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Visit My Mosque Day: Muslims open doors with tea and cakes for the unbelievers



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PAVAN AMARA SUNDAY 01 FEBRUARY 2015

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The crowd gathered at East London Mosque were not its typical worshippers – there was a mixture of atheists, agnostics and those who simply “wanted to meet the sort of Muslims who aren’t on the television”.

For some of the 50 or so visitors today, even matters as simple as “how you walk in and what you do” caused confusion – with one person admitting: “It’s all a bit alien.” It was to address this lack of knowledge among non-Muslims that led the mosque in Whitechapel, east London, to be one of 20 across the UK opening its doors to the public as part of “Visit My Mosque Day”, complete with tea and cakes. The event was arranged after the Muslim Council of Britain raised concerns about anti-Muslim sentiment following the killing of 17 people in Paris last month.

“I was curious,” said Horatio Waller, 23, a barrister from central London. “I wondered if Muslims had different values or an alien culture. But, I didn’t want to just walk in to a mosque.” For Tricia Montague, 56, from north London, she wanted to “stop a scary part of myself believing the propaganda.

“I work in the NHS and I’ve worked with Muslim colleagues for years. I’ve never had any doubts. But after France I could feel these niggling doubts rising,” she said. “I shocked myself because that’s not me. I was being drawn in, and I’ve come to remind myself of the reality.”

The afternoon began with a tour around the mosque, starting with the men’s prayer space, then the women’s prayer space, the women’s centre, and the visitor’s centre, with a brief history of the mosque opening in 1986.

The mosque has been targeted in the past by far-right groups. “Muslims were scared to come to the mosque at one point, because of the attacks,” said Mohammed Uddin-Anwar, a regular member of the congregation.

“Last month was difficult, but we know how to handle it better now. We started open days a few years ago, and I would overhear comments like ‘It looks normal.’ That’s because it is normal in here. The minds of crazy terrorists in Paris are what isn’t normal.”