker, consisting of a chant in Arabic lasting about two minutes. After this, everyone who was going to take part in the formal prayer went into his or her designated washrooms to perform ablution. Men and women were separated because directly after ablution was

the entrance into the mosque, in which men and women are unable to see each other for fear of physical distraction from prayer.

According to the directions of Bawa, men and women of all backgrounds are considered equal within the Fellowship; no one is discriminated against or unable to participate in the activities of the group. However, when it comes to the traditional prayers and religious practices of the Fellowship, Bawa instructed that they be carried out in the traditional sense, with men and women being separated, all covering their heads, and the prayers of Islam being carried out properly. Therefore, at the Fellowship, everyone gathered together within the meeting room. But once it was time to pray in the mosque, men and women were separated, those who were unclean were not allowed in the mosque, and all were required to cover their heads with hats (for the men) and scarves (for the women). I found this whole practice interesting, the way in which the Fellowship is attempting to include all people, yet still limits those who are allowed to take part in formal prayer. In a way, it seems as though they are contradicting themselves, saying everyone is welcome in one breath, and then refusing formal prayer to certain people in the next.

After performing ablution and learning the reasons for it, which are to cleanse the physical, mental, and spiritual self in preparation for meeting God, I made sure that my head was completely covered, that the only extremities visible were my face, hands and feet, and then I entered the mosque. During the prayer, I simply observed the actions of the other women, the prostrations of prayer, the chanting of God's name (led by one of the elders), and observed the designs along the walls. I later learned from one of the members that the gold writing that adorned the border of the mosque actually contained

the ninety-nine names for Allah that the Sufis chant during certain prayers throughout the day. Also, the writing in the center of the room contains the name of the Prophets and the meaning of Sufism, which is purity of heart, intention, thought, conduct, and speech.

At the end of the formal prayer, each of the women present embraced one another, making sure to address the two angels supposedly sitting on the left and right shoulders of each individual. This practice appears to be very similar to the Roman Catholic practice of the Sign of Peace. The words that the members stated roughly translate to “May the Peace of God be with you. And may the Peace be also with you.” These words are almost the exact same as those Catholics recite as they shake hands, embrace, or kiss the other members of their congregation. The reasons for this action are not completely the same for both religions, but the basic meaning behind them are similar, to wish peace among one another.

Finally, after the meeting and the prayers ended, it was time to share a meal with one another, which had been prepared by certain members of the Fellowship earlier in the day. During this time, I had the opportunity to speak to a variety of people and also ask any last minute questions that I had. Overall, the people were friendly and open, willing to assist and share all that they were able to with me.

Reading about the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship and hearing about them from other people did not have the same effect on me as actually attending and participating in the activities of the group. Knowing the background and the basis of the Fellowship helped me prepare for my experience, but I definitely would not have gained as much knowledge and insight into the Fellowship had I not met the members personally, had the ability to participate, or had the opportunity to answers to my questions directly from the

source. Overall, the project opened my eyes to a new religious that I knew nothing about until attending the worship service and meeting the people who practice this faith. In the end, I met friendly and welcoming people who simply love Allah and have a desire to continue to practice and pass on the teachings of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen.