**Fall 2010 Student Example of Cultural Reflection Assignment (posted with permission of student)**

Exploring Religions

Imagine walking into a completely unfamiliar place filled with people who believe in something that goes against everything you have faith in. Nervousness invades your body and mind as you enter those strange doors. Looking around, you do not recognize anyone. You feel scared, embarrassed. What should you do? How should you act? Where do you go now? I asked myself equivalent questions when I attended a Buddhist religious service on November 7, 2010. I arrived at 10:30, attended a service which lasted from 11:00 until 12:00, and spoke with Buddhist members from 12:00 until 2:00. Attending a Buddhist service has given me the opportunity to experience a different culture, alter any misconceptions I previously had about that culture, and connect course teachings to real situations in guiding me to become an exemplary future teacher.

This cultural exploration was quite a culture shock for me. For as long as I can remember, I have been a Christian. I was baptized to a Lutheran church as an infant. When I was little I attended Sunday school to learn about God and stories of the Bible. Last Sunday, however, I attended a Buddhist religious service. Before exploring the Buddhist culture, I had very little knowledge about what Buddhism is. After experiencing this cultural exploration, it is evident that the Buddhist culture differs greatly than my Christian culture. For instance, my Lutheran church consists of mostly Caucasian people. The Buddhist Temple of Chicago, however, consisted of mostly Japanese people. As I entered the Temple, I felt as if everyone was staring at me because I was different. Then, I looked more closely at everyone in the room as the service began and realized that there were Japanese, African American, and Caucasian people all attending the service. Many different people travel from far suburbs to attend the Buddhist Temple of Chicago.

Interestingly, the service which I was able to attend was considered a memorial service. Unlike my Christian culture, Buddhists spend the first Sunday of every month memorializing loved ones who passed away in that month. The Sunday which I attended was the first Sunday of November so the minister conducted a moment of silence to honor loved ones who departed in November. Ana Idol, who spoke with me for several hours after the service, was chairmen during the service. She explained that the minister asked her to be chairmen because her parent had passed away in the month of November. In my Lutheran church, we simply conduct a memorial service after the death of a loved one, but we do not honor the deceased each month.

Another important difference I discovered about Buddhism was evident from first entering the service room. At the front of the room, there stood a golden statue, Buddha, surrounded by an altar of gold as well. I mistakenly believed that Buddha was the ‘god’ that Buddhist people worship. I also noticed that Buddha was not the typical statue I have seen before; he was standing tall and skinny. Ana Idol, a volunteer at the Temple, sat with me after the service to talk about Buddhism and discuss what happened during the service. She explained that Buddhists do not worship any god. The standing Buddha at the front of the room actually represents the concept of enlightenment. The traditional sitting statue of Buddha represents the actual man who lived whom was known as ‘the enlightened one’. This allowed me to assimilate my misconception that Buddha was the Buddhists’ god. Ana Idol explained further that Buddhists learn about themselves and how to rid one’s self of an ego. At my Lutheran church, we pray to and learn about God and his followers. The fact that Buddhists do not worship any god is very different than the culture I am accustomed to. Furthermore, the aim of Buddhism is to focus on the present. During services, the minister does not speak about past stories of history or about what happens after people pass away. They help people enjoy the time they have living which differs from my culture. Ana Idol said, “Rid yourself of your ego and anger, and you will develop a loving heart for you and others.” In my religion, I have studied stories of the Bible which focus mostly on history and life after death. Overall, the Buddhist culture varies greatly from my culture as a Christian.

I experienced many feelings in exploring the Buddhist religion. At first, I was scared and nervous to go to a completely unfamiliar place. I really had no idea what to expect. After entering, however, I was greeted with a warm welcome which made me feel much calmer. During the service, I felt anxious because I really did not know what was going on, especially when the minister, Reverend Ashikaga, hit the dong and sat in silence for several minutes. It was quite awkward because I did not feel comfortable meditating and singing the songs that went along with the meditation period. It was a bazaar experience for me, but proved to be worthwhile. After the service I was able to interact and talk with several people who are members of the Temple. They offered me lunch and tea after the service; eating after a service is a tradition of the Buddhist Temple of Chicago. At this point, I felt much more comfortable because my questions were getting answered and members were very welcoming. All in all, although I felt discomfort in unfamiliar surroundings, experiencing another culture was helpful in gaining knowledge about Buddhism. I am glad to have explored the Buddhist Temple of Chicago because I learned about Buddhism, which I have always been interested in learning more about, and was able to compare my religion to the culture of another.

Not only has this cultural experience provided insight about me as a Lutheran, but it has also aided me in becoming an exemplary teacher. As a teacher, it is essential to foster all cultures in the classroom. No two students will come from the same culture, nor will they have the same background knowledge I may presume they have. Savage and Armstrong (2008) define Americanization as, “an approach that seeks to merge ethnically and linguistic diverse groups into a single dominant culture, and has sometimes been labeled the “melting pot” theory of assimilation” (p. 191). Basically, some believe that people should give up their own culture to assimilate to the American culture. Therefore, it is essential that teachers rid children’s minds of this idea because it is important to cherish one’s own special culture.

In the end, teachers must teach multiculturalism in the classroom to help children value their culture. Social studies is the perfect place to begin teaching children multiculturalism. As we discussed in class, social studies is more than learning about history and maps. Children develop an understanding about how social beings interact in the world through social studies. Using role-plays as we did in class, students can be free to express their culture from their own perspective as well as develop socially. Also, if a teacher does not venture outside of his or her own culture, then he or she will not be knowledgeable to teach children from multicultural view points. Teachers cannot be naive to the world outside their comfort zone. Moreover, culture is one of the ten thematic strands that help create a multidisciplinary approach to social studies (Savage and Armstrong, 2008, p. 7). Teaching children from multicultural perspectives will guide students in attaining a global-awareness education. “Aspects of your social studies program connected to global-awareness education seek to sensitize your students to perspectives of people in other cultures and other lands” (Savage and Armstrong, 2008, p. 12). As a future teacher, it is crucial that I develop a welcoming hand to different cultures in order to support every student in becoming a social being.

Works Cited

Idol, A. (Volunteer). Buddhist Temple of Chicago. Personal communication. November 7, 2010.

Savage, T. & Armstrong, D. (2008). *Effective Teaching in Elementary Social Studies*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education Inc.