



## FAITHFUL TO THEIR DIVERSITY : Local exhibit documents stories of unique religious groups

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Rick Nahmias photographed what he says is the world's only transgender Christian gospel choir.

He took pictures of sex workers who pray, inmates who practice Zen Buddhism at San Quentin State Prison, and an order of dispensated nuns who were too progressive for the Roman Catholic Church.

To some, it would seem he focused on those on the fringe of religious society; to him, he simply captured those who had the courage to be different.

Mr. Nahmias, 43, will display the provocative photos in his "Golden States of Grace: Prayers of the Disinherited" exhibit, which runs Friday through Dec. 12 at Karpeles Manuscript Library Museum, 21 W. Anapamu St. The show will feature 56 pictures as well as audio recordings of interviews, prayers and music of the religious individuals and groups.

Santa Barbara and 10 other California communities are featured in the exhibit, and Mr. Nahmias plans to take the show to them all.

Through his travels, which took place from 2003 to 2006, he found diverse religious groups that were willing to be different even though it's easier to conform. He heard about them, in part, through consulting with clergy and academics.

"They are, if not nothing else, unified by a sense of passion and belief and courage," Mr. Nahmias said of the groups on a recent day at a Summerland restaurant. "When people are marginalized, whether they're a farm worker or a prostitute, every time you step out, the odds are against you. You have to be strong to survive. You don't have a chance to say, 'This is too tough.' You just do it. These are survivors.

"I wouldn't say I was giving voice to them," he added. "They have their voices."

He just needed to record them.

The groups in Mr. Nahmias' exhibit include Transcendence, the world's only gospel choir made up entirely of transsexuals. He found the choir in San Francisco and said it consists of people making the switch from male to female, female to male or in between genders.

For them, getting together made sense.

"They found a commonality," Mr. Nahmias said. "They have found greater acceptance."

Although it hasn't always been easy. At least, musically speaking.



"They're going through hormone changes. Their voices are changing," Mr. Nahmias explained. "They're the first ones to tell you that some of their early rehearsals were pretty hideous to listen to."

They were actually so bad it was funny. The members didn't stop laughing during those early rehearsals, Mr. Nahmias said. "They have a sense of humor."

But the choir got better. A lot better.

"To my surprise, when I shot them, they had had 56 public performances, one performance a week. It says a lot about them," Mr. Nahmias said.

Another unique group consists of the deaf members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in San Diego. "They (the University City branch) do deaf services and outreach for other deaf people, whether they're Mormon or not," Mr. Nahmias said. "I went to their Sunday services. They have a prayer service led

by a deaf individual, Ross Clark; if you're a hearing person, you hear an interpreter."

Mr. Nahmias was impressed by how the Mormon Church embraced the deaf members.

"This had to be one of the most organized communities that catered to the deaf members," he said. "The people had their own sanctuary to pray in."

Mr. Nahmias had nothing but praise for a Santa Barbara group he photographed -- the Immaculate Heart Community, an order of dispensated nuns.

"This (order) started in the 1800s in Spain, and the earliest outreach was to prostitutes on the streets," Mr. Nahmias said. "They existed as an order of nuns in Los Angeles. In the early '70s, the archbishop of Los Angeles saw their social justice work and feminist tenets and gave them the order to buckle under or get lost.

"They were teaching at Immaculate Heart High School, one of the respected Los Angeles schools, during a time of feminism, social justice and civil rights enlightenment. They were told they couldn't teach what they wanted to teach," Mr. Nahmias said. "What was inspiring to me is these were women who had invested their entire lives (in the church), and they walked away from their cars and homes. They were middle-aged women and saying, 'Now I'm going out and will support myself.' They didn't have to do that; their principles said they had to do something."

The nuns didn't leave the church, but gave up their vows and became lay members, said Carol Carrig, director of the Immaculate Heart Center for Spiritual Renewal in Montecito.

For his exhibit, Mr. Nahmias photographed the Santa Barbara members during their retreat at the Montecito site, which also includes La Casa de Maria. He shot them at various stations during what they said was a re-enactment of Christ's walk to the crucifixion.

"Each of the 14 steps (in the walk) was a different social step or recent activity. The goal was to convert the ritual of Christ's sacrifice to showing the world of social injustice," Mr. Nahmias explained. "One person was at a station to show the rape of women in Darfur."

Another group, Zen Buddhists, awaited Mr. Nahmias at San Quentin State Prison in Marin County.

"I learned more insight into the human condition from them than I ever expected," he said of the men, who call their group Buddhadharm Sangha, which means "Buddhists teaching community."

Freed from the distractions of the Internet and television, the prisoners can devote more time for self-reflection and contemplation of a higher power, Mr. Nahmias said.

Their crimes vary from robbery to murder.

"You're dealing with people who admit guilt of their crime and are aware of the repercussions and the lives they've ruined. These were people not taking that lightly," Mr. Nahmias said. "Some were finding peace; some were not."

In San Francisco's Tenderloin district, Mr. Nahmias found Latina prostitutes from Guadalajara, Mexico. The women, who regularly pray and have altars in their hotel rooms, are devoted to Santisima Muerte, the female folk deity who protects outcasts; St. Jude; and the Virgin of Guadalupe.

"I'm not saying these are people who we should aspire to be, but what you have is people who have come to terms with a higher power," Mr. Nahmias said.

The photographer, who will be releasing a book on the subject in 2009, came up with the idea for the exhibit after a dinner with the Rev. Paul Chaffee, executive director of the Interfaith Center at the Presidio in San Francisco. Mr. Nahmias had wanted to do an exhibit about the state's religious groups but couldn't find a focus and was ready to give up.

He decided to focus on marginalized communities after the Rev. Chaffee suggested he take an approach similar to the one Mr. Nahmias took for "The Migrant Project: Contemporary California Farm Workers." The photo exhibit also looked at a marginalized group. It was displayed in 2005 at the Channing Peak Gallery in Santa Barbara and Betteravia Gallery in Santa Maria. His book of the same name features the photos and was published this year.

"He (the Rev. Chaffee) said, 'That's your lens into religion.'"

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### IF YOU GO

"Golden States of Grace: Prayers of the Disinherited" runs Friday through Dec. 12 at Karpeles Manuscript Library Museum, 21 W. Anapamu St. Admission is free. The museum is open 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily.

Photographer Rick Nahmias will give a free preview of the exhibit at 8 p.m. Tuesday at Victoria Hall, 33 W. Victoria St. An opening reception will take



Marty, serving a life sentence at San Quentin State Prison for homicide, participates in a walking meditation performed by inmates who have converted to Zen Buddhism.

PHOTOS BY RICK NAHMIA



In 2003, Ashley founded Transcendence, the world's only choir made up entirely of transsexuals.



Members of the Immaculate Heart Community in Santa Barbara re-enact what they say is Christ's walk to the crucifixion.



Rick Nahmias photographed diverse religious groups up and down California for "Golden States of Grace: Prayers of the Disinherited."

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