

Sacred Journeys

# Exhibit Invites Families to Explore World's Religions



NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC  
SACRED JOURNEYS

**"It's been a journey for all of us just creating this ..."**

—Chris G. Carron, director of collections at The Children's Museum of Indianapolis



Visitors pause before captivating photographs. They see Hindu women in brilliant saris prepare red and yellow lota pots to float on the Ganges River in India. There is shimmering gold embroidery on the black silk draping the Kaaba in Mecca. There is Mary, the mother of Jesus, robed in a star-covered blue cloak, depicted as Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Each image offers a vivid invitation to explore religion, a subject rarely tackled by secular museums, let alone a museum for children. But The Children's Museum of Indianapolis did just that, creating the ground-breaking exhibit, National Geographic Sacred Journeys. During its run at the museum from August 2015 through February 2016, the exhibit encouraged some 165,000 visitors to consider extraordinary places and traditions sacred to people of different faiths throughout the world.

Nearly four years in the making, Sacred Journeys was made possible through a \$1.2 million Lilly Endowment grant in 2013. It was created in partnership with the National Geographic Society, which provided photographs that are central to the exhibit.

## Pilgrimages

According to a 2014 United Nations study related to The First International Congress on Tourism and Pilgrimages, an estimated 330 million people a year embark on journeys to the world's sacred places. To make that number both real and accessible to visitors, Sacred Journeys introduces visitors to five young people who meet in an airport as they begin their own distinct pilgrimages.

Luis, a Christian boy from Mexico, visits the shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe and the Roman Catholic basilica in Mexico City. Micah, a Jewish-American boy, travels to the Western Wall in Jerusalem. Amala, a Hindu girl, goes to the confluence of three rivers in India sacred to her religion to purify her soul. Hana, a

Muslim girl from the United Kingdom, goes on hajj, a pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia. An, a Buddhist boy from Vietnam, seeks guidance for his future at the Bodhi tree in Bihar, India, where Gautama Buddha achieved enlightenment.

Visitors travel, too, through the 7,000-square-foot exhibit's immersive environments, past video screens and National Geographic photography that reveal personal acts of faith, religious observances and family celebrations. Objects of devotion are on display throughout. Some have Indiana roots, including a Bible published in 1845 and

owned by Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, the oldest African American church in Indianapolis.

"Some items came from our own collection, some we commissioned or purchased, and others came from about 20 different lenders," says Chris G. Carron, director of collections at the museum. "Part of curating an exhibit like this is finding those things that have meaning for people and that tell the story."

Shortly after the exhibit opened to the public, Miranda Harrison of Monroe City, Ind., drove more than 120 miles with her three sons to see Sacred Journeys. "It's really one of the most well-done exhibits I have ever seen," she says.

Her 12-year-old, Logan, liked seeing aspects of his Christian faith displayed. "I thought it was really cool. I like the Jesus stuff," he says.

The replica of the Shroud of Turin intrigued her oldest, Austin, 15.

Some 165,000 children and adults toured Sacred Journeys (previous page and opposite) during its six-month run in Indianapolis.

Artifacts in the exhibition include:

- Fragments of the Dead Sea Scrolls from Qumran, Israel
- A replica of the Shroud of Turin
- A mezuzah (a piece of parchment inscribed with the Shema, a prayer from the Torah, held in a decorative case) and other Jewish devotional objects carried into space by former NASA astronaut David Wolf
- A 500-year-old handwritten Quran
- A stone from the Western Wall in Jerusalem
- The trunk that Mormon leader Brigham Young carried from New York to Utah
- A statue of Ganesh, Hindu god of good fortune
- Australian aboriginal art depicting "dream time" stories about the earth's creation

# Religion and the American Narrative

IN LIGHT OF THE CHILDREN'S MUSEUM'S SUCCESS with National Geographic Sacred Journeys, the Endowment began conversations in 2015 with the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History and National Museum of African American History and Culture about how they could strengthen their interpretation of religion in American life for the long term. These conversations led to a total of \$15 million in grants to support the following projects:

- **A \$10 million grant** will help the National Museum of African American History and Culture establish a Center for the Study of African American Religion. Located on the
- **A \$5 million grant** will endow a curator of American religious history at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History and support religious history programs

National Mall and scheduled to open in 2016, the museum will be the first national museum dedicated to the interpretation of African American history and culture. A portion of the grant will endow a senior curator in religion, who will direct the new center. In 2010, the Endowment approved a \$10 million grant to the Smithsonian as a leadership gift for the national campaign to construct the National Museum of African American History and Culture.



"I really don't know what to think [of the shroud and its authenticity]," he says. "I want my dad to see it so I can talk to him about it."

In the tradition of The Children's Museum, the exhibit encouraged hands-on exploration. Families created stained-glass window art inspired by the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City and mosaic patterns similar to tiles at the Dome of the Rock mosque in Jerusalem and put sticky notes on a global wall map to mark sacred places they have visited.

### Creating a safe place

Religion can be a source of comfort but also conflict, which concerned The Children's Museum staff in 2011 when it first considered the idea of this exhibit. Why would a museum known for entertaining and educating children and their families take on such a potentially contentious issue?

"Our hope is that we created a safe place for families to have conversations about what they believe and what their neighbors believe," Carron says.

"We may have grown up having been taught to avoid talking about religion, yet it is such an important topic. We wanted to open up a conversation that would instill respect."

As an institution that serves more than a million visitors each year, the museum



during a five-year period. Also located on the National Mall, it is the most visited history museum in the United States, attracting 5 million visitors and 18 million Web users annually. In recent years, leaders of the National Museum of American History have been exploring how to include religion more intentionally into their interpretation of American life.

These grants are part of the Endowment's commitment to increase public understanding of religion and the role that religion plays in shaping the nation and enriching the lives of individuals and their communities.

**"We are all about experiential learning, yet we wanted to be careful that we are not asking people to participate in something that is not part of their religious tradition"**

—Chris G. Carron

is intentional about creating family learning experiences, says Dr. Jeffrey H. Patchen, museum president and CEO. Those experiences have touched on challenging subjects before. Case in point: The Power of Children, a permanent exhibit. It introduces young audiences to Anne Frank, Ruby Bridges and Ryan White, children who made a lasting impact on the way people understand the Holocaust, racial segregation and HIV-AIDS. The success of The Power of Children – as well as a 2009 exhibit, Take Me There: Egypt, which touched on religious diversity in Egypt – prompted museum staff to consider exploring religion in a bigger way, Patchen says.

So museum staff approached the Endowment with the idea and received a planning grant, along with assistance in launching a series of consultations facilitated by Raymond B. Williams, LaFollette Distinguished Professor in the Humanities emeritus and professor of religion emeritus at Wabash College. Williams convened a group of religion scholars and religious community leaders that encouraged the museum to move forward. They endorsed a preliminary design for a non-proselytizing exhibit that would respect religious traditions and cultural diversity.

"Part of the wonderful thing about the advisors the Endowment referred us to was that they are not just academics but people who really understood our hope of fostering understanding and tolerance," Patchen says.

With that guidance in hand, the museum focused on five religions that the advisors agreed were most influential worldwide: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism. Other religions are represented, too, in images and devotional objects.

Reflecting diversity and the distinctiveness of each tradition was critical, especially for a museum in the United States, one of the most religiously diverse nations in the world. Immigration produced this variety across the U.S., and Indiana continues to reflect it, according to Williams.

"Indiana is the crossroads of the country, and it has been a crossroads of religion from the very beginning," Williams says. "As people came through Indiana, they brought faith on their shoulders, and they continue to do so."

Another member of the advisory group was Sandy Sasso, an Indianapolis rabbi and author of several best-selling children's books about religion. She met with journalists from the PBS television series *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly* who came to Indianapolis to produce a story about the exhibit. Touring Sacred Journeys with the production crew, she said that explaining religion to children is critical because religion is part of their lives – and the world in which they are growing up.

"All children have an innate spirituality, and they like to ask the big questions. It's really we, who are adults, who are afraid of those questions," she said.

"It's very important for children to be able to confront these difficult issues because they see what's happening around the world on the news," she said.

"We can't really understand our culture, our civilization without understanding religion."

### Lasting impact

Photos chosen from the National Geographic Society archives provided a deep visual experience for visitors to Sacred Journeys, exposing wider audiences to images of religious practices that they may not otherwise see. The National Geographic Society found a "like-minded partner" with The Children's Museum in telling meaningful stories, according to Kathryn Keane, vice president of National Geographic Exhibitions.



Rabbi Sandy Sasso, who advised museum curators, says children have an innate spirituality and curiosity. Diverse images and artifacts from around the world engaged young patrons on both levels.

"The Children's Museum allows us to put our content into their educational settings," she says. "They know their audiences so well, and I think it's just a fabulous idea for a children's museum to take on the subject of the world's religions, its rituals and objects."

Sacred Journeys was designed to travel. In 2016 it will begin a four-month run at the Mayborn Museum at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. Yet the exhibit's impact at The Children's Museum will endure in Indianapolis. The Endowment grant allowed museum staff to create a smaller, permanent exhibit that will feature elements of different religious traditions on a rotating basis. Future international exhibits, such as those in the signature Take Me There series, will incorporate the religious dimensions of featured countries.

Sacred Journeys has paved the way for religion to be part of how children and their families explore the world. It's a journey that Osama Samir, a native of Egypt, entered enthusiastically when he toured the exhibit on a Sunday afternoon in fall 2015. He was there with his daughters, Basma, 13, and Noura, 10, and son, Yassein, 4.

Held in his father's arms, Yassein wasn't very interested. "He really wants to see the [museum's] trains again," Samir says, a bit apologetically. But the older children were engaged. "We like to see the places and cultures we don't know about," says Basma, a student at Fall Creek Junior High in Fishers, Ind. "It's very beautiful."

Samir and his family relocated to Indiana in 2014 for his job in drug development at Eli Lilly and Company. Sacred Journeys reflects the kind of diversity that Samir, who is Muslim, believes is good for his children, and society. "When you understand differences," he says "you understand people."

