

The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

Islam in America

Islamic Scholars View American Society

WASHINGTON: When ever Arabs and Muslims allow movies and politics to strongly influence their opinion of the American people, they are wrong, according to an Algerian scholar who says he found that Islam and Muslims in the United States are safe and sound.

"I discovered that the American society is different than the one we see in American movies," said Dr Abderrazak Gassoum, professor and director of the National Institute of Islamic Studies at the University of Algiers. At the conclusion of his first visit to the United States, Gassoum said "I also found that the

Americans are, to a large extent, a very religious people."

Gassoum was on a one-month visit to the United States (June 27 to July 22) along with a group of Islamic scholars from Morocco, Tunisia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and journalists from Jordan and the West Bank.

The purpose of their visit, sponsored by the International Visitors Programme of the United States Information Agency, was to observe the role that religion has played in the culture and society of the United States.

"The American society has many positive characteristics of which we were not aware,"

he said, and added, "We were impressed by its religious, ethnic and cultural diversity. They all coexist in harmony and unity."

Gassoum said he found that Islam and Muslims in the United States are safe and sound. Muslims enjoy complete freedom — freedom to exercise their religious obligations, freedom of organisation, and freedom of cooperation among themselves and with other religious groups. This in itself is an example that should be followed everywhere."

He said, however, that a problem Muslims face is a lack

of material resources. This, the Algerian scholar said, is largely due to the fact that they are not yet as widely organised as other religious groups.

What impressed the Algerian scholar most was the prayer before meals that American families offer. "That was a clear evidence of how religious the Americans are," he said. "Before coming here, we did not know that such a thing exists."

Gassoum and his colleagues were impressed as well by the number of churches, synagogues, mosques and other religious centres. "We did not

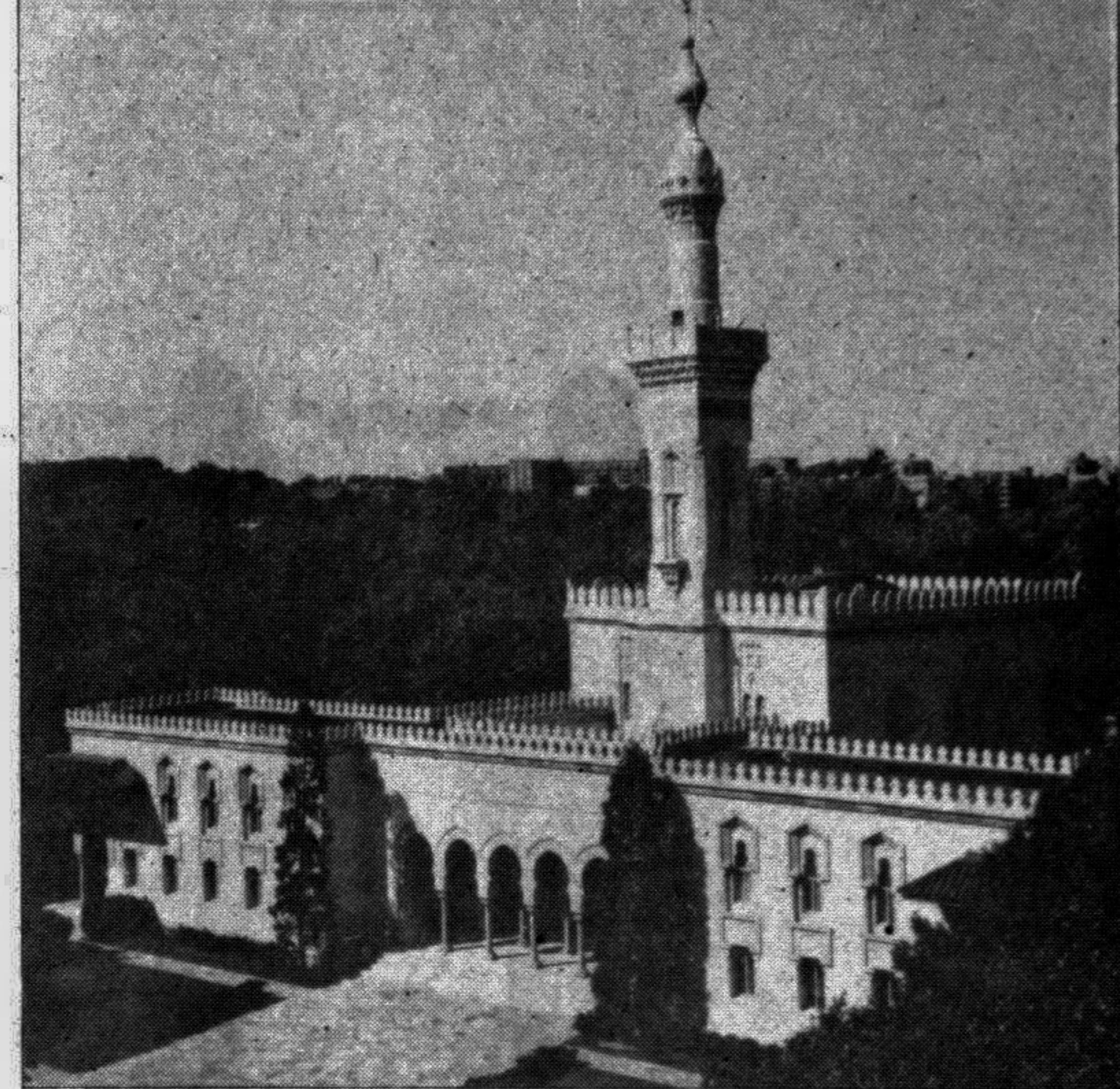
know that they existed in such huge numbers and sizes. Our visit made us change the opinions we held before we came to this country," he said.

The purpose of the International Visitors programme is to increase mutual understanding between the peoples of the United States and other countries by means of educational and cultural exchange, and thus to assist in the development of friendly and peaceful relations.

Inviting scholars from other countries to visit the United States was a great initiative, Gassoum said, adding that the programme should be expanded "by inviting American scholars to visit our countries. Our contacts and exchanges should not be confined only to diplomats and movies."

Impressed by the openness of the Americans, the Algerian scholar said they are "willing and eager to talk with anybody and to listen to anybody. This in itself is very positive. We met with Buddhists, all sorts of Christians, as well as representatives of other religions. What we got was a full and complete picture of a country that is wide open to all religions and races." — USIS

Islamic Center, Washington DC

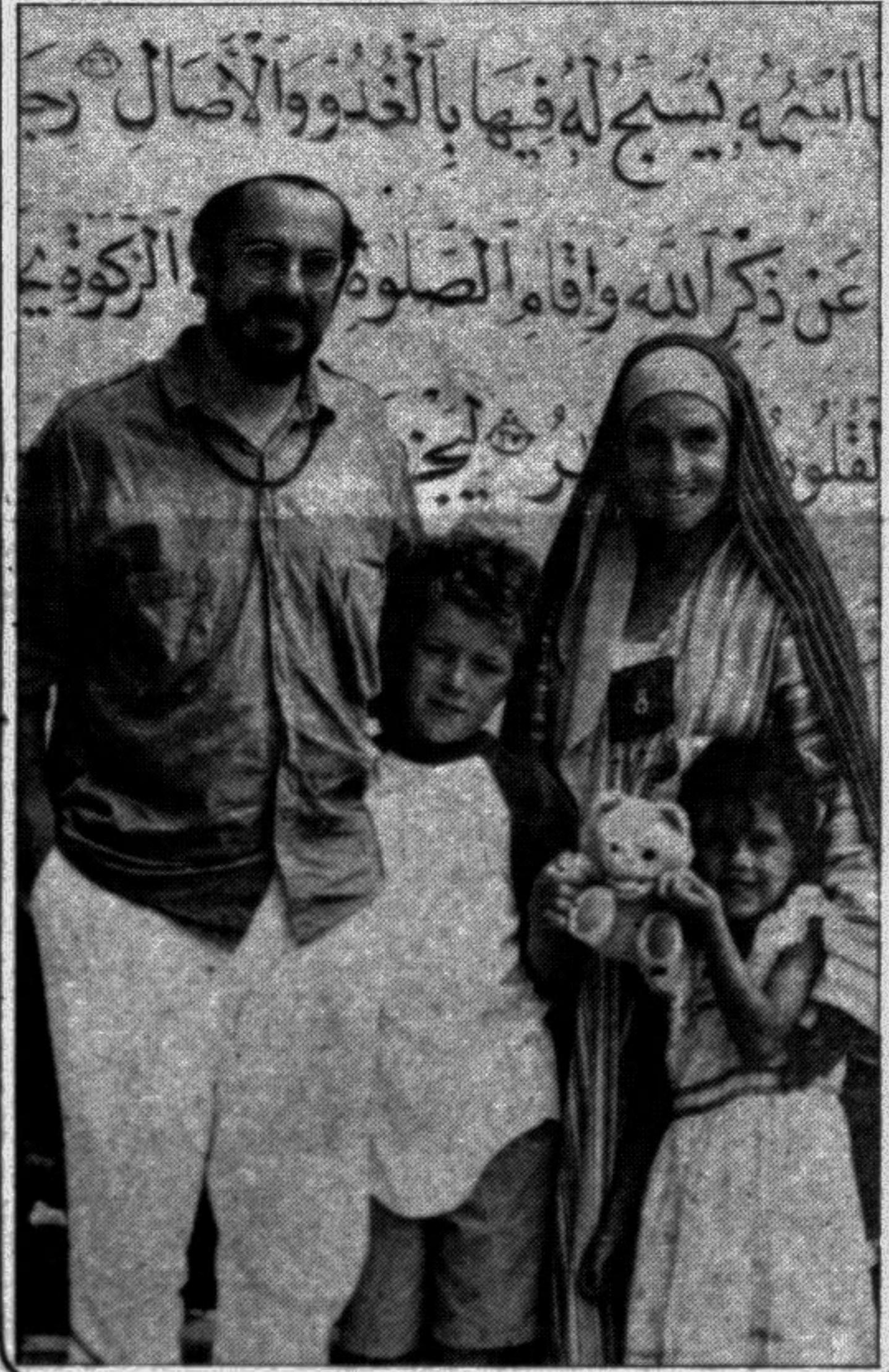


Family Life

RECENT immigrants from Islamic countries have helped invigorate American Muslims' reverence for family. Traditionally, the family provides identity, security, and continuity. This kinship loyalty extends to the community as well. In Arab-American neighborhoods, for example, immigrants settle near others from their home villages and often help one another financially and spiritually.

Most American Muslim children are born into a large extended family. Social life revolves around the mosque, neighborhood organizations, family gatherings and, for men, the coffeehouse.

In the more traditional families, children do not leave home until they marry. Young people meet at school or on social occasions, but families often are involved in marriage arrangements.



In the Mosque

THE traditional role of the mosque as religious sanctuary has been broadened by many American Muslims. Members may celebrate weddings, conduct funerals, and attend religious classes and cultural events in the mosque. Mosques have even adopted such all-American traditions as potluck dinners and bake sales to provide social opportunities for their congregants and additional funds for maintenance and other expenses.

As a result, the Muslim imam or religious leader often fills a greater role than the historic duties of prayer and instruction in the Quran and Islamic law. In many mosques, he is a community leader who presides over social activities, provides counseling services, and acts as liaison with the larger community. As yet, no Islamic schools of religious training have been established in North America. American imams have usually received religious instruction at an Islamic university in another nation.



NOSTRADAMUS The Man Who Saw Tomorrow

by Mohammad Zafar Akhter Khan

deemed popular and perilous enough to be placed on the Catholic Church's Index of Prohibited Books.

Now, as the millennium draws nigh, Nostradamus virtually springs from the grave in a tidal wave of public appreciation. Japanese author Ben Goto reached the top of his country's bestseller list in 1991 with the Predictions of Nostradamus: Middle East Chapter, which explained how Nostradamus had foreseen the rise of Saddam Hussein and the war between Iraq and Kuwait. In France, England, and America, too, newly published books reexamine Nostradamus' centuries-old prognostications as foreshadowings of recent history. Using hindsight to document the prophet's foresight, followers of Nostradamus conjure Armageddon and apocalypse with the mere mention of his name.

For the sake of the skeptics among us, however, the resurrection of Nostradamus must anchor itself in the fabric of modern space — time. If, as some would argue, wormhole tunnel through the universe, facilitating rapid transit from one epoch to another and back again, then Nostradamus may have been the system's first frequent flyer. But if the future stands an unassailable fortress, protected like a black hole in the space by an "event horizon" that is strictly a one-way

threshold, then Nostradamus' pronouncements must be chalked up, however reluctantly, to imagination, coincidence, and charisma.

As any journalist quickly learns, the skeptics are numerous, indeed. For most of those who heard me discuss Nostradamus, the response was shocked and swift. "You?" the local librarian asked when I checked out the stack of books on his prophecy. "Him?" asked the owner of a used book store in our college town when I went looking for some hard-to-find Nostradamus titles. "Oh, that!" exclaimed a clerk in another book store, who answered me scornfully with the occult section on a low shelf at the rear of the shop.

Although I didn't expect the predictions of Nostradamus to carry much more weight than a horoscope, I was curious to discover why they had persisted over the centuries.

From the little that history reveals of events in the actual life and times of this famous prophet, Nostradamus was born late in December of 1503, at Saint-Remy-de-Provence. His Jewish family had only recently converted to the Catholic faith and, in compliance with local law, changed their name from Gasson to Nostradamus. Had they not done this, they would have been forced to leave Provence and their property behind.

Nostradamus, an excellent student, attended school in Avignon and then at the University of Montpellier. Upon graduation at age 22, he followed the custom of other contemporary scholars and Latinized his name so that it became Nostradamus instead of Notredame. Four years later, after completing medical studies that certified him as a physician, he assumed another entitled affection: the special four-cornered hat that served the same identifying purpose in those days as the initials M D serve today. The only surviving portrait of Nostradamus painted during his lifetime depicts him in his physician's garb. His clear eyes stare off into the distance, or perhaps into the distant future. His long, full beard does not obscure his rosy cheeks or the smile on his lips.

The painting poses Nostradamus outdoors, with the columns of a great edifice rising behind his right shoulder and a tree in the distance behind his left, as though to emphasize the way a good physician forges links between acquired learning and respect for the natural world. He rests his right hand on a globe while the left holds a pair of compasses and a telescope. Despite the image, history tells us, and despite the fact that Nostradamus had a great interest in astrology — casting horoscopes and making pre-

dictions based on planetary positions — he was no star gazer. The world would have to wait for more than 40 years to pass after Nostradamus' death for Galileo to point a telescope toward the sky.

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Islam Gains Members in US as Americans Learn More

Joanne L Nix writes from Washington

INTEREST and curiosity about Islam are prompting more and more Americans to study and increase their awareness and appreciation of the religion. As a result, the Muslim imam or religious leader often fills a greater role than the historic duties of prayer and instruction in the Quran and Islamic law. In many mosques, he is a community leader who presides over social activities, provides counseling services, and acts as liaison with the larger community. As yet, no Islamic schools of religious training have been established in North America. American imams have usually received religious instruction at an Islamic university in another nation.

According to one source, "The Muslims of America," America's Muslim population has increased substantially in urban areas and has developed institutions across the country.

Records from the city of Philadelphia show that more than 7 million Muslims live in the United States and about 3 million US residents are of Arab origin. Across the country there are more than 600 mosques/Islamic weekend schools, women's organizations, youth groups, and professional and civic organizations.

He said that 20 years ago, he and other committed Muslims were concerned that Islam would not take root among Americans. "But today," he reported, "Muslims from abroad, a new generation (in the US) and bright and brilliant American converts to the faith) will take the banner of Islam in America."

Also participating in the dialogue was Khalid Abdulla

Syed, who has been actively involved in fostering understanding among the world's religions and played a prominent role in founding the American Muslim Council, said that in the United States, the second generation of Muslim youth is a "phenomenon."

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Both speakers noted that American Muslims are becoming more involved in the political process. They said that even though American Muslims have only recently begun to organize themselves politically, they have been instrumental in encouraging dialogue among religious faiths, the US government, Arab and Muslim governments, and Islamic movements around the world.

Syed said that Muslim-friendly city laws that have been passed in the United States and Muslim holidays are often noted and explained in the popular press. The inauguration of the Senate and the Congress with the recitation of the Koran, (and) the message from the President on the Eid El-Fitr, for example, these symbolic gestures go a long way in giving a better image of Islam," he said.

"When my children go to school their classmates have heard about Ramadan. They have heard about Eid. So then they feel more comfortable to discuss Islam in a positive light," he said.

Syed also reported that he interviewed a Muslim who recently had been elected mayor of a Texas town. "We asked him (the mayor) to analyze what went into his success. Is there a large number of Muslims in that city?" said Syed, who noted that the mayor's family were the only Muslims in that city. "But the people there have recognized him as a trustworthy person so he got the largest number of votes. And this scene is being repeated in other cities as well at different government levels," Syed said.

Blankinship, when asked about the loss of religious principles among young American Muslims, replied that Muslim children often grow up with very little community with Islam. "They would come back to the mosque in the end only to bury people, which was like burying the religion itself," he said.

But despite the erosion of religious principles worldwide, Blankinship described the future as "not bleak, but very hopeful. Because there is more of a Muslim community now.... There is more of a social basis for keeping the children in the fold of Islam." And, he said, the loss of committed Muslims "is counterbalanced by the other phenomenon of people coming into Islam."

JOANNE L NIX is a USIA Staff Writer.