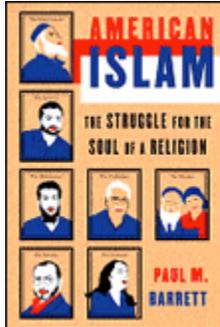




American Islam: The Struggle for the Soul of a Religion

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Introduction

JOANNE MYERS: I'm Joanne Myers, Director of Public Affairs Programs, and on behalf of the Carnegie Council I'd like to thank you all for joining us as we welcome Paul Barrett to discuss his book, [American Islam: The Struggle for the Soul of a Religion](#).

In the decade before the events of September 11th, Islam was one of the fastest-growing religions in North America. Mosques and Islamic schools were going up in every major American city. Muslim leaders, once a frustrated and marginal group, found themselves pursued by politicians and news media alike.

But this courtship would not last long. Although Muslims had been living in the United States since the early 1900s, and without provocation, on that fateful day everything changed. Most significantly is that in this post-9/11 world, one of the biggest challenges facing Muslims is how to overcome the frequent stereotyping which labels them as monolithic extremists bent on destroying the West.

This scenario is especially so for American Muslims, who see themselves as anything but monolithic. Although the data for Muslims living in America is imprecise, estimates suggest that there are between three and ten million practitioners nationwide. This group includes Asians, Arabs, and African-Americans. Therefore, to speak of them as one community obscures the significant differences in background and ideology that divide them.

In *American Islam*, our speaker this afternoon seeks to change our misperceptions. He does so by providing us with an intimate portrait of seven Muslim Americans who in his view offer portraits of conflicted identities and an intricate mixture of ideologies and cultures. From West Virginia to Northern Idaho and from Michigan to New York, these stories show the diversity that lie within the millions of Muslims who reside in the United States.

Paul Barrett was a reporter for the *Wall Street Journal* and is now an editor at *Business Week*, heading their investigative reporting unit. In the aftermath of September 11th, he became convinced that we needed to learn much more about Islam in our country. Accordingly, using his journalistic skills, he entered the world of his subjects to write a series of engaging profiles of American Muslims for the *Wall Street Journal*. His aim, he writes, "was simply to explore what for adherents of the Muslim faith is the meaning of a normal life at this turbulent moment in the history of the United States."

He asks: How do American Muslims, who represent a vast range of backgrounds and views—including

immigrants and native-born, black and white converts, whether well-integrated or alienated from the larger society—define themselves in a religious subculture torn between moderation and extremism? The answer, he found, lies within their individual stories.

While the tales told in *American Islam* represent only a microcosm of the larger worldwide community, it is important to note that they face the same religious, ethnic, and sectarian divides that one finds throughout the Muslim world.

Please join me in welcoming our guest today, Paul Barrett. We're delighted you are here. Thank you.

Remarks

PAUL BARRETT: Thanks very much for that very generous introduction, and thank you to all of you for coming to hear me speak. I am very grateful.

My book is, in fact, a collection of portraits. It is not a work of sociology or social science of any sort. My view is that we probably have a few too many generalizations about Muslims in this country and too little in the way of particular granular facts about Muslims in this country, and I am to provide what I think of as the beginning of what should be a continuing effort to understand our Muslim neighbors.

I thought I would start today with one of the main characters in the book and tell his story, with the aim of addressing the question of the degree to which Muslims are assimilated into American society. I think there is a great deal of concern and questioning about whether Muslims are marginalized and alienated from—and perhaps hostile to—American society; or, as I would argue, on balance, Muslims as a group are, in fact, impressively assimilated into American society, if you take into account the full body of information about them.

So let me start with a man named Osama Siblani. I'll start with where he was born. He came from Lebanon, where he was born in the mid-1950s into a poor family in a village near Beirut. He served briefly in the Lebanese National Army during the beginning of the civil war there, and then, as one of the more ambitious and talented sons in a large family—he had ten siblings—his parents scraped together money and sent him to Detroit to go to college, which is a story that has been going on with variations for many generations. As you probably know, in and around Detroit is basically the unofficial capital of Arab America. There actually have been people coming from Lebanon and Syria since the 1920s to that area, originally to work for Henry Ford in the main Ford auto plant there. And there are still Muslims coming from various parts of the Muslim world to put together pickup trucks in Dearborn, Michigan, outside Detroit.

Siblani demonstrated upon arriving a very typical course of impressive success. He held down a variety of menial jobs—delivering pizzas, parking cars, that kind of thing—while going to college at night. Obtained an engineering degree. Went to work for GM as a very junior entry-level employee. As he described it to me, he thought he would become president of GM in six-to-eight months; and when that didn't happen, he quit. Things were just moving too slowly for him.

He got work with an import-export business that primarily sent heating and air-conditioning equipment to the Middle East to contractors there. He flew all around the Middle East, and was extremely successful, particularly financially. By the time he was in his early thirties, he was very well-to-do and well off enough to rebuild his childhood home outside Beirut, where his mother still lived.

His life changed in 1982, when Israel invaded Lebanon, as part of that very complex series of events, where [the PLO](#) at that time was in southern Lebanon and Israel was determined to drive the PLO out and to install a friendly, presumably Christian, government in charge of Lebanon.

During the invasion, Osama Silbani's childhood home—the one for which he had bought a washer, dryer,

television, all kinds of modern appurtenances, for the first time, for his aged mother—was destroyed by an Israeli aerial bomb. I sincerely doubt that the pilot and bombardier were aiming for Mrs. Siblani, but nevertheless this is something that obviously struck home very severely.

He was frustrated at the way that the Israeli invasion, and the civil war generally, were depicted in the American media and felt that the media consistently favored Israel and presented the Arab cause in a very unfavorable light. Prompted by that reaction, he decided to drop his business career, take the money he had earned and money he could borrow, and start a newspaper from scratch, with absolutely no journalistic experience and no colleagues who had any journalistic experience. He had to go to London and Saudi Arabia to find Arabic typesetting equipment because none could be found in the Detroit area, even though it was a center of Arab population.

A couple of years later, he founded what is now known as [The Arab-American News](#), which is a bilingual English- and Arabic-language newspaper that comes in tabloid form. It presents the Arab brief. It is the Arab perspective on the world. As he says, he makes no pretense of being a balanced journalist in the American tradition. He is, as he describes himself, a biased journalist. He is there to argue the Arab cause, to explain the world through Arab eyes.

He has been very successful with this newspaper. Although it has had business difficulties from time to time, it is now quite well established and is one of the major institutions in the suburb of Dearborn, outside of Detroit.

Simultaneously, Siblani has become one of the most powerful local political power brokers in the Detroit area on behalf of the large Arab population there. He himself is a registered Republican, passionately anti-abortion, pro-business, and had voted for the most part for Republicans down through the years.

In 2000, he played a key role in organizing Arab support for [George W. Bush](#), who very aggressively sought out Arab and Muslim support by campaigning in mosques and Islamic centers and by basically explicitly saying "Muslims and Arabs are part of the American tapestry and I appeal to you for my vote." Siblani was critical in doing the logistical work to make sure that that word got out to the Arab community.

Exit polling showed that in 2000 Arab and Muslim voters swung very strongly to Bush, having actually been [Clinton](#) supporters in the prior two elections. In fact, it's possible to argue, I would say, that Muslim voters may have helped hand the presidency to Bush, because there's a very substantial Muslim population in south Florida. If, as many people view the election, as having turned on the Florida vote and turned on several hundred Florida votes—if that's the way you analyze that complicated election, with tens of thousands of Arab votes favoring Bush, you could view it as being an Arab victory, putting George Bush in the White House.

Now, since then, Siblani has grown very disillusioned with Bush, as have other Arabs and Muslims. But his political role and his role as this kind of quasi-journalist opinion shaper has grown no less significant.

In 2004, both the Republicans and the Democrats once again for every office, ranging from county, to circuit court judges, to the White House, sent their emissaries to his office, treating him extremely deferentially. In the course of reporting my book, I witnessed some of this and reported on it directly. I attended political rallies and political dinners where pretty much the entire Michigan congressional delegation would show up and pay deference to Osama Siblani the way they would to any major ward-type politician who has a bloc of votes that, if he doesn't control them exactly, he certainly has tremendous influence over them.

So here is this man who has a large house in the suburbs. By the way, he started out in Dearborn and then moved out to a fancier suburb further out from Detroit, in the classic American pattern. He drives a big Mercedes. His wife drives a fancy Lexus SUV. He is a Republican. He is deeply immersed in secular American politics. He has operated two businesses that have made him wealthy in two very different lines

of work. It would seem to me he represents everything that you would expect from an immigrant assimilation story.

At the same time, this is a man who is branded by some local publications, particularly Jewish publications in the Midwest, as an extremist. That stems from the fact that he openly supports [Hezbollah](#), an organization that our government, of course, brands as a terrorist organization, which first came to the awareness of most Americans back in the 1980s when there were several very celebrated hijackings and suicide bombings aimed at Americans. Since then, the interaction between Hezbollah and the United States may have tapered off, but, as you know, as recently as last summer, Hezbollah was responsible for sparking the huge conflict that resulted in the massive Israeli bombing of Lebanon.

You have a situation where a man, who not only sympathizes with but speaks on behalf of Hezbollah, is also someone whose political support is sought by all mainstream politicians of both parties. It would be very hard to imagine another such character at this moment in American politics and society who would have those two different aspects. I don't propose to rationalize that for you, to explain to you how that fits in, because it's quite the opposite; it doesn't fit into normal categories. Although it is comparable, if you pause and think about it for a minute, perhaps, to supporters in the 1970s, say, of [the IRA](#), of which there were quite a few people here in the New York area and Boston and elsewhere who supported what clearly could be viewed as a terrorist group but at the same time otherwise were involved in the mainstream of American life.

So I offer Siblani as an initial quick illustration how it is difficult to pigeonhole in many cases Muslim Americans, because their array of experiences and views frequently just doesn't line up—or at least at this point in our history doesn't line up—quite in our existing categories.

Having said all that, I don't think there is any question over whether Muslims in this country are well assimilated. They are. I would say that the most helpful understanding of someone like Osama Siblani, who I have come to know quite well, is that of course he is very assimilated: he is very well educated; he is very prosperous; he is a huge believer in our secular political system; he is a huge fan of [the First Amendment](#), which he can recite to you in his still-thick Arabic accent word for word; and he prizes pretty much all that the civics textbooks would have you prize about American society.

In that regard, he is not unusual. Muslims in this country overall are better educated than Americans generally. Surveys show that something like 59 percent of Muslim adults have graduated from college. The comparable number for the overall population is 28 percent.

Muslim median family income is higher than the national median of \$55,000-and-change.

Muslims register to vote at a rate of about 80 percent. The overall rate is in the low 70s.

I could go on, and in my book I do tick off some other statistics. There are all kinds of indications of a population that is settling in, digging in, or as one colleague of mine put it—and I've borrowed this phrase before—"buying into the American dream," in all of its standard material aspects.

A lot of this success is due to the subgroup of American Muslims that most people don't think of first. Most people think that Siblani is typical of American Muslims in being a person of Arab descent. They think that most American Muslims are from Arab countries, which is not correct. Most Muslims are not Arabs; and most Arab-Americans are not Muslim, they're Christian. The largest subgroup of American Muslims is from South Asia—Pakistan, India, and other countries in that region—that represent some 34 percent of the Muslim population. People of Arab descent represent only about a quarter. Another 20 percent are African-American, mostly converts, and now the children of converts. And a final 20 percent are immigrants from places like Iran, Turkey, and the African continent.

The population is much more varied than most Americans understand. The places of origin frequently help shape the views of American Muslims to a greater degree than we appreciate. For example, while

overall there is a tremendous amount of antipathy toward the state of Israel among Muslims, that antipathy is much stronger among the Arab component than it is, for example, among the South Asian component, let alone among the South East Asians who may not care that much about the Arab-Israeli conflict one way or the other; it just may not be one of the leading things on their mind.

The concerns of inner-city African-American converts are frequently very different. They tend to be much less well off than their co-religionists and there is quite a bit of tension between many black Muslims and immigrant Muslims.

I would come back to an overall point, that, by any conventional measure, I would argue that American Muslims are probably less different from other Americans than non-Muslims assume. But they are different, and I want to stress several ways in which Muslims are different. This takes us back to the seeming anomaly of Mr. Siblani's views.

Muslims are subjected to a very particular set of biases. While these may have heightened since 9/11 a little, they have also actually wavered a bit, if you look at polling before 9/11 and since. So I'm not sure actually that 9/11 itself has had a huge influence on this. Here are a few examples:

- Forty-five percent of people polled by Gallup last August said that they have some feelings of prejudice towards Muslims.
- Fifty percent said they would favor a special identification card for Muslims based strictly on their religion, something that obviously doesn't exist and couldn't exist constitutionally in our country.
- Forty-nine percent would favor special security provisions at airports for Muslims, again just based strictly on their religion.
- Thirty-one percent said they would not want a Muslim as their neighbor.
- Thirty-eight percent said they believe Muslims are sympathetic to [al Qaeda](#)—in other words, they are not loyal to the United States; are loyal to arguably the United States' greatest enemy.

A fascinating qualification to all of that grim data is that if you break the respondents down into two groups, those who say they know Muslims and those who say they don't think they know a Muslim—and there's a little ambiguity there because some people aren't sure whether they know a Muslim, of course—those who say they know a Muslim, their level of bias tends to fall off by half, very substantially. So that is perhaps reason for optimism in the future.

Another reason for optimism in the future is, again, the level of bias falls off very substantially when you look at people who are ages 18-to-34 as opposed to 34 and older. Older people have much more pronounced biases against Muslims than younger people.

So Muslims are subjected to this kind of bias.

There are also examples of specific acts of discrimination. Nearly three-quarters of American Muslims responding to a survey by the [Council on American Islamic Relations](#) report that they or someone they know had suffered a specific act of prejudice since 9/11. That same group, known as CAIR, has reported that in 2005 it received almost 2,000 civil rights complaints, up 30 percent since 2004. That includes everything from actual alleged hate crimes, to someone attacking someone, to someone saying something to them that's nasty at work, or perhaps being fired they believe because of their religion.

I would note that those kind of statistics are sometimes subject to being distorted. As groups like CAIR become more sophisticated, they often become better at gathering such information. So seeming increases can sometimes reflect that a little bit.

American Muslims are frequently told that Americans don't like them, and this problem is getting worse. CAIR, for example, on its website right now, if you go and look, it says: "It is clear that there remains a growing atmosphere of fear and hostility toward American Muslims, Arab-Americans, and South Asians."

Conservative radio hosts, of course, consider it absolutely routine to insult Muslims and the religion of

Islam. This is a truly disgusting problem all across the country. One example of a man who was actually fired for this is a guy named [Michael Graham](#), who used to be a host on WMAL, a big AM station in Washington, D.C. In one broadcast in July 2005, he said this 25 times: "Islam is a terrorist organization."

Finally, sadly, some of our evangelical Christian preachers routinely insult Islam and Muslims, making statements such as [Pat Robertson](#)'s comment that the Prophet Muhammad was "an absolute wild-eyed fanatic"; or [Franklin Graham](#)'s comment—this is the son of [Billy Graham](#)—that Islam is a "very evil and wicked religion."

Muslims are extremely sensitive to these types of statements. The fact that these famous Christians, even if they are Christians who only represent a particular limited slice of Christianity—they are frequently cited as illustrations of how all of American society is hostile to Islam, when clearly all of American society is not.

American Muslims—and Siblani would definitely fall into this category—are very humiliated and frustrated by the so-called domestic war on terror, the investigations and prosecutions of Muslims and Arabs in this country since 9/11. Now, some of those investigations and prosecutions have been entirely legitimate, and people have been convicted and sent to prison for planning to go overseas to training camps in Pakistan or Afghanistan, saying that they intend to bring down the Brooklyn Bridge or things like that. There isn't a lot of evidence that any of these people were anywhere close to actually doing any of these things. Most of them are much more, I would say, in the category of bunglers and "wannabes." But nevertheless, these things are illegal and you're not allowed to plan to do them.

The majority of the activity that has taken place in the way of roundups, interrogation, and the treatment of people as they are being held, of course, has been very disappointing. The Justice Department, sadly, has frequently made a huge deal over cases that turn out to be extremely peripheral, and even cases that have resulted in acquittals. This, as I say, is extremely frustrating to Muslims, who see this as a campaign against their religion as opposed to a campaign against criminals.

Finally, American Muslims are bitterly opposed to aspects of American foreign policy. This brings us back to Mr. Siblani. There is no gainsaying the gap between the majority view in American society toward, for example, the state of Israel and the majority view among American Muslims toward the state of Israel. There is a huge divide. Most Muslims are hostile to the state of Israel and see it, not as a beacon of democracy in the Middle East or a sanctuary for Jews in the post-Holocaust period, but they see it as a force for evil. Personally, I don't have any specific proposal for how that gap is overcome. But in understanding why someone would be enthusiastic about an organization like Hezbollah or [Hamas](#), you have to keep in mind that perspective on Israel, the idea of Israel as an invader, as an interloper, and as a brutal regime, a view that I happen not to share but that many otherwise very-well-assimilated Muslims do hold.

Finally, I would add that it's not that I think most Muslims, like Osama Siblani, agree with all that Hezbollah or Hamas stand for. For example, he's no fan of suicide bombing; he doesn't advocate theocracy, a religiously ordered political system—in fact, he opposes those things. But he is an enthusiastic for someone who can give Israel a black eye, for a group that has stood against Israeli occupation.

Those types of views have now migrated over to how Muslims view the American military invasion, occupation—whatever you'd like to call it—in Iraq. There is similarly a tremendous degree of alienation and frustration over what the United States has gotten itself involved in. Many Muslims view these things as being in the same category: once again, the United States or its ally Israel are imposing themselves on the Middle East and on the Muslim world.

I think I will leave my talk there and then answer questions, with the final thought that we have a highly, for the most part, assimilated population, but one that in certain specific areas has very different views of the world, and we need to think about them with all of that complexity rather than demanding that they

fit into every single category and agree with every single American point of view. If we approach American Muslims in that light, we will see that there actually is much more to agree with them on in terms of life in this country, even if we have tremendous disagreements over some of America's involvement overseas and events overseas.

So please tell me what I can tell you.

Questions and Answers

QUESTION: You didn't mention something that, of course, is in the newspapers a lot, and that's Muslim schools in the United States and the flow of money supposedly to terrorist groups in various parts of the world. Is that just a red herring; and is that why you didn't mention it? Is it insignificant or not?

PAUL BARRETT: Well, there are many things about Muslim life in this country I didn't mention. No, I was not evading the point. Let's see.

There are a growing number of Islamic schools. Most estimates now run roughly in the area of 300, maybe more. They are primarily primary and secondary schools. There are no real full-fledged colleges. That is actually an important point, because in terms of their clergy, Muslims are still in 99 percent of the cases importing clergy from overseas, and that is a big source of more extreme religious and political views.

There are problems with Muslim schools in this country in terms of some of the religious literature they use. A lot of that comes from Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Persian Gulf and reflects the very particular and extreme form of the religion that prevails in Saudi Arabia.

You then also mentioned the question of raising of money?

QUESTIONER: Yes, the raising of money for terrorists.

PAUL BARRETT: Right. I think that's in the same general neighborhood as the schools, but isn't really related directly.

Through the 1990s, it was relatively common for money to be raised in this country for organizations that are, at least now, defined as terrorist organizations. I've mentioned a few—Hezbollah, Hamas. It's not unusual for people to get together and raise money for those organizations. That has become much, much less common, if it has not been stamped out completely, by the post-9/11 prosecutions, a fair number of which were specifically aimed at that activity and have deterred it across the board.

There also were a number of charities that presented themselves as humanitarian charities and allegedly funneled some of their money to Hamas and Hezbollah. The argument that the officials of those charities made was that Hamas and Hezbollah, of course, are more than just paramilitary organizations; they are also in their respective areas, Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories, social service organizations, the sponsors of schools, and now substantial political forces.

The American government in the form of the Bush Administration is not at all sympathetic to that argument and those charities have all been shut down. So there really are no more major Islamic charities operating in this country. This is a source of tremendous frustration and chagrin on the part of many Muslims. There are some very small ones that have cropped up, but they don't take on any heft, in part because people are afraid to deal with them.

This is a terrible situation. I mean this is a religion that has as one of its five pillars the giving of a very specific amount of charity. It is calculated by a percentage of your net worth. We have made it very inconvenient for them to fulfill that, generally speaking, quite honorable principle.

Muslim organizations have even gone to the Bush Administration, to the Treasury Department in particular, and said: "Can you bless charities? Would you make a list of ten charities that you audit and say they are safe to give to?" The government has refused.

So we've had a problem in this regard. We have people serving prison sentences as a result of that problem.

I write about one of the figures in my book, a guy who came to this country from India, a relatively moderate-minded fellow, but who got wrapped up with the Muslim Brotherhood while going to the University of Tennessee, of all places, in Knoxville, Tennessee. He raised money for extremist groups for a couple of years and then stopped. He has now actually abandoned his more extreme views and circled back to a much more moderate, open-minded view of the world. But he speaks quite passionately about his frustration about the charity issue.

QUESTION: I am interested in knowing why it is that the American Muslim community has been totally silent as far as their attitude towards what this Administration calls "Islamic fascism" or "fundamentalism," the activities of the [Wahhabis](#) and al Qaeda and so forth. They really have made no statement in opposition of it. So I can understand perhaps why some Americans, not really knowing how they feel and not having heard any negative feelings coming from the community, if you can call it a community, would suspect that they might be supportive of al Qaeda.

And also, you said that of course they have an antipathy towards Israel. Is that also manifested then as anti-Semitism in this country? I know people who are anti-Israel but who are not anti-Semitic. I'm interested to know whether in your experience you could tell me about that.

PAUL BARRETT: Those are two big and important questions, which I hear at each and every event I go to to talk about my book. It never fails. I was wondering why you weren't first out of the gate. You probably just didn't get chosen.

In fact, as a result of that, I have recently written Op-Ed pieces addressing both questions: one that ran in the *Los Angeles Times*, which was called "[Reporting on Muslims While Jewish](#)," because I am Jewish; and one which actually just went up today on a very good online magazine site called [Salon.com](#). So if you want my full treatment of these issues, you can retreat and find those. But I'm happy to address them.

Let's talk about condemnation of terrorism. With all due respect, your premise is entirely wrong. Muslim organizations, and certainly individual Muslims, have condemned terrorism over and over and over again, including on September 11th by 9:30 in the morning. This is easily documented. You can go back online to places and news services and find this.

So the interesting question is: Why don't we hear what they say? The answer to that is complicated.

Part of the reason we don't hear, I suppose, is we may have such a strong assumption that they don't condemn terrorism that we literally just block it out.

A more sophisticated explanation would include the fact that some of those statements include qualifications that I think tend to cancel them out in the ears of non-Muslim listeners. The qualifications frequently, if you listen closely or look at them, include assertions about how Islam is a religion of peace; there is no such thing as "Islamic terrorism" because there can't be because terrorism can't be Islamic; that Muslims don't carry out terrorism because no real Muslim would be a terrorist—you know, the perpetrators on 9/11 weren't Muslims because no Muslims would ever do that; the Qur'an would forbid it. These are all very sort of circular, tautological, unhelpful evasions.

My guess—and this is only a guess—is I know that they have irritated me and my ear, even though I'm

aware that Muslims have condemned terrorism generally, and I think they just tend to cancel out the condemnations unintentionally.

Then, you come to a question of: Why, beyond just general-purpose defensiveness and embarrassment—because, of course, put yourself in American Muslims' position when it comes out that 19 Muslims have undertaken the greatest attack on American soil ever. You're humiliated, you're frustrated. "I'm a law-biding citizen. Why are they asking me? Why do I have to defend them?" One should have some sympathy for those feelings.

But there is a very specific reason, I would argue, that a lot of those evasions have been built on, and that takes us back, interestingly, to Siblani and Hezbollah and Hamas. Muslims condemn all across the board—you have to go very far out to the tiny extreme to find Muslims who will try to evade responsibility for what happened on 9/11—but many Muslims do not want to be backed into a corner where they feel they might be condemning Hamas and Hezbollah. The degree of loyalty to and attachment to those organizations—not their literal programs, not their—

QUESTIONER: What about al Qaeda?

PAUL BARRETT: They'll condemn al Qaeda quite readily. I'll mail you a stack like this.

QUESTIONER: I'm not questioning it. I can empathize with them and their feelings, the American Muslims. But continue. I didn't mean to interrupt.

PAUL BARRETT: It's my feeling that Muslim attitudes toward Israel, and particularly toward Hamas and Hezbollah, the desire not to compromise there, the sense that "we have a right to say that we favor the cause, if not the methods, of the Palestinians and the militant Shiites in Lebanon," inhibits some Muslims from stronger, clearer, unqualified condemnation of all terrorism all the time perpetrated by anybody, no footnotes; no ifs, ands, or buts.

Also, since mid-2005, the premise of your question really is faulty. Since 2005, Muslim organizations have issued some extremely adequate, laudable, across-the-board condemnations.

The bombings in London in July 2005 were devastating to American Muslims. Why? Because those were not foreign Muslims. Those were not distant crazy people from the Persian Gulf who we don't understand where they come from or their Wahhabi ideas. The bombings of the London Underground were perpetrated by Muslims born and bred in England. They prompted some serious introspection on the part of Muslims in this country. Statements made since then have been stronger and more across the board.

QUESTIONER: And are they published?

PAUL BARRETT: Yes, absolutely, all over the place. You've just got to look. I'll leave to you the question of why you haven't seen them, but they are there.

QUESTIONER: I don't know. I read extensively. But anyhow, what about anti-Semitism?

PAUL BARRETT: I brought my own faith up in all of my interviews (1) because I didn't want anyone to feel sandbagged, and (2) because frequently when you're having a long interview it's often good to throw a catalyst like that into the mix and see how people react to it. I found a good deal of anti-Semitism among American Muslims. I found many American Muslims who were quite sophisticated and able to separate out Jews from Israel and were not anti-Semitic at all. And I found the proportion to be roughly similar to the proportion I find among Jews who I know who are reflexively biased against Muslims and Arabs, who just reflexively assume that all Muslims and Arabs are evil. So that's my layman's assessment.

QUESTION: I would like to know what you think about the difference of integration between Muslims in

Europe, which is a big problem, and in the United States.

PAUL BARRETT: An excellent question. It follows very directly from my discussion of assimilation.

Very, very different situations, beginning with the reasons why immigrant Muslims are present in these Western societies to begin with. Muslims in Western Europe primarily—and, of course, I'm generalizing some here; this is not everybody—primarily began showing up in Western Europe at the invitation of Western European societies after World War II to help rebuild destroyed cities. They were mostly menial laborers, and they were viewed as such. They were viewed basically as guest workers with the assumption that they would go back home sometime in the not-too-distant future. Well, a lot of them didn't go back home. Life there compared to life back home was better.

And then, interestingly, European societies implemented social service systems that allowed people to live somewhat on the periphery without necessarily even learning the language, and certainly without being integrated. So you ended up with fairly insular, marginalized communities on the peripheries of big cities like Amsterdam, Paris, and so forth in relatively large numbers. I mean ten percent of the people living in France now are Muslims, so it's a very significant minority.

The story in the United States is entirely different. Looking at that slice of the population that is the highest-achieving slice, the immigrants who have come since the 1960s, when the American immigration laws were changed so that it was easier to get to this country from places like South Asia, people came here not to rebuild walls but to go to college and to go to graduate school in subjects like engineering and computer science. Some of them stayed too. But they stayed in a society where there isn't in fact a very generous social service safety net for immigrants. Once you're here, you either go illegal, or if you're legal you actually have to work; you can't just subsist. So I think you ended up with a population in this country of people who were better educated, quickly became more prosperous, and were more ambitious.

It wasn't only students who came here. It was often people who had substantial sums saved by their families and came here to invest them in businesses such as—it's a cliché, but it's a cliché that fits—7-Eleven's and small motel chains and so forth, all throughout the country, as well as gas stations, absolutely. On balance, they have been extremely successful in the traditional American way of being successful. Our self-image is that if you come here and you work hard, you can make your way.

It's easier to get a job in this country. Labor regulations are less onerous. It's easier to get hired because it's easier to be fired. As a Turk or someone from Egypt who lives in Holland, because it's more difficult to fire people, a lot of employers are more hesitant to hire you in the first place.

Europe is hostile to religion generally. The secularism of Europe is much more strongly felt than it is here. I think in an interesting way we respect religious people, even if we are sort of biased against them at the same time. I think Muslims are aware of that. I think that, while many of them do feel somewhat alienated, they also have the sense that there is this thing called the First Amendment and there is protection of religious expression. They see religious people are accorded respect. They have respect for other religious people in many cases. I think that makes them feel somewhat more integrated.

Finally, there is just the different national senses. If you're honest about it, most French people think that other people from abroad are never going to become "really French." This is less common here. There's plenty of nativism, there's plenty of bias; but once you've got a couple of cars in the driveway, people think twice—"Hey, that guy's okay."

QUESTION: I was wondering about their objectives between religion and politics, which in their culture are not separated. Are they following the injunctions of the Qur'an to stay alienated and not say hello to the infidel, and eventually sort of hope that the crescent flies over the White House? Or are they wanting to become American and less religiously extremist and just blend in and assimilate?

PAUL BARRETT: Again, there are several premises built in there.

One, that the Qur'an obviously enjoins believers to reject secular rule and so forth. I'm sure there's an interpretation of the Qur'an that says that, because there's an interpretation of almost every holy book that says almost everything. But I don't know many Muslims—and I know quite a few—who interpret the Qur'an as commanding them to stay separate from secular society.

QUESTIONER: [Inaudible]

PAUL BARRETT: Right. But as I say, there are injunctions in the commands. You can find lines in the Qur'an, as you can find lines in the New and Old Testaments, that make sharp distinctions between the believers and the unbelievers, and say we should basically smite the unbelievers and rally the believers. That can be done with the Qur'an too. We could have a whole separate discussion as to interpreting scripture, but, as most people agree, the meaning of scripture is very much determined by the moral sense of the reader and what they bring to it. The books themselves, particularly books written 1,500 or more years ago, are subject to lots of different interpretations.

The short answer to your question is I don't think that there is a significant number of Muslims in this country who believe as a practical matter, or who desire as a practical matter, to see, as you said, the crescent to fly over the White House versus the American flag.

What you do find is some fundamentalist rhetoric. You can go to mosques and you can hear the imam preach on Friday afternoon that the Qur'an is superior to all books, including the Constitution. You can hear that Islam is more important than democracy and one day Allah's law will reign supreme worldwide. It actually is rhetoric that is very similar, if you line it up, two pieces of paper like that, to the rhetoric you hear in fundamentalist Christian churches about how the Day of Judgment will come and everything will get sorted out, the good people will be here and the bad people will be there, bad people will go up in smoke and the good people will rally around Jesus, and so forth.

An important thing, I think, to keep in mind is that fundamentalisms have a lot in common. The most basic thing in common is the separation out of the world of peace versus the world of war, or the believers versus the non-believers. Absolutely you find that strain in Islam. It's very powerful overseas. It is present in this country, but it doesn't predominate in this country.

But, as your question suggests, I think it should be a source of concern. Muslims are actually debating over this in mosques and in their communities themselves, which is something that I tried to illustrate throughout my book. My book's subtitle is "The Struggle for the Soul of Religion." It's about actually mostly the conflicts within Islam, because these subjects are being hotly debated between more moderate, more secularly oriented Muslims versus more fundamentalistly oriented Muslims.

But I don't think that there is any realistic worry about a mass Muslim movement that literally wants to impose [Shariah](#) on the United States the way you have quite potent such movements in some predominantly Muslim countries. There's a difference.

QUESTION: I have been trying to think of a way to ask the question that is less simplistic. I can't find it, so I will just ask the question. So far America has not confronted the kind of struggle—and, indeed, violence—that Britain has faced with their Muslim community. What are the primary reasons for that?

PAUL BARRETT: I think that's just an extension of the answer to the question from our friend here. You have a much more assimilated population that is, relatively speaking, much better off, doesn't feel that it has been excluded and kept separate, and feels much more in every sense invested in American society, both in the literal sense—the percentage of American Muslims who own stocks, bonds, and mutual funds either independently or through 401(k)'s is very, very high. Those are people who are settling in. They are not making plans to make trouble. I mean you don't waste your time investing in a 401(k) if what you're really planning to do is blow things up. So I think the reason is no more or less complicated than

that.

Muslims in Europe feel that they are excluded from society, and that provides a very fertile ground for fundamentalists and extreme ideas. If you then have someone come in and preach about "Islam must prevail," "non-Muslims are all infidels and God hates them," someone who begins the day feeling completely frustrated and excluded is going to be a more receptive audience to that than will the guy who's getting his Ph.D. in computer science at MIT, who's thinking: "As soon as I get this Ph.D., I'm really in the money. Things are going well."

QUESTION: I guess I could call this "what came first, the chicken or the bush?" I'm trying to see a kind of picture—going back to the genocides that we were kind of indifferent to and didn't get involved, and the frustration and the anger worldwide because we didn't; then coming to panic and witch-hunting almost, it seems to me—at least I have a perception of it happening here in so many ways—and in the ambience in general; at the same time, withdrawing, indifference and the terrorism now in the East. Do you see all of this in a way connected and really needing to be addressed to begin to solve the problems that you are addressing in the book?

PAUL BARRETT: I guess my overall cast of mind is more optimistic than yours. I think that, remarkably, the Muslim-American assimilation and success story has actually continued in the wake of 9/11. We didn't have mass violence in this country. There have been instances of crimes against people who attackers thought, accurately or inaccurately—sometimes inaccurately—were Muslims. But the numbers, while too many if the number was only one, have not been astronomical.

Our government has been very ham-handed in pursuing investigations and prosecutions, by which I mean, not that the investigations should not have been launched in the first place, but we have prosecuted some people who were peripheral, unimportant figures and basically were turned into martyrs and the cases broke down and turned into embarrassments for the prosecutors. We need an FBI that is extremely aggressive, extremely agile, and a Justice Department that knows when not to prosecute and when to just keep the file and watch.

But I don't think—and this is not a view that cannot be disputed; you can have a different point of view—but my perspective is that the vast majority of Muslims in this country, though they may feel frustrated at the moment, terribly extrinsic events notwithstanding, will be back on-track and have not left track.

I mean you just go to a Muslim students' association meeting at the campus of any major university, and you see 20 or 30 or 40 or 50 young people who tend to major in relatively pragmatically oriented subjects, and their plans are to launch careers right now the middle of American society and get a house in the suburbs. I mean to me that's not a signal that doom is on the way.

QUESTION: This is just taking up a small piece of what you referred to about the frustration among American Muslims that they are not able to contribute to Muslim charities, because of the problems you referred to, and a lot of them have not been allowed to continue in business. But, especially if they are so well assimilated here and involved in American life and making the money and so on and so forth, there are tens of thousands of charities that are not necessarily Christian, they are just sort of all of us. It sounds like they are not thinking in terms of contributing there as an alternative, contributing to other standard charities that benefit all.

PAUL BARRETT: That's an interesting point. I suppose my response is that in the same way that my family might think first of a Jewish cause, even if we then move on and contribute to [Heifer International](#), I think Muslims will tend to think first about Muslim causes. I think it is particularly the case, since many people are first- or second-generation immigrants, that what is going on in the home country is still very much on their mind.

Finally, I guess I would point out that in many cases, sadly and for very complicated reasons, the

predominantly Muslim world is extremely troubled and in great need of aid. I think that Muslims in this country who come from that part of the world feel a sense of responsibility.

But it's an interesting point you make, that there are other ways to do good.

QUESTION: I'd like to ask you two questions, going back to the support for Hezbollah. I know it is hard to generalize, but what percentage would you say in the Muslim community would be more in the camp of Avumas [phonetic] and wanting to make peace, getting the settlements back, but not agreeing with Hezbollah and never Hamas?

The second is if you could say something—again, it's a generalization—about the role of women in the Muslim community.

PAUL BARRETT: My experience is that the majority of the people who I came in contact with recognize that Israel is not going away. My strong guess is that most of Hamas recognizes that Israel is actually not going away, even if the organization's position remains one where they are not officially recognizing it.

I think the thing that needs emphasizing is it's not so much that American Muslims approve of everything that Hamas or Hezbollah actually does on a day-to-day basis, but it's their refusal to be put in a position where they feel they need to rebuke those organizations or condemn them. It's largely symbolic, I think, more than it is a sense of their own membership in the groups, although there are people who here are directly associated with the groups.

I don't have hard percentages. I don't think many American Muslims have the illusion that Israelis are going to be driven into the sea, or the desire for that. I think many American Muslims, like many Americans generally, would love somehow for that conflict to be resolved so people could move on and deal with other matters. But, sadly, it has proven extremely hard to resolve that.

What was the second part of the question?

QUESTIONER: How about Muslim women in this country?

PAUL BARRETT: Not something that can be dealt with in a minute and a half.

One of my chapters deals with that explicitly. There is a ferocious debate going on within American Islam, to a lesser degree in certain other parts of the world, about women's literal and figurative place in the mosque. A lot of these debates have to do with seemingly minor issues of choreography and head covering and so forth, but those are really proxies for much larger collisions between old-world traditions and more Western traditions.

What you have within American Islam is a huge range of people: at one extreme, those who think it is entirely irreligious for women to appear in public without various types of coverings; on the other side, women who think that's just not the case, who want to know where in the Qur'an it says you have to do that—and, in fact, there isn't a place in the Qur'an that clearly says you have to cover in a certain way—and who, if they presented themselves to you, you would have no way of knowing whether they were Muslim or not Muslim, although you might have a sense that they were from India or Pakistan or what have you.

There are debates over, as I say, clothing; there are debates over where people can pray in the mosque; there are debates over whether women should be allowed to be on mosque boards. And then there are more amorphous debates, just over how men treat women generally; whether women should be allowed to seek out their own husband, or vice-versa. These are similar to debates that have taken place within other immigrant religious groups as they move from a more traditional old-country setting to a more pluralist setting where the rules and regulations get a little more diluted, more secular, more materialist, a more materialistic society.

Muslims right now, I would say, are in a state of flux on all of this. But there is a large number of Muslim women who are very disturbed by this because they would like to see basically more Westernization of their own culture.

The one thought I'd leave you with on this is that I think more of this has to do with culture and place of origin than it does with the actual dictates of the religion. I have looked very closely at the verses in question—I actually wrestle with some of this in the book—and you can find a verse to support your point of view. You can find a verse that supports a very progressive point of view, that has Muhammad welcoming the council of women, and his wives and daughters being hugely influential in the original Muslim society, that indicating that 1,400 years later women should be able to do anything and everything. And you can find people who look at just the very next verse, that women should never come outside the house.

So what do you make of that? It's a group of people struggling with a holy text. It's a group of people struggling with a presence in a new society. My guess is that things will continue to move, roughly speaking, in the direction of Westernization.

But at the same time, interestingly, things don't move all in the same direction at one time. There is actually movement in both directions right now. You have women who are moving away from the traditions, but you also have some mosques where things have gotten more conservative, because only in the last ten years some of the more extremely conservative ideas of the Persian Gulf have come to predominate in those particular mosques. So it is actually very, very hard to generalize.

JOANNE MYERS: I thank you very much for shedding light on Muslims in America.

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