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Religions in Philadelphia- Tennis

Alien Worship

For my Alien Worship Project, I attended a Quaker meeting at the Lansdowne Friends Meeting House in my home town. I am Catholic, so this type of silent worship was completely foreign to me. However, after experiencing the meeting, I found that I really like the quiet meditation. I felt that I could take part at my own pace. The whole occurrence was very relaxed, from the setting of the meeting, to the fact that everyone was dressed very casually; jeans, shorts, and t-shirts was the norm on this day.

Upon arriving at the meeting house, any nervousness that I had been experiencing before had immediately gone away. I was the first person to arrive because I was a little over-anxious, so I looked around to get a basic feel for the meeting house. As I first walked into the building, there was a small common room that had pictures covering almost every inch of the walls. There were polaroids of previous visitors and drawings done by the children of the Lansdowne Friends School that is next door. Throughout the space, there were numerous Quaker resource materials. I looked at some of the books and noticed names of people that we studied in class: George Fox, Mary Dyer, William Penn, and others. They actually had all the books that we use in class.

While waiting for the members to arrive, I looked at the part of the House where the “gathering” took place. Being a Catholic, I am used to seeing statues, pictures, candles flowers, and many other decorations throughout my church. However, there were no such things found here. There was nothing extraordinary about it. There were no smells, sights, objects, musical instruments, or anything else of that nature. Quakers keep their meeting

houses plain and simple because they feel that lavish decorations and material possessions are distractions (Coleman 56). The walls were bare, except for a laminated copy of the Society Of Friends Peace Testimony located in the back corner. The pews were situated in a manner that I was not accustomed to. They all faced the center of the room, in a circle formation, so that all the members would be aware of the other people around them, realizing that they are all there to worship together (Weening). There was no alter or pulpit. This is because Quakers do not have priests or any formal established authority over the congregation. They feel that they would only serve as an obstacle for members trying to experience “the spirit” for themselves. Essentially, they just are not viewed as necessary for salvation (Coleman 6, 9, 56). There were only the pews and the Peace Testimony. The rest of the room was barren of any religious symbols or pictures.

After a few minutes of exploring, members of Lansdowne Friends began to arrive, each one greeting me kindly as they saw me because they knew I was a guest. At ten o'clock, the meeting began to take place. In all, there were about thirty people present. Everyone took seats wherever they wanted to. There was no set seating arrangement. Women sat among men. Young sat among old. But all were here for the common purpose of receiving the spirit in silence.

This practice of sitting in silence is known as “gathering” to the members. Everyone sits still, silently praying to themselves or just reflecting, in an attempt to feel the presence of God. The silence allows each member to personally connect to the spirit. If one feels moved by the spirit, they may speak. However, “...the congregation is quite content to spend the entire meeting in silence-not an empty, hollow silence, but one which is filled with the Spirit an any spoken testimony” (Coleman 5-6). There was no music, no songs, no sounds at all

coming from inside the meeting house. All that could be heard was the sounds from outside, which the members do not view as a distraction. So like everyone else present, I sat there in silence, praying and reflecting on events that had taken place that previous week. Behind me, there was a little girl, about three years of age, who was getting antsy. So she started moving around like any normal child would do. It kind of kept me unfocused on praying, until she said something. The little girl called out, "Where is God? When is he coming, mommy?" This gave me a really good feeling, because I realized that this small child knew the purpose of worship at such a young age. She was aware that God's presence was sought for in the service. After that, I felt even more comfortable, and the distractions did not affect me any longer.

About fifteen minutes into the meeting, one woman stood up and gathered all the children that were in the congregation to allow for the parents to have time to worship by themselves. After the commotion of moving the children out had subsided, the quietness of the silent meditation took over once again. After another thirty minutes, the first person of the congregation stood up to speak. It was an old man that spoke of the innocence of youth, and how as we grow older, we must never forget our inner child. He sat down soon after standing and all was still again. Within the next thirty minutes, only one more person stood up to say anything. This time it was a woman that spoke of how God needs us to be peacemakers to all people. And then once again, silence. "This 'ministry' is intended to express aloud what is already present in the silence" (Weening). No one has to say anything. But if for some reason they feel compelled to, they may speak freely, as long as what they are saying is positive.

After the silence had continued on for another fifteen minutes, the meeting was concluded by two people that shook hands. The rest of the congregation did the same. I asked why they did this, and one man told me it was to signify the understanding that all the members were there to worship and that they were thankful for each others presence. I thought that was really nice because almost all of the members present made it a point to come over to me to shake my hand. It made me feel completely welcomed. From the meeting, the people take with them the inspiration they gained into their lives.

The Society of Friends practice a very simple religion. Quaker meetings are typically silent from beginning to end. They gather and worship in quiet meditation to become aware that God exists in all things. The only time there is any noise is when someone is moved “by the Spirit” to speak. The occurrence of people being moved is usually sporadic and unplanned. Other than that, the members are accustomed to meetings where absolute silence is maintained the whole time. They feel that their silence is filled with the presence of the Holy Spirit as much as any other spoken testament (Coleman 6).

Quakers do not practice established sacraments like most other religions. They feel that the internal and spiritual core is found within the midst of the silence. Their main belief is that of the Inner light, which holds that every human posses in them and inner essence of God, which ultimately fosters tolerance, humility, and pacifism among the followers. With this said, they do not feel a need for mediators to profess the Word of God (Coleman 8). “In practice most of the preaching was done by Friends ministers who might be men or women. They were not ordained but simply ‘acknowledged: or ‘recorded’ by their meetings as having a spiritual gift for spoken ministry, and they were not paid for their religious service” (Crist

56). They feel that every person is capable of reaching God individually, without the interference of a priest or other established hierarchy.

Along with the simple design for their worship, Quaker meeting houses also reflect their simplicity in every day life. There houses do not consist of lavish decorations and material possessions like other religions. “There were no stained glass windows, no altar or pulpit, and no set form of worship, since these were regarded as departures from primitive simplicity or as human interference with the free movement of the Spirit” (Crist 56).

As a first time visitor of the Lansdowne Friends Meeting House, I fully enjoyed my visit. Everything about the meeting was completely different from what I am used to in my usual routine of Sunday worship as a Catholic. But I liked having the chance, well more or less the push, to experience something uncommon to me. I can honestly say that I would be willing to attend another meeting of the Society of Friends because the religion and the members were extremely welcoming, making me feel as though I was an accepted member. I would not suggest any improvements to the setup of this project because it gives students the initiative to familiarize themselves with another religion, and ultimately, another way of life.

## Works Cited

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