

CATHOLIC COURIER

Diocese of Rochester Thursday, March 28, 1991 75¢ 20 pages



Ethnic observances

Holy Week and Easter bring forth a host of ethnic traditions, ranging from the painting of pussy willows on German Easter eggs to the procession of Hispanic Catholics reenacting the Way of the Cross on Good Friday. Page 6.

Muslims seek to dispel stereotypes

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

Ask a random sampling of U.S. citizens what they know about the Islamic faith, and the following statements are likely to be among the responses:

- Muslims are generally Arabs;
- Muslims use terrorism to advance their goals;
- Muslims are often fundamentalist fanatics;
- Muslims believe in waging "jihad," or as the word is often translated, "holy war;"
- Muslims believe in a false god named Allah;
- Muslims force Christians and Jews to convert under threat of death;
- Muslim women have no rights.

The problem is, none of these assumptions about Islam is true.

Take, for instance, the notion that Muslims are usually Arabs.

"Not all Muslims are Arabs," observed Emil Homerin, professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Rochester. "The largest Muslim population is in Indonesia. There are more Muslims there than there are Arabs in the world. And not all Arabs are Muslims."

John Renard, professor of Islamic Studies at St. Louis University, pointed out that such non-Arab nations as Indonesia, India, Bangladesh and Pakistan have large Muslim populations — accounting for approximately 400 million of the estimated more than 800 million Muslims in the world.

"The Arabs are in the minority, probably one sixth of all Muslims," Renard said.

And while the bulk of Muslims can be found in Africa, the Middle East and Asia, the faith is spreading throughout the world. In Europe, for example, Islam is the leading religion in Albania.

In the United States, meanwhile, the Muslim population is between six and eight million, and growing rapidly. By the year 2,000, Homerin predicted, Islam will become the second largest faith community in the United States. (Catholicism, which currently has approximately 57 million believers, will remain the largest faith community.)

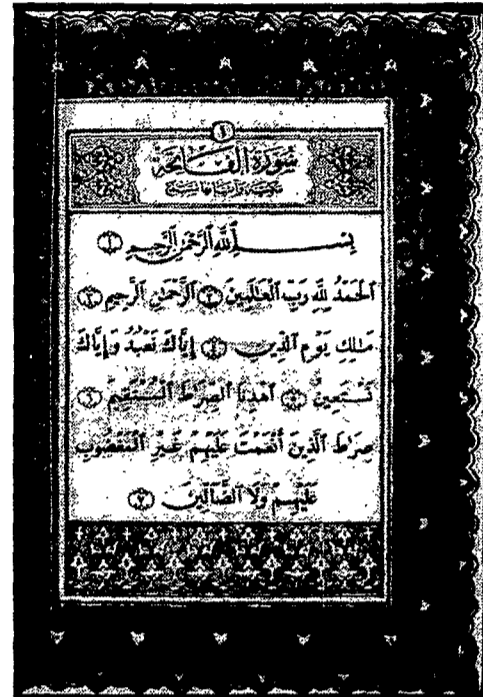
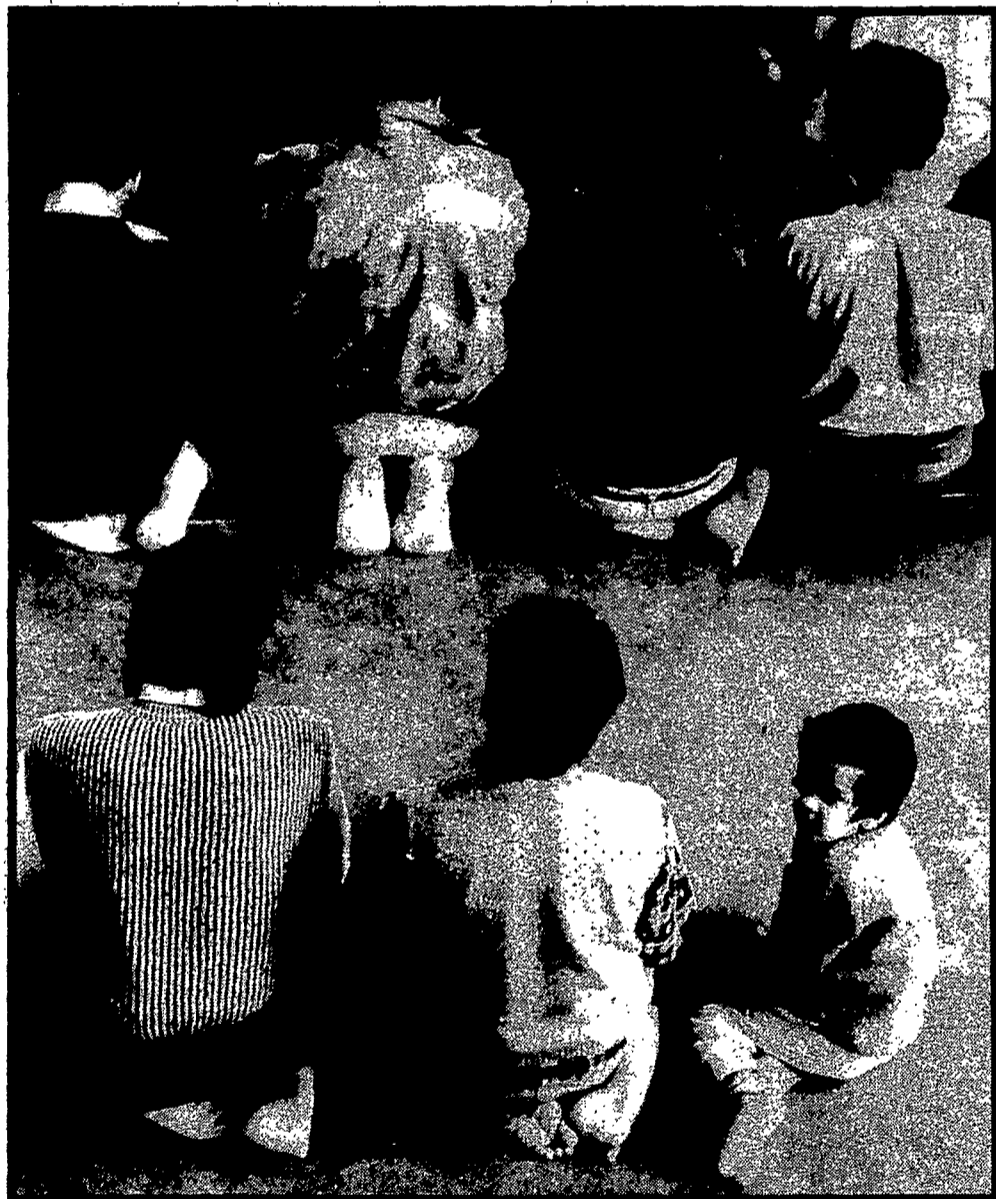
The truth about Islam is that it has much in common with both Judaism and Christianity, noted Aly Nahas, vice chairman of the council of trustees of the Islamic Center of Rochester.

Islam — a word which means submission to the will of God — teaches that there is only one God, Nahas said. That God is the God worshipped by Christian and Jews. In Arabic, the word for God is Allah.

Adherents of Islam recognize the validity of Judaism and Christianity, linking all three beliefs together as the "religions of the book." Under Islamic law, Jews and Christians are to be allowed to practice their faith, and can not be forced to convert.

Islam, however, marks the completion of God's revelation, while the other two faiths are earlier steps in the process, Muslims believe. Thus a person can convert from Judaism or Christianity to Islam, but under Islamic law, a Muslim is not permitted to convert to either faith.

Muslims also accept the prophets of the Old Testament as genuine, and regard Jesus as a prophet as well. According to Muslim beliefs, Muhammad was the last of



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer
The Islamic Center of Rochester is one of three locations where local Muslims gather to worship. Clockwise from top left: an unidentified man begins Friday prayers at the mosque on Westfall Road March 15; the Fatiha or Opening Chapter of the Koran is repeated throughout the day as a preface to prayer. The prayer reads: 'In the name of God, Most gracious, Most Merciful. Praise be to God, The Cherisher and Sustainer of the worlds. Most Gracious, Most Merciful; Master of the Day of Judgment. Thee do we worship and Thine Aid we seek;' Kausar Khan of Rochester prays at the end of Friday services; a young boy is distracted by other children playing in the balcony of the mosque.

the prophets, and God dictated the Koran to him.

The Koran outlines how to create a just society, Renard observed. Thus, Muslims are enjoined to take care of the poor and underprivileged, and to be honest in their business dealings.

The Koran does include laws that, by contemporary standards seem harsh, Nahas acknowledged. Among those rules are cutting off the hands of thieves, stoning women caught in adultery, and executing a person who attempts to convert from Islam.

"It is very important to realize that in the Koran, before you apply that punishment, forgiveness always should be considered first," Nahas said. He added that these laws are rarely enforced in Islamic nations, with Saudi Arabia and Iran among the ex-

ceptions.

Homerin, who was in Egypt at the time that the Ayatollah Khomeini condemned Salmon Rushdie to death for allegedly blaspheming Islam in his book, *The Satanic Verses*, noted that the majority of Muslims did not agree with the decision.

"Most of the people said (Rushdie) should not have done what he did," Homerin said. Most Muslims were calling for a boycott of the book company or stores that sold the book, however, not death for Rushdie, he reported.

"Most Muslims denounced (Khomeini's) declaration," Homerin said. "What was clear was that this was a minority opinion."

The Koran also provides no support for the kinds of terrorist activities often mistakenly linked to Islam, Renard said.

"It seems to me to associate (terrorism and violence) with Islam is like blaming drugs and violent crimes in the United States on Christianity," Renard said. Assuming that Muslims are by nature terrorists because of the activities of some individuals, he continued, has as much validity as assuming that Catholics are terrorists because of the activities of the Irish Republican Army.

Even the notion of jihad is misunderstood, Nahas said.

"Jihad is not a holy war," Nahas said. "How can war be holy?"

"Jihad in Arabic means to strive to do your best," Nahas continued. "It means to fight within yourself, to be a better Muslim, to be a better human being."

When terrorist groups — or more re-

Continued on page 18