



MAKE A SPLASH

Xerox Color. It makes business sense.
Business color that's innovative,
reliable and affordable.
Now that's brilliant!

SPLASH IT

XEROX

Technology | Document Management | Consulting Services

BusinessWeek online

Close Window

JANUARY 15, 2007

BOOK ADAPTATION

They're Muslims, And Yankees, Too

*Muslims in America represent almost every variety of Islamic thought and experience. The heavily secular and prosperous Iranian community in Southern California has little in common with orthodox Yemeni laborers near Detroit. College-educated white converts whose interest in New Age concepts leads them to the spiritual Sufi branch of Islam do not resemble poor black prison inmates who embrace Muslim beliefs behind bars as a source of discipline and solace. Indeed, as Business Week Assistant Managing Editor Paul M. Barrett explains in his new book, *American Islam*, the U.S. can be seen as a vast experiment in how Islam can adapt to the West.*

Business is good these days at *The Arab American News*. The bilingual weekly newspaper in Dearborn, Mich., bulges with dispatches on strife in the Middle East. Its columnists bristle over what they see as America's many misdeeds in the region. And, boosted by readers' anxiety over bloodshed in Iraq, Gaza, and Lebanon, circulation has risen 60% over the past year, to 36,000, says Osama Siblani, the publisher and editor-in-chief. More advertisers have come with the growing readership, and among employers buying substantial help-wanted ads is the U.S. Homeland Security Dept., which desperately needs Arabic linguists. A fierce critic of American foreign policy, Siblani acknowledges the irony of his profiting from the U.S. security establishment. "It seems like the niche we have is working for us," he deadpans.

Such incongruities permeate Muslim lives in Dearborn, where auto factory jobs have drawn Arab immigrants since the 1920s, making the gritty Detroit suburb the unofficial capital of Arab America. Muslims there and around the country are the objects of suspicion and in some cases prejudice, especially since the attacks of September 11, 2001. But as a group, they offer a model of assimilation and material success. An astounding 59% of Muslim adults in the U.S. have a college degree, compared with only 28% of all American adults. Surveys show that median family income among America's Muslims exceeds the national figure of \$55,800. And four out of five eligible Muslims are registered to vote, slightly higher than the overall rate.

The duality of Muslim-American life often surfaces in the tension between allegiance to an adopted land and to causes back in the old country that most Americans view as dangerous. For example, in addition to running his newspaper, Siblani relishes his role as a leader of the Dearborn-based Arab American Political Action Committee. The group's endorsement has been avidly sought by candidates of both parties running for everything from Michigan county judgeships to the White House. But during last summer's clash between Israel and Hezbollah, Siblani and some fellow Lebanese immigrants made no secret--at rallies and in statements to the media--of their sympathy for Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed Lebanese militia and political movement.

Jewish leaders attacked Siblani and his allies for supporting an organization committed to Israel's destruction and considered terrorist in nature by the U.S. government. And during the fall election season, a number of state and national politicians who normally woo the Detroit area's large Arab-American constituency steered clear, at least in public. This infuriates Siblani, who insists that his main concern last summer was pressuring Washington to seek a swift cease-fire in Lebanon.

Siblani, a pro-business, anti-abortion Republican who drives a sleek black Mercedes and lives in a comfortable house complete with white pillars in front, helped organize Arab American support for George W. Bush in 2000. But the President's "war on terror" after 9/11 left him feeling that his adopted country had turned against Muslims. He abandoned Bush in 2004 and publicly branded the current administration the "Taliban in Washington."

Siblani reflects the complexity of American Islam, an intricate mixture of creeds and cultures: immigrant and native-born, devout and secular, moderate and radical. By comparison, most immigrant Muslims in such countries as France, England, and Spain have remained poorer, less well educated, and more marginalized. Europeans encouraged Muslim immigration as a source of menial labor, but until recently did little to integrate workers as citizens. And more generous welfare benefits in Europe allow Muslims and other immigrants to live indefinitely on the periphery of society. The American combination of a comparatively modest social safety net with greater economic opportunity appears to have drawn Muslims willing to adjust to new customs and acquire education needed for good jobs. So the ideologically motivated violence that has erupted in Muslim enclaves in Western Europe so far hasn't surfaced from within the U.S.

What follows are glimpses into the lives of four successful American Muslims. They suggest both the variety and flux within Islam in this country.

THE PUBLISHER

Osama Siblani arrived in Detroit from Lebanon in 1976 at the age of 21. He had \$180 in his pocket and little else. Within days he held three jobs: parking cars, pumping gas, and delivering pizza. In the space of four years he earned an engineering degree at the University of Detroit and landed a high-paying post with an export company selling equipment to Middle Eastern builders. He lived well in the Detroit suburbs and fixed up his mother's house in a village near Beirut, the same house where he was raised. "This is the American dream," he says. "It doesn't matter who you are or whether you have anything to start. You can make something of yourself."

But the trajectory of Siblani's life shifted in June, 1982, when Israel invaded Lebanon, seeking to crush the Palestine Liberation Organization and install a friendly Christian government in Beirut. An Israeli aerial bomb destroyed his mother's house. She and other family members survived unhurt, but the dwelling was left in cinders. The furniture, washer-dryer, and television Siblani had bought his mother were ruined. "My letters from lovers I had when I was in school, my pictures. I don't have any pictures from when I was little," he said. "Who burned it? Israeli jets."

His admiration for Hezbollah stems from the movement's resistance to Israel and its provision of social services to the poor, not from any enthusiasm for

Hezbollah's goal of establishing an Islamic theocracy. Siblani, who rarely attends mosque, favors secular democracy. Determined to provide an alternative to what he saw as the pro-Israeli perspective of the American media, he quit his export job and started *The Arab American News* in 1984.

He lacked any journalism experience and had to use savings and credit cards to finance the venture. Arabic typesetting equipment wasn't available in the Detroit area, so he shipped some in from England and Saudi Arabia. The newspaper quickly gained notice among Arab immigrants, but Siblani's enthusiasm for growth led to costs outstripping revenue. By 1994, his credit cards tapped out, the publisher declared personal bankruptcy, losing his home and car.

Gradually, he pieced things back together, and today, he says, the paper has achieved financial stability. The real payoff for Siblani is that he can vent his plentiful political opinions via a First Amendment-protected business--something he acknowledges isn't possible in most Arab countries. "I would never pretend that I am a journalist out to tell the story without feelings, without bias," he says. "I am a journalist on a mission. I want to tell my story. I don't want somebody else to come and tell it."

THE LAWYER

Nazish Agha recognizes that many Americans would be surprised that an observant Muslim woman can work comfortably at a tony New York law firm, let alone one with a name like Cadwalader, Wickersham & Taft. Many Muslims, even in this country, would similarly be surprised--and disapproving. Agha is used to it. As an undergraduate at Yale University in the early 1990s, she encountered male Muslim classmates who savagely criticized her friendships with non-Muslims and failure to wear hijab, the traditional Muslim head covering. "I had a Muslim guy tell me I was a lost cause," she recalls. By contrast, in the high-end law world, her religion has seemed a nonissue. "People look at the work you do," she explains.

Agha, who is in her mid-30s, wears subdued business suits and has long wavy chestnut-brown hair. She came to America from India with her family as a small child. An observant Shiite Muslim, she nevertheless describes her path to accomplishment as defined by "the typical Protestant work ethic." Public school teachers in suburban New Jersey persuaded her parents to send her to Groton, the quintessential New England prep school, where she took French and Latin. Yale followed and then law school at Georgetown University. Today she has a 32nd-floor office with a sweeping view of New York Harbor and the Statue of Liberty. She helps engineer corporate mergers and acquisitions as an associate with Cadwalader, which boasts a Wall Street practice dating from the 1790s. On top of working long hours for paying clients, Agha has offered pro bono counsel to fledgling artistic groups and those protecting abused women.

She explains that opinions among American Muslims vary widely on whether women should work outside the home and on what sorts of jobs they ought to hold. Law, in particular, seems like an appropriate pursuit, she says, pointing to the Islamic tradition in which being "a jurist is considered a quite noble profession." For more than a millennium, Muslim legal scholars have imparted influential interpretations of the *Quran* and the sayings of the prophet Muhammad. During medieval times, some of these scholars were women, although they are mostly forgotten today. Agha sees her practice of corporate law as growing from this jurisprudential heritage: "It is about relationships and fairness--between human beings, between industry and government, and between contracting parties."

THE BAKER

Idris Abdul Wasi runs Abu's Homestyle Bakery just down the street from Masjid At-Taqwa, a well-known house of worship in the tough Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, N.Y. One of the mosque's respected elders, Wasi does a brisk business in sweet-potato and bean pies, as well as heavy German chocolate cake. Wasi is African American, a convert to Islam but not a follower of Louis Farrakhan. In recent years, Farrakhan's idiosyncratic Nation of Islam has dwindled in prominence, as the majority of black Muslims have switched their allegiance to increasingly independent African-American and nonblack imams.

A native New Yorker, Wasi sang in the choir at Bushwick Methodist Church as a boy, but he says that "the whole Trinity thing never really penetrated my heart or my head." This is a common complaint from American converts to Islam, both black and white: that they couldn't make sense of the idea that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are all parts of one God. Wasi, now in his early 50s, saw Islam as a more logical approach to monotheism: one deity, pure and simple. He also appreciated what he saw as Islam's more clear-cut rules. "Coming up a child of the '70s, I was into the intoxicants, the lifestyle," he explains. His father, a longshoreman, drank himself to an early death. Wasi's mother was remarried to a Muslim and converted. Wasi's two younger brothers embraced Islam as well. In 1976, while a junior at John Jay College on Manhattan's West Side, Wasi followed suit. The only college graduate in his generation of his extended family, he has six children, all raised as Muslims. Not one drinks or smokes, he says.

About three years ago, when Wasi fell ill for a time, his oldest son, also named Idris, left the Web development firm he ran and came to work at the bakery. The younger Idris, though a practicing Muslim, decided that the family business, which serves a mostly black, non-Muslim clientele, would benefit if the religious motif were slightly toned down. "Abu," which means father in Arabic, remained in the shop's name, but the younger Idris inserted "Homestyle." He removed a sign declaring, "There is no god except Allah." But the bakery still distributes pamphlets proselytizing Islam and doesn't sell Christmas cookies in December. "It may hurt business, but we have certain values," the younger Idris, 35, says.

African-American Islam began with Muslim slaves brought from West Africa. But Christian slave owners suppressed Muslim belief and ritual, and African-American Islam faded. In the early twentieth century, black fraternal associations reintroduced Islamic themes to assert an independent identity in a still hostile white society. That tradition continues today, lending black Islam a rebelliousness to which the elder Wasi sometimes gives voice.

"There are elements in the media and society who are clearly enemies to Islam," he asserts. "They'll do anything they possibly can to turn the society against Muslims." He enjoys talking about business and has an inventive theory about one force generating the assault against Islam. He thinks manufacturers of cigarettes and alcohol have grown alarmed over the religion's ability to steer African Americans and others away from smoking and drinking. The companies "are not going to sit back and allow that to happen," he says, and they could be the ones influencing the media to depict Islam unfavorably. He has no proof but still says: "It's almost as if, whenever there's a concerted effort to do something positive to uplift ourselves, there's this [opposing] effort to divert us."

THE EXECUTIVE

Monem Salam aims for understatement: a charcoal-gray, buttoned-down look, soft voice, and modest demeanor. But when pressed, he admits he has achieved a pretty impressive formula for combining spiritual and material interests. The 34-year-old Pakistani immigrant oversees Islamic investing for Saturna Capital Corp., a Bellingham (Wash.) firm offering Muslims mutual funds that hew to the strictures of *Shariah*, or traditional Islamic law. With \$400 million in client money, Saturna's two Islamic stock funds are tiny by industry standards. But historically they have reported solid results. For 2006, the more conservative stock fund reported a 22% return; the more aggressive growth fund, 15%. And the mere existence of the funds and a handful of rivals are a source of pride among American Muslims, including many who don't always observe the *Shariah's* prohibitions.

Salam moved to Saturna in 2003, leaving behind a money manager's job in Dallas with Morgan Stanley ([MS](#)). Nowadays he and his wife and three young children live in Bellingham, the picturesque harbor town where Saturna has its 25-person office. Salam says he is "more at peace, doing something to help Muslims and doing it in a way [with which] God would be happy."

With guidance from Islamic scholars, Salam helps shape a portfolio that excludes companies that deal primarily in alcohol, pork, or pornography. There are no gambling stocks and, most challenging, no equity in banks, because Islamic law bans the imposition or payment of interest as a form of usury. Small impurities are permitted: The funds can own airline stocks, even though flight attendants serve liquor. Lately the funds have favored technology and telecommunications. The fact that companies borrow money doesn't preclude Salam from buying their shares, but he monitors the ratio of debt to market capitalization and avoids corporations that leverage to the hilt. "You have to allow some leeway, or you can't do anything," he tells audiences at Muslim investing seminars around the country. Only a small minority of American Muslims, perhaps 15% by Salam's estimate, even attempt to follow *Shariah* restrictions in all of their financial dealings. His goal is to make that percentage grow.

In his spare time, Salam takes flying lessons. His father, a retired commercial pilot, flew Boeing 747s for airlines based in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Salam knows that after 9/11 a Muslim showing up at an American flight school could suggest something ominous to some people. That's part of the reason he's doing it: to show that Muslims can fly planes as innocuously as other Americans. Even as he sells mutual funds with an Islamic twist, he hopes his life demonstrates that "being an American Muslim is not an oxymoron." So far his flight training has gone smoothly, and Salam, whose surname means "peace" in Arabic, expects to get his pilot's license in the spring.

Adapted from *American Islam: The Struggle for the Soul of a Religion*, by Paul M. Barrett, published on Jan. 2, 2007, by Farrar, Straus & Giroux. Copyright 2007 by Paul M. Barrett

[Advertising](#) | [Special Sections](#) | [MarketPlace](#) | [Knowledge Centers](#)

Xerox Color. It makes business sense.

[Terms of Use](#) | [Privacy Notice](#) | [Ethics Code](#) | [Contact Us](#)

The McGraw-Hill Companies

Copyright 2000- 2007 by The McGraw-Hill Companies Inc.
All rights reserved.