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Reuters/CNS

An Afghan refugee in Pakistan waits as the sun sets, signaling the end of fasting Nov. 27, during Ramadan.

Muslim-American image improves

WASHINGTON (CNS) — Since the Sept. 11 attacks, Americans' opinions of Muslims in this country have improved, even though some believe the terrorist attacks were motivated in part by religion.

According to a nationwide poll by the Pew Research Center for the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, the percentage of people with a favorable opinion of Muslim-Americans increased from 45 percent in March 2001 to 59 in a November poll. The results were released Dec. 6.

Thirty percent of those questioned believe religious beliefs were the main factor in why terrorists attacked the United States, while 49 percent said political beliefs were the cause, 10 percent said it was both and 11 percent either said they don't know or had other answers.

Although Christianity and Judaism have

the same monotheistic origins as Islam, few people questioned in the survey of 1,500 adults nationwide think their own faith has much in common with Islam. Nationwide, 52 percent described Islam and their own faith as "very different."

Among Catholics, 50 percent said the faiths are very different, compared to 44 percent of nonevangelical Protestants and 63 percent of evangelical Protestants.

Very few people polled agreed even slightly that the attacks on the United States are a sign that God no longer protects the country. Of the whole group polled, 8 percent agreed with the statement. Among Catholics, 5 percent agreed. The largest group to concur with the statement were evangelical Protestants, of whom 12 percent agreed.

Vastly more people think religion is

gaining in influence on American life since the September attacks, the poll also showed. In the November poll, 78 percent said religion is increasing in influence. Just seven months earlier, 37 percent agreed with the statement while 55 percent said religion was losing influence.

That 78 percent is the highest number to say religion is becoming more influential in more than 40 years of polling, according to the Pew report. It cited Gallup Poll results going back to 1957, when 69 percent said religion was gaining influence. Through all other years listed, people said the opposite. In 1968, 67 percent said religion was losing influence, for instance.

All those people who say religion is becoming more important in the country aren't necessarily going to church more themselves, according to the poll.



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Inside This Week

Women's abilities to lead

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Karen Callaway/CNS

Anthony Caldwell from the Diocese of Davenport, Iowa, celebrates the opening of the National Catholic Youth Conference Dec. 6 in Indianapolis. About 24,000 young people and adult chaperons attended the four-day biennial event.

The National Catholic Youth Conference opened Dec. 6 at the RCA Dome in Indianapolis with plenty of music and the foot-stomping and cheering of 24,000 teenagers and adult chaperons from across the country. And it ended much the way it began, according to Catholic News Service.

After three days of taking part, teenagers were still clapping Dec. 9 for Jesus, shouting "Amen" and celebrating their Catholic identity. It was the largest attendance of teenagers in the history of the biennial conference, sponsored by the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry.

Forty-nine U.S. bishops joined the youths, and some prelates came into the stadium on opening day wearing racing helmets in honor of the city known for the Indianapolis 500 auto race.



Karin von Voigtlander

Christian Austin, 15, of St. Patrick's, Macedon, boards a bus Dec. 5.

Nearly 1,000 youths and adults from the Diocese of Rochester — including Bishop Matthew H. Clark — formed the largest diocesan contingent in the country from outside Indianapolis.

In his homily at the closing Mass Dec. 9, Bishop Clark told all the youth, "You are a beautiful gift of God for the life of the church today and tomorrow. When you go home tell the people about God and the living Christ."

Two diocesan teens, Martha McCahill and Mike Rondeau, were members of a Youth Press Corps designated to report on the NCYC for their hometown media. Both are also members of the Diocesan Youth Committee. Their firsthand reflections are featured on Pages 6 and 7. Their coverage replaces the *Catholic Courier's* normal "On the Move" teen page this week.

MORE COVERAGE ON PAGES 6 & 7