



The Polis Center

a Newsletter of the Project  
on Religion and Urban Culture

Winter 2001

Vol. 5, no. 1

**Immigrant and**  
ETHNIC CONGREGATIONS

The "house of worship" owned by the Guru Nanak Sikh Society is literally that—a small house. It sits at the end of a dead-end street in a poor residential neighborhood on the near-southeast side of Indianapolis. There is little to indicate that the structure is not a residence but a *gurdwara*, as Sikh houses of worship are called.

On the lot behind this house, the Society is constructing a small 2,400-square foot building that will serve as the congregation's worship center. Unlike the house, it will be a visible marker of the congregation's presence in the neighborhood.

Over the past three decades, numerous congregations have formed to serve the immigrant and ethnic communities of Indianapolis. In their early years, these congregations often meet in makeshift quarters, before moving into permanent worship spaces. The city's oldest gurdwara, the Sikh Satsang of Indianapolis, moved into a new building in 1999. The Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'i moved into a new facility in 2000. And Geeta Mandal, the local Hindu congregation, is partnering with other local Indian organizations on plans to build a temple.

According to a recent Polis Center survey, the Indianapolis area is home to a Buddhist temple, a Baha'i congregation, a Hindu congregation, two Sikh gurdwaras, five Muslim mosques, several Orthodox Christian churches serving various ethnic groups, and about a dozen Korean Christian congregations, ranging in denomination from Catholic to Southern Baptist. The largest group of recent immigrants, Hispanics, are represented by numerous churches. (See the Fall 1998 issue of *Religion & Community*.)



**Sunday services, An  
Lac Buddhist Temple,  
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**An Lac Temple: the visual richness of Buddhist ceremony.**

In 1965, the U.S. Congress rewrote the nation's immigration laws, resulting in a major increase in immigration from Asia. Locally, Eli Lilly and Company has attracted immigrants from around the world, as has the Indiana University Medical Center, based on the campus of Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis.

In 1999 and 2000, researchers from the Oral History Project at Indiana University Bloomington interviewed Indian-American immigrants living in Indianapolis. According to Steve Sheehan, an oral historian with the Project, most of the interviewees came to the U.S. in the late 1960s and the 1970s seeking higher education and career opportunities in medicine, engineering, and science. The majority are Hindus.

Sheehan found that their common faith and nationality bound them together as they adapted to a new culture. The children of first-generation immigrants, however, face the conflicting demands of fitting in as Americans while remaining close to their families. "Most first-generation immigrants would like their children to understand Indian religions," Sheehan said. "Many believe that Hindu philosophy constitutes the core of Indian identity and culture."

Long Nguyen, a member of the An Lac (Buddhist) Temple on East 30<sup>th</sup> Street in Indianapolis, noted that "it's hard to get the youth to come. They have part-time jobs and friends that take them away. We need to work on getting them involved."

Even when the issue is not complicated by adherence to a minority faith, such as Buddhism or Hinduism, there is substantial tension. The city's Korean Christian congregations have found that, as their young people grow older, they

frequently move to English-speaking congregations where they feel more at home.

"They look Korean, but inside they're American," said Charles Chae, an elder at Korean Presbyterian Church of Indianapolis. "They think like Americans. We have to have a very specific plan for how we're going to serve these people."

The church recently instituted an English-language service for teens that meets while the adults attend services conducted in Korean. The church hopes to someday hire a bilingual pastor to help it bridge the generation gap. Likewise, An Lac Temple is trying to attract a bilingual Buddhist monk.

The influx of Korean immigrants to Indianapolis that began in the 1960s has slowed considerably. There are now about 4,000 Koreans in the Indianapolis area, Chae said. That's a significant larger community than existed here thirty years ago, but far smaller than those found in the nation's largest cities. The local Korean population is large enough to support five grocery stores, three restaurants, and a dozen churches, according to Chae, but it isn't large enough to appeal to new immigrants. The daily frustrations inherent in belonging to a small minority population prompt them to go elsewhere if an opportunity arises.

The Chicago area is home to about 100,000 Koreans. On the written section of a driver's license test in Chicago, Chae said, instructions are provided in Korean. "There,



**Outside, only the sign indicates this is a place of worship.**

you don't have to speak English," he said, "but in Indiana, you have to be bilingual." Chae, a real-estate broker, noted that overt forms of discrimination are also a problem for Koreans. When his children were school-age, he transferred them to a private Christian school because of the taunting and abuse they suffered in their public school. "Indiana is really conservative," he said, "and there's still a lot of discrimination toward Asian people here, compared with other cities. You get the feeling from Koreans that Indianapolis is okay, but not ideal."

Sheehan reports that the majority of Indian-Americans strive to fit in with American culture and believe they have found acceptance without giving up the Indian part of their identity. "They view the United States as a nation brought together under the banner of pluralism," Sheehan said. "They believe that they can maintain Indian traditions while simultaneously integrating into the mainstream."

What ethnic groups and immigrant congregations encounter most often is neither discrimination nor glad welcome, but indifference. There is "a passing awareness" of their presence in the city, as Frank Alexander, pastor of Oasis of Hope Missionary Baptist Church noted, "but not a detailed awareness." Alexander said he was aware of the An Lac Temple, yet at another church, less than a mile from the Temple, an assistant minister reported that he did not know that Buddhists were in the neighborhood. Immigrant and ethnic congregations confirm that they often seem invisible.

"Some people don't think of us as a religion," said Carol Niss, long-time member of the Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'i of Indianapolis. "There's mostly an attitude of, 'That's nice.' We're not really big enough to cause problems."

Indifference is at least an improvement on the hostility and violence inflicted on minority populations and minority faiths in past decades. Yet indifference can be its own sort of curse, as the Chinese Community Church discovered in the summer of 1999 when it moved into a new facility in Carmel. To celebrate, the nondenominational, evangelical church invited several hundred of its new neighbors to an open house.

"To our disappointment, only one or two came," said senior pastor Peter Chen. "We wanted to show our friendship to the neighbors. Somehow, they didn't show up. But that doesn't mean they don't want to be friendly with us. There could be other reasons."

*Ted Slutz*



**Giani Pritam Singh, spiritual leader of Sikh Gurudwara Temple, Indianapolis.**



**Sunday services, Korean Presbyterian Church of Indianapolis.**

# THE SECOND GENERATION:

## Keeping the Faith

When K.P. Singh moved to Indianapolis in 1967, an Indian man wearing a turban merited a photograph on the front page of the newspaper, with the headline: "Did You See?"

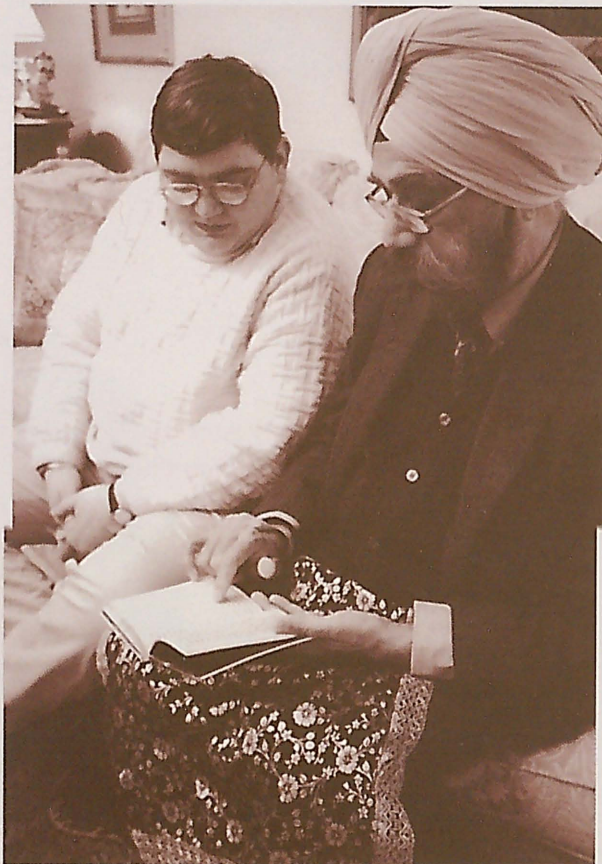
Singh remembers the woman at the Bureau of Motor Vehicles who insisted he had to take off his turban to have his picture taken. Sikh men wear turbans because they don't cut their hair.

Back then, he couldn't get anyone to rent him an apartment.

Singh, now 61, is an established member of the community, an architectural artist and a spokesman for members of his faith. But after their two sons were born, he and his wife decided that a certain amount of assimilation would be easier on the children.

"We want to say that we are Americans first," Singh says.

**K.P. Singh and his son, Robbie, read Sikh scriptures.**



**Gloria, Maria, and Consuelo Quiroz worship at St. Patrick Catholic Church.**

"Faith is a private domain. First and foremost, we want to be in the mainstream of American life and culture."

Consuelo Quiroz was born to Mexican parents and spent her childhood shuttling from Texas to Mexico to Indiana. Her father, who worked for the railroad, finally settled the family in Indianapolis. Like Singh, she wanted to be an American without abandoning her native culture. Catholicism doesn't have the strong traditions here that it does in Mexico. But her ties to the church enabled Quiroz to feel a part of a community in which she was an ethnic minority.

As the Hispanic—and mostly Catholic population—has grown here, Quiroz and her two grown daughters have become community leaders, helping to introduce elements of Mexican worship to local parishes.

In a city with fewer than 400 Sikhs, the Singhs had to work hard to hold onto their traditions. The Quiroz family, in a city where over 20 percent of the population is Catholic, found that they could practice their faith much as they would in Mexico.

The Singhs encouraged their children to explore different faiths, while continuing to practice the principles of Sikhism. Singh's wife, Jan is American-born with a Jewish and Catholic religious heritage.

"Sikhism is a universal faith," Singh says. "We believe in the equality of all human beings, regardless of religion, sex, or background." Their sons grew up attending a Methodist church, a Catholic church and a Jewish synagogue, while also worshipping at a local Sikh temple. Throughout their childhood, they listened to the five daily prayers that most Sikh families have recorded.

When he was growing up in India, Singh remembers that at prayer time, "We dropped everything to sit on the floor cross-legged. We covered our heads. If we walked past a Sikh temple,

we were supposed to stop and pray on the way. But the pace of life has changed. Now, many Sikhs have small shrines in their homes. We haven't figured that out yet." He says they use the family room for prayer and meditation.

Their youngest son, Robbie, who lives at home while pursuing medical studies, still listens to the prayers, but doesn't attend the Sikh temple often, nor does he follow the Sikh practice of leaving his hair uncut.

He recalls his freshman year at Indiana University, when he attended different churches with his friends. At a Baptist church, he heard that belief in Christ was the only way to salvation. "This was my first exposure to that idea," he says. "It made me think seriously about where my religious beliefs lie."

Today, he says, "I consider myself to be a Sikh. I try to enshrine those ideals."

One of those ideals is service to others. Service, his father says, is considered "the only way to the Lord. It is not an option." So the Singh boys passed out blankets at a mission for homeless people. They participated in a food drive with other families. They were Eagle Scouts. "They were happily doing without expecting anything in return," their mother says.

In Mexico, Quiroz says, churches are open 24 hours a day, and there is practically one on every street corner. It is not unusual to attend church at least seven times a week. She misses that. In Indianapolis, she and her two daughters attend St. Patrick Church, where mass is celebrated in Spanish three times on Sunday. Quiroz heads St. Patrick's program of instruc-

tion for adults wishing to convert to Catholicism. She's also head of the Spanish liturgy program. Her youngest daughter teaches children's religious education at the church.

Her oldest daughter is married to an Anglo, who, although he is Catholic, is not very observant. Likewise, neither Quiroz's husband nor their son are as active as the women. So together, the women propagate the faith.

Twenty-five years ago, Quiroz's sister was one of the first young women in the city to have a *quinceanera*, a major celebration which marks a girl's transition into adulthood on her 15th birthday. "At the time, even the priest didn't know how to do it," Quiroz says.

When her daughter Maria was married five years ago, the ceremony was in Spanish and English. The couple wore a Mexican lasso around their shoulders, which symbolized their union. They also used *los arras*—12 coins that are blessed by the priest. They are first given to the husband, who promises to take care of his new wife 12 months out of the year. They are then given to the wife, who promises to spend them wisely.

Quiroz and her daughters believe the practice of their faith has drawn them closer together as a family. After the three women worship together, they always go out to eat. "For as long as I can remember, I have associated going to church with food," says Quiroz's daughter, Gloria. "Church and food—these are times to be with family."



**The Quirozes before the altar draped with the flag of Mexico.**

Robbie Singh has also taken from Sikhism a strong sense of family. He says that he probably spends more time with his family than do his non-Sikh friends.

The family has already talked about marriage plans for the boys. Sikhs in this country do not arrange marriages for their children, but there are "alliances" between families. While they may not go to India to meet a young woman, interviews can be arranged with women in Chicago, where the Sikh population is much larger.

"I'm open to the possibility of marrying a Sikh woman," Robbie says.

But, his father says, "We'll let Rob make the choice."

*Kathy Whyde Jesse*

*Photo Credits*

Ginny Taylor Rosner: pp. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6.

K.P. Singh: (Sikh Gurudwara Temple) pp. 3, 6, 12.

Carl Pope: pp. 8, 11.

Kim Charles Ferrill: (Dr. Syeed) pp. 1, 8, 9, 10.

# FRESH CURRENTS

## Interfaith Alliances: Building Understanding

The founding prophet of the Baha'i faith once admonished his followers to treat other people "with the utmost love and harmony, with friendliness and fellowship," for "so powerful is the light of unity that it can illuminate the whole earth."

The essence of this admonition is common to many religious traditions, and it poses a dilemma for some people of faith: how can they maintain the integrity of their beliefs while finding unity and common ground with people of other traditions?

In the Christian tradition, prophetic calls for Christian unity have long competed with calls for separation from Christians with a different theology. Movements have formed with the goal of uniting the denominations, only to end in further divisiveness and fragmentation. Still, if ecumenical movements have met with only sporadic success, movements toward interfaith cooperation may be poised to grow, as the nation's population becomes more religiously diverse.

Interfaith efforts "reflect the reality of the religious landscape today," says Bruce Johnson, pastor of the Unitarian-Universalist Church of Indianapolis and current president of the Interfaith Alliance Indianapolis. "It's no longer adequate just to pursue ecumenical relationships. The reality is that it's an interfaith

world, and it's becoming increasingly more so."

The Alliance is the most active organized effort to bring the city's faiths together for dialogue and social action. Begun in the mid-1980s, the Alliance has member congregations representing Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Baha'is, and Unitarian-Universalists.

The Interfaith Alliance sponsors panel discussions on various subjects—for example, on how the various faiths celebrate life ceremonies or perform certain rituals. Member congregations sponsor a drive to collect underwear for children in need. The drive's slogan reflects the Alliance's philosophy: "Underneath it all, we're all the same."

Another long-standing local program promoting interfaith unity is Dialogue Today, a discussion group for African-American and Jewish women. The group started in 1984 in the wake of inflammatory, anti-Semitic comments made by Nation of Islam minister Louis Farrakhan.

"It was important for us to come together after that, rather than let it tear us apart," said Gladys Nisenbaum, a member of the Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation and former president of Dialogue Today. The group limits itself to 100 members—50 African-American and 50 Jewish. The entire group meets four times a year; smaller groups of eight to 10 women meet several more times.

Although Dialogue Today's purpose is not primarily to bridge religious differences, religious ceremonies play a large part in members' interaction with one another. Jewish members sometimes invite African-American members to attend a

bar or bat mitzvah or a Passover seder. African-American women will invite Jewish women to attend weddings at their churches. Last year, the group sponsored a musical celebration, open to the public, at the Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation. An African-American choir sang gospel music, while the IHC's Cantor Janice Roger sang Jewish liturgical music. Afterward, there was a discussion about the themes common to the music of both traditions.

"The whole idea is to try to understand each other and respect each other without all this friction," Nisenbaum says. "We haven't been afraid to enter into these discussions, and it has been very salutary."

The new Baha'i Center at 3740 W. 62<sup>nd</sup> St. is an example of the growing religious diversity of Indianapolis and of the enduring hope for interfaith unity. The guiding principle of Baha'i is the unity of all faiths and the equality of all people. Baha'is occasionally visit the sanctuaries of other faiths to share in their worship services.

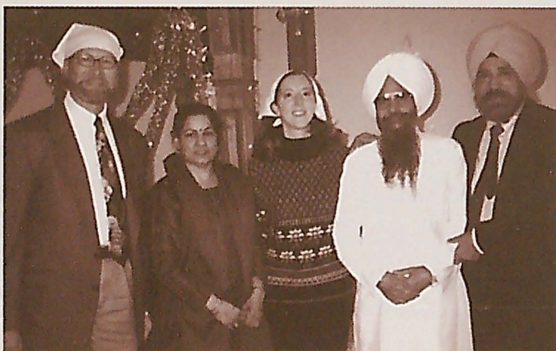
"As you observe the different groups, there's a beauty and spirituality that is specific to each, which cannot be imitated by others," says Manucher Ranjbar, a Baha'i who occasionally visits churches in the area. He believes that the relationship between Baha'i and other faiths will be improved by the congregation's permanent meeting place. Until recently, he says, Indianapolis Baha'is met in private homes and in the meeting room of an apartment complex. Members of other faiths couldn't easily reciprocate the Baha'is' visits. "Before, we were sort of homeless," Ranjbar says. "Now we have a center."

Ted Slutz



**Osma Spurlock and Gladys Nisenbaum, past presidents of Dialogue Today, with some of the organization's literature.**

**As part of the Spirit & Place Festival in November, Sikh Gurudwara Temple invited the public to attend a religious ceremony and information session.**



# TRANSPLANTED COMMUNITIES:

## Religion and the Foreign-born in Indianapolis

In the 1890s, immigrants from Slovenia came to Indianapolis in considerable numbers to work for National Malleable Castings Company, a foundry located in the industrial suburb of Haughville. As Slovene families adjusted to life in a new country, they sought to maintain their culture and sustain one another, surrounding themselves with mutual aid societies, lodges and fraternities, and businesses selling familiar goods. At their center, Holy Trinity Catholic Church served for decades as both religious and social hub of the Slovene community.

During those same years, Jews from Eastern Europe arrived to take advantage of new employment opportunities in the warehouse district of South Meridian Street. They too established distinct enclaves, community organizations, and synagogues.

There was a time when local civic leaders characterized Indianapolis as “100 percent American”—a city free of foreign influences. This was never true, and while the impact of immigration has been muted here, compared to other cities, foreign cultures and their influences have permeated Indianapolis history. The Slovenes, East European Jews, Greeks, and other immigrant groups of a century ago were neither the first nor the last to come to Indianapolis.

The processes of immigration, development of distinct communities, and eventual assimilation have been almost continuous from the city's founding. During the 1830s, large numbers of Irish laborers and German artisans settled in Indianapolis. Predominantly Catholic, each group formed its own ethnically based parish and

offered services in its own native language. Macedonians, Italians, Romanians, Danes—these groups and more came, each with its distinct language, culture, and religion.

In recent years, the city has received numerous immigrants from Asia, bringing religions unfamiliar to the American heartland—Sikhism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. The largest group of recent immigrants has come from Latin America, particularly Mexico. Numerous congregations in the city, Catholic and Protestant, now offer religious services in Spanish.

For almost two centuries, generations of newly arrived settlers to Indianapolis have maintained their sense of community by reestablishing here the culture and religion of their homelands. As people slowly assimilate, and succeeding generations are born American, the old immigrant-religious neighborhoods and their distinct institutions tend to fade. They are preserved only in memory or in the structures that once served an “ethnic” community—now become in most respects thoroughly assimilated.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Indianapolis leaders chose to emphasize the city's “all-American” character. Today, ethnic and religious diversity are recognized as elements that enrich the Indianapolis community. The city continues to experience an influx of the foreign-born, their cultures, and religions. Drawn by jobs and educational opportunities, Indianapolis' foreign-born population is clearly evident in the proliferation of ethnic restaurants and businesses, the growing number of foreign students and employees, and

the founding of religious institutions tied closely to nationality. Indianapolis enters the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a complex and diverse city representing the truly global nature of modern life.

*Adapted from an essay by David G. Vanderstel. The full text can be found in the “Prologue” series on The Polis Center web site at [www.thepoliscenter.iupui.edu](http://www.thepoliscenter.iupui.edu).*

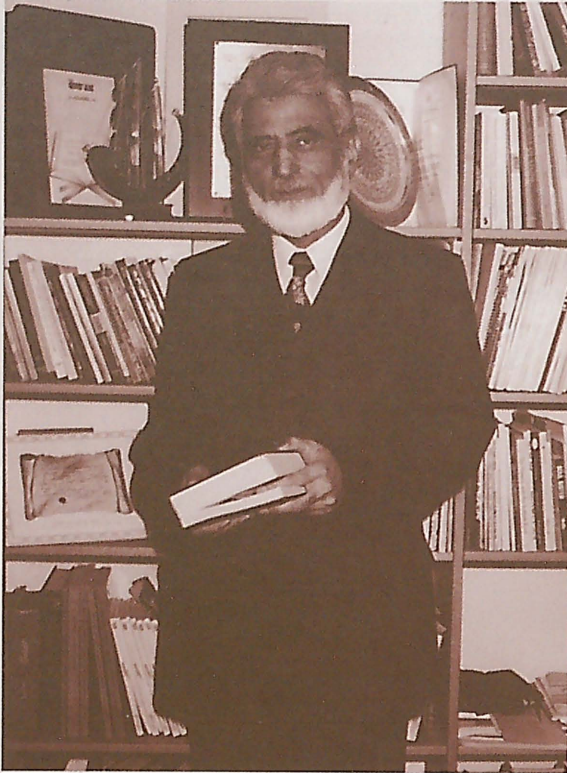
*Photograph courtesy of the Indiana Historical Society Library (neg. # C1785)*



**Slovene immigrants, wedding ceremony at Holy Trinity Catholic Church, Haughville neighborhood, ca. 1923.**

## An Interview with Dr. Sayyid M. Syeed

# Islam in America



**Dr. Sayyid M. Syeed,  
Secretary General, Islamic  
Society of North America.**

**Masjid Al-Fajr: one  
of five mosques in  
greater Indianapolis**

*The Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), headquartered in the Indianapolis suburb of Plainfield, is an “organization of organizations” according to Dr. Sayyid M. Syeed, Secretary General of ISNA. Under its umbrella are gathered several hundred Muslim community and professional organizations in the USA and Canada. ISNA seeks to “advance the cause of Islam and Muslims in North America” by supporting Islamic schools, community centers, outreach programs, and other activities designed to foster unity among Muslims while helping them to live in and contribute to American society. The Society publishes a magazine, Islamic Horizons, and sponsors a number of conferences around the country, on topics ranging from domestic abuse to banking.*

*Islam is the world’s fastest growing religion. Estimates of the number of Muslims living in the USA range up to 10 million. Muslims now outnumber the membership of some mainline Protestant denominations. ISNA’s annual convention, held in Chicago, is the third-largest religious convention in the country.*

*Religion & Community interviewed Dr. Syeed, who holds a doctorate in sociolinguistics from Indiana University-Bloomington, at the Society’s headquarters. Dr. Syeed granted the interview, he said, in the spirit of da’wa, which means, literally, an invitation: “Da’wa is an outreach, where you explain your position, your understanding of issues to outsiders.”*

*The interview, conducted by Robert Cole of The Polis Center, appears here in edited form.*

**R&C:** To begin: what are the origins of ISNA?

**SYEED:** When Muslim countries were becoming independent from colonial occupation, their first priority was to send their students here for advanced

science and technology education. In the '60s, we had about half a million Muslim students in American universities. This was the first visible presence of Muslims in America. In 1963, we established the Muslim Students Association (MSA) of







**Dr. Syeed with students from the Muslim Students Association at Plainfield High School.**

the USA and Canada. In 20 years, large numbers of those students had graduated with Ph.D.s, and had gotten jobs and settled here. In 1980, we transformed the Muslim Student Association into the Islamic Society of North America.

**R&C:** Were you one of those students?

**SYEED:** I was one of those students. I was the president of MSA and one of the founders of ISNA. We needed to have a headquarters for the organization, and one of our criteria was that it should be centrally located, so our members in New York, in Texas, in Toronto, could be within one day's driving distance. There was no other place to come but to the Crossroads of America! Once we decided on Indianapolis, we wanted to be close to the airport—so Plainfield was the place. We bought this land here in 1977, but it took us three years to build the center,

because the people here were against us. This was a closed, white, Christian community. They could have accepted one Muslim family, perhaps. But when they heard that this was going to be a national headquarters, the town resisted; they took us to court, and it took three years to get a resolution.

At that time, people here had no knowledge of what Muslims are, of how much we share the Biblical heritage with Christians. But in 1995, when the Oklahoma [terrorist bombing] tragedy took place, in many cities Muslims got nasty phone calls because people thought they were directly or indirectly involved. But the people of Plainfield came to me and said, "We'll stand by you; we know that it cannot be a Muslim." Because in 20 years, they had found out what kind of ethics, what kind of mission, and what kind of religion we have. They said, "We are with you, and this is all nonsense."

**R&C:** So now you know how long acceptance takes.

**SYEED:** It takes 20 years. We had put up a signboard that said, 'Islamic Society of North America.' And every day, there would be bullet holes in it, and they would break it. After 20 years, we opened our gym to the local Plainfield community youth. Last year, we had a seminar for the parents who were bringing their children here to play. They were very happy that we provided them with this facility. We had a relaxed discussion with them about Islam, Muslims, and so on, and these parents said, "Twenty years ago, when we were students in high school, we were the ones who used to break the sign." They felt so bad. I said, "Don't feel bad about it, you were not the first ones. Pope John Paul himself is apologizing for the whole millennium!" We believe in pluralism. We believe that all religions have to contribute, and the onus is on us to reach out and help others understand the common roots of all these religions, particularly the Judeo-Christian and Islamic religions.

**R&C:** Do you represent, or are you supported by, any particular denomination in the Islamic community?

**SYEED:** No, we are denominationally neutral. When Islam was at its glory as a world power, when Islamic civilization was flourishing, when Muslims were contributing towards the growth of technology and science, there was much commonality among the whole Muslim world, from Morocco to Spain to

Indonesia. But once it was fragmented by the colonial masters—one portion occupied by the British, one by the French, one by the Dutch, one by the Spanish—Muslims did not interact among themselves. Local, colonial, and other influences corrupted Islam, and created certain unjust, incongruent, and inconsistent social norms. Therefore it has hampered the growth and development of Islamic societies. Now, suddenly, we are in a country where there is freedom of religion, freedom of expression.

Here in America, for the first time, Muslims from all over the world are together. It is a unique opportunity. A new identity is being forged; the universal principles of Islam are being rediscovered and redefined. Much of the considerable baggage that is specific to particular countries is being shaken off. In Saudi Arabia, for example, a woman is not allowed to drive. It is not part of Islam—the Qur'an does not say that women should not drive. Rather, the prophet of Islam has commanded us that we should equally train our boys and girls. In the Islamic identity that is forging within the American melting pot—from all this diversity of Muslims—some things will persist, some will fade away, and there will be more cohesiveness defined by the universal principles of Islam.

**R&C:** Are there particular challenges for Islam in a pluralistic society—especially being in the minority?

**SYEED:** In a pluralistic society where you are recognized and respected for your uniqueness, you have to define what your uniqueness is, or you can become so diluted that you lose it.

The history of the emergence of the Jewish community in America is instructive: the anti-Semitism in the beginning, then slowly and gradually, by utilizing the American openness and respect for multiplicity and diversity, they were in a position to flourish within the system. Now the Muslims are doing the same thing. Most are professionals with advanced training and education. They will have the same rewarding experience of recognition and power. But this will have an impact on the Jewish identity, in the sense that Jews were the only successful minority in the past. They will have to share.

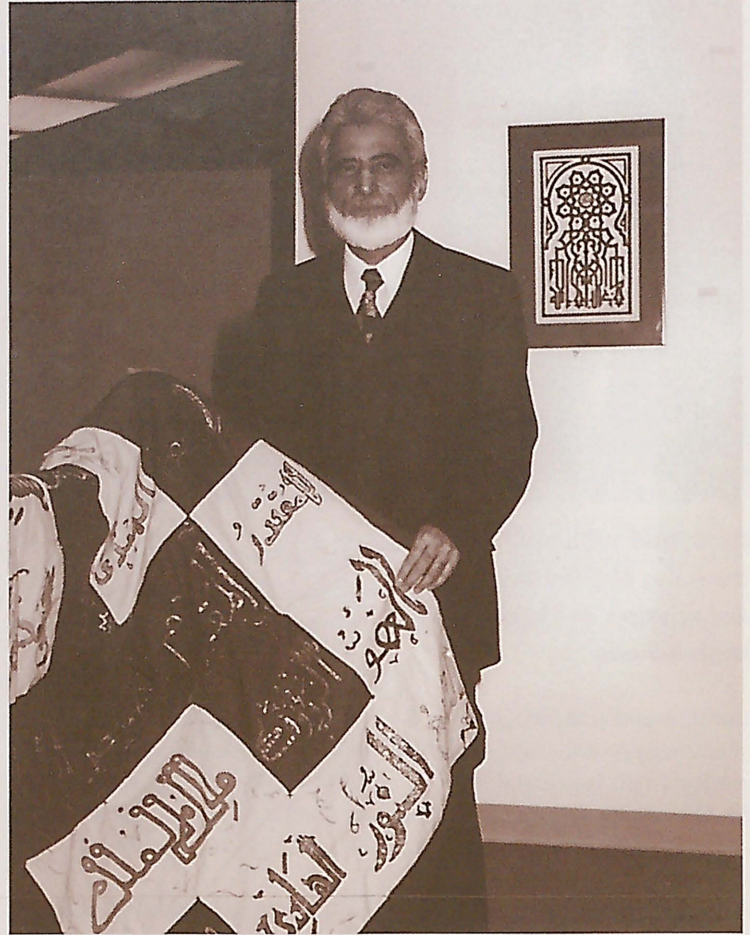
It is critical that American Jews recognize this new emerging identity and identify our common heritage, rather than concentrate only on the recent confrontations in Palestine. We have a long history of commonality—from Noah and Abraham to the period of Muslim civilization in Spain. So if they concentrate on identifying the mutuality and things in common—rather than the small interlude that is the creation of Israel and the Palestinian State—it would be more relevant to the American context.

**R&C:** Does ISNA make any particular effort to cooperate with Jews or Christians, or to spread mutual understanding?

**SYEED:** Definitely. We have standing committees with Catholics and other denominations. I was in Rome this year for an inter-religious assembly sponsored by the Pope. In Chicago, we had an interfaith dinner and dialogue with Jewish representatives. It was great. Progress has been slower perhaps, because of this Palestinian and Israeli shadow, and I feel really bad about that.

Islam is the fastest-growing religion in America. Some of the fundamentalist and evangelical Christians are worried about it, but the Southern Baptists are very excited. They used to go to Muslim countries with a mission to Muslims. Then they issued a statement saying, “God has given us a better opportunity. Rather than our going to those countries, the Muslims are coming here!” They wrote a book called *Mission to Muslims in America*. We got a thousand copies of that.

The Methodists have distributed a very good booklet about Muslims. It tells Methodists, these are your neighbors, this is a reality in America, so it is better for you to understand what these people believe, and you will be soothed and comforted when you find out that they are highly religious, and very disciplined in their talk and behavior. It's interesting to see how others are watching us, and how they are dealing with us. I can use this literature.



**Dr. Syeed displays a quilt made by Muslim youth, bearing “the 99 names of Allah.”**

**R&C:** What is ISNA's role in establishing Islamic schools?

**SYEED:** Many of us have come from Muslim countries where we were very well grounded in our own heritage. Our challenge is not whether we ourselves will practice those things—we do—but whether we are going to pass on this heritage to the next generation. We are addressing it many ways. There are several thousand Sunday schools. On the weekend, every Islamic center arranges teaching Islam

to children. It is part time, a few hours once a week, but it is better than nothing. Even this we had to start from zero. There was no literature, no trained teachers. We had to write a curriculum. The second step that Muslims are taking is establishing full-time schools. There are about 300 full-time schools. We are developing a whole new expertise and professionalism.

**R&C:** How are you going to keep the young people down on the farm, as we say, when American secular culture is so seductive?

**SYEED:** It is very important that our young people not see acceptance of Islam as a negation of rationality. If Islam forbids you from drinking, it is because drinking is detrimental to making a healthy contribution to society. Those who have consciously, deliberately made a choice that they will live as Muslims, and contribute as Muslims to America, will have multiple kinds of satisfaction. It will give them a cohesive, healthy personality, at peace with themselves, at peace with God and with their environment. That is pretty well what Islam means: at peace with God. Maintaining Islamic values and culture within American secular culture is very tough, and we will have casualties, there is no doubt about that.

**R&C:** Do you encourage Muslims to be become involved in politics?

**SYEED:** When you are collectively creating a new identity, you want to see it recognized. If I am not happy with what my children are being taught in the school, I have to come forward and interact with the teachers, look at the textbooks, get involved with the PTA. Ten years ago, 20 years ago, text-

books had stereotypes directly insulting to Islam and Muslims. We confronted these publishers and the school systems and showed them that this was totally unacceptable. We established an Institute of Islamic Education in Los Angeles, and it has been doing wonderful work. At every level it is critical for us to get involved, to defend our rights, and to be properly represented. At both the Democratic and Republican conventions last summer, Muslims participated. At our convention in Chicago, we had a voter registration drive and several discussions on participation in the American system.

**R&C:** You referred earlier to a rediscovery of the true principles of Islam. Do you see the possibility of a “reflowering” of Islamic culture within America?

**SYEED:** We are reflowering not only to the benefit of Muslims living in America, but as our contribution to American culture. In the beginning, Islam was the liberator. It emphasized human dignity and unleashed the tremendous capacity that human beings have. It gave birth to an era of science, technology, exploration, and invention.

Then it got stagnant through centuries of war—the Crusades, and so on—that weakened the whole civilization. Then there was the period of occupation by European powers that took a tremendous toll on the Islamic heart and philosophy. The result is that many countries still have colonial institutions and traditions. Their vitality is missing. They have not become contemporary.

Here in America, there is freedom of expression, and immediate response to challenges. Therefore the new understanding of Islam is emerging in America. Islam will be far more vibrant, far more contemporary. It will imbibe the values of freedom of religion, of mutual human respect—which essentially belong to Islam, but they will be rehabilitated after centuries of stagnation. Islam will become more powerful, more accommodating—and more in keeping with the American dream. America will benefit from it, and the Muslim world will benefit from it. This kind of reflowering is not possible within the Muslim world, which is occupied by tyrants, dictators, and monarchs, and where the freedom of expression is lost.

## Major RELIGIONS of the World

Ranked by Number of Adherents as of January 2001

Christianity: 2 billion  
 Islam: 1.3 billion  
 Hinduism: 900 million  
 Buddhism: 360 million  
 Chinese traditional religion: 225 million  
 primal-indigenous: 190 million  
 Sikhism: 23 million  
 Yoruba religion: 20 million  
 Juche: 19 million  
 Spiritism: 14 million  
 Judaism: 14 million  
 Babi & Baha'i faiths: 6 million  
 Jainism: 4 million  
 Shinto: 4 million  
 Cao Dai: 3 million  
 Tenrikyo: 2.4 million  
 Neo-Paganism: 1 million  
 Unitarian-Universalism: 800 thousand  
 Scientology: 750 thousand  
 Rastafarianism: 700 thousand  
 Zoroastrianism: 150 thousand

Secular/Nonreligious/  
 Agnostic/Atheist: 850 million

Source: *Adherents.com*

### Adherents of non-Christian organized religions in the USA

Jews: 5.6 million  
 Muslims: 4.1 million  
 Buddhists: 2.4 million  
 Hindus: 1 million

Source: David Barrett, *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 2001 edition



**The challenge for Muslims in America is passing on their culture to the next generation.**

# RESOURCES

Consult the following publications and Internet sites for more information about world faiths.

Baha'i: [www.us.bahai.org](http://www.us.bahai.org)

Buddhism: [www.buddhanet.net](http://www.buddhanet.net)

Divita, James J. *Ethnic Settlement Patterns in Indianapolis*. Indianapolis: Marian College, 1988.

Hinduism: [www.hindunet.org](http://www.hindunet.org)

Islam: <http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/islam>

Membership statistics: [www.adherents.com](http://www.adherents.com)

Pluralism Project at Harvard University: [www.fas.harvard.edu/~pluralism](http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~pluralism)

Religious Movements project at the University of Virginia: <http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu>

Religious Studies on the Internet: [www.wlv.ac.uk/sed/rsnet.htm](http://www.wlv.ac.uk/sed/rsnet.htm)

Rudolph, L.C. *Hoosier Faiths: A History of Indiana's Churches and Religious Groups*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.

Sikhism: [www.sikhs.org](http://www.sikhs.org)

Taylor, Robert M. and Connie A. McBirney. *Peopling Indiana: The Ethnic Experience*. Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1996.

Virtual Religions Index at Rutgers University: <http://religion.rutgers.edu/vri>



**Sikh Gurudwara Temple, Indianapolis.**

## RELIGION COMMUNITY

is a newsletter  
of the Project on Religion  
and Urban Culture at the Polis  
Center, funded by a grant from  
Lilly Endowment Inc.

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