

Islam appeal in U.S. small, but compatible

Islam's 600 million to 800 million adherents live in a path that spreads from Africa across Asia to the Pacific and in a few other places, too. But this most popular of religions has had little appeal in the United States. It's been limited mostly to immigrants from Moslem countries and to American blacks.

By MIKE FEINSILBER

WASHINGTON (AP) — In Iowa, where the Sioux and the Algonquin once worshipped, some people kneel on prayer rugs five times a day and face Mecca.

They are Moslems. They also are Americans, members of a small community of followers of Islam who have lived in Cedar Rapids for more than a century.

Islam is the world's most popular religion, but Islam in America has been limited mostly to Moslem immigrants and their descendants and to blacks, many of whose ancestors worshipped Allah in Africa before they were converted to Christianity as slaves. Through its 1,400-year history, Islam has appealed chiefly to the enslaved and the downtrodden.

To most Americans, Islam is an exotic and mysterious religion. But it is becoming a political force in the world, too, one likely to influence events in America.

The rise of power of Ayatollah Rumollah Khomeini in Iran has focused new attention on Islam.

Around the world, one person in eight is a Moslem. Only one Moslem in every 2,000 lives in the United States. Roughly only one American in every 1,000 is a Moslem.

The Islamic Center of Washington claims Moslem explorers reached both the Atlantic and Pacific coasts before Columbus.

Legislation enacted by the South Carolina House of Representatives in 1790 gave "sundry Moors, subjects of the Emperor of Morocco" the right to be tried in local courts. The minutes of other

southern legislatures record debates over granting freedom of religion to "Catholics, Jews and Mohammedans."

But Islam found few converts among those already settled here. For the most part, American Moslems lived alone and apart.

By one authoritative estimate, Islam has only 250,000 adherents in the United States. The Mormons, whose faith is native to America, are 10 times more numerous.

Cedar Rapids became a Moslem center in a typical way. A few Lebanese Christian peddlers, seeking a new life on the frontier, opened shops there not long after the Civil War ended. Islamic Arab immigrants, seeking to live among those who knew their language, followed.

The first North American mosque was built in Cedar Rapids in 1934. It was a white clapboard building which looked like a country church — except for a crescent where a cross might have been.

Most Moslems settled in larger cities, chiefly Detroit and Dearborn, Mich.; Toledo, Ohio; Philadelphia, Baltimore, New York and Los Angeles.

Moslem religious, educational and social institutions exist in 42 states and on many college campuses, where they serve students from the Middle East.

In the open atmosphere of America, some Moslems became more devout, reacting to the materialism and relaxed standards of sexual conduct, dress, drinking and morality they found. Others succumbed to the Western lifestyle and forgot their prayers. Some found a middle way.

In an interview, Muhammad Abdul-Rauf, director of Washington's Islamic Center, says he finds nothing incompatible between his religion and democracy, technology or modern ways. "I send my children to American schools. I watch television. I fly in airplanes," he says. "One can go to

the movies and be a good Moslem, but one could not go to the movies to watch naked girls and be a good Moslem. The few prohibitions about being a Moslem — the prohibition against eating pork, for example — are insignificant. One can be a good Moslem and a good American, and not eat pork."

Abdul-Rauf says the teachings of Mohammed have had a special appeal to black Americans because equality is a basic tenet of Islam and because the religion offers "certainty and a meaning of life to the individual."

Afro-American Moslems and Moslems with old-world ties have not always agreed on how the teachings of Mohammed are to be followed, and this led to tensions.

Most Moslems abhor the black supremacy doctrine preached by the Black Muslim movement of Elijah Muhammad as a heretical perversion.

Abdul-Rauf explains that Elijah proclaimed himself a prophet of God and "promoted hatred of whites. His creed, from our point of view, was false."

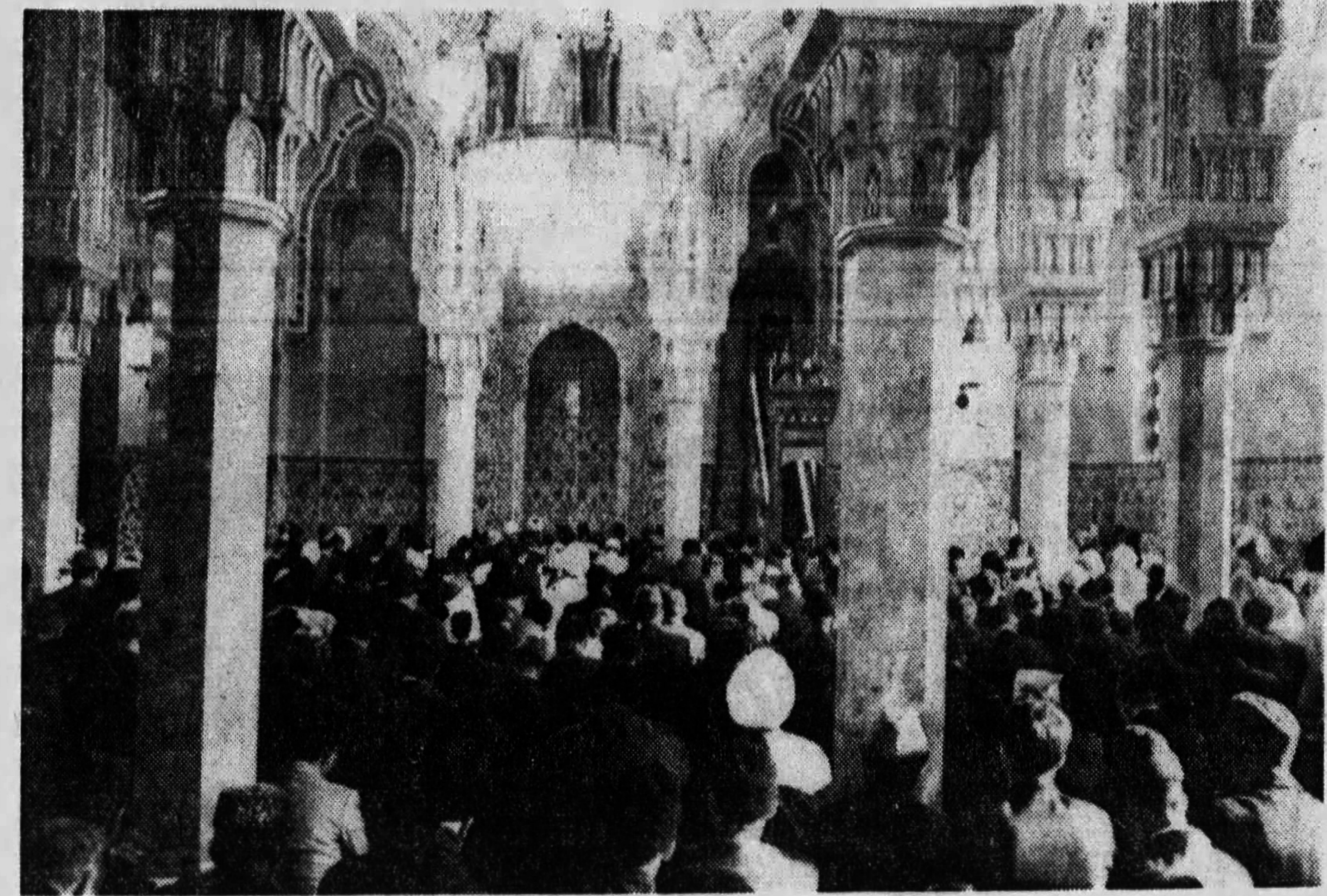
Not until Elijah died and his son directed the movement toward more traditional views were the Black Muslims welcomed as genuine adherents.

Islam has no structured clergy or single spokesman. To provide this country's Moslem institutions with guidance, the embassies of Moslem countries built the Islamic Center along Washington's embassy row.

It opened in 1957, supported with contributions from Moslem governments.

In 1977, it became a battlefield in a dispute between two splinter groups of black American Moslems — the Black Muslims and the Hanafi Moslems.

Twelve Hanafi Moslems seized three Washington buildings — the Islamic Center; the headquarters of a Jewish service group, B'nai B'rith; and Washington's city hall — and held 149 hostages for 38



In a scene rarely seen in the United States, Moslems fill the mosque (above) at the Islamic Center in Washington, D.C. At right, followers of the Islamic faith sit as an Imam, or leader, reads from the Koran, Islam's sacred book, in 1958 at the Islamic Mission of America, a mosque established in Brooklyn, N.Y. (AP)



hours. The ambassadors of Egypt, Iran and Pakistan finally persuaded them to end the siege. One person was killed.

Today, a visitor to the center finds a quiet place where he can learn something about Islam. The center offers lectures and publications on Islam's literature, philosophy and concepts.

At its heart is a mosque with the floor covered by overlapping Persian rugs. The mosque is oriented so that a Moslem at prayer before the back wall is facing Mecca.

Once his eyes adjust to the dim light, the visitor is likely to find a man humped in prayer, his face lowered to the floor.

It is a scene one is likely to find only here and there in America.