

Muslims and American Popular Culture

Volume Two: Print Culture and Identity

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Chapter 18

Mosques in Minnesota

Melissa K. Aho

Minnesota is known for its German and Scandinavian roots, and since the mid-1800s it has been scattered with Lutheran, Baptist, Methodist, and Catholic churches.¹ Not until the 1880s did the state receive its first Muslim settlers.² After World War II, greater numbers of Muslims arrived in the Minneapolis area in order to attend the University of Minnesota. And in the late 1960s the first mosque in Minnesota was built. Today there are roughly 30 mosques in the state, and they serve Muslims born in the United States as well as Muslims from Africa, South Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. These mosques represent different currents of the Islamic religious tradition. Most serve Sunni³ Muslims, including those whose practices are influenced by the Nation of Islam, and at least two mosques serve Shia⁴ Muslims. It is estimated that between 130,000 and 175,000 Minnesotans attend mosques.⁵ Minnesota mosques can be found in a range of locations from Duluth to Rochester, but most are in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. The buildings differ in size, design, construction

material, and décor. Architecturally, the mosques of Minnesota, with perhaps one key exception, blend into their surroundings—in some instances, so much so that unless you are looking for them, you will have trouble finding them. This chapter offers a short tour of certain prominent mosques and sketches their diverse origins and evolutions, their receptions in local communities, and the key elements of their architecture.

The story of Minnesota mosques is in some ways similar to that of the sacred places of other religious communities, for most Minnesota Muslims began by congregating in homes and only gradually moved their religious activities to small and then to larger buildings. Like most U.S. Muslim congregations, those of Minnesota are very diverse and represent a range of ethnic, geographic, and theological backgrounds. Their mosques provide a space for prayers, offices and meetings, education, and occasionally sports. Although expansion of mosques has at times faced opposition, through education and community outreach Minnesota's Muslims have been able to obtain the facilities required to serve a growing religious community.

THE FIRST IN MINNESOTA: THE DINKYTOWN MOSQUE

The first mosque in Minnesota was opened in 1969, near the Minneapolis campus of the University of Minnesota. Located on South East Sixth Street in a neighborhood nicknamed Dinkytown, the building was built in 1922 as a family dwelling and was later turned into apartments. A group of Muslim students who were living in the apartment in 1969 purchased the building and created a mosque in the basement. They called it the Dinkytown Mosque, after the neighborhood. Although originally meant to be a temporary tag, the name remains to this day.⁶ Small and cramped, the space in the wood-and-brick building eventually was renovated by members of the group's new organization, the Islamic Center of Minnesota (ICM), which is the oldest Islamic organization in the state.

Even with rent money coming in from students who lived in the building's apartments, the mortgage soon became too expensive for the group. While the congregation searched for ways to pay its bills, a letter explaining the situation made its way to King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, and soon a check in the amount of \$35,000 arrived to pay off the mortgage.⁷ Although no longer owned by the ICM, the Dinkytown Mosque continues to serve the University of Minnesota Muslim community.

COLUMBIA HEIGHTS MASJID

By 1976 the Dinkytown Mosque was too small for its growing congregation, so the ICM planned a new mosque. After surveying the surrounding neighborhoods, members found an old unused Mennonite church in the Minneapolis suburb of Columbia Heights. Through the generosity of Najati Abukhadra, a Saudi who was seeking medical treatment from the University of Minnesota, funds became available to purchase the empty church. Originally named the Columbia Heights Masjid, in 2007 it was renamed the ICM Abukhadra Masjid in recognition of its benefactor.

The ICM has kept the building's original Mennonite architectural shape inside and out, but undertook limited renovations to make the space more usable as a mosque. Portions of the interior include the light wood that is reminiscent of many local Christian religious buildings, but the rest is distinctly Islamic, with calligraphy of Qur'anic verses on the walls, art work that contains Qur'anic verses, and a red carpet with a prayer-direction design incorporated into the pattern. Outside, the yellow-and-white exterior blends into the neighborhood so well that people passing by might not recognize the building as a mosque. The only recognizably Islamic features on the building are the crescent moon above one window and a sign above the door that reads "Islamic Center of Minnesota." For many years it was the only mosque in Minnesota to have a *ghusl* room for the ritual cleaning of the dead.⁸

The ICM congregation continued to grow, and in 1987 it purchased an old school and offices a few blocks away, in the neighboring city of Fridley. The building now serves as ICM's headquarters and contains a school, offices, and a small mosque. Future building plans include a glass-domed courtyard and a minaret.⁹ These new offices, which echo the original shape and design of the brick building, provide a variety of services for the Muslim community, including marriages, burials, family counseling, and even a free health-care clinic for those in need.

Developments in response to the expansion of the Muslim community have taken additional forms in the state. In order to reach suburban communities that were not being served, two ICM members established the Islamic Institute of Minnesota (IIM) and began purchasing buildings and sites for mosques and cemeteries.¹⁰ These include the Eden Prairie Mosque and the Maplewood Assalam Mosque.¹¹ In 2008, the IIM purchased an old Snyder's Drug Store building, which after its renovation became the Burnsville Mosque.¹²

STOREFRONT AND OTHER MOSQUES IN MINNESOTA

Most mosques in Minnesota fall under the heading of what has been called *storefront mosques*, or buildings of "non-pedigreed architecture . . . anonymous buildings."¹³ They have been built for a variety of reasons, have usually housed many different types of businesses, and have no or few special features or architecture. Minnesota mosques typically have started out as rented or borrowed spaces with no renovations or additions and have tended to serve growing congregations for a limited time. The evolution of mosques usually has occurred either through purchase of the space the community has rented and renovation of it as money has become available or through moving to a larger existing building and remodeling/expanding as space and funds have allowed.

The Abu-Bakr Al-Sidique Mosque in Rochester, for instance, was founded in 1998, in a building that originally served as an American Legion hall. The hall was purchased for \$200,000 and later renovated for \$600,000.¹⁴ Another example is the Islamic Center of Twin Ports (ICTP) in Duluth, which serves Muslims in Northeast Minnesota, Northwest Wisconsin, and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. After years of renting space in local Christian churches, ICTP finally was able to purchase a former Unitarian Universalist Church in 2010.¹⁵

ANJUMAN-E-ASGHARI (LITTLE COMMUNITY) MASJID

Not surprisingly, Minnesota's mosques reflect the diversity of the state's Muslims. The Anjuman-e-Asghari (Little Community) Masjid, located in Brooklyn Park, is unique for being the first mosque designated for the Minnesota Shia community. It was also the first mosque in Minnesota to be built from the ground up and the first Islamic center in the United States to be built totally by African immigrants.¹⁶ The Anjuman-e-Asghari community currently consists primarily of about 300 East African Indian, Bosnian, Iranian, Pakistani, Afghan, and Iraqi members.¹⁷

The first documented Shia family in Minnesota arrived in 1972 from Uganda and was sponsored by a group of Christian churches from Minneapolis and St. Paul.¹⁸ Slowly the Minnesota Shia community grew. Originally holding prayers in the home of the local *mullah*,¹⁹ the community eventually rented a local community center for their weekly prayers, and in 1988 purchased a 3.4-acre lot in Brooklyn Park with the help of the Shia World Federation and the North American Shia Islamic Communities.²⁰ The Imambara Center and its mosque

MINNESOTA

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opened in 1989. In 1996 a *madressah* was added²¹ and, in 2003, a multi-purpose sports complex.²² These beige and white buildings blend into their surroundings so thoroughly that it may be difficult to identify them as Islamic. "To the lay passer-by, the sole indicator of its function as a space for Muslim prayer is the presence of two small metal crescents on the cupolas²³ of the [main] building."²⁴ The Anjuman-e-Asghari was the second mosque in Minnesota to offer *ghusl* services.

MASJID AN-NUR

Another important mosque in Minnesota is the Masjid An-Nur. Located on Lyndale Avenue in Minneapolis, it is the first mosque in Minnesota to have a dome and a minaret and thus to look like a traditional mosque.²⁵ The history of the congregation of Masjid An-Nur goes back to the 1950s and to a few African American Minnesota families who followed Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam. The community remained small, often moving and changing names as the years went by. In 1975, however, when Imam Warith Deen Mohammed became the leader of the Nation of Islam and embraced an approach to Islam that reflected the Sunni tradition more fully, the Minneapolis congregation changed along with the Nation's leadership.²⁶ In 1990 the congregation officially established itself as Masjid An-Nur (Mosque of the Light), and its eight members rented space in a community center for their meetings.²⁷ By 1995 the congregation had grown to approximately 75–80 worshippers and decided to move to its current building (which originally housed a few restaurants) in North Minneapolis. In 1996 Imam El-Amin became its spiritual leader.²⁸

As the congregation grew, the mosque underwent renovations. When it was first purchased, basic improvements were made to the 3,900 square foot building,²⁹ and in 2006, a new renovation and expansion phase began. More than 6,000 square feet were added, which included the expansion of the *musallah* (a prayer hall) to hold 300 worshippers and the extension of the rest of the mosque to hold 150 to 175 people, new *wudu* facilities,³⁰ new offices, a multipurpose community room in the basement, and the Islamic architectural façade of the dome and minaret.³¹ Construction was completed in 2007. Members of the Masjid wished to accomplish three main objectives with their expansion and renovation plans:

to establish a clearly identifiable Islamic architectural edifice of which its members and the northside community can be proud;

to expand the current structure to accommodate its ever increasing worship community, and the outreach programs that it operates; and to create an aesthetically attractive and functional working environment for its members, guests, and members of the community.³²

The imam explained that the congregation also wanted to "raise [its] profile in order to bring a better light to the religion of Islam."³³ Funding for the mosque came from the congregation, through fundraising dinners, through the sale of real estate, and from contributions from local mosques (15 mosques in Minneapolis and St. Paul raised between \$50,000 and \$60,000 apiece), which eventually contributed \$1.5 million dollars.³⁴

The renovations, expansion, and dome and minaret were designed by Muslim architect and University of Minnesota School of Architecture graduate Aly El-Nagdy. It was El-Nagdy's intent to combine both Islamic and modern architectural ideas when creating the dome and the minaret, as he wanted the design elements to reflect both traditional Islamic and contemporary American culture.³⁵ The dome, a fiberglass construction over a metal frame, is octagonal in shape and 40 feet in diameter.³⁶ Four rectangular windows in the dome allow light into the *musallah*. The minaret, the first built in Minnesota, stands 60 feet tall in the northeast corner of the building. This square structure was created from a single steel frame and is crowned with a lotus-shaped ornament.³⁷ It is a nonfunctioning minaret, for it does not allow people within, no calls to prayer are recited from it, and no audio system is connected to it. During construction a height variance was approved by the City of Minneapolis, which would normally have restricted the minaret to a height of 35 feet.

WOMEN IN THE MOSQUE

The role, as well as the actual space, that women have in Minnesota mosques depends on the mosque and the congregation. At Masjid An-Nur it was decided early on that there would be no separate space or area for women, so women worship at the back of the *musallah*, as is traditional. The Dinkytown Mosque, the ICM Abukhadra Masjid, Anjuman-e-Asghari, and the Darul Quba Mosque, however, each have created separate areas for women in their congregations.³⁸ At most mosques in Minnesota, women have a vital function in the daily operations of the mosque and are active members in their communities.

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and minaret were designed Minnesota School of Architecture's intent to combine both in creating the dome and to reflect both traditional culture.³⁵ The dome, a octagonal in shape and windows in the dome allow built in Minnesota, stands square. This square structure is crowned with a lotus minaret, for it does not allow from it, and no audio system height variance was applied would normally have

women have in Minnesota congregation. At Masjid An-Nur there is no separate space or lack of the *musallah*, as is the case at the ICM Abukhadra Masjid, however, each have congregations.³⁸ At most mosques function in the daily operations in their communities.

The ICM Abukhadra Masjid has elected a woman to its board of directors, and at Masjid An-Nur, women have played central roles since the congregation's founding in the 1950s.

EDUCATION

Most mosques in Minnesota offer some type of educational classes for children and adults in order to teach the Qur'an, prayers, Islamic manners, and the Arabic language. These range from Sunday classes for children and women to Islamic schools for children. The ICM has been offering Sunday school since its founding, and students also have the option of attending the Al-Amal School, which is attached to the offices in Fridley. Today it offers both Saturday and Sunday school classes, as well as adult lectures and seminars. In response to strong interest in Children's Qur'an and Islamic classes, the Anjuman-e-Asghari in 1996 created the Az-Zahra Madressa, which now serves more than 130 students and holds classes on Saturdays.³⁹

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

For nearly 20 years, members of the ICM Abukhadra Masjid have held meetings with people of all faiths, and the ICM is recognized throughout the United States for its involvement in interfaith dialogue.⁴⁰ The Anjuman-e-Asghari, some of whose members were sponsored originally by Minnesota Christian churches, has held dialogues with Hindus, Jews, and Christians. Mosques such as Masjid An-Nur and ICM Abukhadra Masjid regularly host visiting Christian groups. Local imams and mullahs, such as Mullah Hussein Walji of the Anjuman-e-Asghair, are often asked to meet and talk with leaders of other religions at local, national, and international events.⁴¹ Masjid An-Nur's Imam El-Amin has come to represent not only the local Muslim community, but also the state of Minnesota on numerous occasions. In 1999 he was invited to the Vatican to meet with other religious leaders, among them Pope John Paul II and the Dalai Lama.⁴² He is also a member of a local association of religious leaders who traveled to Israel and Palestine in 2007.⁴³

LOCAL OPPOSITION TO MINNESOTA MOSQUES

In the 1970s when the ICM was engaged in purchasing an unused Mennonite church, there was opposition from local Christian churches, the local community, and the Chicago-based Mennonites who owned

the building and did not want to sell to Muslims.⁴⁴ After many town meetings, much negotiating, and help from a local church pastor, the church was purchased by Najati Abu Khadra for \$70,000—and the Columbia Heights Masjid was created.⁴⁵

In the 1980s the ICM again ran into opposition as it was hoping to expand and purchase a new set of buildings in a nearby town. This time, the opposition was not just from the local community and some local Christian groups, but also from Hindu communities.⁴⁶

Once again, after holding town halls and other meetings, the ICM was able to purchase the buildings. Disturbingly, Al Huda Mosque, created from a former Jehovah's Witness kingdom hall, was destroyed by fire in 1999.⁴⁷ Many religious and human rights groups suspected that the arson was a hate crime. (Laura Runyan's chapter in this volume explores the issue of mosque burnings in the United States, with an emphasis on the State of Tennessee.) The community response to the fire was an outpouring of support.⁴⁸ Likewise, vandalism to the ICM Columbia Heights Mosque in 1974 led local Christian churches to call and offer their sympathy. A Unitarian Church offered the use of their church, and a professor at one of the local evangelical Christian colleges invited the head of the ICM to come and talk to his classes, which he continued to do for the next 35 years.⁴⁹

Masjid An-Nur is so well liked and admired that no group in the non-Muslim community protested the expansion, renovations, or addition of the minaret and the dome.⁵⁰ This is probably because Masjid An-Nur has been very active in its Minneapolis neighborhood, receiving numerous local, national, and federal grants for community projects, including healthcare outreach, classes for the unemployed, and after-school tutorial programs. The mosque has also been running a local food shelf program since 1997 which offers free food to impoverished Minnesotans, regardless of religious affiliation. Masjid An-Nur is also known as the mosque of the first Muslim member of the United States Congress, Congressman Keith Ellison,⁵¹ who gained 56 percent of the vote and was backed by such Twin Cities newspaper *American Jewish World*.⁵²

CONCLUSION

Mosques have been facilitating exchange between Muslims and other Minnesotans since the first days of the Dinkytown building. These congregations have served the crucial function of educating Minnesotans about Muslims and Islam through participation in local

government, interfaith dialogue, and charitable and educational programming. Each mosque has framed its relations with the surrounding communities in its own way, and many have adopted a low-key posture aimed at blending into while supporting their neighbors. Finally, Mosques such as Masjid An-Nur, with its vibrant engagement in community service and outreach, have been able to assume important leadership roles in their Midwestern communities.

NOTES

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