

Los Angeles Times

CALIFORNIA

LOS ANGELES EDITION

Tuesday, October 3, 2006

latimes.com/califor



SHOWING: Photographer Rick Nahmias spent three years working on his traveling exhibit of black-and-white photos, "Golden States of Grace," which is on display through Jan. 14 at the Fullerton Museum Center. CHRISTINE COTTER Los Angeles Times

Getting Into the Spirit of a Photo Exhibit

A gallery chronicling 11 exotic faith communities in the state gets help at its opening from a few of its subjects.

By ROY RIVENBURG
Times Staff Writer

It sounded like the setup to a joke: A rabbi, a Muslim and a Gospel preacher walk into a museum.

In reality, it was opening night for an unusual photo exhibit—and the guest list featured a veritable United Nations of spirituality.

Gay Hindus, Jewish 12-steppers and Women of Wisdom were among those who dropped by the Fullerton Museum Center on Saturday to see "Golden States of Grace," a traveling photo gallery chronicling 11 exotic California faith communities.

As visitors admired the black-and-white pictures, which will be on display through Jan. 14, some of photographer Rick Nahmias' subjects provided a soundtrack to their portraits.

In a tent outside the museum, black

Pentecostal Christians from rural Tulare County belted out gospel tunes. And a choir from Beit T'Shuvah, reportedly the nation's only Jewish halfway house, sang prayers.

Nahmias, 41, spent three years snapping photos for the exhibit. Traveling from San Quentin to San Diego, he encountered Buddhist prison inmates, transsexual gospel singers, Muslims who fled genocide under Cambodia's Khmer Rouge regime and sex workers who worship Santissima Muerte, or St. Death, a Mexican folk deity.

The L.A.-based photographer said he hoped his audience would "set aside the judgments you would normally bring to a convicted murderer or a transsexual and understand that everybody has to grapple with a higher power."

Originally, Nahmias set out to depict mainstream religious groups. But he soon lost interest and shifted to obscure spiritual communities, such as a group of deaf Mormons in San Diego and the Federated Indians in Santa Rosa, who granted him rare access to the tribe's acorn festival.

Nahmias got some seed money from the University of San Francisco and the Pew Charitable Trusts but financed the

rest of the project himself. Estimating the cost at more than \$30,000, he said he hoped to make a profit as museums rent the exhibit.

Most of the 50-plus photos are portraits, but others showcase a feather-filled Indian suitcase, altars decorated with candles and a teddy bear, and a forlorn tambourine.

Rounding out the exhibit are audiotapes of Nahmias' subjects, along with quotes from the likes of Albert Einstein, Mother Teresa and St. Francis of Assisi. For the premiere, an eclectic cast of characters showed up. They included Mark Borovitz, a con man-turned-rabbi who operates Beit T'Shuvah, a Culver City rehab center for drug, sex, alcohol, and gambling addicts; Suleiman Ibn Idris, a Cham Muslim from Orange County who returned to his native Cambodia after the genocide and became a colonel in the Royal Cambodian Air Force; and Alfred King, a former grape picker and janitor who pastors a tiny Pentecostal church in Pixley, Calif.

"We wanted to give the people a taste of our culture," King said.

roy.rivenburg@latimes.com



STATE OF GRACE: Suleiman Ibn Idris, a Cham Muslim, stands by a portrait of himself in an exhibit about California exotic faith communities at the Fullerton Museum Center. **B4** CHRISTINE COTTER Los Angeles Times