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E-cards help minority faiths feel connected

Holiday greetings now a click away for many religions

By Ofelia Casillas

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When the Zoroastrian new year holiday comes around, Roxana Mehta can't just buy a Navroz card at the corner drugstore to mark the occasion.

But since mainstream Web sites have begun offering electronic greeting cards to members of minority faiths, the 28-year-old Naperville consultant has a way to share the holiday with family members scattered worldwide--even if she spends the day privately celebrating at her work desk.

"Our holidays are not ones that everyone knows about. Zoroastrians wake up, know it's Navroz and go to work," said Mehta, who has sent 15 and received 40 Zoroastrian e-cards this year. "Getting e-cards that day helps you celebrate and raises your spirits."

In the last couple of years, user feedback has led sites such as Amazon.com and Bluemountain.com to create electronic cards for smaller religious groups such as the Zoroastrian, Jain and Bahai faiths.

Before that, followers had to create their own e-cards, buy imported paper cards in bulk or at specialty shops, or send cards from sites specifically targeting them.

Every year, an average of 17,000 Zoroastrian and 57,800 Bahai cards are sent out on Bluemountain.com. And although those numbers pale in comparison with the 943,000 Christian and 84,000 Jewish everyday cards sent (not including those for major holidays such as Hanukkah and Christmas), the site's operators say they are responding to a real need.

"We try and approach these things somewhat democratically," said Charlie Fink, president of the Americangreetings.com network that includes Bluemountain.com and Egreetings.com. "It's an aspect of a larger business that tries, in a selection of 8,000 greetings, to target every religion and every race."

Tracking world trends

Yahoo's 25 offices around the world track growing trends and religions to help the company decide which greetings to add, said Lisa Pollock, company director of messaging products.

"We are always updating the sites," Pollock said. "As users' tastes change, so will the content."

For followers of Jainism, a faith native to India that teaches strict nonviolence, cards are offered on Yahoo for the birth of Jain founder Mahavir Jayanti. But choices are lacking for every other holiday, including a meditation festival in August.

"It would be nice if we had more variety. But I also understand. When I even tell people I'm Jain, I'm trying to educate them about what it is because sometimes they've never heard of it. It is a minority religion," said Shama Khandwala, 24, a physical therapist who lives in Elk Grove Village. "Just like you have cards for Christmas, it would be nice if there were cards to

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celebrate the different holidays of Jainism."

There are 3 million to 4 million Jains in India and perhaps 4,000 in the Chicago area.

Even though the quantity of cards offered to the larger Christian population far outnumber those for smaller faiths, senders say the existence of the cards promotes the feeling that they are a united minority.

And if they don't find what they want, they can turn to specialty sites such as [Zubin.com](#), a Zoroastrian site where all-purpose cards have images of the Fravashi, a guardian spirit, and Zarathustra, the faith's founder.

Zubin M*****, 35, a technology consultant and network engineer in Minneapolis, started creating Zoroastrian cards three years ago in response to his mother's complaints that there weren't any. Now, every new year celebration in March, up to 3,000 cards are sent from his site, he said.

M***** said he welcomes the bigger sites, with more features than his personal Web page, because they offer more options to Zoroastrians.

Small, but personalized

"I think it's great because more people know about Yahoo and Bluemountain.com than they know about me. Mine is a personal site," he said. "Those cards are not as personalized; mine are more intimate to the community because I have an inside look."

Originating in ancient Persia, the Zoroastrian faith is one of the oldest and smallest monotheistic religions, with members estimated to number between 200,000 and 250,000 worldwide and about 700 in the Chicago area. Followers believe in one god; good thoughts, words and deeds; and in choosing the right path, practitioners say.

Ruhiyyih Bagley, 32, meetings coordinator for the Bahai National Center in Evanston, has sent and received the religious e-cards and feels that as Web sites cater to Bahais, the group becomes more visible to the larger community.

Bahais, who believe in one god, unity among people and an annual period of fasting, are estimated to number more than 2,000 in Chicago and 5 million worldwide. The faith originated in Iran in the 19th Century.

"Having more access to e-cards would be a direct [indication] of the Bahai faith emerging from obscurity," Bagley said. "It would bring some people closer together to know they could send cards more often."

Rev. Stanley Davis, executive director for the Chicago-Illinois region of the National Conference for Community and Justice, a group that promotes interfaith awareness, said the e-cards reflect the ever-changing religious identity of the U.S.

"It can only help to further interfaith understanding," Davis said. "It gives recognition and validation to the fact that these are legitimate religious expressions that have sometimes been around for centuries."

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