

United Arab Emirates bills itself as interfaith leader

The UAE, a financial powerhouse and growing power in the Arab world, is committed to showing Western allies that all are welcome to worship there.

by [Taylor Luck](#) in the [July 17, 2019](#) issue

(The Christian Science Monitor) Indian women place candles at an outdoor grotto of the Virgin Mary as couples from Uganda and Nigeria pour into the nearby chapel. Arab Chaldeans, Maronites, and Latin Catholics laugh together as they enter an Arabic-language mass. Egyptian and Sudanese families gather next door at the Coptic church, and English expatriates head into the Anglican church. Filipinos line up for mashed purple yam cakes and *polvorón* shortbread at an outdoor bake sale in the church courtyard, with the Islamic call to prayer from the neighboring Jesus Son of Mariam Mosque ringing out overhead.

This is not an international festival; it's a Sunday in Abu Dhabi, capital of the United Arab Emirates.

A financial powerhouse and growing diplomatic and military power in the Arab world, the UAE is also billing itself as an interfaith leader. It declared 2019 to be a national "year of tolerance," with a visit by Pope Francis in Abu Dhabi in February—the first papal visit to the Gulf.

As the UAE emerges as a leader in the region, its government is committed to showing its Western allies that Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Jews are all welcome to worship on Emirati soil.

But even while this oil-rich country's rulers promote harmony, the UAE's laws strictly forbid seeking to convert Muslims or publicly displaying crosses. Saudi Arabia, its closest ally, has banned the building of churches or temples.

The UAE's history with non-Muslim faiths is part of the story of its rise from poverty to a global economic power. Christianity, Hinduism, and Sikhism all had communities here before the Emirates gained independence and entered the United Nations in 1971. The communities grew in size as the UAE's oil industry absorbed influxes of expatriate engineers, administrators, and oil rig workers.

When oil was discovered here in 1958, decades before petrodollars filled their coffers, the preindependence Emirates were served by few schools or basic medical facilities. Churches and foreign missionaries helped the UAE to modernize.

In 1960, American Christian missionaries established the Oasis Hospital in the town of Al Ain. They served the ruling families and addressed prenatal and neonatal health in the Emirates, cutting infant mortality rates from 50 percent to 5 percent within a few years. The social outreach was noticed by the ruling families.

"The government here is grateful to Christians, as Christians contributed to the development of the country and have proven to be trustworthy," said Gandalf Wild, vice secretary of the Apostolic Vicar of Southern Arabia, based in Abu Dhabi.

As the UAE became a global economic hub, its expatriate community exploded to some 8 million, with workers from across Asia, Africa, North America, and Europe now outnumbering Emiratis four to one. In Dubai there are more than 40 churches, a large Sikh temple, a Buddhist temple, and two Hindu temples, and several informal Jewish prayer groups meet in rented spaces. A cornerstone for a new Hindu temple was laid in Abu Dhabi in April.

At St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Abu Dhabi, men and women from the Philippines, India, Uganda, and elsewhere have gathered for Bible study, a large wooden cross hanging above.

"We come from all over the world and speak different languages, but we are united in our love for our Lord," said Lawrence, a student.

In Bur Dubai, Hindu shipyard porters and CEOs pray at shrines for Shiva and Krishna. In the Sikh temple, a trio of men plays a trancelike *kirtan* song on the stringed *dilruba* and drums. Linking the two temples is a small, open-air kitchen where Sikhs provide small meals of pilaf and lentils to Hindus, Sikhs, and other visitors.

“We pray at the temple each day; we put up lights for Diwali,” said Priya, an Indian national who has lived in the UAE for ten years. “It is like we are back home, but we get to share it with others who have no idea of our religion.”

A small, street-level shop next to the Hindu and Sikh temples offers worshipers strings of flower necklaces and a counter of ready-made plates of bananas, apples, oranges, milk, and sweets to offer at the shrines. The owner, Ahmed Mohammed, is a Shi’ite Muslim. Originally from Iran, he sees no contradiction in running a store catering to his neighbors and friends of 25 years.

“We all come from different places, but we are all one people here in Dubai,” he said as he sold a *prasadam* plate to an Indian couple. “We support one another and help one another.”

But to conform with Islamic norms, faith groups also face limits.

Under Emirati law and a long-standing unspoken arrangement with the ruling family, Christian, Hindu, and Sikh religious groups do not proselytize or attempt to convert Muslims—a criminal act in the UAE. Apostasy by Muslims is punishable by death under the law, although there is no known legal case or prosecution in the UAE’s history.

Due to Islam’s ban against idolatry, Hindu temples were previously required to place images, rather than physical idols, in their shrines.

Human rights watchdogs say religious freedoms for non-Muslims in the UAE are by and large respected. A law bans discrimination on the basis of religion, and the government does not require faith groups to register or be licensed.

The key, church and temple leaders say, is “no politics.” Foreign workers and expatriates refrain from discussing or criticizing Emirati laws, policies, or the ruling families in public. Among the various faith groups, some leaders say they are happy to keep it this way.

But if the world’s religions are welcome, Emirati authorities have been less lenient with variations from the state-sponsored version of Sunni Islam, human rights advocates say.

“There is no room whatsoever for any interpretation of Islam in the UAE other than their own,” said Hiba Zayadin, UAE researcher at Human Rights Watch. “As soon as

you are out of step or criticize the state's definition of moderate Islam, you are in trouble."

Wary of the Muslim Brotherhood, which challenges the Gulf monarchies' grip on power, the UAE has jailed Brotherhood sympathizers as terrorists and discourages various strands of Sunni and Shi'a Islam from holding public displays of worship.

In 2017, to promote the UAE's interfaith outreach at home and across the region, the Emirates created the world's first Ministry of Tolerance. It is headed by Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak, a member of the ruling family.

"We have a history of living alongside the other and respecting the other, and we don't want to take this for granted," Nahyan said. "We have to protect future generations from intolerance."

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