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The Journal News

1st Place Supple Award 2002
Opus Dei

Secretive Catholic group opening up

For the past two decades, the most controversial Roman Catholic group in the world ran its American operations on a New Rochelle side street, waiting for the right time to deliver its message.

Now Opus Dei is ready to take its stand.

This mysterious worldwide movement for lay Catholics, long a visible religious force in Europe and Latin America, has just opened a new 17-story, $55 million headquarters in midtown Manhattan and is aiming to increase its American membership.

The news that Robert Hanssen, the FBI agent accused of spying for Russia, was an Opus Dei member brought an unexpected round of media attention in February. Suddenly, the longstanding international debate about Opus Dei was cracked open, with Catholic liberals and progressives framing the more conservative organization as a Catholic mafia — cunning, cult-like and secretive.

The movement, whose Latin name means “Work of God,” has faced a long and sweeping list of charges, including intimidation of members, elitism, denigration of women, even infiltration of governments. And the group’s use of self-mortification — some members must wear spiked chains around their thighs, whip their buttocks and sleep on boards — has been too much for many critics to take.

But Opus Dei dealt squarely with February’s media assault, seeing a chance to confront its critics and polish its public image. Its ultimate weapon: Opus Dei is beloved by the pope, and its teachings are in lock step with the Vatican.

As one Opus Dei priest put it, the group’s “coming out party” in America is under way.

Still, there will be no ceremonial ribbon-cutting. Opus Dei operates below the cultural radar, finding new members and raising millions of dollars through a network of supporters. How it will reach out to 8 million New Yorkers remains to be seen.

“The joke is that we should put ‘Opus Dei Inc.’ at the top of the building,” said the Rev. Arne Panula, Opus Dei’s vicar, or top official, for the United States. “Then we thought that maybe we won’t.”

Opus Dei’s critics say that the group, despite the new, high-profile real estate, will continue to operate behind a veil of secrecy. They contend that Opus Dei actually promotes a rigid brand of Catholicism by aggressively recruiting new members and controlling them, and by seeking members in positions of political power.

The revelation that one of FBI Director Louis Freeh’s children attends an Opus Dei school has fed this theory, especially on the Web.
“Members lead a kind of double life,” Paul Baumann, a columnist for the liberal Catholic magazine Commonweal, wrote after Hanssen’s arrest. “To the world, they are successful doctors or lawyers, distinguished only by their professional skills and autonomy; off the job they must not only engage in an intense life of prayer (all to the good) but be strictly accountable to those above them in ‘the work’ (more problematic).”

Diocese without borders

The Catholic left’s emotional opposition is starkly at odds with Opus Dei’s place in the heart of the church. Pope John Paul II is so enamored with Opus Dei that in 1982 he made it the church’s only “personal prelature,” which is like a diocese without borders. In 1992, the pope beatified Opus Dei’s founder, Monsignor Josemaria Escriva of Spain, before 300,000 people, one of the largest crowds ever in St. Peter’s Square.

Opus Dei’s 84,000 members live in some 50 countries and include 1,750 priests, who run the movement. Most members are married and work full time but contribute much of their time and money to the movement. Others are celibate and give their lives and entire paychecks to Opus Dei.

Members insist they are simply pursuing the founder’s vision: lay Catholics striving for Christian perfection at work and home instead of leaving holiness to the clergy. To achieve this goal, they gather for retreats, prayer sessions and daily Mass at their local parishes.

“By working, we share in the suffering of Christ,” said John Casey, an Opus Dei member from Chappaqua. “We become co-redemptors with Christ.”

Members say Opus Dei is misunderstood because it is a relatively new, 72-year-old movement in a 2,000-year-old church, and because its goals are revolutionary for those who would leave real religious practice to priests and nuns.

Even critics admit that Opus Dei usually achieves its goals. With only 3,000 official members in the United States, Opus Dei has raised tens of millions of dollars in recent years through nonprofit foundations based in New Rochelle and across the country. The money goes to Opus Dei programs as far away as Kenya and the Vatican.

“Opus Dei’s influence is not nearly as great here as in Latin America or Europe, but I don’t doubt that they are growing in influence in the U.S.,” said the Rev. James Martin, a Jesuit who wrote a 1995 study critical of Opus Dei in the Catholic journal “America.”

“I would like to think they are becoming more open, but in general, they are a very secretive organization. The way they do things runs against how America operates, and they may strike many Americans as questionable and quite odd.”

Last month, Opus Dei achieved a milestone in America. The Rev. Jose Gomez became an an auxiliary bishop in Denver, making him the first Opus Dei priest ordained a bishop in the United States. This sign of Opus Dei’s prominent place in the church came weeks after the archbishop of Lima, Peru, Juan Luis Thorne, became Opus Dei’s first cardinal.

Extreme or mainstream?
It would be hard to overstate the ferocity with which Catholic liberals, and some moderates, attack Opus Dei. Critics contend that Opus Dei has a cult-like allegiance to its founder and is more concerned with pushing Vatican policy to the right than with enriching the spiritual lives of individuals.

And yet, Opus Dei could not be held in higher esteem at the Vatican. Pope John Paul II's spokesman, Joaquin Navarro-Valls, is a member of Opus Dei.

John Paul II's recent apostolic letter for the new millennium calls for a fresh emphasis on holiness in daily life, echoing Opus Dei's clarion call and delighting its members.

Opus Dei's overriding theme of holiness at work and in daily life actually predated the Catholic Church's historic Second Vatican Council. Escriva, the founder, said he had a vision from God on Oct. 2, 1928, that people can "love and serve God without giving up their ordinary work, their family life and their normal social relations."

Vatican II, a worldwide gathering of bishops more than 30 years later, reached strikingly similar conclusions about the laity.

In 1998, the late Cardinal John O'Connor, at a special Mass for Opus Dei, said: "The kind of life Opus Dei offers as an ideal is the life of holiness to which everyone is called." O'Connor's successor as archbishop of New York, Cardinal Edward Egan, plans to bless a chapel in Opus Dei's new headquarters next month.

For many Catholic liberals, though, Opus Dei represents the worst strains of religious extremism. They call the group militant and fundamentalist for teaching that true holiness can only come through adherence to Opus Dei discipline.

"Liberals and progressives label Opus Dei as right wing and fundamental in rather promiscuous ways," said William Dinges, an associate professor of religion at Catholic University in Washington, D.C. "Opus Dei is clearly very conservative. But their growth is largely due to the loss of religious fervor that used to be found in the parish and the priesthood. Opus Dei has become the alternative for a hard-nosed expression of what it means to be Catholic."

Perhaps the best example of this expression is Opus Dei's belief in not only self-denial, but the ancient Christian practice of corporal mortification. Some members are required to sleep on boards, wear shirts that produce itching or conceal spike chains around their thighs to control physical desires.

"If you're used to saying no to yourself, then you can have courage," said Diana Jackson, director of a New Rochelle facility for female members. "The point is to build fortitude and offer that to God."

Accusations of secrecy

For critics like Eugene Kennedy, a prominent writer on the Catholic Church, there can be no explanation for Opus Dei's choosing to operate outside of the public view.

"It is time to stop being polite to Opus Dei," Kennedy said. "Secret societies cannot be Catholic. Opus Dei does not constitute a community of love and support, like Jesus did, but seeks to divide, subvert and, as I believe we found with Mr. Hanssen, appeal to the paranoid strain in life."
Opus Dei members express bewilderment over the vitriolic nature of the charges. They insist they are private, not secretive, and never coerce anyone to join.

"Critics imply that Opus Dei has an agenda, which is a falsehood," said Irene Dorgan, a celibate member who lives in New Rochelle and runs an Opus Dei tutoring program for girls in the South Bronx. "I've been in Opus Dei since college, and no one has told me any secrets. This is a calling from God, a vocation you commit to. This is a life of service, a life of prayer."

The bottom line, Opus Dei officials say, is that many critics are uncomfortable with any promotion of orthodox Catholicism.

"If Mother Teresa's order is very supportive of the papacy, no one cares," said Brian Finnerty, Opus Dei's head of communications in America. "But if Opus Dei focuses on lay people, something must be wrong."

Opus Dei is regularly accused of having a retrograde attitude toward women. Female members do the domestic work at Opus Dei facilities, a practice that members openly support.

"Opus Dei is saying that these activities are something that can actually lead people closer to God," Finnerty said. "It helps contribute to a homelike atmosphere."

Dorgan said that women are better at such chores.

"It's really not so much a sexist thing," she said. "Taken out of context, it can sound funny."

Perhaps the most common criticism of Opus Dei in America is that its members pressure naive college students into joining and call them unholy if they try to leave. This is the main focus of the Opus Dei Awareness Network, a national group that warns parents about Opus Dei's activities and helps to "deprogram" college-age children who join the group.

Dianne DiNicola of Pittsfield, Mass., started the group after her daughter, Tammy, joined Opus Dei while a Boston College student in the late 1980s. Tammy says she was initially impressed with the group as an alternative to keg parties. But after moving into an Opus Dei facility, she says, she was forced to wear a spiked thigh chain for two hours a day and whip her buttocks once a week, and was also instructed on how to target new members.

"I was made to feel that I was doing what God wanted me to," she said. DiNicola left Opus Dei after her family intervened.

In 1981, the late Cardinal Basil Hume of Westminster, England, actually banned Opus Dei from recruiting members under 18 in his diocese.

But chaplains at prominent local Catholic colleges say they have had no problems with Opus Dei. Carl Procario-Foley, director of campus ministries at Iona College, located only blocks from Opus Dei's former headquarters, said he knew little about the group's presence in New York.

"I've been here for 10 years and have no interaction with them at all," he said.

The Rev. Joseph Currie, head of campus ministries at Fordham University, said Opus Dei is no more visible on campus than other Catholic groups.
“We have them all, from the far right to the far left, but Opus Dei hasn’t been that active,” he said.

Even the Rev. Walter Debold, a professor at Seton Hall University who believes that Opus Dei is overly controlling and manipulative of members, said he was not personally aware of students who had faced undue pressure from Opus Dei.

“They style of piety is not mine, but I have only heard indirectly of people who say they lost sons or daughters to Opus Dei,” Debold said.

A new day

In Europe, the media has regularly accused Opus Dei of trying to infiltrate government. During the final years of Francisco Franco’s authoritarian regime in Spain, more than half of his cabinet ministers belonged to Opus Dei. And during the Cold War, Opus Dei was a strident foe of Communism, making Hanssen’s alleged ties to Russia even more bizarre.

But Michael Walsh of London, author of a highly critical 1991 book about Opus Dei, said this theme has become stale.

“I rather suspect that they had their fingers burned over Franco, and were unwilling to risk it again,” he said. “Moreover, no ex-member of Opus I ever spoke to thought there had been much political involvement as an organization.”

Until now, Opus Dei has kept such a low profile in the United States that churchgoing Catholics in the northern suburbs of New York City may reasonably think that Opus Dei is an overseas phenomenon. This may soon change as Opus Dei seeks to reach more people who confine prayer to Sunday Mass.

Opus Dei members even say, with no apparent irony, that the Hanssen arrest may ultimately bring positive exposure.

“Even though it is a tremendous tragedy, God has the ability to bring good out of tragedy,” Finnerty said. “The media attention could help us spread the message about finding Jesus Christ in daily life.”

Traditionally, Opus Dei employs a sort of stealth message system. The organization does little marketing, but operates and grows through person-to-person contact. Members reach out to friends and co-workers who appear to be stable, devout and family-oriented.

“The people in Opus Dei are all people I look up to and admire,” said Mary Andrus, a married member from Scarsdale. “I wouldn’t hesitate to go to them with any question or problem I have. We’re all on the same wavelength.”

That’s why members profess utter surprise at the apparent double life of Robert Hanssen, who was active in Opus Dei while living in Scarsdale and Yorktown. It was in Yorktown that he allegedly began peddling $1.4 million in secrets to the Russians.

Opus Dei’s main public role, its apostolic work, has been in the area of education. Opus Dei runs high schools in Chicago, Washington and Boston and tutoring programs for underprivileged
youth in the South Bronx, Chicago, Boston and elsewhere, all blending academics with character lessons.

The group also runs more than 60 residential facilities for celibate members, including men’s and women’s facilities in New Rochelle.

The group is able to accomplish much — and to raise millions — with only 3,000 official members in the United States. Seventy percent are married or single members called supernumeraries. The rest are celibate members called numeraries. Then there is a network of “cooperators,” nonmembers who support the movement financially and with prayers.

In the New York area, some 200 members and 500 cooperators make monthly contributions or lump-sum grants to Opus Dei.

“You can’t raise the funds unless you get the inspiration from the good Lord to do it,” said Al Frank, a retired auto mechanic from the Bronx and an Opus Dei member who makes a monthly contribution and gave $2,500 to the new headquarters. “It’s a gift from God himself. People dig in and give. It’s like a chain reaction. They go and talk to other people.”

The largest of Opus Dei’s four fund-raising arms in New Rochelle, called the Woodlawn Foundation, has raised more than $50 million over the last decade. The money has gone to an Opus Dei university in Rome as well as Opus Dei programs in heavily Catholic cities.

Another fund-raising entity in New Rochelle, the National Center Foundation, paid for the $55 million construction of the new headquarters at 34th Street and Lexington Avenue.

Despite this success, Opus Dei officials say it is time to reach more people.

“If you can bring the message of Christ in the workplace here, in the crossroads of Manhattan, you can do it anyplace,” said Panula, the vicar for America. “Three thousand members is not many out of 280 million people. The goal of the founder was that if someone wanted to be affiliated with Opus Dei, in any town, they would be able to. It’s a big challenge, and we have a long way to go.”

**Priests in the lay world**

Growing up Irish Catholic in New York City, Sim Johnston of Opus Dei remembers feeling like a spectator when he attended weekly Mass. There was the priest, whom he saw as having an exclusive calling to serve God, and everyone else, who essentially sat in the bleachers and plugged in.

His view dramatically changed when he was exposed to Opus Dei and its driving principle that everyone is called to holiness in their chosen professions. Jesus was a carpenter, not a priest, the logic goes.

“God wants us exactly where we are,” Johnston, a onetime banker, said at Opus Dei’s new headquarters early this month. He was there for an “Evening of Recollection,” a monthly session in which members pray, meditate and receive spiritual guidance.

It is one of several group rituals. Members typically go to church daily, meet weekly with an Opus Dei priest and join occasional retreats, such as one for men this weekend about families.
But their commitment is expressed constantly through work and routines. There is no unholy task, no occasion not worthy of prayer.

"Work can be transformed into prayer; that's what Jesus did when he was on Earth," said Maria Gomez, a celibate member who joined Opus Dei in Spain and works as a biophysicist in Tarrytown. "Parts of work are tedious. But when you do it and offer it to God or someone who needs it as a prayer or sacrifice, it helps."

For Janice McKirgan, in Opus Dei for 36 years, even being stuck in traffic provides metaphysical opportunities. She sees it as a test from God that she offers up as a prayer.

"I learned to accept cheerfully whatever God sends," she said, glowing in her Yonkers home after returning from a funeral. "When you're in Opus Dei, you fall in love with your Lord and do whatever you can to please him."

That starts when she wakes up to the "morning offering," the first of several daily prayers. In her living room, beside pictures of family and the pope and the Bible, is her trusted copy of "The Way," Escriva's guide to faith. She gives her own spiritual readings and confesses regularly to an Opus Dei priest who offers direction.

"If my goal is to get to heaven, it's important for me to have a spiritual road map," the widowed mother of six said. "I want to bypass purgatory."
Egan’s 1st year marked by cuts

Many priests, laity criticize cardinal for swift reorganization

A popular criticism of Cardinal John O’Connor during the last years of his tenure was that the media-savvy churchman was a poor administrator who avoided difficult decisions that would prove unpopular.

His successor has had no such qualms.

Cardinal Edward Egan, who tomorrow will celebrate the first anniversary of his installation as Roman Catholic archbishop of New York, has delivered on his promise to quickly revamp the Archdiocese of New York. During a breathless year, spent largely out of the limelight, he has closed three schools and 11 archdiocesan offices, fired and transferred dozens of priests and lay employees, and shaken up the widely respected seminary system.

By striking quickly, before people could get a sense of him, Egan has been accused of forsaking advice and treating employees callously.

"The archbishop is under a lot of pressure, for sure, to correct problems he inherited, but people on the receiving end of his stuff have been stunned by how matter-of-fact he is, removed, cut-and-dry," said one Putnam County priest, who knows people working for several archdiocesan ministries.

Egan has told numerous people, including those he let go, that his overriding priority is to eliminate the archdiocese’s $20 million annual budget deficit in two years. Doing so, he said, will strengthen the church long-term and allow him finally to pursue more pastoral duties.

Speaking Wednesday at St. John the Baptist Church in Yonkers, Egan anticipated criticism of his moves, warned parishioners against inaccurate media coverage and stressed that he is doing what he must.

“We will keep anything that will support our parishes, but we will see to it that we live within our means,” he told priests and lay representatives from all Yonkers parishes. “I trust the Catholic faithful will understand.”

Egan also pledged that when he is finished remaking the archdiocese, he will enter the public arena to fight for the Catholic agenda, starting with private school vouchers.

“I have had a lot to do this first year,” he said. “At the end of all this, Paul Revere is coming.”

How long will he stay? A popular theory among insiders is that Egan, 69, is moving fast because he intends on returning to Rome, not retiring or dying in New York. Egan spent 23 years in Rome, where his duties included working directly for Pope John Paul II as a canon lawyer.
Egan is so well liked by the pope that he will play a key role in a monthlong meeting of the world's bishops this fall. It will be his job to summarize discussions for the pope.

"Many people believe he will be back in Rome," said Joseph Varacalli, director of the Center for Catholic Studies at Nassau Community College. "If you're going to be here for a short stay, you can mix it up with the media or reverse the fortunes of the archdiocese. He is dealing with the most important issue first, putting the Catholic house back in order."

Egan has taken time at virtually all public appearances to call for more men to consider the priesthood. He picked up O'Connor's mantle of leadership in fighting a state Assembly attempt to force employers, including the church, to provide contraception benefits.

From the day he was introduced as archbishop, Egan was tabbed as a leader with the steely focus to strip down a bloated archdiocese. O'Connor, having closed schools early in his tenure, had backed off in his later years from threatening money-losing schools and parishes.

Egan came to New York with a reputation as a shrewd administrator. He knew what he was getting into, having served as an auxiliary bishop under O'Connor from 1985-88. He spent the next 12 years in New York's shadow as bishop of Bridgeport, Conn.

"We're in a period of transition, and people do not like change — especially if they're being transferred or losing their job," said the Rev. Robert Henry, pastor of St. Ann's Church in Nyack, where the parish school was one of the six targeted for closure, but one of three that survived. "People are frustrated, but we have to be patient because we haven't seen the results yet. If these actions were not taken, the archdiocese could go bankrupt and the schools, hospitals and social programs wouldn't be here."

Besides closing three schools, Egan has shut 11 offices, including the Office for Women's Concerns, the Liturgical Music Commission and the Office of Pastoral Research. Twenty-three people connected to those offices were dismissed, with two priests named to take over their responsibilities.

In reshaping the seminary system, Egan has replaced the rector of St. Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers, the Rev. Francis McAree, and other key leaders. Six administrators at the seminary were transferred and several lay faculty members fired.

Much criticism of Egan has to do more with his methods than his goals. Several department heads heard rumors that they would lose their jobs before they were told. Others talked casually to Egan about future plans not long before they were fired.

When Egan announced sweeping changes at St. Joseph's Seminary at a March staff meeting, he read a list of those faculty members who would be brought back this fall, leaving those not on the list to stare at their feet.

The Rev. Benedict Groeschel, head of the archdiocese's Office of Spiritual Development in Larchmont, said Egan is not enjoying his work.

"I know he doesn't like it, but the boat was sinking," Groeschel said.

Most observers agree that Egan is much warmer when he's dealing with the laity. During a visit to St. Anthony's Church in Nanuet in March, Egan, a classically trained pianist, was clearly
moved when the choir sang "Va, Pensiero" from Verdi's opera "Nabucco." In Yonkers on Wednesday, he stopped to bless a baby and posed for pictures after the prayer service.

"When he's with laypeople, he comes across well," said John Healey of New Rochelle, the retired director of the Archbishop Hughes Institute for Religion and Culture at Fordham University. "I think he would like to be seen as warm. But people are really wondering about his sensitivity to those who work for the diocese."

While O'Connor had an inner circle of advisers, Egan mostly goes it alone. Veteran archdiocesan priests and officials do not know who he talks to or how he reaches critical budget decisions.

"There is dissatisfaction about this everywhere," said one senior Westchester priest, who initially thought Egan would thrive in New York. "When your task is to cut, you should ask for support. No one knows how he's making decisions."

Egan talks often about reaching out to the many immigrant groups coming to New York — particularly Hispanics, who make up anywhere from 35 to 50 percent of the archdiocese. Last week, he said the total number of Catholics is certainly "much, much higher" than the official figure of 2.4 million.

The person preparing to analyze figures from the 2000 census has been discharged as of August. Ruth Doyle, director of the Office of Pastoral Research and Planning, said she fears the archdiocese will be unable to use the data to get a better grasp on its changing demographics.

"I don't see how you can do any serious planning without knowing who your people are," she said. "As far as I know, no one has the training to work with the data. Racial figures, age ranges, family composition — it all has to be studied."

Anthony Stevens-Arroyo, a Brooklyn College professor of Puerto Rican studies who is examining Hispanic parishes, said he didn't see concrete plans to reach Hispanics.

"The cardinal is still very new, but I don't know that he has enough pastoral experience for this complex situation," he said.

Egan's reconfiguration of the seminary system also surprised many. The junior seminary is being moved from Riverdale in the Bronx to a new building on the St. Joseph's campus that O'Connor planned as an archives center and public exhibit hall. Egan also put the seminary system under the leadership of Monsignor Peter Finn, a former spokesman for the archdiocese.

Observers are concerned that the seminary will lose its hard-earned academic reputation, as officials with doctorates are replaced by leaders with lesser credentials.

Deborah McCue, the St. Joseph's registrar until she resigned in March because of the changes, said most staff members who prepare for accreditation reviews are no longer at the seminary.

"The cardinal is within his rights to make whatever changes he wants, but I believe he hasn't given enough attention to the seminary as an institution of higher education," she said.

For those who believe that Egan is too removed, a defining event of his first year came on May 29, when he visited St. Jerome's Church in the South Bronx. The crumbling church needs to be repaired or closed, but when parishioners pressed him about his plans, Egan cut the meeting short.
The pastor, the Rev. John Grange, was disappointed.

"He just didn't listen," Grange said. "Everyone in the church knows there has to be cuts. But it seems it's being done by amputation, which leaves you crippled."

Despite the current tensions, parishes have to be patient with Egan as he does a difficult, thankless job, said Monsignor William Belford, vicar of Rockland County and chairman of the archdiocese's liturgical commission, which is losing its office and support staff under Egan's cuts.

"This is a time of economic struggle," he said. "The cardinal is doing the best he can and will be looking for vindication down the road. I think priests know that his job is awfully hard. God bless the one who's got to do it."
Recent crimes bring scrutiny of Hasidim

Spate of fraud cases prompts questions about insular society

Hasidic Jews are an Old World mystery to most outsiders, leaving only a black-and-white impression of untrimmed beards, large families and a single-minded devotion to pious living.

But this image has been clouded by a series of recent criminal cases in New York against the ultra-insular Hasidim. Public scrutiny intensified after outgoing President Clinton reduced the prison terms of three Hasidic men from New Square who stole millions of federal dollars.

It is a striking moral paradox: How can people who are supposed to live by religious law choose to defy civil law?

"Hasidim go to synagogue three times a day, and they devote a part of their day to studying the Torah," said David Zwiebel of Agudath Israel, a Manhattan-based advocacy group for Orthodox Jews. "By their appearance and their lifestyle, they are holding themselves to a more pious standard. So it's troubling and surprising when these stories happen."

Experts are quick to point out that the great majority of Hasidim are law-abiding as well as devout, and that many Hasidim respect America for providing a religious sanctuary after World War II. Observers worry that media coverage of Hasidic crime — boys with dangling curls squeezing into courtroom benches — can feed stereotypes.

Yet the Hasidim are hardly the first religious group to see members stray. When evangelical Christian ministers faced financial and sexual scandal, Catholic priests molested children, and Amish youth were arrested for drug-dealing, the devout felt pangs of shame while skeptics jumped to point out hypocrisy.

Still, the Hasidim are a unique story because they are sometimes accused of devising financial schemes to bail out their poverty-stricken communities. Since many Hasidic men spend their days studying the Torah instead of holding jobs, their families often live below the poverty line. Changing their way of life is not considered an option.

So complex schemes to defraud the government and others are tempting — for some.

"They see this world and say, 'No thanks. We don't want any part of it,' " said Samuel Heilman of New Rochelle, professor of Jewish studies and sociology at the City University of New York. "They would rather live under their restraints, even if they can't afford it. They believe they are making a sacrifice — the way they live — to protect Judaism."

The federal cases against Hasidim were thrust onto the national stage with Clinton's last-minute decision to grant clemency to the three New Square men who were convicted in 1999 of stealing millions from federal education and anti-poverty programs.
Months earlier, the tight-knit Hasidic village had given Hillary Rodham Clinton 1,400 of its 1,412 votes for the U.S. Senate, raising questions of whether the clemency was borne of a political quid pro quo. A federal grand jury in White Plains is now investigating the matter.

Last March, two Rockland residents were among 14 men from the Kiryas Joel Hasidic community in Orange County accused of stealing millions from financial institutions, the government and private citizens.

And in recent years, dozens of Hasidic men from Brooklyn to Orange County have been accused of swindling millions from trusting Orthodox investors, laundering money for Colombian drug lords, bribing zoning officials to bolster development deals, sneaking the drug Ecstasy past airport inspectors and bilking millions from elderly annuity-holders in Florida.

Many people in the larger Jewish community feel angry and humiliated over the schemes. Some leaders are now calling on the community to denounce such crimes.

"It's an unmitigated disaster," said Marc Stern, assistant executive director of the American Jewish Congress. "It lends itself to the canard — which certainly has deep roots in the history of anti-Semitism — that Jews have no regard for anybody but themselves when it comes to money."

A life of tradition, poverty

New Square is a village of about 4,700 Hasidic Jews, founded in 1954 by descendants of the Ukrainian Skver dynasty, who emigrated from Eastern Europe to Brooklyn after World War II. Many of its settlers were Holocaust survivors.

In purchasing the 130-acre plot, the group set out to create an isolated home where they could uphold Jewish law and protect themselves from the corruption of the outside world.

Walking into New Square is like stepping back in time. Bearded, yarmulke-wearing men walk on one side of the street, while women with long skirts and head-coverings keep to the other side. A sign announces a ban on clothing that displays a person's legs or body.

Television, radio and newspapers are not part of the daily ritual. Residents generally will not talk to the media.

"They came to America not because they loved America and wanted to participate in the American dream, like most Jewish immigrants, but because it was the best place to live their traditional life with as little disturbance as possible," said Arthur Green, professor of Jewish thought at Brandeis University in Waltham, Mass.

The main thing Hasidic communities have in common, other than their reverence for Torah and fear of Western values, is poverty. Career advancement is often abandoned for religious devotion. Children require yeshiva tuitions. And there are many mouths to feed, as family sizes routinely triple the national average in an effort to promote self-preservation.

Poverty figures from the 2000 Census have not yet been released, but the 1990 Census showed half of New Square's population living below the poverty line at the time — an annual income of $12,674 for a family of four. Forty-one percent of residents lived in homes that included seven or more people.
In Kiryas Joel, 63 percent lived below the poverty level, and 47 percent lived in homes with seven or more family members.

One New Square woman offered a glimpse into the Hasidic way of life in a 1999 letter she wrote to U.S. District Judge Barbara Jones. She was asking for mercy in the sentencing of New Square defendant Benjamin Berger, who was then principal of a boys’ yeshiva.

“Rabbi Berger has a special knack of making children happy with very little,” said Judith Rajcensztajn. “They own very few possessions. They have no major toys. Each child has very few articles of clothing to wear. It is obvious that Rabbi Berger makes up for the physical things with his wonderful rapport with children.”

**A community’s survival**

Even after a jury convicted the New Square men of devising phony religious courses to steal millions in federal education funds, supporters argued that they had only done it to feed and educate a struggling community, not to enrich themselves.

Assistant United States Attorney Joanna Hendon told jurors not to consider the defendants’ financial or religious situations in reaching a verdict.

“The fact that they did live in a relatively poor community, and they dedicate themselves to religious pursuits, is not an excuse,” Hendon said.

But it may have explained their motives.

Rabbi Mayer Schiller, a spokesman for New Square, said the crimes that led to the presidential pardons were similar to others in Hasidic communities that were probed by federal investigators during the early 1990s. During a 1993 U.S. Senate hearing, witnesses cited 37 instances in which Hasidic groups were using federal funds illegally.

“Nobody got rich here,” Schiller said. “The men convicted used the money to support local schools and, while they might have violated the letter of the law, they didn’t think they violated the spirit of the law.”

Janet Belcove-Shalin, author of several books of Hasidic communities in America, said that while doing research in the Hasidic community of Boro Park in Brooklyn, she often heard about intricate scams to increase government revenues. Many had to do with inflating school rosters and school lunch programs.

“If you think you’re doing a mitzvah for your community — feeding the hungry — and that government won’t miss the money, the human power to rationalize is remarkable,” Belcove-Shalin said.

Brandeis’ Green said that Hasidim must first be viewed as Eastern European Jews who suffered under oppressive governments. They were nearly wiped out by the Holocaust and some haven’t adopted a modern attitude toward government despite decades in America, he said.

“They come from a tradition that never experienced a government that wasn’t hostile and oppressive to them,” Green said.
Hasidim who are stuck in the past may also take a very narrow view of what Halacha — Jewish law — says about crime, he said.

"Jewish law forbids these crimes, of course, but only in general terms," Green said. "Corporate and government entities are not recognized in Jewish law as individuals are. So people can find room, wrongly, to say that crimes against these impersonal bodies are not a direct violation of Jewish law."

Part of the problem facing Hasidic communities is that they started becoming reliant on welfare and other government programs as far back as President Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society," said Hasidic Rabbi David Eidensohn of Monsey, a biblical scholar. This led to abuse of a system that many Hasidim believed was already corrupt, he said.

"They are desperate and see other people getting the money, which is being handed out like water flowing in a river," Eidensohn said. "They want their cut of the action. And they quickly see it is so easy to steal from the government."

Eidensohn said that Hasidim need to end their reliance on government and perhaps start their own colleges to educate people for high-income professions.

The airtight insularity of Hasidic life might also contribute to the recent problems, said Rabbi David Niederman, a spokesman for the Satmar Hasidic sect in Brooklyn. He recently sent a letter to some 200 rabbis urging them speak out against crimes within the Hasidic community.

In Kiryas Joel, an affiliate of the Satmar sect, some residents have said that the younger defendants among the 14 charged were manipulated by respected elders into committing acts they did not know were illegal. One alleged scam involved sending mass mailings across the country that solicited money for lotteries, diet plans, car clubs and long-distance services that did not exist.

"A Hasidic kid is not exposed to that much, so maybe he will sign a document for a student loan or a credit card without knowing that this is perjury," Niederman said. "There's no question that because they live outside of the system, they are more likely to fall through the cracks."

Joel Lieberman, a White Plains attorney who appeared in federal court last week for one of the Kiryas Joel defendants, said, "I've had a longstanding relationship with the Satmar community, and I know the overwhelming majority of them to be decent, God-fearing and law-abiding people."

Mixed feelings for Jews

For the overall Jewish community, particularly Orthodox Jews who are Torah-observant but live and work in secular society, the crimes of Hasidim produce mixed emotions.

On the one hand, they see these crimes as embarrassing to all Jews, especially if they inflame stereotypes about Jews and money. On the other hand, they cringe at the thought that Hasidic Jews — all observant Jews, in fact — are being typecast by non-observant Jews and non-Jews.

Dr. Mandell Ganechrow of Monsey, the former long-time president of the Orthodox Union, which represents 1,000 synagogues, said he understands why the media and others zero in on crimes
committed by people who proclaim their piety. But he doesn’t want to see all Hasidim grouped together as potential criminals who disrespect civil law.

“It makes a difference when you wear certain garb that says, ‘I’m Orthodox. I believe in Torah, morality and ethics,’ ” Ganchrow said. “But we have to be very careful not to judge Hasidim by the deeds of a few. Most Hasidim are hard-working, honest, family-oriented.

“People don’t like those who are different, who speak a different language, look different, act different,” he said. “It can be very easy for some to take this situation and condemn all.”

Rabbi Ely Rosenzveig of Congregation Anshe Sholom, an Orthodox synagogue in New Rochelle, said that there is no getting around the damage caused to the Jewish community by Hasidic crime. He said such crimes not only reflect badly on all Jews, but give non-observant Jews an excuse to claim Orthodox hypocrisy.

Rosenzveig said it is time for the Jewish community to condemn crimes committed by Hasidic and other Jews.

“We don’t do enough as Jewish leaders to condemn this kind of behavior,” he said. “We ought to be taking a firm stand, saying this is something that shames us all. We don’t do that. If we came out clear as a bell, it may help deal with the fallout.”

Media attention to Hasidic crime is not likely to wane, just as the media will not shy away from misdeeds committed by any religious leaders, said Ari Goldman, professor of journalism at Columbia University and an Orthodox Jew who wrote the recent “Being Jewish: The Spiritual and Cultural Practice of Judaism Today.”

“Journalists like to focus on society’s hypocrisies,” Goldman said. “When someone holds himself up as a religious person in this dramatic way — living a separate life, dressing in dark clothes — and they are involved in fraud, it’s like catching your Sunday School teacher in the X-rated section of the video store.”
The Mormons expand

Fastest-growing church encounters opposition to Harrison temple

Countless New Yorkers share a common first encounter with a Mormon temple: driving up the Washington, D.C., Beltway and being mesmerized by a gleaming, white edifice that appears out of nowhere like Disneyland or Emerald City.

Residents of Kensington, Md., originally tried to fight plans for the six-spire temple, the Mormon Church's first holy site in the East. But the imposing structure opened in 1974 as a statement to the nation's capital that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was no longer just a Utah institution.

Mormons believe that God reveals where their temples should be built.

Steadily growing church membership in the Northeast has created an urgent need for more temples, where Mormons practice only their holiest rites. The problem for the church is that the towns of Harrison and Belmont, Mass., have waged bruising battles to scale down the first two Mormon temples proposed northeast of Washington.

It's not just that Mormon temples are home to a mysterious religion and practices, such as baptisms for the dead. The temples are generally larger, more prominent and have taller spires than a neighborhood church, and draw Mormons from a wide region.

For suburban communities that protect planning and zoning codes with a preacher's fervor, this means traffic, congestion and a basic threat to their way of life. The proposed Harrison temple, while strategically placed at the intersection of Interstate 287 and the Hutchinson River Parkway, would also sit across the road from million-dollar homes.

"The Mormons don't understand why anyone would fault them for wanting to build tall temples that reach toward heaven, seeking to connect with the divine," said Richard Francaviglia, a history professor at the University of Texas. "They are running into trouble in the suburbs, where the belief is in spreading out and hunkering down, not reaching up for anything."

Residents battle building

The Belmont temple opened last fall after five years of delays and a federal court challenge that the U.S. Supreme Court declined to consider. In a separate case, Massachusetts' highest state court ruled two months ago that the church can construct a 139-foot steeple that exceeds Belmont's height limit.

The proposed Harrison temple is still seeking town approval after five years of meetings, studies and increasingly virulent opposition from residents. The town's Zoning Board of Appeals rejected the proposal's height — 53 feet with a steeple peaking at 115 feet — but a state Supreme Court judge overturned the decision and a town appeal is under way.
There are only about 4,500 Mormons in Westchester, Rockland and Putnam counties, though their numbers are growing. But the temple would be expected to draw Mormons from Hartford to Philadelphia.

The Harrison Town Board, meanwhile, has held six hours of emotional hearings on the proposal and will continue public debate on Aug. 6. At a meeting this month, residents demanded a new study on potential traffic around the temple and questioned the honesty and motives of a church based 2,000 miles away in Salt Lake City, Utah.

They even produced a star witness, a Belmont resident named Charles Counselman who claimed that Massachusetts Mormons lied to and deceived his community. He described how their temple lit up the neighborhood at night, made nearby homes unmarketable and produced steady streams of unwanted visitors.

Harrison resident John Dearie, in introducing Counselman, called for the town to study how the larger Mormon Church operates: "We can learn about the modus operandi, the style, the tactics, the contempt — I might say — that this applicant shows for communities."

The church argues that its steeple would be about as tall as the one above the Manhattanville College chapel in Purchase. But residents counter that their neighborhood is not a college campus.

**Church’s religious vision**

The debate ultimately comes down to Harrison’s planning and zoning laws vs. the Mormon Church’s religious vision. Can a town decide that a temple is too tall when the church says that all key decisions regarding its temples, from location to design, are made by its worldwide president, Gordon Hinckley, based on revelations from God?

Mormons hold that their president runs the church with God’s guidance. A church lawyer explained this to the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court in January, stating that a temple’s design is about more than blueprints.

"The location and design of temple buildings are directly inspired by revelation to their president, who they believe is a prophet in our time," the lawyer, Paul Killeen, said.

The court wanted no part in debating Mormon doctrine. Its decision concluded that judges cannot determine whether a building’s design is appropriate for a particular religion: "A rose window at Notre Dame Cathedral, a balcony at St. Peter’s Basilica, are judges to decide whether these architectural elements are ‘necessary’ to the faith served by those buildings?"

Leaving nothing to chance, though, one of the nation’s most powerful Mormons, U.S. Sen. Orrin Hatch of Utah, sponsored a new federal law, passed in September, that severely restricts the use of local codes to halt religious development. Religious groups whose plans are denied by community boards can seek the law’s protection in federal courts.

**Temples are a mystery**

Part of the reason that Mormon temples provoke concern is that they have no parallel in other faiths. The temple is not a place for public worship, and does not include a sanctuary. Mormons gather at nondescript, community chapels for Sunday services.
Devout Mormons visit temples, rather, to practice special rites in private rooms. They “seal” marriages for eternity. They baptize dead ancestors into the church, standing in for those who never had a chance to become Mormons. In a holy ceremony not shared with outsiders, they receive instructions on their faith, agree to covenants with God and, finally, pray silently in an elegant room that represents the highest reaches of heaven.

Simply, Mormons believe their temples to be the holiest places on the planet, a touch of heaven on Earth. They change into white garments upon entering. Non-Mormons and Mormons who have not been approved by a superior are barred.

It is no great surprise, then, that Mormon temples are traditionally opulent buildings, usually topped by high-reaching spires, although designs have varied by era, said Richard Jackson, a geography professor at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah.

“Like with most religions, the steeple or spire is symbolic of reaching up to God, and with Mormon temples, it is usually an integral part of the design,” Jackson said. “The Washington, D.C., temple, with spires at 288 feet, was also a massive political statement by the church. Since then, they have been quite surprised by the negative reactions to some temples and they’ve tried to scale back without sacrificing the meaning of the temple.”

A regional draw

To appease the community, the proposed Harrison temple has been scaled back from 97,000 square feet to 56,000. The steeple has been lowered from 159 feet to 115.

The temple would be built on a 24-acre tract that the church bought in 1996 for $2 million, not long after church President Hinckley visited Harrison himself. Located just off the “Platinum Mile,” the temple would be expected to draw Mormons from as far south as Philadelphia, north as Hartford and west as Scranton, Pa., said James Staudt, a White Plains lawyer who is representing the church in Harrison.

The church estimates that 60,000 Mormons live within those boundaries, but only about 7,000 who live strictly by the faith would be eligible to visit the temple. Most would come to Harrison on an average of two to 12 times a year to perform sacred rites, Staudt said.

The concept of a regional temple, even after five years of debate, remains foreign to many in Harrison. At their recent meeting, Town Board members still seemed uncertain how a Mormon temple is different from an ordinary church. Residents say they can’t be sure how a temple would change their community.

“We are mothers and fathers with families at stake here,” said Kathy Gurfein, who lives close to the Mormon site. “How can the town continue to proceed without a comprehensive, independent long-term study?”

In recent years, Mormon temples have also faced community opposition in the heartland, from Nashville, Tenn., to Billings, Mont. But the church is likely heading for more battles over temple construction, thanks to Mormonism’s history-making growth.

Fastest-growing church
The church was founded only 171 years ago in western New York, after a farm boy named Joseph Smith is said to have received visions that directed him to scriptural records. These would become the Book of Mormon, which Mormons give the same scriptural authority as the Old and New Testaments.

The Book of Mormon tells of Christ, after his resurrection, visiting a tribe of ancient Israelites in the Western Hemisphere. He calls for the re-establishment of his original church, which Mormons believe fell away after the deaths of the apostles.

Mormons believe that God was once a man, that people can take on godlike qualities in the afterlife and that God, Christ and the Holy Spirit are separate persons. Most mainstream Christian churches do not believe Mormons to be Christians.

Worldwide membership in the church has soared to almost 11 million, making it the fastest-growing church in the world. There are more Mormons in the United States, 5.2 million, than Episcopalians or Presbyterians, and they will pass Lutherans in the coming decade.

The church has been building temples at a quickening pace to keep up. The church had only 20 temples worldwide in 1981, but now has 106. Nineteen are under construction or planned.

Spurring the growth is the church's belief that it is being guided by God's hand. On May 7 of last year, Mormons throughout the New York area were asked to fast and pray for divine intervention to shepherd the Harrison temple past its obstacles.

Only time, and perhaps the courts, will tell whether it worked.
Catholic bishops aim to explain Eucharist

Leaders say church is reeling from weak education

The belief that the bread and wine of Mass turn into the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ, with the bread and wine ceasing to exist, is so central to the Roman Catholic faith that it has helped define Catholic identity in Protestant-dominated America.

And yet, the nation’s Catholic bishops have concluded that many Catholics no longer get it. Saying that the church faces a “grave situation,” the bishops have just released a 20-page booklet that explains that the bread and wine are not symbolic of Christ. They are Christ.

“The whole Christ is truly present, body, blood, soul, and divinity, under the appearances of bread and wine,” the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops explains in its booklet, now available to parishes.

That the nation’s Catholic leadership has taken this step does not surprise clergy or laypeople in the northern suburbs, who say the church is still reeling from decades of weak Catholic education that followed the Second Vatican Council in the mid-1960s.

They say education programs that emphasized “peace and love” at the expense of core beliefs, coming at the same time that society began losing its respect for authority, produced a generation of Catholics who unwittingly hold non-Catholic beliefs about the Mass.

Even worse, clergy and laypeople say, Catholics who were poorly educated during the 1970s now have children who haven’t been taught to believe in the “true presence” of Christ in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

“I teach that the true presence is fundamental to the faith, that if you do not believe in the true presence, you are not a Catholic,” said Deacon Robert Whiteman of St. Bernard’s Church in White Plains, who helps lead parish education programs. “You may be a Christian, but you are not a true Catholic. Maybe half our students do not appreciate or understand the true presence. It extends to the parents, who set the example.”

Observers say problems started after Vatican II, the historic worldwide council of bishops, when many parish education programs for public school students abandoned the just-the-facts Baltimore Catechism. This 19th century guide to the faith, written in question-and-answer form, had been designed to help Catholics defend their church before Protestants.

Educators tried instead to teach the popular interpretation of Vatican II, that the Catholic Church should be more modern and open to the world.

Jeanne Scarcella, 37, of Scarsdale, is part of a Catholic prayer group made up of people who fumbled through this period before finding their own path to Catholic understanding.

“We were taught that God is love and peace and joy and all that stuff, which is beautiful, but we didn’t learn the fundamentals of the faith,” said Scarcella, who grew up in Albany. “We were
never instructed on the meaning of the Eucharist, that the Mass is being at Calvary, the Last Supper and the Resurrection all at once. When I learned all this at 29, 30 years old, I thought, ‘How did we miss all this?’

This potential crisis facing the Catholic Church came to light in 1994, when a national poll found that only 34 percent of Catholics believed in Christ’s actual presence in the Eucharist. The Diocese of Rochester soon found nearly the same thing.

The U.S. bishops decided to act based on those studies, as well as bishops’ individual encounters with parishioners.

Bishop James McCarthy, vicar of northern Westchester and Putnam and pastor of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Church in Shrub Oak, said many Catholics do not fully grasp the church’s teaching about what occurs when a priest consecrates the bread and wine of the Eucharist. But he said that it is hard to measure what people understand because the concepts and language involved are so abstract.

“You could say we’re living with a religiously illiterate generation,” McCarthy said. “But I think most people understand that there is a sacredness about the Mass. When you ask them to define it, you might be disappointed.”

Edward Foley, a professor of liturgy at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, agreed that modern-day Catholics may call the Eucharist symbolic, but see it as deeply meaningful. Many Americans want flag-burning to be banned because the American flag, although a symbol, is more than a symbol, he said.

“The church faces a fundamental challenge to explain a mystery in contemporary language,” Foley said.

After a 9 a.m. Mass one day last week at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, senior parishioners said that younger Catholics missed a grounding in the faith.

“On Easter, when you see these couples come in with five kids, it’s sad, because they don’t know what’s happening,” said Mike Dorney, 64, of Mahopac.

“If you have the foundation, you can put it all together later on in life,” said Owen McCrudden, 65, of Shrub Oak. “If you don’t ...”

Through Christianity’s first millennium, it was generally held that Christ was present at Mass, fulfilling his promise from the Gospel of Luke that, “This is my body ... This is my blood.” Yet the nature of Christ’s presence was not spelled out until the 11th century, when the Western church, split from the East, defined the transformation of bread and wine as “transubstantiation.”

This concept explained the substance of the bread and wine is changed by the Holy Spirit into the substance of Jesus Christ. The bread and wine cease to exist, even though their appearance is unchanged.

The Orthodox Christian and Anglican churches also hold that Christ is present in the Eucharist, but insist that it is a mystery that cannot be explained.
The 16th century Protestant Reformation produced many new understandings of the Eucharist. Martin Luther declared that Christ is present at the Eucharist along with the unchanged bread and wine. John Calvin said that Christ is present spiritually. And Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli argued that the Eucharist is purely symbolic of the Last Supper, a position still held by many Protestants, particularly evangelicals.

Christopher Bellitto, a church historian from Pelham, said the Catholic Church chose to re-explain its position about the Eucharist in 1551, after the Reformation, just as the American bishops are doing today.

"There you have an example of later bishops revisiting an ancient truth for a contemporary market," he said. "Periodically in the church's life, the bishops find that they have to reteach, so this is nothing new."

Locally, it is up to the Archdiocese of New York's catechetical office to educate the thousands of Catholic students who attend public schools. They try to do this through crash-course parish programs that average 30 hours of instruction a year.

Cardinal Edward Egan, since becoming archbishop of New York last year, has repeatedly lamented this challenge, saying that the average Catholic teen-ager spends more hours in front of MTV than getting Catholic instruction. At this point, he has no plans to revamp the program, a spokesman said.

Linda DeMarkey, who oversees education programs in 60 parishes in central and southern Westchester, said it is an uphill battle to teach kids when parents do not understand Christ's presence in the Eucharist.

"There is a lot of confusion today because adults went through religious formation during the '70s, when the emphasis was on peace and love and not theological teachings," she said. "We're trying to turn it around."

But Marilynn Hilpert, who runs the parish programs in Rockland, Putnam and northern Westchester, said it is difficult to measure the quality of education without considering the questioning culture in which Catholics now live.

"There was a time when people accepted what the church taught, even if they didn't fully understand it," she said. "Now we are in a place where people question institutions and want concrete explanations. It is up to the individual to see the real presence."
Holy wars aren't new — or holy

Religious rhetoric can cloak political goals, scholars say

It is the tragic irony of this time that countless mourners are filling houses of worship in search of peace, refuge and solace, haunted by the knowledge that America's enemies believe they killed thousands in the name of God.

The God of the terrorists is the God of Adam, Abraham, Job, Moses, David, Jesus Christ and Muhammad.

The God of the terrorists is the God of the peoples of the book, to whom Jews, Christians and Muslims now pray for answers and hope.

It is an old story, probably as old as religion itself, and it continues to play out across the globe. Self-proclaimed holy warriors take the timeless messages of justice and tough love that fill the Torah, the Gospels and the Koran and look at them through a prism of temporary geopolitical concerns. Then mankind wages war and spreads hate as a holy mission.

But don't blame God or the great religious traditions, say scholars and historians who study religious war.

The monotheistic religions provide a framework for moral and just living, they say, whether one believes that religious law comes from God's mouth, God's inspiration to mankind or neither. Bloodshed results when people ignore the overriding messages of religion, purposely or not, and cloak political goals, coarse nationalism and economic fears as a mission to defend their faith.

"Religion is just a smokescreen," said the Rev. Walter Gagne, spokesman for the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement in Garrison, a Roman Catholic community focused on interreligious understanding. "We don't need religion to be violent or warlike. The great religions of the world put a high value on peace, respect and moral values. But people do not always want to live that way, and ignore the message."

Pope John Paul II conjured up a millennium of religious-themed violence in 2000, when he apologized for the past errors of Christians. He cited the brutal excesses of the Crusades, military expeditions to recapture the Holy Land from Muslims during the Middle Ages, and the Inquisition, staggered efforts by the church to interrogate and punish heretics.

"Pope John Paul II apologized recently for the sins of the church and mentioned the Crusades and the Inquisition," Gagne said. "But Christianity didn't force us to go to war against Islam or our neighbors. That's ridiculous. It's what the people did on our own."

Cold War fallout

The growth of Islam is a major religious event, but the growth of fundamentalist, potentially violent Islam is a political event brought on by the end of colonialism and the Cold War, said
Bruce Lawrence, chairman of the religion department at Duke University and author of 1998's "Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt in the Modern Age."

“All these states that were born from colonialism or affected by it did not develop during the Cold War, as they aligned themselves with the U.S. or the U.S.S.R.,” Lawrence said. “The U.S. won the war and got the spoils, Islamic majority states that are not healthy or even functioning. They never learned to honor freedom or equal standing for citizens.”

The idea of funneling Arab political and economic frustration into a fundamentalist Muslim stand germinated as long ago as the 1950s. An Egyptian scholar named Sayyid Qutb, who briefly studied in the United States but is now largely unknown here, called for a religious uprising against corrupt Arab governments, several of which were supported by the United States. Qutb was hanged in 1966 after being found guilty of conspiring against Egyptian President Abdul Nasser.

Qutb’s writings called for a pure Islam uncorrupted by the West, and are now widely seen as inspiring Islamic fundamentalism and perhaps, indirectly, Osama bin Laden.

“Qutb raised the stakes, making Islam a radical movement,” Lawrence said. “He said that anyone claiming to be a Muslim must support a Muslim state.”

Ahiyet Karamustafa, director of religious studies at Washington University in St. Louis and chief adviser to this year’s PBS documentary, “Islam and Empire,” said that fundamentalist Muslims are employing the oldest trick used to start religious wars: insisting that their version of Islam is the only pure Islam.

“Religious nationalism can be a potent weapon for anyone who wants to stir up political opposition,” Karamustafa said. “Their extremist writings are filled with crusade rhetoric. They’d like nothing better than to portray the American response as yet another example of Western aggression directed against Islamic traditions.”

On Friday, hard-line Muslim clerics in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt and elsewhere decried an American war against Islam itself, with several citing President Bush’s promise of a U.S. “crusade.” The White House has apologized for the remark.

**Mixing with nationalism**

The world is today filled with wars and conflicts inspired, at least in part, by religion: Israelis vs. Palestinians; Catholics vs. Protestants in Northern Ireland; Muslims vs. Christians in Sudan; Muslims in Pakistan vs. Hindus in India; Muslims vs. Christians in Indonesia; Muslim oppression of Baha’is in Iran; and many others.

The catch is that almost every country that is a member of the United Nations has promised to allow some degree of free religious practice, said Lawrence Goodrich, spokesman for the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom in Washington. In many countries, he said, especially where there is little diversity, the people themselves are not ready to accept religious differences.

“Cultures mix religion and nationalism so tightly that it becomes hard to separate them,” Goodrich said. “To be a good Russian, you have to be Orthodox. To be a good Indian, you have to be Hindu. To be a good Arab, you have to be Muslim. It’s a reality that’s hard to counter.
When people do things that would be seen as abhorrent, they know they can get away with it if they use religious terminology."

In many of the world's conflicts, warring factions that are identified by their religions do not even understand their faith's basic theology or practices, said the Very Rev. Leonid Kishkovsky of Long Island, an official with the Orthodox Church in America and a member of the governing board of the World Council of Religions for Peace.

He cited the recent violence in Bosnia, where the warring factions were described as Bosnian Muslims, Serbian Orthodox Christians and Croatian Roman Catholics. The truth, he said, is that many of those involved grew up in Communist Yugoslavia and had little religious understanding.

"What happened was that political figures who were players in Yugoslavia's breakdown were cynically using religious themes to support their political goals," Kishkovsky said. "We are too willing to over-identify certain conflicts as being religious because they use religious imagery. Radical Islam uses terms and practices that the authentic, mainstream religious community does not use or understand."

The term "jihad," for instance, does not simply mean holy war. It means the struggle to spread Islam, primarily through prayer, study and missionary work. Medieval Islam in the Sunni tradition did develop a notion of religious war, but with qualifications: just cause; reasonable hope for success; appropriate leadership; minimum force; and discrimination between guilty and innocent parties.

As threatening as Islamic fundamentalism may seem today, an ongoing study reveals hope.

A group of historians organized by Wayne Te Brake, a history professor at Purchase College, is now studying the aftermath of religious wars that took place during the 16th and 17th centuries. The study, funded by the Ford Foundation, is focusing on tensions between the Muslim Ottoman Empire and Christianity in Western Europe, as well as between Roman Catholics and Protestants at the time of the Reformation.

Te Brake said the group is dealing with periods that followed terrible hostilities and unrestrained bloodshed. And yet, historians are finding that religious groups once considered mortal enemies did learn to coexist. It would normally take many, slow steps, he said, such as nine civil wars between Catholics and Protestant Huguenots in France during the late 1500s.

"The evidence makes a lie of the idea that religious hatreds are intractable," Te Brake said. "It takes incremental steps, but people do learn to coexist. It may be hard to see beyond the immediate situation, but things are not as hopeless as they appear.

"In the 16th century, zealous Calvinists looked pretty scary to Roman Catholics, as well."
Dobbs Ferry family dispels Muslim stereotypes

DOBBS FERRY — This time last year, Zena Mikdadi’s three children begged her to butt out.

They were new in town, teen-agers, not exactly looking for attention. They could live with the Christmas tree and the menorah at Dobbs Ferry High School. It’s not like they weren’t used to everybody else’s holiday season. Why make a big deal out of it?

Mom relented. But that was then.

“Last year, we were new. Fine,” she said. “This year, I called the school and said, ‘There’s a third Abrahamic religion in town.’”

So two weeks ago, 18-year-old Dina Mikdadi, a senior, made an addition to the holiday display in the principal’s office. Between a 5-foot tree and a plug-in menorah, she placed candleholders shaped like a crescent moon and a star, symbols of Islam since the Ottoman Empire.

At Dobbs Ferry High, they’re now also symbols of Ramadan, the Muslim holy month, which ends today.

It was a small task, but important to Zena Mikdadi. Especially now. She has always wanted her children to be proud Muslims, schoolyard ambassadors for the faith. But now all of America is trying to figure out Islam, trying to separate global politics from belief, looking for something familiar in a foreign and suddenly frightening religion.

Look no further than the Mikdadies. They represent one strain of Islam in America: Muslims who are both devout and happy to be here.

They are proud of Islam’s often ignored history, dedicated to explaining their faith and committed to raising good Muslim children. They also love America’s free exchange of ideas, take pride in their individualism and gleefully emphasize the importance of education and success in the workplace.

Sound like any Christian or Jewish families you know?

“When you make the decision to immigrate to this country, you are telling your children that they will lead a different lifestyle than you did,” Zena Mikdadi’s husband, Salem, who goes by “Sam,” said over a recent dinner in their home to break the daily Ramadan fast. “If you try to force them to live here like they would live in the Middle East, with very narrow ways of thinking in some cases, it can break up the family.

“It is a misconception that Islam and the West are incompatible. We value the same things — ethics, your conduct at home and at work, family. The other nonsense is not Islam.”

The Mikdadies abhor terrorism and see anti-Western attitudes in the Middle East as ignorant, self-indulgent and hypocritical. And that was before Zena Mikdadi was nearly killed Sept. 11 in the supposed name of Islam.

Faith in suburbia
The Mikdadis pray five times a day, as their religion requires. They fast from sunrise to sunset during Ramadan. They know Arabic. And their teen-age children do not date, honoring Muslim tradition and focusing their energies on education.

But they look and act so suburban that you would never notice them.

Zena and Dina do not wrap their heads as many Muslim women do. They defend the right to wear the hijab, insisting that it symbolizes modesty and not, as many Americans think, the oppression of women. But personally, they don't feel the need.

"I don't wear the veil, and some people might think I'm not a good Muslim," said Dina, who is working on choosing a college. "But I feel dedicated to my religion. My intent is to be modest. It is between you and God."

Zena Mikdadi, 43, is a civil engineer by training and a stay-at-home mom by choice. She hopes to return to the work force soon, but says in her typically open way that it will be tough in a male-dominated field.

"Women always have to work harder," she said. "Some things are true all over the world — to different degrees, of course."

Sam Mikdadi, 48, is soft-spoken and has a disarming smile, but works in a tough business. He is a projects manager for Bechtel Telecommunications, a corporate giant that manages large engineering and construction jobs. He is now helping AT&T Wireless expand its local cell phone coverage, meaning he is haunted by suburban campaigns against building cell towers.

"Oh, it's not easy," he said. "Nobody wants them."

Dina and her brothers, Bassil, 15, and Nasser, 12, are typical suburban children in most ways. They play sports, watch some television and take their studies seriously. But they have traveled the world thanks to their father's job, giving them a sophisticated take on current events. They have also had to handle a lot of questions about Islam, although no discrimination, since Sept. 11.

"People always say, 'You don't look Muslim,'" Dina said.

"And I'm supposed to have a beard, dark skin and a turban, I guess," said Bassil, a big football and soccer fan who has a classic teen-ager's lack of patience with anyone he sees as ill-informed.

American pop culture is considered a real problem by many Muslims who are repelled by inescapable images of sex, drinking and drugs. But the Mikdadis don't worry about it, trusting in their values and laughing off the culture's excesses.

"People in the Middle East watch U.S. movies and think the U.S. is all drugs, crime, drinking, sex," Sam said.

"Come on. Hollywood is not America," Zena said. "Hello?"

Dina's favorite TV show is "Friends," in which casual sex is a weekly storyline. But she doesn't date and says she doesn't miss it.
“I see my friends breaking up every two weeks,” she said. “Who needs all the emotional baggage? My religion says no dating. In a practical sense, it makes sense. My religion makes sense to me.”

Marriage prospects for Dina and her brothers are rarely discussed. The family line is: Focus on getting your degrees. But the children know that their parents were introduced by their families in December 1981, when Sam was in Jordan on Christmas break.

“I hated that process,” Zena said. “Both of us are Western-educated and laughed it off. But that kind of brought us together. We talked afterward for three or four hours and said, ‘Let’s give it a try.’”

They got engaged a week later, began dating and married the following July.

Seeing both sides

The Mikdadis moved into a handsome new townhouse in Dobbs Ferry in August 2000, the latest stop in the family’s travels. Ask them where they’re from, a common conversation opener in suburbia, and they smile and gather themselves.

Sam’s and Zena’s families are both from pre-Israel Palestine. But Sam was born in Kuwait, Zena in Jordan. Both are from upper-middle-class families and had good schooling, to which they attribute their modern views of the world.

Sam attended an Anglican boarding school in Jerusalem and, after the Six Day War of 1967, an American-run school in Beirut, Lebanon. Then he arrived at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pa.

Zena left Jordan at 17 for England, where she lived for five years. Then she moved to Elvis country, enrolling in the University of Memphis.

“In England, people were very reserved, not welcoming,” she said. “In Memphis, I was welcomed into people’s homes. I got the real Southern hospitality.”

After marrying in 1982, they moved to the San Francisco area, where all three children were born. They stayed until 1994, when Sam’s job took them to places that Dina, Bassil and Nasser had only heard about: Qatar, Jordan and Kuwait.

Living in Muslim lands was not what they expected. The kids had to get used to a foreign culture, but appreciated the experience. Sam and Zena, though, found themselves feeling like outsiders.

“At first, it was enriching for me to return to places I had been as a child,” Sam said. “But then I found that I could not live or work in that environment. The lack of business ethics. The way people treat each other. I spoke the language, but thought like an American.”

He said the upper class in Jordan lives almost hedonistically, throwing wild parties, paying little attention to family, ignoring the poor.

“They’re going through a counterculture period that you don’t hear about,” he said. “Americans are far more conservative in the way they raise their families.”
Zena remembers culture shock. She was bumped by men in the street for wearing a T-shirt. And she was turned off by affluent locals with chauvinistic, narrow-minded views of the world.

"I couldn't get along very well," she said.

They returned to the United States early last year, stopping for several months in Vienna, Va. The change was again abrupt, with one classmate asking Dina if Kuwait was a Virginia suburb. They had forgotten how little some Americans knew or cared about the rest of the world.

Then they moved to Dobbs Ferry, where they are trying, in small ways, to help create a new Muslim identity in post-Sept. 11 America.

Nearly a victim

The Mikdadis not only detest so-called religious violence, they almost had their lives destroyed by it.

On Sept. 11, Zena arrived in Newark for a 9:30 a.m. flight to see a friend in San Francisco, her first trip without the family. She nearly switched to an 8:30 flight, but decided to save the $100 fee.

The 8:30 flight, United Flight 93, crashed in southwest Pennsylvania. Zena was already seated on the next flight, but got off in time to see the second Twin Tower disintegrate.

"People ask me why they did it," Zena said. "Don't ask me."

Sam has an answer. He believes that most Middle Eastern governments are so corrupt and obsessed with preserving power that they have helped foment religious madness as a distraction. They, or their clerical lackeys, lead the cheerleading against the West.

"When I hear someone like bin Laden say the problems of the Palestinians have to be solved and the children of Iraq have to be fed, I laugh," he said. "Bin Laden never cared about the Palestinians. Arab leaders use the Palestinians to promote their agenda and talk about the U.S. presence in Saudi Arabia to deflect attention from themselves, the real problem."

Seeking to erase Muslim stereotypes, Sam accepted an invitation to speak Dec. 9 at a Unitarian church in Mount Kisco. In his easygoing way, he explained that for a millennium, from the end of Greek civilization to the Renaissance, Islamic culture changed everything from philosophy to mathematics.

It is true, he said, that colonialism set up Muslim lands for a fall by carving them indiscriminately. But political leaders took advantage by building corrupt dictatorships.

Poverty and illiteracy, not religion, have fed intolerance, he said.

"The Quran has not changed, but Muslim societies and governments have," he said. "The Muslim world needs to go through a self-assessment exercise."

He also explained that practices now associated in the West with Islam, from beards and veils to dowries, caste systems and female circumcision, are cultural and not prescribed by the Quran or the prophet Muhammad.
When his speech was over, Sam, somewhat relieved, wondered if he had been able to change minds. Zena talked about what the future holds for her children's generation, and thought about Dina immersed in schoolwork at home. Bassil decided against critiquing his father — "I can't go there" — and was anxious to get home and listen to a San Francisco 49ers game over Internet radio.

A woman putting on her coat said she was won over by Sam right away, when he opened with a carefully chosen line from the Quran:

"There must be no coercions in matters of faith."