



Gannett News Service

Worshippers gather at Bharatiya Temple in Detroit. Many American-born Muslims, Hindus and Jews struggle to fully understand the theology and rituals of their religions because they don't know their faiths' languages.

# Words of worship

## Learning original language helps followers understand

By TAREK HAMADA  
and LISA FAYE KAPLAN  
Gannett News Service

When Rhonda Hashim hears someone chanting the Koran, she wishes she could understand the words.

"I can't even speak Arabic, and I don't think the (English) interpretations are 100 percent exact," says Hashim, 26, an American Muslim of Lebanese descent living in Dearborn.

Hashim is not alone. Many U.S.-born Muslims, Hindus and Jews struggle to fully understand the theology and rituals of their religions because they don't know the faiths' languages.

"The translation is never the same as the original," says David Weiss Halivni, religion professor at Columbia University. "If you use the Bible as prayer, you want it as close as possible to the way it was given, because you believe it was given by a supernatural being."

Christianity's long history in the United States means all of the major texts have been translated. But for the more recently arrived religions such as Islam and Hinduism, existing in an English-speaking culture is a challenge.

Leaders at mosques and temples are trying to meet the needs of their English-speaking followers with more translations, which some say are fairly true to the original.

“The responsibility of the religion does not come from the language. Belief is the most important thing.”

— Mohamad Kabbaj,  
Islamic Mission  
of America

"Koran is in English and every language," says Mohamad Kabbaj, director of the Islamic Mission of America in New York City, who says the English translation is "90 percent accurate."

The Arabic version of the Koran has many explanatory notes, but English translations have much sketchier translations, some say. The notes, known in Arabic as the Tafseer, give readers the Koran's theological and historical context.

An English translation of the sayings of Imam Ali, the guiding light of Shiite Islam, needs the explanatory notes that the Arabic version contains.

Along with English translations, mosques, Hindu temples and synagogues try to overcome the problem with language classes.

National Jewish Outreach, based in New York City, offers

free, five-week "crash courses" in Hebrew. Classes are held throughout the country.

"We see it as a way of reacquainting people with their heritage," says program director Rabbi Yitzchak Rosenbaum. "Prayers are said in Hebrew. The Torah is written in Hebrew. A Jew, in order to feel comfortable in a synagogue, has to at least be able to read Hebrew."

James Klisz from Fremont, Ohio, attends classes in Greek at the Grace Bretheran Church so he can read the New Testament in its original language.

"I'm never going to be a Greek scholar," says Klisz. "I'm just doing it so when I come across certain words or phrases, I can pull out a book and find out exactly what they mean."

Despite the language limitations, religious leaders and their English-speaking followers insist that language is not a barrier to understanding and following a faith.

"The responsibility of the religion does not come from the language," says Mohamad Kabbaj of the Islamic Mission of America. "Belief is the most important thing."