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*U.S. Freedoms Give American Muslims Influence Beyond Their Numbers*

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Omaima Bukhari is a precocious Muslim in Maryland. She's 20, fascinated by Islam, computer science and psychology. She discusses everything with her father, Zahid, who works at Georgetown University and counts as friends imams and sheiks from Al Azhar, the prestigious seat of Islamic learning in Cairo.

Last December, she attended an engagement party for relatives in Pakistan. The bride-to-be was sobbing in the next room. So Bukhari marched before the family elders and demanded to know: Did you ask for her consent to the marriage? No? You have to! This right is from Allah, conveyed by our prophet Muhammad!

The women were silent. The men were arguing. These were men with beards down to their chests. This was a small rural village. This was a place where women have only just begun to receive educations.

But Bukhari was quoting the Koran. She was quoting a hadith (an account of the prophet's life). She was insisting that the villagers' treatment of women was based on cultural practices, not the faith of Islam. No one could argue with her sources.

Finally, the graying patriarch of the Bukhari clan delivered judgment: Omaima is right. Consent must be obtained.

The fiancee eventually granted it. And, as Bukhari prepared to return to America, the old-world patriarch told his new-world descendant, "Granddaughter, you've taught me a lot."

Far from the fatwas--the religious decrees--of hierarchies abroad, American Muslims are slowly but steadily carving their mark on the Islamic world.

Their relatively small numbers, young history and still fledgling organization would seem daunting barriers to wider influence. Of the roughly 1 billion Muslims worldwide, those in the United States are only a tiny fraction, numbering somewhere between 3 million and 10 million.

But a confluence of forces that has made those Americans among the freest, most educated, affluent and diverse Muslims in the world has given them an impact greater than their numbers. Helped by the growing use of English as a language of Islamic discourse and by the ever-spreadng world of the Internet, they are self-consciously seeking to influence their religious brethren worldwide.

Moreover, the spirit of the times may be on their side. "The guy with a turban and rifle is out," says Marcia Hermansen, a theology professor at Loyola University Chicago. "The guy drinking a latte with a laptop computer reading Internet fatwas is in."

Provocative Islamic thinkers are flourishing in the climate of America's unparalleled intellectual freedom. They are tackling taboo subjects such as spousal abuse and highlighting the aspects of their nearly 1,400-year tradition that embrace women's rights, human rights and democratic practices.

The sheer diversity of the community here is prompting efforts to promote Islamic models of pluralism. U.S. Muslims include American natives, mainly of African descent, as well as immigrants from more than 50 nations.

American Muslims also are expanding their influence by bringing modern education, business practices and economic development to their homelands through a mushrooming number of nonprofit organizations. More than 300 such groups now raise about $50 million a year for such causes as education and health care, according to Aslam Abdullah, editor of the Los Angeles-based Minaret magazine and president of the American Federation of Muslims From India.
"Muslims all over the world are looking with high expectations toward the ummah [community] in the United States and Canada," says Murad Wilfried Hofmann, a retired German diplomat and Muslim jurist. "Its dynamism, fresh approach, enlightened scholarship and sheer growth is their hope for an Islamic renaissance worldwide."

Working against that hope are the community’s weaknesses. American Muslims are divided and sometimes fractious. They struggle with discrimination and comparatively weak political clout at home. They are seen by Muslims elsewhere as generally lacking in the classical Islamic education that would undergird their authority.

Some leaders worry that the powerful forces of assimilation, which homogenize most immigrant groups in the U.S. by the third generation, could weaken the American Muslim identity before it fully consolidates.

Key leaders across the ideological spectrum—from Sheikh Hisham Kabbani of the Islamic Supreme Council of America to Nihad Awad of the Council on American-Islamic Relations—voice a common view that Muslims here must get their own house in order before hoping to have a major impact abroad.

But despite the problems, American Muslims present the Islamic world with a seductive new model of modernity, says Sulayman Nyang, a professor of African and Islamic studies at Howard University in Washington.

Until now, the main model in the Islamic world for modernization had been Turkey, which excised Islam from public life in the name of progress. America gives Muslims an alternative—an example of a society in which the faithful are free to be both modern and religious. Here, more women are voluntarily donning the hijab head covering as a mark of religious pride and identity—even rendering it hip with T-shirts touting it as "Good in the 'Hood."

Nyang argues that the potent combination of modernity and piety demonstrated by Muslims in the U.S. could catch on in the Islamic world, offering a compelling alternative to extremism.

The American faces of Islam belong to people like Dany Doueiri and Shamshad Hussain.

Doueiri is a co-founder of one of the world's most popular Web sites on Islam, http://www.islam.org. Every day, the Los Angeles-based site receives 140,000 hits. More than half the visitors are from outside the United States. They are shown an expanse of Islam that bypasses the divides of cultures, religious sects and schools of Islamic law that often separate Muslims from one another.

For instance, when numerous Bosnian Muslim women were raped by Serbian soldiers during the Balkans conflict, the site was flooded with queries on the Islamic position on abortion. Doueiri says his team presented without judgment two opinions from different schools: one holding that any abortion is forbidden, the other saying that the procedure is allowed for up to 120 days into the pregnancy, after which, adherents believe, the soul enters the body.

The neutral presentation of differing views within the vast Islamic tradition, though rare, is equipping Muslims worldwide to think through their own Islamic practices rather than simply accepting the rulings of the local scholar, Doueiri says.

"This site has brought so much happiness overseas, because people say they find a much more objective point of view than they get from their own scholars," he says.

The rise of the electronic fatwa, sometimes by self-styled experts, dismays some classically trained scholars. But experts say the trend is irreversible.

The Internet, satellite TV and steady gains in literacy are prompting a quiet but dramatic shift in the source of Islamic authority throughout the Muslim world—from political and religious leaders to the common educated people, says Dale F. Eickelman, a Dartmouth College
anthropology professor and co-author of the book "New Media in the Muslim World."

Led by Muslims in the West, unprecedented numbers of believers are debating the fundamentals of their faith and practice in a new Islamic reformation, he says.

"Nobody is controlling anymore," Eickelman says. "Even if you're not getting an increase in liberalism or a shift from authoritarianism, you're now getting large numbers of people who know what they're missing."

One pipeline of fresh Islamic views to younger Muslims abroad is the Iqra International Educational Foundation in Chicago. Iqra--the Arabic word for "read" and God's first word to the prophet Muhammad, according to the Koran--is pioneering American-produced, English-language Islamic textbooks. In the last few years, overseas demand has skyrocketed and the foundation now exports tens of thousands of books annually to 16 countries in the Mideast, Asia, the Indian subcontinent and Europe.

The books' distinction, according to managing director Hussein, is that they promote the idea of self-study of the Koran and hadith and present the tradition's essence shorn of regional and sectarian differences.

The quest to crystallize Islam's essence, free of the overlays of cultural tradition, is perhaps most advanced here because America's diversity is forcing Muslims to strive for a common understanding.

Douelri's Internet group, for instance, represents Muslims from both the majority Sunnis and minority Shites who hail from 30 countries.

Douelri, for example, is an African-born American of Lebanese ancestry.

American Muslims are producing the first modern "hajj model of community," says Agha Saeed, who teaches ethnic studies at UC Berkeley, referring to the annual gathering of Muslims in Mecca, Saudi Arabia.

American Muslims say they are striving to restore their faith to its essence of tolerance and pluralism. Two decades ago, the Islamic Center of Southern California was a pioneer in arguing for an American Muslim identity based on "finding ways in Islam to make bridges to 'the other' and live together," as center co-founder Maher Hathout puts it.

At the time, his was an odd voice among Muslim leaders who were focused inward and viewed America as dar ul-kufr, or "place of unbelievers." Today, the concept is mainstream.

In Westwood, Michael Flemming represents the small but growing number of Muslims who are marrying cross-culturally. An African American graduate student in Islamic studies at UCLA, Flemming says his in-laws from India initially resisted his request to marry their daughter. But that resistance began to melt, he says, after he made his pilgrimage to Mecca.

Still, the challenge of pluralism looms unmet for many. "Some African Americans get the feeling that even with our Muslim brothers, it's still 'us and them,' " Flemming says. "I think the youth, because they've grown up together here, will be able to overcome this."

In the academic arena, striking American voices of Islam belong to people like Khaled Abou el-Fadl. The UCLA professor of Islamic law is breaking intellectual ground with bold social critiques based on a blend of classical Islamic training and Western academic grounding. He trained in Egypt and Kuwait and at Princeton and the University of Pennsylvania.

Over the last four years, Abou el-Fadl has published searing critiques on sexual abuse, wife-beating and other problems among Muslims, analyzing how Islamic tradition sometimes promotes such behavior. Without America's academic freedom, he says, such scholarship would have been impossible.

Using case studies of mistreated Muslims, Abou el-Fadl has admonished the tradition--and present-day imams--for the general silence on incest and sexual abuse. He has challenged divorce laws favoring men and concluded that expectations of blind obedience from women is immoral.
So far, he has not been able to punch a doctrinal hole in the laws of apostasy, although he would like to. He says he is morally offended by the laws, which punish those who leave Islam with penalties of death or imprisonment in many countries.

His unflinching scholarship is controversial, but it is gaining notice abroad. Abou el Fadl has been asked to lecture in the Mideast, North Africa and Europe and has received e-mail from around the world. Some people chastise him, but he says the vast majority back his efforts to reinterpret the Islamic legal tradition.

He has no patience for those who claim that Islam is perfect.

"Instead of being brave and gutsy in confronting the flaws and shortcomings of the tradition, they are being apologists," Abou el Fadl says. "It is our moral obligation as Muslims to speak the truth."

American Muslims have even established an organization that counts gender equality as a core value. Jamal Al-Muslimeen was established in 1977 in Minneapolis and now has chapters in Nigeria, Bangladesh, Ghana, Britain, Germany and Canada, according to Ali Siddiqui, an imam based in Chino who is a member of the group.

Siddiqui tries to walk the talk, delivering sermons at area mosques on spousal abuse as a consequence of misplaced ideas of male superiority. When he marries couples, he tells them that Allah has made women and men equal. Sometimes, he says, he is challenged—especially by elders from remote areas.

Such experiences temper his idealism about the impact American Muslims can have in changing values both here and abroad.

"We have a lot to contribute, but it's a very slow process," Siddiqui says. "Ideas take time to take hold, especially when people have been doing something for so long."
*Exorcism Flourishing Once Again*

* Hundreds of ministries now exist, at least one providing the service over the radio. The resurgence has sparked a debate on the nature of evil and the ritual's role among Christians.

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RALEIGH, N.C.--Days before Halloween, the demons already were loose in this southern town of tall pines and steeped churches.

Bob Larson, an evangelical minister who has honed the art of exorcism into astonishing public performance, was facing down the demon of witchcraft in Karen Ward, a 42-year-old medical administrator. Or so the guttural voice that emanated from the woman identified itself.

Before a standing-room-only crowd in a Hilton hotel here, the voice growled that it had gained a foothold in Ward by cursing her bloodline 10 generations ago, had pushed her into evil sex and intended to keep her in its grasp.

Oh, yeah? Larson snarled, brandishing a Bible in one hand and a microphone in the other. "Witchcraft, face me!" he bellowed. "We break every curse! I now call down to you the wrath of God. Go now to the pit!"

"To the pit!" the crowd chanted.

At once, Ward's contorted face relaxed. She hugged Larson as she called out thanks to Jesus for her deliverance. The crowd went wild. Later, she said the healing was genuine and all her demons were "completely gone."

The ancient ritual of exorcism, which fell out of favor in the Age of Reason, is once again flourishing in the Age of the Internet.

End-of-the-world fears? A desire stoked by Hollywood occult films? Ministers looking for new lines of work?

Whatever the cause, hundreds of exorcism ministries now exist--some with names like Demon Stompers that offer personal delivery testimonies and toll-free lines for convenient counseling.

Along with the heightened public interest in exorcisms has come a passionate debate on the nature of evil and the proper role of the ritual among Christians.

"It's a sensational, fast-food solution to long-term problems that absolves you of any responsibility for your vices," says Hank Hanegraaff of the Christian Research Institute in Santa Margarita. "I call it Flip Wilson theology: 'The devil made me do it.'"

Counters Larson, whose Colorado-based ministry offers exorcisms by radio and conferences nearly every week: "Critics can take all the cheap shots they want, but we are genuinely trying to do something about the suffering of people."

Exorcisms are nearly as old as human civilization, practiced from antiquity by Babylonian priests, tribal healers and Jesus, himself. But, according to historians, exorcisms declined in Western churches about 200 years ago only to begin resurfacing in the 1970s.

Recent growth seems brisk: An international exorcism association established by the Vatican's chief exorcist attracted just six practitioners to its first conference in 1993, but drew more than 200 exorcists and their lay assistants this summer.

In the United States, the Catholic Church has quietly increased the number of appointed exorcists from just one in 1990 to between 15 and 20 today, according to Michael W. Cuneo, a Fordham University associate professor and author of a soon-to-be published book, "American Exorcism." Moreover, he says, countless maverick priests are performing bootleg rites without their bishops' required permission.

The Chicago Archdiocese made international headlines last month by
confirming that it had appointed an official exorcist a year ago for the first time in its 160-year history.

Cardinal Francis George made the appointment after repeated requests for the ministry from Catholic prayer groups. The unidentified exorcist has so far conducted one ritual, deemed successful, says Robert Barren, a theology professor and archdiocesan spokesman on exorcisms.

(In the Los Angeles Archdiocese, the exorcist position is vacant, according to a spokesman.)

But the number of Catholic exorcists pales next to those in the world of charismatic and evangelical Protestantism. Among theologically conservative evangelicals alone—those who don't believe in speaking in tongues and other Pentecostal gifts—Cuneo says exorcism ministries have skyrocketed from a handful in the early 1980s to more than 600 today.

The Fordham scholar has personally witnessed more than 50 exorcisms—most of them performed out of genuine spiritual compassion with no demand for fees, he says.

But people have been beaten and even killed in exorcisms, including a Korean woman in Los Angeles who died after a six-hour ritual in 1996.

And experts say the psychological dangers of what some see as playing with people's minds and telling them they are possessed can be great.

"When anything and everything can be demonic, you are setting yourself up to be a spiritual paranoid," says Father Mitchell Pacwa, a Jesuit priest and University of Dallas scholar who has studied exorcisms for 25 years.

Cuneo attributes the apparent rise in exorcism requests to popular culture. From the 1973 release of the movie "The Exorcist," which was re-released last month, to Harry Potter books today, an endless string of films, books and TV talk shows has made the occult part of general discourse, he says.

Geraldo Rivera, Oprah Winfrey, Larry King and Barbara Walters have all featured exorcists on their shows, Cuneo says.

"Should we not think that exposing people relentlessly to this talk of demons wouldn't have some effect?" he says.

America's most well publicized Catholic exorcist, Father James LeBar of New York, agrees—to a point. "The Exorcist" publicized the possibility of possession and the fact that the church could help, he says, fueling the growth in requests for services.

But the larger driving force is a rise of Satanic cults, music and other malevolent influences that has opened more people to evil, he believes.

A decade ago, LeBar received no requests for exorcisms; today he is referred to 25 to 30 cases a month.

"People dabbling with the occult are playing with a spiritual loaded gun, and they will be faced with something far bigger than they can handle," Pacwa says.

Others say a decline in morals and family life is opening the door to demonic forces.

At Harvest Rock Church in Pasadena, a team of 25 counselors focuses on exploring whether an afflicted person had childhood traumas or problems with parents.

If so, the experiences likely created what lay pastor Albert Landry calls 'Satan's strongholds'—anger, bitterness and resentment, a lack of forgiveness. When those emotions are dissolved through prayer and repentance, he says, "the demon leaves on his own because he has nothing to hold onto."

"In the early days, we would cast out demons, but we would find they would come right back again," says Landry, who has worked in deliverance ministry for nearly 20 years. "The counseling approach gets to the root of the problems."

Whether possession is real or imagined has been debated for centuries.
Catholics are cautious about diagnosing possession. An exorcism requires a bishop's authorization after all physical and psychological causes for problem behavior are ruled out. LeBar says only 5% to 10% of all cases he examines warrant an exorcism.

Despite that screening, Richard Woods, a Catholic priest and psychotherapist with Loyola Hospital in Chicago, says he has examined hundreds of cases and has not yet found one that convinced him of genuine demonic possession.

Even the celebrated St. Louis case on which the book "The Exorcist" was based has been grossly exaggerated, Woods says. The psychotherapist was able to read the eyewitness note taker's confidential transcript of the 1949 exorcism and found nothing more dramatic than "a frightened boy" of 13.

Over time, he says, the story became embellished. In an interview years after the ritual, for instance, one participant reported that an exorcism manual spontaneously burst into flames. But the transcript, Woods says, reported merely that the boy tore out a page.

A large body of clinical literature and anthropological studies has shown that in times of social upheaval, people act out their fears through trance states and other possession-like behavior, Woods says.

Hanegraaff adds a theological twist, arguing fiercely that Christians cannot be possessed by demons at all because they are filled with the superior power of the Holy Spirit. The fact that so many Christians believe otherwise demonstrates an appalling degree of Bible illiteracy, he says.

By contrast, Landry at Harvest Rock says demons may enter anyone who sins.

And Larson not only believes Christians can be possessed, but he also has developed an elaborate system explaining how.

Videos, books and tapes detail his theories on the four laws of spiritual warfare, six strongholds of Satan and four ways that Satan can acquire the legal right to possess a person--through a generational curse, for instance, or "soul ties" forged through sex with a demon-possessed partner. Sales of the products supplement the fee--$39 to $49--that he charges for exorcism workshops following his free public conferences.

The diverse views amid rising public interest in exorcisms are challenging seminaries and schools to wrestle with how to teach the topic.

In 1994, Biola University in La Mirada began a course on exorcism and the related concept of "spiritual warfare," which primarily views the Christian life as one of battle between God and Satan.

Last week, Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena convened the first in a yearlong series of meetings among its schools of psychology, theology and missions to begin exploring how to train its future ministers to deal with the controversial topic.

Among other things, says Fuller Provost Russell Spittler, some of the school's Asian faculty had expressed dismay that spiritual warfare proponents are overtaking churches in South Korea.

Others, however, believe the school should affirm the ministry and prepare people for it. Spittler, raised in the evangelical Assemblies of God tradition, believes there is a place for exorcisms, although "I wouldn't be surprised if more people were not helped by them."

In any case, the demand seems unabated.

The wide range of people seeking relief was evident at the Raleigh gathering, where more than 300 people sat transfixed by Larson's spectacle.

Jean confessed that she was sexually abused at the age of 6 and is plagued by multiple personalities. Steve, a bearlike man of 46, vented anger at his father for a lifetime of verbal abuse. Diane, a willowy brunette, told Larson she was given up for adoption, raped and
institutionalized in a psychiatric hospital 23 times. Then she stood up and screamed: "I am angry at everyone!"

Alex Cleghorn, a 52-year-old home remodeler, came to Larson's conference with his family in the hopes of deliverance for his son Chris, 27. As a boy of 7, Chris was molested by a family friend and has suffered from emotional problems ever since.

Therapy has not helped, but the conference seemed to have an impact. Chris burst into tears when the exorcist homed in on him, and he hopes for more concentrated attention from Larson later.

"I believe this man is on to something America needs," Cleghorn said. "That is to help people in their wounds and hurts."
*The New Gospel of Academia*

Once largely ignored in social research, religion--and its powerful role in shaping individuals and cultures--is now a hot field of inquiry.

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In Pennsylvania, researchers are documenting how religion keeps young people from drugs and delinquency. In Cambridge, professors are pondering how faith propels environmentalism and inner-city economic development.

And in one of the world's most religiously diverse laboratories--Southern California--scholars are visiting such sacred sites as Sikh gurdwaras, Chinese Buddhist temples and Armenian apostolic churches to scrutinize the powerful role that religion plays in the lives of new immigrants.

Across the nation, scholars have begun to promote a new paradigm in academia: Religion matters.

Once a largely forgotten factor in social research, dismissed by those who believed that society would inevitably secularize and cast spirituality aside, religion is now a hot field of inquiry. Until recently, a long-standing academic bias against religion has blinded many scholars to its powerful role in shaping both private lives and the public culture.

"While millions, even billions, of people view so many different human concerns through the lens of religious faith, this crucial subject remains one of the most understudied social phenomena of the 20th century," Princeton University President Harold Shapiro said last year.

That's changing. Driven by new funding opportunities, a national spiritual resurgence and growing political interest in faith-based initiatives, more people than ever are studying religion. No longer confined to schools of divinity, religion is being increasingly probed in departments of sociology, political science, international relations, even business schools. The new research is expected to "significantly reshape the social sciences," said Jon Miller, a USC sociology professor.

"We've started to legitimize the study of religion and help people acknowledge it's a phenomenon people need to pay attention to," said Donald E. Miller, executive director of the USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture.

The American Academy of Religion, for instance, reports a 34% increase in membership in just the last six years, from 6,700 members to 9,000. Major academic organizations have added religion subsections in recent years; the one established by the American Sociological Assn. has gone "from nowhere to one of the largest" in the last five years, Jon Miller said.

More foundations are funding religious research. The Ford Foundation, for instance, launched a religion program in 1997 and has doled out about 50 grants totaling $10.5 million. Foundation President Susan Berresford added the program after she repeatedly encountered people in her global travels troubled by "deep moral uncertainty" amid rapid modernization and globalization, said Constance C. Buchanan, the foundation's religion officer.

Other major funders include the Lilly Endowment and Pew Charitable Trusts. Pew recently launched a multimillion-dollar initiative to create 10 academic "Centers of Excellence" to study the intersection between religion and international relations, urban affairs, American democracy and other contemporary issues. So far, centers have been established at Princeton, Yale University, Emory University, Boston University and the
University of Notre Dame.

"Religion was often seen as soft, too ephemeral to be included in serious scholarship," said Kimon Sargeant, a Pew program officer. "We want to help provide a broader public understanding that religion can be a remarkable force for common good."

Interest in religion's impact on social problems has grown tremendously in the last few years, as policymakers have looked for new approaches and shown a greater willingness to lower the wall between church and state to allow more public funding of religious initiatives, scholars say.

Both major-party presidential candidates, Al Gore and George W. Bush, are pledging to expand the involvement of religious organizations in public programs to combat poverty, homelessness and other problems. Bush, for instance, has pledged to establish an "Office of Faith-Based Action" with $8 billion in funding for such initiatives.

Whether faith-based programs are more successful than secular ones has not yet been proved, but scores of scholars are now exploring that question. Two of them are Byron R. Johnson and John J. Delulio Jr. of the University of Pennsylvania and the Manhattan Institute. In groundbreaking research on religion and juvenile behavior, the two have shown that religious faith is one of the top three factors in predicting a childhood free of delinquency, along with attachment to parents and school.

"Ten years ago, if you put religion in a proposal to get [public] funding, you would have gotten immediately disqualified," Johnson said. "Now, the Department of Justice is saying that religion is fair game to look at."

The bustling Center for Religion and Civic Culture at USC is a leading player in the new research efforts. Scholars there have examined religion's effects on health care, welfare, immigration and urban development. They have also distinguished themselves nationally by venturing outside the ivory tower to regularly bring together academics, faith leaders and public policymakers to brainstorm solutions to pressing social problems.

"Most centers do wonderful work, but they tend not to get their hands dirty," said Diane Winston, a Pew religion officer. "USC does, in the best sense of the word. In the move among scholars to make religion applicable to real problems, USC is at the cutting edge."

The center's dual commitments to professional research and community activism keep scholars scurrying.

Consider this August calendar: peacekeeping duties for the Democratic National Convention; co-sponsorship of a major Salvadoran religious feast day; suggestions to USC, the Multicultural Collaborative and others on how to better embrace faith groups; brainstorming sessions with the Cornerstone Theater Company about a series of faith-based plays; plans for an economic development conference with religious leaders and federal housing authorities.

One recent day found Greg Stanczak, a doctoral candidate in sociology, sipping tea with a Buddhist nun from the Hsi Lai Temple in Hacienda Heights. He scribbled notes as the Rev. Man Yee mixed amusing stories of a former life as a hotshot real estate agent with descriptions of temple services for its members, most of them Chinese immigrants.

Yee detailed how the temple does far more than bring Buddha's teachings to the flock: It operates as a lifeboat for new immigrants, offering English classes and seminars in Chinese on U.S. tax laws and financial planning, dental care and menopause.

Across town on another day, Lezlee Suzanne Cox was interviewing the Rev. Alvin Tunstall Jr. on how his Trinity Baptist Church manages to produce a successful summer jobs program for South-Central Los Angeles youth. Congregants pitch in $140,000 a year to pay about 30 youths for
their time as free interns at local corporations.

The congregation's largess is rooted in the conviction that the 4th Commandment to honor the Sabbath also obligates faith communities to provide the jobs that enable people to work the rest of the week, Tunstill told Cox, a doctoral candidate in political science. The minister shared ambitious dreams to revitalize his community, discussing stock market returns, small-business opportunities and economic incentives to lure doctors and other professionals back to the area.

And on a recent Sunday at St. Gregory the Illuminator Armenian Church in Pasadena, Father Vazken K. Movsesian explained to Tim Fisher how the church offers both ancient Armenian worship services and American social action programs of food and toy giveaways.

Such research reinforces the growing public recognition of religion's robust role in civic life. Donald Miller said the 1992 Los Angeles riots were the seminal event in raising his own awareness of that role as he watched news coverage and saw inner-city ministers leading efforts to quell the tensions and reweave the city's sheared fabric.

In 1993, he and two colleagues won a one-year grant from the Haynes Foundation to study the role of religious organizations in post-riot Los Angeles. That led to other grants and the USC center's formal establishment in 1996. The center is housed at USC but is fully supported by grants from Pew, Haynes, the James Irvine Foundation and other private and public funders.

The resurgent interest in religion marks a startling turnabout for academia—sociology in particular. Although many early sociologists were Christians active in the 19th century social reform movements, religion lost its academic luster in the 1950s, said Jon Miller of USC's sociology department.

The two theorists with the most influence on sociology at that time, Karl Marx and Max Weber, traveled different philosophical paths to reach similar conclusions—that society would inevitably push religion to the periphery, he said.

"In real life, we know religion never went away, but people just stopped paying attention to it," he said.

Stanczak was one of those scholars convinced that religion was obsolete. He came to USC to test his hypothesis that religion was disappearing among youth. Almost immediately, he said, he found out he was wrong.

"I was looking mostly at Generation X and Generation Y, and saw that religion was giving structure and meaning to their lives," he said. "To these people, religion is the core of what is radically transforming their lives."

Gaspar Rivera-Salgado never paid attention to religion either, focusing on political and social organizations of Latino immigrants. But the deeper the USC sociologist looked, the more he discovered that many of the groups had a priest, a church or a religious cause behind them.

Now his work—along with a slew of new national studies on religion and immigration—likely will prompt major theoretical revisions in the field of immigration studies, said Jon Miller and others. Many previous scholars had ignored religion's central role in new immigrants' lives, they said.

The USC center's community outreach also distinguishes its work—and wins high praise from faith leaders across the spectrum.

When Carole Shauffer, a lawyer from the Bay Area, wanted to rally religious leaders for a foster child support program, she went to the center for names.

When the Rev. Richard Ramos wanted to launch an affordable-housing program in Santa Barbara, the center's staff helped him find funding sources.

When the Rev. Eugene Williams wanted someone to evaluate his literacy programs for prison inmates, he turned to the center, which now works
with his Los Angeles Metropolitan Churches on a range of other programs.

"If anyone wants to know anything about religious or church-based
organizations, the center is the place to start," Williams said.

As religion gains renewed respectability among scholars, more people
are likely to be knocking on the center's door.

"There has been a phobia about religion, but the corner has been
turned," Don Miller said. "People's religious experiences are going to
be taken much more seriously in the academy, rather than being seen as
something to be debunked and discarded."
*Memo From Pagans: Relax, Will Ya?*

* The nature-loving faithful who gathered at the pride festival say they're nothing to be afraid of.

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It's Pagan Pride Day, and hundreds of witches are out of the broom closet, flying high.

In a meeting room at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Long Beach, a priestess of the Yoruban goddess Yemaya is teaching an enraptured group of four men and four women how to read Tarot cards. The priestess, June Gerron from Orange, is telling her class that the woman-with-a-lion card is often interpreted as "power over your animal self--grrrrrr!"

Near the entrance, Jon Elder is selling his services as a pagan psychotherapist--which means if you're into it, he can offer you magic spells to work wonders in your life. Say you're looking for a lover. Elder might suggest a nightly ritual and meditation, using a candle to represent yourself and objects to represent your ideal partner. As you move the objects closer to the candle, he says, you focus your subconscious on your heart's desires and work toward attracting them.

"Usual psychotherapy would probably recommend something like journaling, but that's left forebrain activity," says Elder, a pleasant man with a bushy beard. "If you do something with symbols, you're taking action."

At the gathering Saturday, all manner of witches, priestesses and pagans turned up to celebrate the autumnal equinox, assert their religious rights and promote accurate images of their faith. Let it be known: This is not a religion of green-faced hags, evil warlocks, black magic and satanic sex orgies. Those are Hollywood fantasies, pagans say or deliberate smears by Christian zealots who have mischaracterized their nature-loving religion since the days of the Inquisition.

"I feel misunderstood," says Peg Greenfield, who has rejected organized faith in favor of the ancient goddess tradition of Isis of Egypt. "People ask: Aren't witches bad people with nasty laughs and pointy hats who hurt people? No, we're not: We're peaceful and harm no one."

The Long Beach event was part of a growing pagan pride movement, with celebrations scheduled in 67 cities across the nation this month, according to Brian Ewing, an organizer. He and two others started the Pagan Pride Project of Los Angeles last year, after a Christian congressman from Georgia, Rep. Bob Barr, attacked pagans in the military who were trying to hold rituals at an Army base in Texas. The project is modeled after the gay pride movement, says Ewing, a 26-year-old Web site designer who says he was drawn to the pagan path after searching several years for a spirituality that would reflect his love of nature.

While the number of pagans in America is unknown, their visibility is increasing with growing numbers of books, Web sites and events. Nowadays, witches are seen as more trendy than terrifying, with positive portrayals in such films and TV shows as "Practical Magic," "Charmes" and "Sabrina the Teenage Witch."

And particularly in polyglot California, pagans say, most people are generally accepting: Ewing says his boss at a former restaurant job used to ask him to twitch his nose--a la Samantha in the old "Bewitched" TV show--to bring customers in on a slow day.

But pagans say they still face discrimination. Michael Gennitti, a Long Beach network engineer, says he had to stamp out false rumors that he was a Satanist after a colleague at work saw him wear a pentagram, the ancient pagan symbol that is a five-pointed star. His friend, Stephanie Baham, an Orange County insurance administrator, says she once
was accused by a Christian of evil practices for using Tarot cards.
Elder says a friend was fired from a job at a Christian school in
Riverside when it became known she was a pagan, and others say witches
have been disowned, rejected for housing and even assaulted because of
their faith.
"There have been a lot of gains," Elder says, "but people are still
losing jobs and having their children taken away from them."

The eclectic religious movement, which has been afforded legal
protections by federal and state courts, has no central dogma except the
rule, "If it harm none, do what you will." Pagans revere female as well
as male deities and center much of their spirituality around
nature--celebrating the seasonal changes as expressions of the endless
cycle of birth, death and resurrection.

The Long Beach event, for instance, featured a ritual celebrating the
autumnal equinox. In traditional times, the fall festival was used to
thank the gods for the bountiful harvest; festival attendees gave that a
modern twist by bringing a canned food donation for a Long Beach program
for AIDS sufferers.

The crowd called out to the four directions, sang of death and
rebirth and invoked the wisdom of Mother Earth and Lord of the Harvest.
Then they ate "cakes and ale" (actually bread and apple juice) to
commemorate their wishes to never hunger or thirst.

"Merry meet and merry part, and merry meet again!" they called out in
their boisterous closing.

The festival drew more than 300 people and featured about 25
different vendors peddling items from gemstones and candles to jewelry
and incense. There were books like "Wiccan Warrior" and "Money, Charms
and Spells." There were "power wands"--crystals wrapped with feathers.

Pentagrams, of course, were the jewelry of choice. At the food stand,
the $3.50 "Pagan Plate" turned out to be nothing more exotic than a hot
dog, chips and soda.

Several organizations showed up to solicit support. They included
Wayward Witches, an Inland Empire support group for those who eschew
covens but still want to meet regularly to swap shoptalk on spells and
such. The Lady's Caldron offers social networking and events such as
belly-dancing workshops and lectures on various pagan traditions.

There are thousands of such traditions--some traditional like Celtic
and Wiccan, and some custom-tailored. Peggy Jentoft, for instance, has
concocted her own blend of "Buddhist Pagan" practices centered on the
Buddhist deities of compassion, Kwan Yin and Tara. Lauren Thyme
describes herself as a "Christian-plus" who has incorporated into her
Christian heritage Buddhist, Hindu and Egyptian spiritual practices.

"I like to take the best of all worlds," Thyme says. "Live and let
live is my own philosophy."

Which pretty much reflected the spirit of the festival. Gennitti, who
is both pagan and gay, says the open-mindedness has helped him finally
find a comfortable spiritual home. "Here, you can explore and see what
feels comfortable," he says, "and everyone is really accepting."
*Has Yoga Stretched Too Far?*
* This ancient Hindu discipline has become so popular that serious devotees are worrying about over-commercialization.

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In the stillness of a light-filled temple, hundreds of yoga devotees sit with erect spines, breathing slowly, drawing their prana--life force--inward and their attention toward God.

Here at the Lake Shrine in Pacific Palisades, more than 1,000 followers gather each Sunday to chant, meditate and pay homage to the Self-Realization Fellowship's lineage of gurus--most prominently Paramahansa Yogananda, the Indian swami known as a founding father of yoga in the West who brought the ancient Hindu techniques here in 1920.

A few miles away, along fashionable Montana Avenue in Santa Monica, a different kind of yoga practice is underway. This secular studio is hip, featuring beautiful people in clingy garb who twist and stretch their bodies in poses with names like Downward Dog. Yoga Works offers nearly back-to-back yoga classes--150 a week--along with workshops on everything from the Yoga of Money to Zen Dance.

Yoga, meet yoga.

Seventy-five years after Yogananda established his worldwide religious headquarters in Los Angeles, Americans are embracing Eastern traditions of yoga and meditation as never before. Once seen as the stuff of snake charmers and magic carpets, yoga is said to be practiced today by some 12 million Americans of diverse backgrounds. Celebrities tout it, doctors prescribe it, health clubs teach it, corporations offer it. Advertisers are using yoga to sell Zippo lighters, Ford Rangers and even yoga pedicures--"guaranteed to soothe the sole."

The yoga craze reflects what the fellowship's Brother Anandamoy calls a "survival instinct" for stillness amid the frenetic pace of the relentless information age. Yoga Works teacher Julie Kleinman says at least half of her students are desperate for decompression; others are tired of treadmills, Tae-Bo and weight training. Still others say the attraction to yoga reflects a broader hunger for mystical, direct experiences with the divine--evidenced by growing interest in Jewish Kabbalah, Islamic Sufism and even Christian Pentecostalism.

Even as devotees hail the spread of yoga into mainstream America, some question its secularization and commercialization. Earlier this month in Anaheim, for instance, a national organization of fitness professionals held a two-day seminar on how to teach yoga--now the third-fastest growing activity in gyms, offered by nearly 60% of them, according to the fitness group, IDEA.

Such instant yoga offends some, who say that the practice is more profound than a path to tight pecs and that it takes years of physical and spiritual discipline to master. "Yoga is a sacred tradition meant to discover who we truly are in a spiritual dimension," says Georg Feuerstein, president of the Yoga Research and Education Council in Sebastapol. "If we only focus on our hamstrings, that's a sad commentary on our culture today."

Lina Gupta, associate professor of philosophy and comparative religion at Glendale Community College, says the physical postures of hatha yoga are meant to be a means to an end. The end is self-realization, which requires meditation, sitting for long periods and limber bodies--for which hatha yoga was developed. But the physical postures have instead become the end, she laments.

Yoga Works, in business since 1987, tries to straddle a middle course between the spiritual and secular forms of yoga. Founder Maty Ezraty
says the studio deliberately downplays yoga's spiritual dimension to remain accessible to all but hires only experienced instructors well-versed in the broader tradition. Kleinman, for instance, featured light touches of meditation and Sanskrit chanting during her recent class; she has also read the classic Yoga Sutras by the great Indian sage Patanjali.

Ask the group that first popularized it all about any furor and its members seem mainly amused.

"Yogananda-ji would laugh," says Mrinalini Mata, vice president of the late guru's worldwide Self-Realization Fellowship, headquartered in a lush oasis of streams, deodar trees and meditation spots in Mount Washington. "He had a tremendous sense of humor."

Yoga, a Sanskrit word often interpreted as "union with spirit," is a 5,000-year-old sacred path to divine realization developed on the Indian peninsula as one of the major systems of Hindu philosophy. Each of the six major yogic paths offer different methods to achieve its ends: hatha yoga, for instance, employs physical postures to purify the body for meditation. The fellowship practices a form of Raja yoga, using meditation techniques to quiet the body and mind by directing the life energy inward, gradually bringing an inner awakening and attunement with the divine.

The Self-Realization Fellowship's own brisk growth, as it marks the 75th birthday of its international headquarters and on Sunday celebrated the 50th anniversary of its popular Lake Shrine, offers testament that the yoga boom isn't merely about muscles.

Since Yogananda's centennial birthday celebration in 1993, the fellowship's number of temples and meditation centers has increased from 400 to more than 500, with members in 178 countries. Between 1993 and 1998, attendance at temples increased an average 42%, the organization reports.

The reach of Yogananda's teachings go well beyond membership. To meet the demand for material, the religious group recently began publishing a line of books in Spanish, along with hand-sized books in English on simple themes such as prayer, success and meditation. And Yogananda's spiritual classic, "Autobiography of a Yogi," remains a perennial bestseller, having sold millions of copies in the more than half a century after its first publication six years before his death in 1952.

"It was a pivotal book," says Phyllis Tickle of Publishers Weekly magazine. "It was the first book on Eastern spiritual practice that made a big play on the popular market. It took spiritual seeking out of never-never land and gave it definition and substance."

While secular practitioners may aim for physical strength and flexibility in their practice, fellowship members profess strong spiritual yearnings. They include newer devotees such as Lorrie De Young, a Hollywood artist who joined the group with her husband and two sons two years ago. Older members include celebrities ranging from George Harrison to Mariel Hemingway, and the producer-director team of Gloria and Michael Schultz. The practice has brought new energy, peace and calm, say the Schultzes.

Gloria Schultz says that on her first visit to the Lake Shrine 24 years ago, she was instantly gripped by pictures of the gurus and, as she was leaving, felt a powerful urge to make the spiritual commitment she had avoided her entire life. Her husband was a tougher sell. He came from New York with an attitude: "This was California fruitcake stuff," he recalls thinking.

But when his wife exhorted him to listen and not judge, Schultz says, he found the sermon about how to maintain calm detachment from life's highs and lows deeply relevant to the roller-coaster entertainment industry. The clincher, he says, was finding that the techniques of concentration, meditation and energizing the body actually seemed to work.
"There was incredible peace and an ability to deal with the toughest situations in business and not be swept away by it," says Schultz, who produced the film "Car Wash," has worked on TV series including "Touched by an Angel," and recently started, with his family, two Internet film and animation firms.

Even as yoga franchises expand in the secular business world, the spiritually based fellowship operates quietly to carry out what leaders say is its highest purpose: to guard the integrity of Yogananda's teachings and disseminate them as requested.

The board of directors is comprised of six nuns and two monks, following Yogananda's wish to keep control in the hands of monastics to minimize "undue financial or commercial interests," according to Brother Chidananda.

Longtime disciples recall Yogananda turning down various marketing schemes to boost membership, preaching a desire to attract not crowds but genuine truth seekers. "Some have said we could pull in a lot of members if we use crystals and spin the approach to where present civilization seems to be rolling," says vice president Mrinalini Mata. "Never! That would be compromising the teachings."

The fellowship's "Mother of Compassion," president Sri Daya Mata, has kept affairs so true to the days of Yogananda that services almost seem a countercultural throwback to the past--especially as other churches rush to rock music, multimedia sermons and other peppy innovations. Mrinalini Mata says services have not appreciably changed in 75 years, still featuring meditation, a sermon and chants sung to the strains of a harmonium.

Unlike many temples that mainly serve Indian immigrants, Self-Realization centers are devoid of Hindu ritual objects and statues of Hindu gods. The centers instead feature a simple altar with flowers and pictures of its six gurus.

The fellowship also bucks current trends toward blending worship and "mix and match" religion--a strong phenomenon on the American religious scene. Yogananda warned of "spiritual indigestion" resulting from too many practices and advised people to choose one and stick with it, according to Sister Savitri of the fellowship. (Even so, she says, Yogananda believed that all faiths were essentially different paths to the same God, and in particular taught that an essential unity exists between original yoga and original Christianity--one reason that Jesus Christ is considered one of the gurus).

The group's lack of trendiness seems to be one of its attractions. "People say they are looking for authenticity," says Sister Priya.

Not that the fellowship has been without controversy. A current effort to expand its Mount Washington headquarters has sparked protests from some local residents concerned about traffic and other problems associated with development. And the group has occasionally found itself embroiled in litigation over copyrights of Yogananda's writings and at least one sex scandal involving a former monk.

But a popular Web site on questionable religious groups, (http://www.rickross.com), does not list the fellowship. "The teaching has maintained its integrity, and the founder himself has certainly laid a foundation for a safe and meaningful method of continued spiritual growth," says Obadiah Harris, president of the Los Feliz-based Philosophical Research Society and a yoga practitioner.

Spiritual growth may ultimately prove to be the goal for both Self-Realization devotees and at least some of the sweaty souls at secular yoga studios like Yoga Works.

Roseann Spengler, a magazine editor visiting from Connecticut, is 60 and looks 40, thanks to a lifelong regimen of careful eating and exercise--running, weight-training, treadmill. But she's here for her second class at Yoga Works this day because she now wants something more: "Peace, calmness and a sense of well-being that comes with doing
something like yoga," she says.
She's ready to try meditation, too. And if all of this brings the lifelong Catholic a new spiritual path—along with greater energy and a more supple spine—she says that's fine. "I think God is universal," Spengler says.
*Prophecy, Karma and a Buddhist Icon in Glendale*

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In the Earth Ox Year of 749, an enlightened Buddhist master of extraordinary power journeyed to the Himalayan kingdom of Tibet. Guru Rinpoche was born in the Milk Ocean land of what is now Pakistan. Ancient legends say he could defy death and brought the teachings to Tibet when he was 1,000 years old. One of them was the secret blueprint of a sacred map to enlightenment called the Shi-Tro mandala.

The mandala was said to be so potent that merely looking at it could liberate any being from all negative karma—the unavoidable consequences of harmful actions. It could transform anger and fear into altruism and compassion.

In the Wood Monkey Year of 804, the chronicles say, the guru left Tibet with a wondrous display of miracles, riding a horse through the air before an astonished crowd. Before he left, he prophesied that the teachings would someday reach the world.

"When the iron bird flies," it is written that he said, "the teachings will go to the West."

Now, in the Iron Dragon Year of 2000, a master Tibetan artist and his staff are using the ancient blueprint in Glendale to build the first three-dimensional mandala in the United States.

Working in the shadow of Forest Lawn Memorial Park's landmark white cross in Glendale, Pema Namdol Thaye is busily adding jewels and paint to what resembles the celestial palace of 100 peaceful and wrathful deities. By the time it is completed in October, this icon of intricate art and intense spirituality will be 10 feet tall and will have taken nine months and $250,000 to construct.

The project will be personally blessed this week by His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet, who arrived in Los Angeles on Friday to give a week of Buddhist teachings.

For Lama Chodak Gyatso Nubpa, the mandala project represents an urgent race to preserve a vanishing cultural and religious art. Once a standard fixture in almost every large monastery, the three-dimensional mandala has become perilously rare amid the destruction of more than 6,000 monasteries during nearly five decades of the Communist Chinese occupation of Tibet.

But project members also envision the mandala as more than important museum art or esoteric Buddhist practice. Their driving motivation is to bring the mandala's benefits to the street: to gangbangers and truck drivers, teachers, dot-commers and children, to open hearts and minds—the only way they believe genuine peace is possible.

Members of Chagdud Gonpa T'hondup Ling, the lama's Los Feliz center, are hammering out a nonsectarian curriculum for peace education to offer to schools and communities as the mandala begins a national tour.

Two members, Linda Maxwell and Jose Quintanar, are holding public workshops to teach people how to use the mandala to nurture compassion. They're bringing mandala training to places like Camp Scudder, a youth detention camp in Saugus, to help wayward kids learn they have a sacred center.

Other project members are marketing the mandala in a hip and humorous way: "Shi-Tro Happens." The image campaign, aimed at creating buzz among a younger, not necessarily Buddhist crowd, features a planned CD of Tibetan music, an e-card of snazzy flash graphics linked to the project's Web site (http://www.shi-tromandala.com), and products ranging from T-shirts to incense.

Some may see the mandala as hocus-pocus, but it has fascinated
non-Tibetans for generations. Swiss psychologist Carl Jung, for instance, viewed the circular shape as a universal symbol of the divine and once called it an "antidote for the chaotic states of mind."

For members of the Shi-Tro team, the project has been a test and a triumph of faith. They began with an audacious belief that a small Buddhist center could sponsor a project so staggeringly complex that no one had ever attempted it in the United States.

But the project has begun capturing the imagination of supporters ranging from musician Stephen Stills and actress Sharon Stone to restaurateur Lucy Casado; from Forest Lawn to Whole Foods Market and Silk Road Gallery.

The lama knew it would.

"Whenever you do anything devoid of selfish motivation," he says, "there is not the slightest doubt that you will succeed."

Lama Chodak Gyatso Nubpa is 49, solidly built, with a shaved head and a wide smile of straight white teeth. A fitting lama for Los Angeles, he can crack Jay Leno jokes one moment, then plunge into a dense Buddhist lecture the next.

He boasts an exceptional background: training from age 4 in Tibetan Buddhism's oldest order, known as Nyingma. Advanced degrees in Buddhist studies—metaphysics, psychology, logic, sutras and tantras—from the prestigious Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies in India. Chairman of the Tibetan parliament-in-exile.

But ask about his background, and he replies: "I feel ashamed, because the level of my practice is so poor. I am still in a sleeping state."

Today, Lama Gyatso straddles the two worlds of Tibetan ancient wisdom and American pop culture through his marriage to Linnea Nan, director of artist development and creative marketing at Warner Brothers Records Inc. in Burbank. The two met shortly after the lama moved to Los Angeles in 1997 at the request of his teacher, His Eminence Chagdud Tulku Rinpoche. He agreed to meet Nan because he misheard her last name and thought she was a Buddhist nun.

Nan is thirtysomething, with translucent skin and a long mane of reddish hair twisted atop her head. In between marketing campaigns for k.d. lang, Joni Mitchell and others, Nan is spearheading the mandala image campaign. She came up with the "Shi-Tro Happens" slogan. He didn't get it. What does the mandala have to do with yak dung?

For them, an aspect of the project is intensely personal: It is a labor of love to preserve the Tibetan heritage for their 16-month-old son, Rigzin Thinley Njorbu.

But it's more than that, of course. It's the need to heal the horrific legacy left by the butchers of Tibet, the henchmen of the Holocaust, the gang warriors in Glendale, the abusers of children—so much violence everywhere, leaving so much lingering pain, and not just among the victims. The perpetrators, the bad guys, need help even more, the lama says.

For Lama Gyatso, forgiveness is not an intellectual exercise.

When the Communist Chinese invaded his homeland in the 1950s, they arrested and tortured his father, an influential community leader hailing from a long line of lamas and medical doctors. During a parole from his interrogations, his father packed up the family and fled across the ice-capped Himalayas.

All 15 children in his family set out. Only five survived. Some of the lama's younger brothers and sisters, just babies, died in his arms.

The young boy, 8 years old, but already four years in Buddhist training, held the small, still bodies of his siblings and thought not of revenge but of compassion—how his prayers might benefit his family in the afterlife. More than four decades later—after about 1.2 million Tibetans have perished under Chinese rule—the lama still speaks only of
empathy.

Shouldn't you blame the Chinese soldiers for the horrors? No, he says, they were just following orders. Who, then? Perhaps Communist Party Chairman Mao Tse-tung, the lama says, but once you consider the "sons of suffering" his acts will bring him under the karmic law of cause and effect, "instead of feeling anger and hatred, you naturally develop compassion."

Such disciplined training of the mind--to transform thoughts of anger with thoughts of goodness and generosity--is a demanding path. "This path is not for everyone," the lama says. "It's a warrior's path."

On a fine spring day, the lama is sitting cross-legged on a purple cushion, burning powdered incense, juniper and other substances on a small charcoal grill. The work of building the mandala begins here, on the open-air esplanade behind the Forest Lawn museum.

The smoke offering ceremony, the lama explains, purifies the environment and what he calls the "mindstream," or consciousness, of all beings in the area. Negative vibes would greatly dilute the mandala's blessings, he says.

For Tibetan ritual artists, cultivating a pure motivation is the single most important goal. Not artistic technique. Not self-expression. Not originality. To benefit others is the driving intent. The Shi-Tro mandala artists--Thaye, his wife, Gaye, and brother, Kunzang--begin each morning with meditation to purify their minds.

Thaye, 33, is one of the few artists left in the world with the breadth of artistic talents and Buddhist knowledge needed to build a 3-D mandala. From age 14, he apprenticed with his uncle, Lama Gonpo Tenzing, who is regarded as one of Tibet's living national treasures.

The intricate work includes woodworking, painting and shaping figures ranging from sea dragons to deities. But the dense spiritual meaning embedded in every doorway and post, measurement and form, is most striking.

The four doors to the palace, for instance, represent the "four immeasurables" of loving kindness, compassion, equanimity and joy. There are lion beams signifying strength and a fire circle in which all negative forces are burned and transformed into wisdom. "I don't see this as just a piece of wood," Thaye says. "I am building a mansion for the deities, so I approach it with great respect."

The intense focus on devotion over originality has no precise parallel in Western art, says John Listopad, an assistant curator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. "Tibetan art is a psychological art and a meditational art," Listopad says. "It's an art which works on people and their personalities. It can calm you down and help you find peace and balance."

When Los Angeles City Councilman Mike Hernandez invited Tibetan monks to construct two sand mandalas in rival gang neighborhoods in Cypress Park and Montecito Heights in 1995, the project seemed to have a tangible impact on easing tensions.

"I saw kids put their rough side away and become civilized," recalls Luis Baretto, who produced a documentary about the Cypress Park project and is now helping the Shi-Tro team. "When these monks tell you, 'My father was killed by Chinese people ... but I love them,' what are you going to say? That this guy spit on my low-rider so I'm going to kill him?"

Under Lama Gyatso, the mandala will be put to work on the streets. Two of his members doing that are Maxwell and Quintanar.

The pair have used the mandala principles in a nonsectarian way to train thousands of youths in peace education, conflict resolution, job training and life skills through their Glendale-based nonprofit
organization, We Care for Youth.  
On this day, Maxwell and Quintanar are bringing mandala training to 14 teenagers at Camp Scudder. The boys are 16 to 18. They have robbed, carjacked, sold drugs and taken them, dodged bullets and fired them. Maxwell leads them to define themselves, not by their dark acts, but by their pure hearts.  
Do they have them? These guys with these criminal records? Maxwell wastes no time finding out. She asks who has lost a loved one. Each one raises a hand. An uncle shot dead in an alley. A cousin who got in the way in a gang fight. A best friend; so many friends. Another beloved uncle--kidnapped, killed and thrown in a dumpster. My little baby, and I didn't even get to go to the funeral.  
Tears fall.  
"The reason we do this is to show you the one common condition we all share," Maxwell says gently. "We will all die."  
Other common conditions: We all have hearts; otherwise they wouldn't break like this. And we all want to be happy.  
With that, Maxwell offers a basic Buddhist teaching--the impermanence of life, nurturing compassion for others by focusing on what we share--without once mentioning Buddhism.  
Then she tells each of them to draw his own personal mandala, a diagram shaped like a lotus flower with a round center and eight petals. Buddhist practitioners use it for healing and meditation by identifying the self with the symbol of divine power in the circle's center.  
Maxwell translates this into simpler language. The center is your pure self. The petals are the things that protect it. Draw it. Some get to work immediately. Others look stumped. No one has ever asked them to think about their goodness.  
By session's end, though, everyone has succeeded in the task. Adam draws a blue center with the words: love, happiness. His biggest protector: MOM. "The hate is outside. It's what people see all day but they don't know me. It's OK to express your goodness sometimes."  
In his center, Gary puts a heart, family, Watts and the names of two loved ones. In one petal, he outlines a cross as a protector--but doesn't shade it in, since he's not yet sure about his faith. Others draw their centers as mind, a smiling face, a prayer. "When you get back out on the street, use this," Maxwell says, pointing to the mandala's center. "This is what makes you glow. Don't do anything that takes you out of your right mind. Remember: Just like you, others feel deeply."  
The teenagers won't change overnight. But the lama would say that the mandala has planted a seed of awareness in them that is certain to ripen sometime. And the Shi-Tro mandala--which they'll view when they attend the Dalai Lama's blessing of it--can liberate them and all those in pain, Lama Gyatso says.  
Which is why he's bringing it here.  
"We need a major healing," Lama Gyatso says. "We are kind of running out of time."
"Struck by 'Golden Miracles'"

* Pastors of a congregation say Holy Spirit has turned silver fillings to gold. Claim stirs excitement in revival movement, but skeptic calls it trick to build membership.

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ORANGEVALE, Ca.--In the heart of the Sacramento Valley, where 49ers flocked to mine a mother lode of riches 150 years ago, Christian believers are proclaiming a new and godly gold rush: The Holy Spirit, they claim, is miraculously transforming porcelain crowns and silver fillings into gold.

Never mind that they can't seem to prove it. Disregard the dental records that contradict some of their claims. The reports of divine dentistry have taken on a life of their own as they rapidly spread on the Internet and in evangelical media, stirring up a frenzy of excitement through revival churches in California and worldwide.

From Seattle to Springfield, Texas, to Florida, Brazil to Britain, believers are hailing the transformed teeth, the appearance of gold dust and a host of other claimed miracles as proof of a powerful "move of God," bringing renewal to Christian churches at the start of the new millennium.

The reports are fueling a growing and controversial movement to revive "miracle ministries" as a way to personally experience God amid disenchntment with rote religious rituals.

Reports of miracles are as old as human history; even in today's scientific age, nearly 80% of Americans in a recent CBS-TV poll said they believed in them.

But ministries stressing the miraculous have taken off among the estimated 500 million charismatic and Pentecostal believers worldwide who comprise Christianity's fastest-growing segment.

Here at the Family Christian Center, Pastor Rich Oliver draws back his lip and displays a glittering gold crown he says God gave him in March. Actually, dental records show his previous dentist put the crown in on April 29, 1991. When confronted with those records, Oliver says: "I'd have to say I was absolutely wrong . . . [but] none of it distracts from the fact that I know God is a healer."

Nonetheless, Oliver touts his congregation's 'gold rush' on the Internet and lines up other church members to witness about how God changed their teeth--and lives.

One member, Jan Rosenberg, said God changed her filling to gold to bolster her spirits after a deep bout of depression over her mother's death. A few days later, her right forearm started itching and suddenly, she says, a tiny cross was divinely etched into her skin.

"You just get goose bumps, you feel God loves you so much," Rosenberg said.

Family Christian Center is the locus of an expanding California Revival Network that, in the last two years, has attracted nearly 100 churches as members. Co-pastors Rich and Lindy Oliver started the network after switching to a revival focus in 1996; now, among other things, they run a school to teach people how to minister in miracles.

Among those churches--and others in which evangelical Christians stress ecstatic expression, miracles, healings, prophetic intuition and "signs and wonders" in their worship--gold teeth have become the latest and flashiest form of supernatural phenomena attesting to God's power.

"God is so much bigger than religion has portrayed him to be," says Lindy Oliver. "He is not only creator but healer, and he heals us because he loves us."

The expanding use of miracle ministries, however, is also drawing
fire. To Hank Hanegraaff, president of the Christian Research Institute in Rancho Santa Margarita, the reports of gold teeth underscore the alarming depths to which evangelical leaders have fallen in turning to supernatural phenomena to overcome religious ennui and build congregations. He describes revivalist practices with a choice list of withering phrases: from a "National Enquirer gospel of cheap sensationalism" to "occult Christianity" to "two-bit, sleight-of-hand, sleight-of-mind cons."

"There is a paradigm shift within the evangelical world from an age of clear teaching of the word of God to an age of esoteric experience," said Hanegraaff, who attacked the practices in his 1997 book, "Counterfeit Revival." "We are not in the middle of a great awakening; we are in the middle of a great apostasy."

He argued that Christians need to "get back to the basics" of service to the poor and needy, rather than dwell in exotica that open the faith to skepticism and ridicule.

Indeed, the gold-teeth reports have already drawn the attention of Michael Shermer, president of the Skeptics Society, who dismisses them as a "classic urban legend" and raises the pugnacious question: "Of all the things going on--cancer, war, disease--God is busy changing fillings? That's the best he can do?"

But the way revivalists see it, they are simply reclaiming Christianity's original tradition of power evangelism--a vibrant faith that pulsates with the visible grandeur of God manifested through miracles, repentance and conversions that dramatically change lives.

Over time, Oliver argues, Christian worship has been reduced to listless liturgies, tired traditions and pro-forma rituals of "three songs, an offering and a homily."

"The American church is the most dried-out, uptight church in the world," Oliver declared. "When I grew up, I thought the preachers all looked and acted like undertakers who ought to work at a mortuary."

That theme--rescuing the faith from the rigidity of religious institutionalization--has been endlessly replayed in Christian history. To propagate a faith beyond a generation, scholars say, dogma and organization are required. Yet, over time, that very institutionalization often disenchants some faithful who begin to yearn for a direct experience of God--or, in today's popular parlance, "less religion and more spirituality."

"People become impatient with all the folderol of high ritual," said H. Newton Maloney, a professor specializing in religion and psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena. "They want direct, born-again experiences."

Maloney, an ordained Methodist minister, said the history of his own denomination is a case in point. Like today's revivalists and faith healers, Anglican cleric John Wesley preached the possibility of direct contact with God through healings and such when he began his Methodist movement in England in the 1740s. By the 1850s, however, that focus had faded as the movement became established and "people thought these things were beneath them," Maloney said.

Eventually, Maloney said, the Methodists proved too staid for some members, who broke away to form the Assemblies of God, Nazarenes and other Pentecostal denominations.

Now the Assemblies of God has become too institutionalized for people like the Ollers, who remain affiliated with the denomination but aligned with an independent network of revival churches.

Oliver is a bear of a man whose deep-set eyes seem fixed in a perennial squint of bemusement as he ticks off a list of what he sees as the sins of organized religion today. Too many artificial rules, he says, like enforced decorum in services and bans against women in church leadership. Too much energy expended on largely marginal matters--such as trying to divine the date of Christ's return. Too much hierarchy,
bureaucracy, intolerance. What does all of that have to do with Christ's basic message to love God and love others?

People "want to know, what is the Lord doing in my life right now?" he says.

The couple says they were good Assemblies of God members who, 27 years ago, even signed pledges not to play cards or see movies. They dutifully preached, taught Sunday school, gave offerings, witnessed about their faith.

"We did that week after week," Oliver says, feigning a snore.

Three years ago, their spiritual lives were shaken when they ran into an old friend just back from a long-running revival meeting in Pensacola, Fla. After watching videos of people shaking, collapsing and reportedly being healed by the Holy Spirit in Pensacola, the Olivers headed to Florida themselves. On their return, they turned their ministry upside down.

Their new approach is apparent in their services, where they have radically loosened the reins. During a recent visit, a rock band belted out a song praising the virtues of "dancing undignified" for the Lord. The aisles were filled with people boinging about like pogo sticks, barefoot, singing. Oliver choreographed showy moves, first blowing a shofar, then brandishing a sword to pray for his members to succeed as spiritual warriors.

After that, the healing services began. "Who's got a need?" Oliver bellowed. Several people stepped forward. One youth with gel-spiked hair asked for help with a sore back. A team of women clustered around him, laying on hands, as one led a rapid-fire entreaty to God: "Lord I pray for miraculous healing in the name of God you said you would do it we claim victory you are Lord over the enemy of sickness we speak healing now we ask it be gone.

"How's it feeling? Still sore?" the prayer team member asked.

"Yeah," the youth said. The women resumed praying.

After several minutes, those feeling healed gave triumphant testimonies. Kristin declared her leg pains gone, then, apparently overcome by the Holy Spirit, jerked and fell to the ground. Shannon said she could finally carry her daughter again, now that arm pains from a sciatic nerve had vanished. Joe, the youth with the sore back, said he was cured, too, then spryly bent from the waist to prove it.

The promise of such spectacular spiritual outpourings boosts attendance at the California Revival Network congregations. Harvest Rock Church in Pasadena is one of them, but most are located in small, nondescript communities like Orangevale: Colfax, Folsom, Rocklin, Salida, Danville, Hayfork, Vacaville, Yuba City. "Jesus is the same today as yesterday: Yesterday he healed people, and today he heals people," declared Bill Johnson, a revival leader in Redding.

That proposition, however, is not uniformly embraced by all Christians. Some, known as cessationists, believe that the miracles recorded in the Bible were necessary credentials for Jesus to convince unbelievers of his divine authority. But the miracles ceased with completion of the New Testament, which could henceforth serve as the authoritative word of God, argues Bob Thomas, a professor of New Testament at The Master's Seminary in Sun Valley.

Other Christians believe in some miracles but not reports of others. The Anaheim-based Association of Vineyard Churches-USA, for instance, was developed by a man, John Wimber, who preached that the key to church growth was a ministry based on such miracles as physical healings and demon expulsions. But reports of gold teeth and uncontrollable "holy laughter" have no biblical basis, argued association president Todd Hunter.

Hanegraaff contends that the reputed miracles are usually caused by trickery, a hypnotic "power of suggestion" or peer pressure to claim a cure even when one has not occurred.
Family Christian Center distributes documentation forms for the claimed miracles, and has received about 80 back. But none of several cases referred by senior associate pastor Don Quattlebum could be confirmed—either because the claimants did not return phone calls, declined to speak or failed to provide conclusive evidence.

One woman who says God healed her of breast cancer also had chemotherapy and a mastectomy; another who said two crowns turned gold was contradicted by her former dentist, who said he did the handiwork.

Still, Christian history is filled with cases of healings believed to have no natural explanation. The Roman Catholic Church, for instance, has investigated thousands of them with a well-established verification process in cases of candidates for sainthood.

The church deems some claims of miracles to be worthy of credence. But officials dismiss as delusions many others—such as reports a few years ago of the face of Jesus in a San Diego billboard ad for spaghetti. "It's just natural to find people trying to ascribe more meaning to an event than really it has," said Father Gregory Colro, spokesman for the Los Angeles Archdiocese. "I think it's all wrapped up in people's desire to be in touch with something of mystery."

Such debates don't particularly interest believers like Rosenberg. Her dentist won't confirm her claims of God-given gold crowns, but to her, it hardly matters. What does is how belief in the miracle has renewed and comforted her.

"God was saying to me: 'I want you to know I'm real. I love you,' " she said.