

**outlook**

## rick nahmias

### *golden states of grace: prayers of the disinherited*

Rick Nahmias is a photographer who lives and works in Southern California. One of his major works documented the lives of California farm workers between 2002 and 2003. Entitled *The Migrant Project: Contemporary California Farm Workers*, his work gave powerful visual testimony to the poetry of these ordinary lives. A version of that exhibit was published in spring 2008 by the University of New Mexico Press. One of the most powerful images was of a simple cross inscribed with the words “no olvidado” (not forgotten) marking the grave of an unknown worker (Figure 1). The accompanying text notes “This dirt lot is the final resting place for many who die crossing the border as well as for migrants who die in America and whose families are unable to afford to have their remains sent back home. Over 2,600 people have died trying to cross from Mexico to the United States in the past decade, ten times the number of people who died trying to cross the Berlin Wall during its entire 28-year existence.”

For his next major project, Nahmias wanted to document religious diversity in California. However, he was interested in something more than a simple catalog of the most religiously diverse state in the world. Instead, he wanted to

document marginalized religious communities. As someone who teaches about world religions in California, I became one of the six advisors to his project, helping Nahmias with background information and contacts. However, I had no involvement with the images photographed or selected for the exhibit.

*Golden States of Grace* premiered at the Fullerton Museum in September 2006, has been presented by the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions in Mexico, was featured at the 2007 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, and can be viewed on the web at <http://www.goldenstatesofgrace.com>. The exhibit is a photo documentary featuring some fifty images of eleven marginalized religious groups: a halfway house for Jewish addicts; a transgender gospel choir; Zen Buddhists at San Quentin prison; Latina sex trade workers devoted to Santisima Muerte (Holy Death); dispensated Catholic nuns; African American Baptists and evangelicals isolated in the Central Valley; Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo Native Americans; Cambodian Muslims in Orange County; an interfaith community composed of prison inmates at the California Institute for Women and the group of women on the outside that supports them; deaf Mormons; and people with HIV/AIDS at an ashram in West Hollywood. Nahmias spent several days with each group, getting to know them before photographing their members. His respectful attitude is the first thing that comes through in viewing his photographs. An exhibit of this type could easily be exploitative or voyeuristic, a modern-day religious “freak show” of sorts. Instead, what comes through is the devotion of those photographed. A perfect example is “Praise Dance,” where Jariah, a young dancer, is seen in practice before a performance (Figure 2).

The photographs document unique groups, such as Transcendence, the only transgender gospel choir in the world (located in San Francisco), or Beit T'shuvah, the only halfway house in the United States for Jewish addicts in a twelve-step recovery program (located in Culver City). Other groups, while not unique, are little known or understudied. For example, there is the Cham Muslim community in Santa Ana. These are Cambodian Muslims who survived the genocide of the Khmer Rouge in 1975 that saw over one-third of their community killed. Fifteen families settled in Orange County in 1980, eventually building their own mosque and school. This is an Orange County that will be unknown to viewers of *The O.C.* or other television shows set in the region that glorify



**FIG 1**  
“Not Forgotten, Holtville.” A grave for an unclaimed migrant body not far from the border.



**FIG 2**  
 "Praise Dance: Teviston House of Prayer."

the rich, white and privileged living in exclusive beach communities.

A moving image is that of Yajahira, a transsexual sex-trade worker in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco. At age twelve, she became a prostitute and a devotee of Santisima Muerte (Figure 3). Of that devotion, she says that: "All of humanity is afraid of death—100% of us. This is a preparation for death. More than anything, it's about not being afraid to know that there will be something after my spiritual release." Each night before leaving her apartment, she prays at the altar that she has constructed to her saint. In the picture, she is smoking a cigarette, dressing to get ready for work, an ordinary person doing an ordinary task. However, the photograph reminds us that she, like all of us, is extraordinary.

In a state that is divided into several regions with a population larger than Canada's, one of the greatest strengths of the exhibit is that there is coverage of the whole state. This is unusual, as local California media is incredibly parochial. If one were to watch, for example, television news coverage in Los Angeles, one would be hard pressed to know that Sacramento, San Francisco, or San Diego were also included in the same state. Moreover, Nahmias represents the state not just in its religious diversity, but in its geographical, ethnic, and socio-economic diversity as well. There are the elderly, the handicapped, the children, the ill, the prisoners, the dying, and the sex workers. These are the groups that are often highlighted in religious traditions, "the least of these" to use Christian



**FIG 3**  
 "Yajahira—Santisima Muerte."

terminology. However, they are often the groups that are marginalized by their religious communities. Nahmias brings their stories and their lives to the forefront, and for this we owe him a debt.

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## musée international de la réforme, geneva

In December 2006 it was announced that the newly opened Musée International de la Réforme, Geneva, had been awarded

the Council of Europe Museum Prize for its contribution to the understanding of European cultural heritage. The judges' citation especially praised the museum's international outlook and demonstration of religious tolerance, as well as its ambitious project to communicate complex theological concepts via, for example,