

Observation of the Baha'i

My experience of the Baha'i faith began in Wilmette, Illinois, where the Baha'i constructed their only temple in North America in the early part of the 20th century. I first saw the temple while driving down a suburban road, the white pillars extending far above the houses and the trees. The building demanded attention. Immediately, I wondered what it would be to live in the shadow of such an immense building and to be reminded of a foreign religion every day. Right in the midst of a Chicago suburb, the building's exterior extended high into the air, reflecting the bright sunlight and making the Baha'i faith impossible to ignore. Another Asian religion had made its way around the globe.

The architecture of Baha'i Houses of Worship vary, depending on their geographical location and the time when built. The one that I visited seemed to have an Arabic influence, but the temples in other continents look drastically different. The visitor center showed photos of the temples located in other continents, and one actually looked very contemporary in design. The temple in Wilmette, however, has more of an ancient feel – with high ceilings, white walls, airy drapery, ornate carpet, and a countless number of engravings and carvings. However, a classmate of mine from Britain felt that the Wilmette temple was much more modern when compared to the cathedrals he was used to in Europe. This, of course, would be expected since the building was constructed in the 20th century.

Before entering the temple, however, my family had to walk up a long flight of stairs. It was a noticeable ascent. As we looked up (partially to see how much farther we had to go), we noticed a statement engraved above the entrance. The message was short, but clear: "Thy heart is my home; sanctify it for my descent." As a newcomer, I was not entirely sure what it meant for the Baha'i to sanctify their hearts, but it was clear that the ascent up the stairs was intended to prepare a person to meet with divinity. There is something significant that occurs within a person's psyche about ascending into the air, something symbolic about stairs that speaks to man's desire to meet with divinity.

Compared to my own tradition, where most churches meet on the ground floor, I certainly noticed the extra effort it required for me to enter the building.

The door woman warmly greeted us, though I surprised to meet her so soon. There was no lobby, as I am used to in most Christian churches. We were immediately escorted into the sanctuary where people were reading, praying, and chanting. As soon as we entered, she reminded us to turn off our cell phones and to be quiet – communicating how important it was for us to be silent. Although my wife and I were nervous that our kids would make a lot of noise (as they often do in our Protestant church), they were almost completely silent. It made me wonder how seriously we take our worship services within evangelicalism, but I was also glad that we are free from strict regulations and a reminder/warning upon entering.

Once inside, I realized another reason for the tall staircase that led up to the sanctuary. Seated at that height, all a person sees out of the windows are the tops of many trees that surround the circular room. It was a serene setting, set apart from the hustle and bustle of Chicago life. I could certainly see why a stressed parent or a businessman would want to stop in for a morning or midday devotional time. Even if for only 15 or 30 minutes, this was probably one of the quietest places in Chicagoland. For a spiritual seeker, the lack of noise could easily be interpreted as peace.

The prayer service was brief and focused on prayer. Three adults and a young Arab boy shared the responsibilities of leading the gathering. (We were told the boy was offering prayers for his recently deceased grandmother.) There are no official clergy for the Baha'i prayer services, so these leaders were volunteers from within the Baha'i faith. The service ran smoothly, until the last five minutes. At that point, it seemed like it was the boy's turn to go again, but he didn't have any more prayers to pray. As quiet as the room was, I was distracted by the leaders whispering to another who would go next. Eventually, the boy's mother stood up and sang a song, which seemed to be Arabic.

The songs added to the serenity of the prayer service, as the sounds reverberated off the walls and high ceiling, filling the room with the pure sound of the human voice. Even when the mother and son sang off tune – something the boy did often – it barely mattered. The way that the music echoed in the room, I am sure that many people would have felt uplifted by the sound. I found myself wondering what it would sound like if I had a chance to sing, but unfortunately, there was not an opportunity for us to participate.

My mind wandered for a minute, imagining what it would be like for a Christian church to fill a sanctuary like that with a cappella songs of worship. I could imagine a vibrant church, full of people, young and old, listening to a passionately delivered sermon, but I was brought back to reality when I noticed the hundreds of empty seats that surrounded me. In retrospect, even though I was an observer, I was surprised at the lack of participation required of those of us in attendance. We were simply expected to pray and meditate, remaining completely silent, but nothing more than that. It is certainly a different experience than most evangelical churches, where we ask much more of our visitors – e.g., filling out a visitor card, standing for certain intervals, singing various songs, listening to a message, raising a hand in response, coming to the front, etc.

Most of the attendees were Caucasian, though on this particular day, there were less than a dozen of us in attendance. The absence of minorities surprised me since the Baha’i faith had Persian roots, but the message of the Baha’i likely has universal appeal, especially in our postmodern context. The low attendance made the large room seem especially barren, and I wondered why more people were not at the gathering. I assume that the lunchtime service was intended for business people to stop by during a lunch break, but at least on this particular day, business seemed to be keeping them busy.

Later, we were told that the primary purpose of the Baha’i House of Worship is for visitors. In fact, although we felt out of place, they told us that the purpose of the daily services is for people like us. They told us that the temple was their “gift to the community.” Those who practice Baha’i rarely

come to the temple, but meet for small gatherings in houses across the world. This was not at all what we expected. I left wondering why this was the case, yet I was more curious as to why more post-moderns have not joined with the Baha'i.

Our conversation with two Baha'i individuals proved to be instructive, yet also heart breaking and motivating. One woman told us that she was baptized when she was 13 years old in a Christian church, but now she was helping propagate the Baha'i faith. When we asked her if there were any advantages for accepting the Baha'i faith (or any consequences for rejecting it), she said no – that the ultimate goal was rebirth into an eternal plane. At least as far as she told us, there was no consequence for not accepting their prophet, except that the future state may not be as wonderful. Her companion proceeded to explain with an illustration about birth and the womb – something about a lack of consciousness, yet the basis of reality. Neither my wife or I could follow what she said, but we were struck by the way she spoke with glazed eyes and the use of abstract terminology. In a moment of self-reflection, I wondered how often we as Christians witness to others with vague generalities, confusing images, or foreign terminology. Even more so, however, I was motivated to engage other religions on a deeper level than I currently do.

As we drove away, my wife and I discussed why more people have not embraced the Baha'i faith – especially since they offer such a positive message of peace, love, and unity. For one, we recognized that the name itself would turn many Western people away. It sounds just as foreign as Presbyterian or Mennonite, yet the hint of Islamic influence in the title may frighten away more people than they realize. Along with the Arab-inspired building, the name "Baha'i" probably does not help them attract many new converts. For the few that are brave enough to visit, however, they can easily join the Baha'i by simply professing their faith in their prophet, Baha'u'llah.

As a conclusion to our trip, we read through the material and were surprised by how little their documents actually communicated. Although their pamphlets speak about marriage, family, the role of

women, the need for unity, and so forth, most of what was said seemed like “common sense” or things that people already know. Both my wife and I felt as if the words were hollow and communicated very little. So while the faith itself seems quite congruent with a postmodern mindset, it also illustrated to us what happens when a worldview attempts to accept so much and reject almost nothing; in the end, very little, if anything, is communicated.