World Faiths Put Down Roots In US.
By Jane Lampman

In Orange County, Calif., the Muslim community couldn’t find a place big enough to celebrate the most important holiday of the year. But after lots of prayer and radio appeals, strangers of other faiths came to the rescue. When the day for Eid al-Fitr arrived in January, more than 11,000 Muslims bowed in prayer in the huge blimp hangar at Tustin Marine Corps Air Facility.

In Northern Virginia, Muslims were seeking approval to build a new school complex in Loudoun County. But at a tumultuous six-hour public hearing in February, many county residents voiced intense opposition. This issue, a county supervisor said, has brought “the most turmoil in our historic county that I can remember.”

These two stories - of cooperation and controversy - are repeating themselves across America as it comes to terms with becoming the most religiously diverse nation on earth.

While the United States remains overwhelmingly Christian in affiliation, a host of world traditions has set up home here during three decades of more-open immigration. The effect is being felt far beyond places of worship.

“These religious communities are here to stay, putting down roots, building temples and mosques, and participating actively in their cities and towns,” says Diana Eck, professor of comparative religion at Harvard University. “The new religious complexity has already become part of the agenda of every public institution - from the statehouse to the public school and the hospital.” Dr. Eck’s Pluralism Project studies these faiths in the US.

For a time these groups worshiped in homes, storefronts, or “borrowed” churches, but now hundreds of Buddhist and Hindu temples, mosques, and Sikh gurdwaras are sprouting on city streets or making dramatic statements along US highways. Los Angeles, for example, now has over 120 temples and is the most diverse Buddhist city in the world.

The US Census does not record religious affiliation, but some 1996 estimates count 5.5 million Muslims, 1.3 million Hindus, 600,000 Buddhists (probably not including Euro-Americans), and 363,000 Sikhs.

But the boom in construction and sheer numbers are only part of the story. As these faiths grow, they are running into challenges that are changing them and the society they now call home.

**Traditions reexamined**

The transplanting to US soil gives many immigrants their first experience as a religious minority. They are suddenly called upon to explain themselves - to other Americans who know nothing of their faith; to their own children, who may begin to wonder why certain practices are necessary; and sometimes even to themselves.

“It is a truism that many Hindus in India go through life without asking themselves what it means to be a Hindu,” says a Chicago woman, speaking to researchers in the Pluralism Project. “But we who live as minorities in a multicultural setting are forced to ask ourselves the fundamental questions.”

As a result, a religion that was essentially a way of life and virtually without a creed has in the US begun to generate its own creedal statements. The Northern California Hindu Businessman’s Association, for example, has printed cards that list “Nine Beliefs of Hinduism.”
Visibility creates waves

But it is in engaging with the broader community that the biggest tests often arise. Seeking building permits has called up concerns (and prejudices) far beyond zoning questions. A Buddhist group setting up a small home temple in Garden Grove, Calif., faced a five-year controversy.

The Loudoun County experience has been a rugged one. Opponents raised issues from terrorism to the lack of religious freedom in Saudi Arabia. While county supervisors approved the school, a local group threatened to seek the recall of some supervisors. Board chairman Dale Myers now says that “even before the issue was resolved, several churches were engaged in the healing process.... This issue has brought out the best and the worst of this community.”

Not all communities face problems. This spring a Vietnamese Buddhist group in Virginia Beach, Va., began construction of a $1-million temple that the city had granted a special permit for “with no problems at all.”

Diversity in the schools

Public schools are dealing not only with the many languages immigrant children speak, but also their need to fulfill religious obligations.

Dallas Independent School District formed a Religious Community Task Force to help set some guidelines. The Task Force, including representatives of Buddhist, Baha’i, Hindu, Islamic, Sikh, and Jain as well as Christian and Jewish groups, produced reference sheets for school use on religious practices (medical restrictions, special diet or foods, dress issues, special observances or rituals), a calendar of religious holidays, and a guide on prayer and teaching about religion in the classroom.

As Roman Catholics did decades ago, many Muslims have decided to build private schools. Their aim is freedom from certain social pressures. “Our major concern is drugs and alcohol, and sexual relations before marriage,” says Imam Talal Eid, religious director of the Islamic Center of New England.

Overcoming prejudices

America’s commitment to religious freedom has not wavered, but its history has been shadowed by prejudice and discrimination. Jews, Catholics, and native Americans once bore the brunt of religious intolerance. Now followers of the new world religions face similar tests.

In New Jersey in the 1980s, for example, women in the Hindu community who wore the traditional dot (bindi) on their foreheads were frequently attacked by a shadowy group calling itself the “Dot Busters.” After the Oklahoma City bombing, Muslim families were targeted in more than 200 incidents before it was known that Timothy McVeigh was the likely bomber.

These problems have spurred interfaith dialogue and encouraged groups to embrace other faiths. The 70-year-old National Conference of Christians and Jews last month changed its name to The National Conference of Community and Justice to accommodate growing diversity. NCCJ also released a poll showing that Americans favor more diversity in neighborhoods, workplaces, schools, and places of worship.

Religious groups are counting on such attitudes. Muslims have responded to what seems the greatest antipathy recently shown a new faith by becoming active in public life.
“Muslims have done ‘the American thing,’” Eck says, “and formed voluntary organizations to work on their own behalf.”

MOVING BEYOND STEREOTYPES

Shortly after the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City, the calls began. As after most any disturbing event in the Middle East, the phone at the Islamic Center in Quincy, Mass., rang with messages from angry New Englanders speaking their minds about Muslims. But this time one caller said, “The center is going to blow up in 15 minutes.”

“It was scary,” says Imam Talal Eid, the center’s religious director.

“We called the police and they came and searched. There was no bomb.”

But Mr. Eid had reason to be worried. The Islamic Center of New England, founded by immigrant families from Lebanon who worked in the Quincy shipyards during both world wars, had suffered an arson attack in 1990 that destroyed part of the center and damaged the rest.

The imam - an affable man with a ready smile - seems to take the situation in stride. He was once imam at the mosque in Tripoli, Lebanon, in a neighborhood split between rival militias in the civil war. His house was in the territory of one group and the mosque in the other.

He, his wife, Hend, and two children came to the United States in 1982. For 16 years, as the family grew to six children, he has led the center through a host of challenges. (He also earned a masters degree at Harvard Divinity School.)

Seeking to expand beyond the rebuilt Quincy location, they encountered resistance in other communities. After they paid a deposit on a property in Milton and met zoning requirements, a small group bought it out from under them. When they found farmland in Sharon two years later, again residents objected.

“You cannot assume a good welcome anywhere,” Eid says. “Not because people are bad, but because they have many negative stereotypes from the media and even school textbooks.” They don’t distinguish between Islam and Muslims generally and those who do bad things, he says, whereas they make those distinctions with Christians. They don’t realize they are often dealing with third-generation Americans thoroughly versed in American civilization, he adds.

But this time, the clergy in Sharon “gave us all kinds of support,” and many faiths shared in the groundbreaking. Now there is a K-7 school, with eighth grade to be added next year, and a social hall for gatherings, including two annual feasts that can draw more than 3,000 worshippers.

Eid spends much time talking to churches, schools, and other groups about Islam. Once Americans understand the basic teachings, he says, they will no longer fear it.

“The environment in America encourages openness, recognition, and respect,” Eid says, “and US Muslims are more open than Muslims anywhere else.” They seek to make their way and contribute to society. But there are challenges to practicing their faith fully. “Our congregational prayer is on Fridays. [Given work demands] how many Muslims can do Friday prayers? ... There are many challenges for Muslims, no doubt, but they can be dealt with,” he muses.