

The Halal Melting Pot

Why Dearborn isn't Paris.

AMERICAN ISLAM: THE STRUGGLE FOR THE SOUL OF A RELIGION

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n Christmas Eve 2006, a newly elected congressman named Keith Ellison gave a simple affirmation of faith before a crowd of Muslim Americans. Ellison promised that on January 4, 2007, he would place his hand on the Koran to take his oath of office. "You can't back down. You can't chicken out. You can't be afraid," he admonished. "You got to have faith in Allah, and you've got to stand up and be a real Muslim." Although Ellison now represents Minnesota's 5th District, he had traveled to Dearborn, Michigan, to deliver his message. It made sense: Located a few miles outside Detroit, for the last 100 years Dearborn has been the focal point for America's growing Muslim community; Ellison himself was born nearby. Along Warren Avenue, Dearborn's central artery, Islamic community centers are just a few short steps from Burger Kings. Thrilled that after a century of co-existence within American society a Muslim had finally achieved national office, Ellison's rapt audience greeted his speech with enthusiastic affirmations of the greatness of God.

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When it became known that he would swear his oath on a Koran, one of Ellison's future colleagues, Virginia Republican Virgil Goode, raised strenuous objections. Joined by Dennis Prager, a conservative pundit appointed by President George W. Bush to the board of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council, Goode warned that Ellison's actions represented a subtle attack on Western civilization. "I fear that in the next century we will have many more Muslims in the United States if we do not adopt the strict immigration policies that I believe are necessary to preserve the values and beliefs traditional to the United States of America and to prevent our resources from being swamped," Goode wrote in a letter to his constituents. Not to be outdone, Prager compared the Koran to *Mein Kampf*. A typically slow pre-Christmas news cycle suddenly featured a religious-political controversy. Muslim organizations denounced Goode and Prager as a pair of bigots. Both refused to back down.

Prager can be dismissed as an opportunistic pundit ginning up a controversy. Goode, however, is a more complicated story. He had nothing to gain politically—and much to lose—by igniting an ugly public fury against his colleague's religious tradition. Even the *de facto*

leader of the Virginia Republican Party, the longtime senator John Warner, rebuked Goode. The more likely explanation is that Goode sincerely believes the arrival of Muslims into the American mainstream is a threatening dislocation. (Never mind that Ellison's own background—born in Detroit, converted to Islam in college—undercuts Goode's warnings.)

Ellison had one final message for his Dearborn audience, one that spoke directly to Goode's intolerance. "Muslims, you're up to bat right now," Ellison said. "How do you know that you were not brought right here to this place to learn how to make this world better?" It is a message at the heart of American Islam, and one that, after the attacks of September 11, Muslim America's neighbors largely do not believe it capable of answering. What has been so bewildering, and sadly revealing, is that five years after the attacks, there has been such little study of who the Muslim next door actually is—a vacuum filled by the fear and ignorance displayed by people like Virgil Goode. It's a shame. For, in fact, a study of Muslim America actually points out how the pluralism that makes America what it is protects the country against the long-term aspirations of Osama bin Laden—and how giving in to Islamophobic demagoguery is exactly what al Qaeda wants.

Does the presence of illiberal Islam inside America threaten the country? To what extent do these currents augur a Europe-style clash of civilizations?

The tension between American and Islamic identities is at the heart of *American Islam: The Struggle for the Soul of a Religion*. Journalist Paul Barrett, a *BusinessWeek* editor who began writing about Islam while at the *Wall Street Journal*, takes readers deep inside Muslim America, revealing the struggles of identity that characterize this diverse community, particularly in an age of constant fear over the next *jihadi* attack. He devotes each chapter to a particular character—a liberal theologian, a civil-rights activist, academics, journalists, Web designers—and uses them to highlight a distinct issue. Barrett’s reporting is excellent. But his failure to take his analysis as deep as his journalism makes the book feel, in significant ways, less than the sum of its parts.

American Islam offers two central contentions. First, that the American Muslim community is itself a glorious mosaic—in addition to the expected imams and political figures, one of the book’s main characters, for example, is a white hippie who found Islam on the way to scoring marijuana. Second, the vast, moderate majority of American Muslims have to battle some of the strident versions of their faith in many of their major religious institutions. At times, Barrett seems to be saying that proximity to the liberalism of America itself has a moderating effect on Islam. The struggles resulting from this tension have consequences that extend far outside the mosque. A Sufi mystic sheikh remarks (before September 11), “I want Muslims in America to know that if we continue with the Wahhabi thinking, the Wahhabi ideology, we are going to a disastrous end... This is not a political stand; it is life or death.”

Some of Barrett’s characters are familiar. Asra Nomani is a former *Journal* colleague of Barrett’s and a distinguished journalist in her own right. Khaled Abou El Fadl is a liberal theologian at UCLA who famously conceded in a *Los Angeles Times* op-ed that Islam had some post-September 11 soul-searching to do—at great cost to his personal safety—and, as a result, has been profiled in untold newspapers and magazines. Osama Siblani, the longtime publisher of Dearborn’s *Arab-American News*, is a must-call source for any journalist exploring American Islam. But it is to Barrett’s credit that the stories presented here don’t feel retold. Instead, his talent is to showcase his characters as people and, in presenting their complex backgrounds, illuminate something about American Islam. For instance, Nomani’s fight for gender equity in her Morgantown, West Virginia, Islamic center is made all the more profound knowing that Daniel Pearl—the *Wall Street Journal* reporter murdered by Islamic fanatics in 2002 for being Jewish—was a close friend (Nomani, abandoned by her boyfriend while pregnant in Pakistan, even named her son in part after Pearl).

Yet the most important story Barrett tells is that of Abou El Fadl. A Kuwaiti-born theologian, he attended Al Azhar University, a Cairo-based seminary with vast

influence over Sunni Islam. After he came to the United States, he grew increasingly wary of the intellectual stridency of mainstream Sunni Islam, particularly its powerful Wahhabi variant emanating from Saudi Arabia. Contrary to Abou El Fadl's supple version of the faith, Wahhabism instructs that true enlightenment and fidelity are found in an emulation of the original, seventh-century blend of Islam; all other Islamic practices represent *jahiliya*, or pre-Islamic ignorance. Abou El Fadl identified and wrote about the intellectual dangers of Wahhabism for years and ended up marginalizing himself from important sources of Saudi-derived funding. He received anonymous death threats after penning his op-ed criticizing Wahhabism. His is a riveting and inspiring story of intellectual bravery.

Unfortunately, a reader comes away from most of the chapters in *American Islam* without a clear sense of what's at stake. Obviously, it would be preferable for Abou El Fadl's Islam to become dominant or for Nomani to fully integrate her mosque. But the fact that they're facing such an uphill struggle raises questions about Muslim America that Barrett never quite answers, or even acknowledges. Put bluntly, does the presence of illiberal or intolerant Islam inside America—which indeed does exist here, alongside Abou El Fadl and Nomani—threaten the country? To what degree do these currents augur a Europe-style descent into a homefront clash of civilizations? To speak in the mode of Virgil Goode, are there terrorists among us? For a book about American Islam to be unwilling to take on the concerns of the Goodes in our midst is a disappointing mistake. In fact, the answers to all these questions are available, and they amount to, simply: Do not fear your neighbors.

The trouble facing *American Islam* is precisely the trouble that, well, *doesn't* face American Islam. While Barrett is an energetic and skillful storyteller, the absence of Osama bin Laden in his book is a true disappointment. That's not to say that bin Laden holds sway over American Muslims, but rather that he doesn't. The key question is what this absence means.

A good place to start is with a man named Mohammed Sidique Khan. Khan was a 30-year-old social worker in the British Midlands who, in 2005, masterminded the London Underground plot, murdering more than 50 of his countrymen. Most significantly, he left behind one of the most important texts of the war on terrorism: A "martyrdom" videotape explaining his actions. It was a landmark of sorts—the first recorded instance of a *jihadi* swearing fealty to bin Laden in English.

What motivated Khan? In his own explanation, it was Great Britain's participation in a global crusade to suppress the believers. While Prime Minister Tony Blair strenuously insisted that the bombings had nothing to do with the

Iraq war, Khan's words undermined him. But Khan's rejection of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan only scratched the surface of his motivations. What was really at work was that a lower-middle-class Briton, with no previous attachment to *jihad*, had examined his alienation from his country and found the most compelling explanation for it to be the one put forward by bin Laden. In other words, Khan found that it was impossible to be both a Muslim and a Briton. As soon as he accepted that schema, his choice—the eternal or the fleeting?—was clear, as was his course of action.

Khan represents the success of bin Laden's broader strategy. The September 11 attacks were a galvanizing experience aimed less at the United States than at Muslims themselves. Building on its interpretation of the Soviet war in Afghanistan, al Qaeda seeks to draw the United States into strategic overreaction—using

military force in ways provocative to Muslims, such as occupying Iraq. In that manner, outraged Muslims around the world will begin to ask themselves: Why does the West act like this? A significant percentage of them, bin Laden hopes, will answer the question in the way that Khan did.

In short, bin Laden seeks what the Leninists used to call the heightening of contradictions, to force Western countries to shrink the psychic and political space of Muslims, especially within their own borders, until the threatened believers feel no choice but to violently resist. This has a practical benefit as well: After the strict security measures taken in many countries after September 11, it is a much sounder strategy to rely on "self-activated" *jihadis* who are citizens of Great Britain or America than it is to hope a new cell of operatives can infiltrate a Western nation. Over generations, if not centuries, of such a snowballing clash of civilizations, bin Laden hopes a global Muslim awakening will usher in a new Islamic age. (When those on the right warn about a new "caliphate," they have in mind a cruder version of this phenomenon.)

Already, bin Laden's approach shows many signs of working. Highlighted by the London and Madrid terrorist attacks, a tremendous upswing in violent Western-Islamic identity crises has begun to boil over in Europe. Counterterrorism experts estimate that hundreds, if not a few thousand, outraged Muslims have traveled from Europe to Iraq to fight the U.S. occupation. The Netherlands has seen the assassination of filmmaker Theo Van Gogh at the hands of an Islamic fanatic. Danish cartoons crudely depicting the Prophet Mohammed sparked

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often heated protests throughout Europe, as did infelicitous statements about Islam by Pope Benedict XVI. Not all of these actions can be understood as terrorism. But their vectors and motivations favor the unsettling expectation that the worst is yet to come.

It is against this backdrop that the story told in *American Islam* is most significant. The experiences of the individuals Barrett profiles demonstrate that, for all of their difficulties coming to terms with their American Muslim identity, all of them accept that both parts of that identity can be reconciled. This is not an experience limited to the dozen or so characters in the book. Only a handful of American Muslims have ever been convicted of associations with al Qaeda. Most of the mass roundups in the wake of September 11 and the Patriot Act have resulted in dismissed or reduced charges. In stark contrast to Europe, the proportion of radicalized Muslims in the United States is negligible. The stories told in *American Islam* show that bin Laden's strategy of dividing Muslims in the West from their home countries is not working in the United States. It is no small irony that in what the *jihadis* consider the source of evil in the world—the United States—their fellow Muslims reject bin Laden's analysis so completely.

Why is this? In short, America is protected from the homegrown-radical threat because of its peculiar ability to combine the cosmopolitan and the traditional. Throughout Europe, Muslims ghettoize to a depressingly great extent, allowing the poverty, alienation, and desperation of the ghetto to take on an identity-based cast. In America, however, Muslims may be one of the first immigrant groups *not* to live in ghettos. Of the largest concentrations of Muslim populations—cities like Chicago, New York, Houston, the suburbs of Washington, D. C., and Detroit—Muslims live in population clusters that are at least 50 percent white. Opportunities for social and economic advancement for European Muslims are minimal, with explosive unemployment rates outperforming those of non-Muslim citizens. In America, Muslim unemployment largely comports with demographic proportion in a given area, and Muslim education rates actually outperform almost every U.S. demographic. Finally, European Islam is overwhelmingly homogenous, befitting a given European nation's colonial history: British Muslims are mostly from the Indian subcontinent, while French Muslims are mostly North African. By contrast, American Muslims come from around the world and in turn live dispersed in different population clusters around the country. Dearborn may be the heart of Muslim America, but Dearborn Muslims come from all over the world. This heterodoxy makes it vastly more difficult for theological-political rigidity to occur in American Muslim communities—precisely the sort of rigidity bin Laden exploits.

But that's not the end of the story. For all the tension between secular and religious America, the domestic-religiosity divide is nothing compared with the outright hostility to public displays of religion across Europe. It is no accident that the Islamic Society of North America, one of the oldest and largest U.S. Muslim civil-society organizations, is located not in a blue-state redoubt of cosmopolitanism but in Plainfield, Indiana. Here the essential religious tolerance of Red America—not often appreciated by secular liberals—needs to be recognized. As one rising young leader in the U.S. Muslim community told me in 2005, “When I go out to Bush Country, it is true that, for some people, the way I pray is peculiar. But they don't think I'm hallucinating when I say, ‘It's prayer time.’” In Europe, by contrast, conspicuous religiosity is viewed as a political threat. Out of this fear of social balkanization, for instance, in 2003 the French banned Muslim women from wearing headscarves in public buildings.

In short, the festering social, political, and religious frustrations that make European Islam a potential growth area for al Qaeda are marginal in the United States. But to say that they are marginal is not to say that they cannot develop into identity-based violence. On a trip to Dearborn last summer, every Muslim I spoke with—from oncologists to imams—expressed extreme anxiety over Bush's definition of America's enemy as “Islamic fascists.” Increasingly, they feel the Bush Administration—from the Patriot Act to Guantánamo Bay to the Iraq war to the warrantless surveillance program—has increasingly made it harder to integrate American and Islamic identities. If the nation continues on this path—ironically, to the “Europeanization” of American Islam—it may find itself exacerbating, if not actually inventing, the problem it seeks to solve.

And this brings us back to Keith Ellison and Virgil Goode. In the age of *jihadi-ism*, Goode's bigotry can't be dismissed as merely ugly simple-mindedness. It is, without hyperbole, a security threat. What *American Islam* doesn't sufficiently explore is that America's identity-based defense against homegrown Islamic radicalism isn't impregnable. If the Virgil Goodes of this country succeed in stoking Islamophobic outrage, it is easy to see the next Mohammed Sidique Khan growing up in Brooklyn or Chicago or Falls Church, Virginia, and deciding, with awful consequences, that America and Islam are incompatible after all. ■