



## Windows on Culture

The poet Thomas Gray once wrote of "rich windows that exclude the light." Just as often, windows offer a view on worlds that may be different from our own.

During the holiday season we can walk down the street and see, displayed in a stranger's window, an evergreen tree adorned with lights and ornaments. The tree signifies that the household is, at least in the cultural sense, Christian. A menorah on display or a statue of the Buddha would mean something else.

But what if we watched the family as they exchanged gifts, or prayed, or chanted, or enacted some ritual, or read from an ancient text, or ate a traditional meal? Better yet, what if a knowledgeable guide explained the significance of what we were seeing?

The Polis Center has produced a six-part video series, *Religion as a Window on Culture*, that takes us "inside" various religions in Indianapolis. The impulse to religion is nearly universal. The videos suggest that what seems strange in another culture may, on closer examination, resolve into something very familiar. While the ideas may be expressed in different ways, most religions locate the sacred in time, in space, in memory, and in the journey toward the sacred.

These are some themes examined in *Religion as a Window on Culture*. The series was filmed here. One of its revelations is the diversity of religious practice in this city. By learning about our neighbors, we may better understand our own traditions through comparison, and appreciate how the culture of Indianapolis is composed of related, yet distinct elements.

—David J. Bodenhamer, Director

## VIDEO TO PREMIERE AT WORKSHOP

On March 31, The Polis Center will host a workshop to premiere *Religion as a Window on Culture*, a six-part video documentary that explores faith in Indianapolis. The videos, designed to be used by congregations with adult or youth study groups, are supported by a 36-page Leader's Guide.

The workshop will feature an introduction to the project, followed by the viewing of one of the episodes. Participants will then join small groups facilitated by members of The Polis Center's advisory committee. The workshop will conclude with a full group discussion of how the videos may be used in congregations.

The workshop will be held at the Fatima Retreat House, at 5353 E. 56th Street in Indianapolis. It will be

offered in two identical sessions: 9:00 a.m. to noon, and 1:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. There is no charge for participants. Refreshments will be served.

If you wish to attend, please make arrangements by March 23, by calling The Polis Center at (317) 274-2455.

## THE MAKING OF RELIGION AS A WINDOW ON CULTURE

Elaine Selmier spent 16 years with NBC, working on television productions in Burbank and New York, but overseeing the shooting and post-production of *Religion as a Window on Culture* was her first time as a field producer. Selmier is director of production planning with Nineteenth Star Productions, an Indianapolis-based company that has produced programming for The Discovery Channel, The Learning Channel, and PBS.

How else was this production different? Well, she said with a laugh, "most of the shooting happened on Sunday." The really big difference, Selmier said, was the time frame. "We started shooting in September '96 and didn't wrap up until December '97. We went into it knowing that we would have to shoot at least a year, because of the various holy days. We didn't try to stage anything because we wanted to capture the spontaneity of people. We were really focused, because we shot to the themes, basically."

The six-part video series evolved from a need expressed by members of the IUPUI Department of Religious Studies, who wanted something to illustrate themes being addressed in a new course called "Religion as a Window on Culture."

At the same time, The Polis Center was seeking an appropriate project for the "Understanding Religion" component of its Project on Religion and Urban Culture. Lilly Endowment awarded The Polis Center a grant to fund the video project. Taped entirely in Indianapolis, the videos portray houses of worship, religious rituals and services, public observances, and moments of private devotion. The videos feature expert commentary, but such scholars as University of Chicago Professor Martin E. Marty, to explain the traditions being portrayed.

Linda-Marie Delloff, former editor of *Christian Century* and a staff consultant to Polis, developed a concept script for the series, following discussions with religion faculty at IUPUI, local congregations, and others. Rather than focus on particular religions, the video would examine four themes common to most religions: Sacred Space, Sacred Time, Sacred Memory, and Sacred Journey.

"Linda-Marie Delloff prepared a narrative script—what we call a treatment," said Selmier. "Only this was much more detailed than most treatments. We sat down with people from The Polis Center, and they suggested specific images, and sites that would work to illustrate the themes. Then we brought in an experienced scriptwriter—who also had a master of divinity degree. Essentially he wrote the narrative voiceover."

Generally there were only the cameraman and the producer present on a shoot, so it wasn't terribly disruptive, Selmier said. "Many people I imagine didn't even know we were there."

"Ten years ago we couldn't have done this, but the technology has advanced so far that basically you can shoot in available light in most situations. The video is fed into a computer and digitized, and then we can manipulate it. We can lay out scenes and see how they play, and it's easy to rearrange them in any order. The system was perfect for a project like this, where bits and pieces were coming into the studio over a long period of time. We could work on it as it was taking shape. All the edits were done in the computer. Not until we were ready to make the final cut did we go back to the master tape."

Draft versions of the videos were shown to Polis Center staff, and others involved in the project, for their comments and suggestions. Even as they observed with a critical eye, many of the viewers found themselves personally engaged.

Maria Blake, community relations representative for the Indianapolis-Marion County Public Libraries, is coordinator of the religious education team at Holy Angels Roman Catholic Church, and president of the Archdiocesan Liturgical Council. She serves on the advisory board of the Project on Religion and

## Urban Culture.

"The video helped me to understand the Jewish tradition in particular," said Blake, "because it showed the diversity within that tradition, which is just as it is in my own Catholic faith. We have the traditional, the very conservative, the middle of the road, and the more liberal. They have the same range of expression in the Jewish faith as well.

"There is no one way to express belief in the sacred," said Blake. "People need to find what feeds their soul. For some people, this comes out of a deeply rooted cultural tradition. For other people, it's very possible to be moved by the ritual of a tradition that is no one's own.

"I was able to find joy in the more evangelical expressions, such as that shown at Grace Apostolic Church. The segment shows preaching; it shows people being filled with the spirit. Just hearing the testimony of the people in a Bible study group about what the scripture means to them reinforces my own belief."

Rabbi Sandy Sasso, of Temple Beth-El Zedeck, is featured in the video as a commentator. "It was wonderful to give voice to my particular tradition and the role it plays in the life of Indianapolis, but also to share with people of other traditions," said Sasso. "Watching the video, you get a sense of the common desire to punctuate our ordinary lives with moments and places of sanctity. We all have places that we call sacred. We all mark times in our life cycle as holy."

Sasso said the video displays both our diversity and unity. "I don't think Indianapolis is commonly understood as being so diverse," she said. "Religious diversity is vital because it makes for a much richer and more colorful community. We learn from each other's traditions. At the same time, the video shows how we are bound together in a common quest for meaning and purpose in life."

Like others involved in making the video, Elaine Selmier found herself engaged not only professionally, but personally. "I thought I was pretty savvy about religion," she said, "but I learned a lot working on this project. I had an impression of Indianapolis as pretty much an end of the road Christian area. What we found was that almost every faith is represented here: Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam. It was really amazing to me to have access to the different faiths, and to be able to capture these observances on video. Some of the images are just so stunning."

Selmier said that working on the video led her to reconsider her own faith. "I think back to something that Professor Martin Marty said. People who learn more about other people's faith are really learning something about their own. The experience has identified for me what my beliefs are, and has shown me that we are more similar in what we believe than different.

"I think the video is going to surprise people. You come away with a sense that we're all looking for the same thing. That people have a fundamental belief in something bigger than they are, and feel a real yearning to pursue the search."