

AN IMAM IN AMERICA

A Muslim Leader in Brooklyn, Reconciling 2 Worlds (1)

By [ANDREA ELLIOTT](#)

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The imam begins his trek before dawn, his long robe billowing like a ghost through empty streets. In this dark, quiet hour, his thoughts sometimes drift back to the Egyptian farming village where he was born.

But as the sun rises over Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, Sheik Reda Shata's new world comes to life. The R train rattles beneath a littered stretch of sidewalk, where Mexican workers huddle in the cold. An electric Santa dances in a doughnut shop window. Neon signs beckon. Gypsy cabs blare their horns.

The imam slips into a plain brick building, nothing like the golden-domed mosque of his youth. He stops to pray, and then climbs the cracked linoleum steps to his cluttered office. The answering machine blinks frantically, a portent of the endless questions to come.

A teenage girl wants to know: Is it halal, or lawful, to eat a Big Mac? Can alcohol be served, a waiter wonders, if it is prohibited by the Koran? Is it wrong to take out a mortgage, young Muslim professionals ask, when Islam frowns upon monetary interest?

The questions are only a piece of the daily puzzle Mr. Shata must solve as the imam of the Islamic Society of Bay Ridge, a thriving New York mosque where several thousand Muslims worship.

To his congregants, Mr. Shata is far more than the leader of daily prayers and giver of the Friday sermon. Many of them now live in a land without their parents, who typically assist with finding a spouse. There are fewer uncles and cousins to help resolve personal disputes. There is no local House of Fatwa to issue rulings on ethical questions.

Sheik Reda, as he is called, arrived in Brooklyn one year after Sept. 11. Virtually overnight, he became an Islamic judge and nursery school principal, a matchmaker and marriage counselor, a 24-hour hot line on all things Islamic.

Day after day, he must find ways to reconcile Muslim tradition with American life. Little in his rural Egyptian upbringing or years of Islamic scholarship prepared him for the challenge of leading a mosque in America.

The job has worn him down and opened his mind. It has landed him, exhausted, in the hospital and earned him a following far beyond Brooklyn.

"America transformed me from a person of rigidity to flexibility," said Mr. Shata, speaking through an Arabic translator. "I went from a country where a sheik would speak and the people listened to one where the sheik talks and the people talk back."

This is the story of Mr. Shata's journey west: the making of an American imam.

Over the last half-century, the Muslim population in the United States has risen significantly. Immigrants from the Middle East, South Asia and Africa have settled across the country, establishing mosques from Boston to Los Angeles, and turning Islam into one of the nation's fastest growing religions. By some estimates, as many as six million Muslims now live in America.

Leading this flock calls for improvisation. Imams must unify diverse congregations with often-clashing Islamic traditions. They must grapple with the threat of terrorism, answering to law enforcement agents without losing the trust of their fellow Muslims. Sometimes they must set aside conservative beliefs that prevail in the Middle East, the birthplace of Islam.

Islam is a legalistic faith: Muslims believe in a divine law that guides their daily lives, including what they should eat, drink and wear. In countries where the religion reigns, this is largely the accepted way.

But in the West, what Islamic law prohibits is everywhere. Alcohol fills chocolates. Women jog in sports bras. For many Muslims in America, life is a daily clash between Islamic mores and material temptation. At the center of this clash stands the imam.

In America, imams evoke a simplistic caricature — of robed, bearded clerics issuing fatwas in foreign lands. Hundreds of imams live in the United States, but their portrait remains flatly one-dimensional. Either they are symbols of diversity, breaking the Ramadan fast with smiling politicians, or zealots, hurrying into their storefront mosques.

Mr. Shata, 37, is neither a firebrand nor a ready advocate of progressive Islam. Some of his views would offend conservative Muslims; other beliefs would repel American liberals. He is in many ways a work in progress, mapping his own middle ground between two different worlds.

The imam's cramped, curtained office can hardly contain the dramas that unfold inside. Women cry. Husbands storm off. Friendships end. Every day brings soap opera plots and pitch.

A Moroccan woman falls to her knees near the imam's Hewlett-Packard printer. "Have mercy on me!" she wails to a friend who has accused her of theft. Another day, it is a man whose Lebanese wife has concealed their marriage and newborn son from her strict father. "I will tell him everything!" the husband screams.

Mr. Shata settles dowries, confronts wife abusers, brokers business deals and tries to arrange marriages. He approaches each problem with an almost scientific certainty that it can be solved. "I try to be more of a doctor than a judge," said Mr. Shata. "A judge sentences. A doctor tries to remedy."

Imams in the United States now serve an estimated 1,200 mosques. Some of their congregants have lived here for generations, assimilating socially and succeeding professionally. But others are recent immigrants, still struggling to find their place in America. Demographers expect their numbers to rise in the coming decades, possibly surpassing those of American Jews.

Like many of their faithful, most imams in the United States come from abroad. They are recruited primarily for their knowledge of the Koran and the language in which it was revealed, Arabic.

But few are prepared for the test that awaits. Like the parish priests who came generations before, imams are called on to lead a community on the margins of American civic life. They are conduits to and arbiters of an exhilarating, if sometimes hostile world, filled with promise and peril.

An Invitation to Islam

More than 5,000 miles lie between Brooklyn and Kafr al Battikh, Mr. Shata's birthplace in northeastern Egypt. Situated where the Nile Delta meets the Suez Canal, it was a village of dirt roads and watermelon vines when Mr. Shata was born in 1968.

Egypt was in the throes of change. The country had just suffered a staggering defeat in the Six Day War with Israel, and protests against the government followed. Hoping to counter growing radicalism, a new president, Anwar Sadat, allowed a long-repressed Islamic movement to flourish.

The son of a farmer and fertilizer salesman, Mr. Shata belonged to the lowest rung of Egypt's rural middle class. His house had no electricity. He did not see a television until he was 15.

Islam came to him softly, in the rhythms of his grandmother's voice. At bedtime, she would tell him the story of the Prophet Muhammad, the seventh-century founder of Islam. The boy heard much that was familiar. Like the prophet, he had lost his mother at a young age.

"She told me the same story maybe a thousand times," he said.

At the age of 5, he began memorizing the Koran. Like thousands of children in the Egyptian countryside, he attended a Sunni religious school subsidized by the government and connected to Al Azhar University, a bastion of Islamic scholarship.

Too poor to buy books, the young Mr. Shata hand-copied from hundreds at the town library. The bound volumes now line the shelves of his Bay Ridge apartment. When he graduated, he enrolled at Al Azhar and headed to Cairo by train. There, he sat on a bench for hours, marveling at the sights.

"I was like a lost child," he said. "Cars. We didn't have them. People of different colors. Foreigners. Women almost naked. It was like an imaginary world."

At 18, Mr. Shata thought of becoming a judge. But at his father's urging, he joined the college of imams, the Dawah.

The word means invitation. It refers to the duty of Muslims to invite, or call, others to the faith. Unlike Catholicism or Judaism, Islam has no ordained clergy. The Prophet Muhammad was the religion's first imam, or prayer leader, Islam's closest corollary to a rabbi or priest; schools like the Dawah are its version of a seminary or rabbinate.

After four years, Mr. Shata graduated with honors, seventh in a class of 3,400.

The next decade brought lessons in adaptation. In need of money, Mr. Shata took a job teaching sharia, or Islamic law, to children in Saudi Arabia, a country guided by Wahhabism, a puritan strain of Sunni Islam. He found his Saudi colleagues' interpretation of the Koran overly literal at times, and the treatment of women, who were not allowed to vote or drive, troubling.

Five years later, he returned to a different form of religious control in Egypt, where most imams are appointed by the government and monitored for signs of radicalism or political dissent.

"They are not allowed to deviate from the curriculum that the government sets for them," said Khaled Abou El Fadl, an Egyptian law professor at the [University of California](#), Los Angeles.

Mr. Shata craved greater independence, and opened a furniture business. But he missed the life of dawah and eventually returned to it as the imam of his hometown mosque, which drew 4,000 worshippers on Fridays alone.

His duties were clear: He led the five daily prayers and delivered the khutba, or Friday sermon. His mosque, like most in Egypt, was financed and managed by the government. He spent his free time giving lectures, conducting marriage ceremonies and offering occasional religious guidance.

In 2000, Mr. Shata left to work as an imam in the gritty industrial city of Stuttgart, Germany. Europe brought a fresh new freedom. "I saw a wider world," he said. "Anyone with an opinion could express it."

Then came Sept. 11.

Soon after, Mr. Shata's mosque was defiled with graffiti and smeared with feces.

The next summer, Mr. Shata took a call from an imam in Brooklyn. The man, Mohamed Moussa, was leaving his mosque, exhausted by the troubles of his congregants following the terrorist attacks. The mosque was looking for a replacement, and Mr. Shata had come highly recommended by a professor at Al Azhar.

Most imams are recruited to American mosques on the recommendation of other imams or trusted scholars abroad, and are usually offered an annual contract. Some include health benefits and subsidized housing; others are painfully spare. The pay can range from \$20,000 to \$50,000.

Mr. Shata had heard stories of Muslim hardship in America. The salary at the Islamic Society of Bay Ridge was less than what he was earning in Germany. But foremost on his mind were his wife and three small daughters, whom he had not seen in months. Germany had refused them entry. He agreed to take the job if he could bring his family to America. In October 2002, the American Embassy in Cairo granted visas to the Shatas and they boarded a plane for New York.

A Mosque, a Magnet

A facade of plain white brick rises up from Fifth Avenue just south of 68th Street in Bay Ridge. Two sets of words, one in Arabic and another in English, announce the mosque's dual identity from a marquee above its gray metal doors.

To the mosque's base — Palestinian, Egyptian, Yemeni, Moroccan and Algerian immigrants — it is known as Masjid Moussab, named after one of the prophet's companions, Moussab Ibn Omair. To the mosque's English-speaking neighbors, descendants of the Italians, Irish and Norwegians who once filled the neighborhood, it is the Islamic Society of Bay Ridge.

Mosques across America are commonly named centers or societies, in part because they provide so many services. Some 140 mosques serve New York City, where an estimated 600,000 Muslims live, roughly 20 percent of them African-American, said Louis Abdellatif Cristillo, an anthropologist at Teachers College who has canvassed the city's mosques.

The Islamic Society of Bay Ridge, like other American mosques, is run by a board of directors, mostly Muslim professionals from the Palestinian territories. What began in 1984 as a small storefront on Bay Ridge Avenue, with no name and no imam, has grown into one of the city's vital Muslim centers, a magnet for new immigrants.

Its four floors pulse with life: a nursery school, an Islamic bookstore, Koran classes and daily lectures. Some 1,500 Muslims worship at the mosque on Fridays, often crouched in prayer on the sidewalk. Albanians, Pakistanis and others who speak little Arabic listen to live English translations of the sermons through headsets. It is these congregants' crumpled dollar bills, collected in a cardboard box, that enable the mosque to survive.

Among the city's imams, Bay Ridge is seen as a humbling challenge.

"It's the first station for immigrants," said Mr. Moussa, Mr. Shata's predecessor. "And immigrants have a lot of problems."

Mr. Shata landed at Kennedy International Airport wearing a crimson felt hat and a long gray jilbab that fell from his neck to his sandaled toes, the proud dress of an Al Azhar scholar. He spoke no English. But already, he carried some of the West inside. He could quote liberally from Voltaire, Shaw and Kant. For an Egyptian, he often jokes, he was inexplicably punctual.

The first thing Mr. Shata loved about America, like Germany, was the order.

"In Egypt, if a person passes through a red light, that means he's smart," he said. "In America, he's very disrespected."

Americans stood in line. They tended their yards. One could call the police and hear a rap at the door minutes later. That fact impressed not only Mr. Shata, but also the women of his new mosque.

They had gained a reputation for odd calls to 911. One woman called because a relative abroad had threatened to take her inheritance. "The officers left and didn't write anything," Mr. Shata said, howling with laughter. "There was nothing for them to write."

Another woman called, angry because her husband had agreed to let a daughter from a previous marriage spend the night.

To Mr. Shata, the calls made sense. The women's parents, uncles and brothers — figures of authority in family conflict — were overseas. Instead, they dialed 911, hoping for a local substitute. Soon they would learn to call the imam.

A bearish man with a soft, bearded face, Mr. Shata struck his congregants as an odd blend of things. He was erudite yet funny; authoritative at the mosque's wooden pulpit and boyishly charming between prayers.

Homemakers, doctors, cabdrivers and sheiks stopped by to assess the new imam. He regaled them with Dunkin' Donuts coffee, fetched by the Algerian keeper of the mosque, and then told long, poetic stories that left his visitors silent, their coffee cold.

"You just absorb every word he says," said Linda Sarsour, 25, a Muslim activist in Brooklyn.

The imam, too, was taking note. Things worked differently in America, where mosques were run as nonprofit organizations and congregants had a decidedly democratic air. Mr. Shata was shocked when a tone-deaf man insisted on giving the call to prayer. Such a man would be ridiculed in Egypt, where the callers, or muezzinin, have voices so beautiful they sometimes record top-selling CD's.

But in the land of equal opportunity, a man with a mediocre voice could claim discrimination. Mr. Shata relented. He shudders when the voice periodically sounds.

No sooner had Mr. Shata started his new job than all manner of problems arrived at his worn wooden desk: rebellious teenagers, marital strife, confessions of philandering, accusations of theft.

The imam responded creatively. Much of the drama involved hot dog vendors. There was the pair who shared a stand, but could not stand each other. They came to the imam, who helped them divide the business.

The most notorious hot dog seller stood accused of stealing thousands of dollars in donations he had raised for the children of his deceased best friend. But there was no proof. The donations had been in cash. The solution, the imam decided, was to have the man swear an oath on the Koran.

"Whoever lies while taking an oath on the Koran goes blind afterward," said Mr. Shata, stating a belief that has proved useful in cases of theft. A group of men lured the vendor to the mosque, where he confessed to stealing \$11,400. His admission was recorded in a waraqa, or document, penned in Arabic and signed by four witnesses. He returned the money in full.

Dozens of waraqa sit in the locked bottom drawer of the imam's desk. In one, a Brooklyn man who burned his wife with an iron vows, in nervous Arabic scrawl, never to do it again. If he fails, he will owe her a \$10,000 "disciplinary fine." The police had intervened before, but the woman felt that she needed the imam's help.

For hundreds of Muslims, the Bay Ridge mosque has become a courthouse more welcoming than the one downtown, a police precinct more effective than the brick station blocks away. Even the police have used the imam's influence to their advantage, warning disorderly teenagers that they will be taken to the mosque rather than the station.

"They say: 'No, not the imam! He'll tell my parents,' " said Russell Kain, a recently retired officer of the 68th Precinct.

Marriage, Mortgage, McDonald's

Soon after arriving in Brooklyn, Mr. Shata observed a subtle rift among the women of his mosque. Those who were new to America remained quietly grounded in the traditions of their homelands. But some who had assimilated began to question those strictures. Concepts like shame held less weight. Actions like divorce, abhorred by Mr. Shata, were surprisingly popular.

"The woman who comes from overseas, she's like someone who comes from darkness to a very well-lit place," he said.

In early July, an Egyptian karate teacher shuffled into Mr. Shata's office and sank into a donated couch. He smiled meekly and began to talk. His new wife showed him no affection. She complained about his salary and said he lacked ambition.

The imam urged him to be patient.

Two weeks later, in came the wife. She wanted a divorce.

"We don't understand each other," the woman said. She was 32 and had come from Alexandria, Egypt, to work as an Arabic teacher. She had met her husband through a friend in Bay Ridge. Her parents, still in Egypt, had approved cautiously from afar.

"I think you should be patient," said the imam.

"I cannot," she said firmly. "He loves me, but I have to love him, too."

Mr. Shata shifted uncomfortably in his chair. There was nothing he loathed more than granting a divorce.

"It's very hard for me to let him divorce you," he said. "How can I meet God on Judgment Day?"

"It's God's law also to have divorce," she shot back. The debate continued.

Finally, Mr. Shata asked for her parents' phone number in Egypt. Over the speakerphone, they anxiously urged the imam to relent. Their daughter was clearly miserable, and they were too far away to intervene.

With a sigh, Mr. Shata asked his executive secretary, Mohamed, to print a divorce certificate. In the rare instance when the imam agrees to issue one, it is after a couple has filed for divorce with the city.

"Since you're the one demanding divorce, you can never get back together with him," the imam warned. "Ever."

The woman smiled politely.

"What matters for us is the religion," she said later. "Our law is our religion."

The religion's fiqh, or jurisprudence, is built on 14 centuries of scholarship, but imams in Europe and America often find this body of law insufficient to address life in the West. The quandaries of America were foreign to Mr. Shata.

Pornography was rampant, prompting a question Mr. Shata had never heard in Egypt: Is oral sex lawful? Pork and alcohol are forbidden in Islam, raising questions about whether Muslims could sell beer or bacon. Tired of the menacing stares in the subway, women wanted to know if they could remove their headscarves. Muslims were navigating their way through problems Mr. Shata had never fathomed.

For a while, the imam called his fellow sheiks in Egypt with requests for fatwas, or nonbinding legal rulings. But their views carried little relevance to life in America. Some issues, like oral sex, he dared not raise. Over time, he began to find his own answers and became, as he put it, flexible.

Is a Big Mac permissible? Yes, the imam says, but not a bacon cheeseburger.

It is a woman's right, Mr. Shata believes, to remove her hijab if she feels threatened. Muslims can take jobs serving alcohol and pork, he says, but only if other work cannot be found. Oral sex is acceptable, but only between married couples. Mortgages, he says, are necessary to move forward in America.

"Islam is supposed to make a person's life easier, not harder," Mr. Shata explained.

In some ways, the imam has resisted change. He has learned little English, and interviews with Mr. Shata over the course of six months required the use of a translator.

Some imams in the United States make a point of shaking hands with women, distancing themselves from the view that such contact is improper. Mr. Shata offers women only a nod.

Daily, he passes the cinema next to his mosque but has never seen a movie in a theater. He says music should be forbidden if it "encourages sexual desire." He won't convert a non-Muslim when it seems more a matter of convenience than true belief.

"Religion is not a piece of clothing that you change," he said after turning away an Ecuadorean immigrant who sought to convert for her Syrian husband. "I don't want someone coming to Islam tonight and leaving it in the morning."

Trust in God's Plan

Ten months after he came to America, Mr. Shata collapsed.

It was Friday. The mosque was full. Hundreds of men sat pressed together, their shirts damp with summer. Their wives and daughters huddled in the women's section, one floor below. Word of the imam's sermons had spread, drawing Muslims from Albany and Hartford.

"Praise be to Allah," began Mr. Shata, his voice slowly rising.

Minutes later, the imam recalled, the room began to spin. He fell to the carpet, lost consciousness and spent a week in the hospital, plagued by several symptoms. A social worker and a counselor who treated the imam both said he suffered from exhaustion. The counselor, Ali Gheith, called it "compassion fatigue," an ailment that commonly affects disaster-relief workers.

It was not just the long hours, the new culture and the ceaseless demands that weighed on the imam. Most troubling were the psychological woes of his congregants, which seemed endless.

Sept. 11 had wrought depression and anxiety among Muslims. But unlike many priests or rabbis, imams lacked pastoral training in mental health and knew little about the social services available.

At heart was another complicated truth: Imams often approach mental illness from a strictly Islamic perspective. Hardship is viewed as a test of faith, and the answer can be found in tawwakul, trusting in God's plan. The remedy typically suggested by imams is a spiritual one, sought through fasting, prayer and reflection.

Muslim immigrants also limit themselves to religious solutions because of the stigma surrounding mental illness, said Hamada Hamid, a resident psychiatrist at [New York University](#) who founded The Journal of Muslim Mental Health. "If somebody says, 'You need this medication,' someone may respond, 'I have tawwakul,' " he said.

Mr. Gheith, a Palestinian immigrant who works in disaster preparedness for the city's health department, began meeting with the imam regularly after his collapse. Mr. Shata needed to learn to disconnect from his congregants, Mr. Gheith said. It was a concept that confounded the imam.

"I did not permit these problems to enter my heart," said Mr. Shata, "nor can I permit them to leave."

The conversations eventually led to a citywide training program for imams, blending Islam with psychology. Mr. Shata learned to identify the symptoms of mental illness and began referring people to treatment.

His congregants often refuse help, blaming black magic or the evil eye for their problems. The evil eye is believed to be a curse driven by envy, confirmed in the bad things that happen to people.

One Palestinian couple in California insisted that their erratic 18-year-old son had the evil eye. He was brought to the imam's attention after winding up on the streets of New York, and eventually received a diagnosis of schizophrenia.

Mr. Shata had less success with a man who worshiped at the mosque. He had become paranoid, certain his wife was cursing him with witchcraft. But he refused treatment, insisting divorce was the only cure.

Time and again, Mr. Shata's new country has called for creativity and patience, for a careful negotiation between tradition and modernity.

"Here you don't know what will solve a problem," he said. "It's about looking for a key."

AN IMAM IN AMERICA

To Lead the Faithful in a Faith Under Fire (2)

By [ANDREA ELLIOTT](#)

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The F.B.I. agent and the imam sat across a long wooden table at a Brooklyn youth center last August.

Would the imam, the agent asked, report anyone who seemed prone to terrorism?

Sheik Reda Shata leaned back in his chair and studied the agent. Nearly a year had passed since the authorities had charged two young men, one of whom prayed at Mr. Shata's mosque, with plotting to blow up the Herald Square subway station in Manhattan.

The mosque had come under siege. Television news trucks circled the block. Threats were made. The imam's congregants became angry themselves after learning that a police informer had spent months in their midst.

At the meeting, the imam chose his words carefully. It is not only the F.B.I. that wants to stop terrorism, he answered; Muslims also care about keeping the country safe.

"I would turn him in to you," Mr. Shata finally said, pointing his finger at the agent, Mark J. Mershon, the top F.B.I. official in New York City. "But not because I am afraid of you."

The moment captured one of the enduring challenges for an imam in America: living at the center of a religion under watch.

Mr. Shata is under steady pressure to help the authorities. At the same time, he must keep the trust of his congregants, who feel unfairly singled out by law enforcement.

The balance is delicate. It requires a willingness to cooperate, but not to be trampled on; pride in one's fellow Muslims, yet recognition that threats may lurk among them.

"It's like walking a tightrope," said Mr. Shata, 37, speaking through an Arabic translator. "You have to give Muslims the feeling that the police are not monsters. And you have to give the police the feeling that Muslims are respectful and clean."

Months spent with Mr. Shata, both around the city and in his mosque, the Islamic Society of Bay Ridge, revealed the vastly complex calling of imams in the United States.

In the Islamic world, imams are defined as prayer leaders. But here, they become community leaders, essential intermediaries between their immigrant flocks and a new, Western land. When Islamic traditions clash with American culture, it is imams who step forward with improvised answers. Outside the mosque, many assume the public roles of other clergy, becoming diplomats for their faith.

But in the years since Sept. 11, diplomacy has given way to defensiveness. For American imams, no subject is more charged than terrorism. While under scrutiny themselves, imams are often called upon to usher the authorities past the barriers of fear that surround their communities. Many are reluctant. They worry that their assistance will backfire in unwarranted investigations, or a loss of credibility at the pulpit.

At Mr. Shata's mosque, people can recite a list of dubious cases as easily as popular verses of the Koran: The three Moroccan men in Detroit who were falsely accused of operating a terrorist sleeper cell; the Muslim lawyer Brandon Mayfield, who was mistakenly linked to bombings in Madrid; the two teenage girls from New York City who were held for weeks but never charged after the F.B.I. identified them as potential suicide bombers.

At the same time, imams must contend with their own mixed reputation, which is marked by a few high-profile cases, like that of Sheik [Omar Abdel Rahman](#), the blind Egyptian cleric who was convicted in 1995 of plotting to blow up New York landmarks.

Imams like Mr. Shata — men who embrace American freedom and condemn the radicals they feel have tainted their faith — rarely make the news.

The authorities are well acquainted with Mr. Shata, and speak highly of him. The officers of Mr. Shata's local police precinct often turn to him for help when Muslims in Bay Ridge refuse to be questioned. The senior F.B.I. counterterrorism official in New York, Charles E. Frahm, described his interaction with Mr. Shata as "very positive."

Mr. Frahm was in the room last August when Mr. Mershon challenged the imam. Mr. Shata and other Muslim leaders had agreed to meet the agents at the Muslim Youth Center in Bensonhurst in an effort to improve relations between the two camps.

"I have been impressed with his desire, as he's expressed it to me, to do good and do right," Mr. Frahm said.

Yet for Mr. Shata, cooperation brings conflicting emotions. He can charm a class of rookies at the 68th Precinct in Brooklyn, turning a perfunctory cultural sensitivity seminar into a comedy hour. But he is quietly outraged that an unmarked car shadows a respected Palestinian board member of his mosque.

The imam is saddened to see so many Muslims leave America, pushed out by new immigration policies, intimidation or despair. He also fears for those who have remained: for the teenage boy in his mosque who is suddenly praying at dawn, having drifted from a high school that left him alienated.

Still, Mr. Shata said, the anger and fear, no matter how deeply felt, are tempered by something greater: the devastating impact of Sept. 11 on non-Muslim Americans.

"It will take them a while to come to terms with us," he said.

A Necessary Dialogue

The competing demands on Mr. Shata became plain when he arrived in Bay Ridge about a year after Sept. 11.

Crisis gripped the city's Muslim neighborhoods. Law enforcement agents searched businesses and homes, and held hundreds of men for questioning. Women were harassed in the subway. Elementary schools lost Muslim children as their families packed up and left.

Mr. Shata's predecessor, Mohamed Moussa, was drained. "I needed a change or I would destroy myself," said Mr. Moussa, who now works as one of three imams at a well-funded mosque in Union City, N.J.

Like many mosques in struggling immigrant neighborhoods, the Islamic Society of Bay Ridge had little choice but to search abroad for a replacement. America produces few imams with the qualities sought by foreign-born Muslims: fluency in Arabic, and a superior command of the Koran and the laws that codify Islamic life.

Mr. Shata was an enticing candidate. Like Mr. Moussa, he had trained at Al Azhar University in Cairo, a citadel of Islamic scholarship. Through an Azhar professor, Mr. Moussa found Mr. Shata in Germany, where he had been working as an imam.

The men who sit on the mosque's board were pleased to find charisma in their new imam. The white brick mosque on Fifth Avenue in Bay Ridge survives largely on the donations of its congregants. Only a riveting speaker can draw them.

But soon after Mr. Shata arrived, he became aware of another, less visible audience. In mosques around the city, informers were hidden among the praying masses, listening

for what officials call "double talk" — one voice of extremism inside the mosque, and another of tolerance outside.

The attention did not worry Mr. Shata, he said, because he had nothing to hide. "My page is clean," he said.

But when the authorities came seeking his help, he faced a choice. He could welcome them and improve the mosque's public standing, or he could rebuff their inquiries at the risk of seeming obstructionist.

"There's a wall of silence around these mosques," said Representative Peter T. King, a Long Island Republican and chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee. "It's not necessarily the imam himself who is actively engaged, but he looks the other way or allows activities in his mosque that could be dangerous."

Mr. Shata viewed cooperation as his Islamic duty. "Whoever is afraid of dialogue is hiding something," he said.

Mosque Under a Microscope

The greatest test of Mr. Shata's relationship with the authorities came with the arrest of a young Muslim congregant who was accused of plotting terrorism.

Shahawar Matin Siraj, 23, was a chatty Pakistani immigrant who worked in the Islamic bookstore next to the mosque. On the job, he was sometimes seen talking to James Elshafay, 21, a soft-spoken Muslim American from Staten Island. In August 2004, both were charged in Brooklyn federal court with conspiring to blow up the 34th Street subway station at Herald Square.

The men had been videotaped discussing the plot and scouting the subway station with a paid police informer who told them he belonged to an Islamic "brotherhood."

In the days after the arrests, reporters swarmed into Bay Ridge. Anonymous threats were called in to the bookstore, Islamic Books & Tapes. One letter to the store read, "You're all dead meat."

The imam and others at the mosque soon realized they knew the informer: a gray-haired Egyptian who called himself Osama Daoudi and said he lived in Staten Island.

"He used to say, 'My name is Osama, like Osama bin Laden,' " Mr. Shata recalled.

Mr. Daoudi had surfaced at the mosque a year earlier, said Mr. Shata. He tried to interest the imam in a real estate deal, proposing that Mr. Shata use his influence over Muslims to collect money owed to Mr. Daoudi in exchange for a secret cash commission, Mr. Shata recalled.

The imam wanted nothing to do with the scheme, he said, and kept his distance. He found Mr. Daoudi off-putting. He claimed to be the son of a famous Egyptian sheik and was known at the mosque for weeping when he prayed. But he also smoked.

"Piety in Islam forbids smoking," Mr. Shata observed.

Most striking was the anti-American sentiment that Mr. Daoudi espoused, Mr. Shata said. During visits with the imam, Mr. Daoudi complained that Americans might fear him because he had a Ph.D. in nuclear engineering. He also said that the F.B.I. wanted to search his home, the imam recalled.

"I told him, 'As long as you do nothing wrong, open your house and your heart to people,'" said Mr. Shata.

The imam said he believed that after Mr. Daoudi found him uninterested, he turned his focus to Mr. Siraj and Mr. Elshafay.

Starting in September 2003, the informer spent months drawing Mr. Siraj into the plot, teaching him about violent jihad, said Mr. Siraj's lawyer, Martin R. Stolar.

The authorities would say little about the case, which is set for trial next month. Efforts to locate Mr. Daoudi, whose name was provided by Mr. Stolar, were unsuccessful.

The Police Department's chief spokesman, Paul J. Browne, dismissed Mr. Stolar's claim that the police had manufactured the plot. "We didn't propose that," he said. "We took action to stop it and there's a big difference."

Mr. Siraj had an "interest in violence" that was known to the authorities prior to an informer's involvement, Mr. Browne added.

For the imam, the informer's supposed maneuvering was not surprising. Mr. Shata shares a view common among Muslims in Bay Ridge that confidential informers are untrustworthy because some have criminal records or work for pay.

This perception irks Mr. Frahm, the F.B.I. official. Informers' reports are closely vetted, he said, and their motives are irrelevant if they provide correct information.

Mr. Frahm devotes much time to building trust among Muslim leaders. But he also warns them not to turn a blind eye to questionable activity. "You can't play part-time American," he said.

'From the Stones of Insults'

Anger at the authorities came easily at the mosque. But a quiet, if disturbing, question soon followed: Entrapped or not, what had caused these young men to entertain thoughts of terrorism?

The imam looks for answers on the crowded sidewalk outside the mosque.

The worn cement slabs along Fifth Avenue have long been divided into two social camps. After the Friday prayer, the section in front of the mosque fills with the neighborhood's Arab pioneers, gray-haired and balding Palestinians and Egyptians.

Several feet south, under the marquee of a movie theater, the neighborhood's Arab teenagers gather. Before Sept. 11, the groups rarely mingled. But in the years since, many of the younger set have returned to their faith.

The imam now rises to deliver his Friday khutba, or sermon, before rows of young men, some in low-hanging jeans and baseball caps turned backward. Many have come to learn more about their religion so they can defend it at work or at school. Others no longer feel at home elsewhere. They have been passed over for jobs, or stopped and questioned by the authorities too many times.

It is these men, and their sense of alienation, that most worry Mr. Shata. The mosque is not their only refuge. A new crop of sheesha cafes opened along the avenue after Sept. 11, filling with male chatter and the sweet smoke of water pipes.

"I once read a Spanish proverb," Mr. Shata said one evening. "The wall of hatred was asked, 'How were you built?' And the reply was, 'From the stones of insults.' "

Over the last three decades, the European immigrant enclave of Bay Ridge has given way to Gazan barbers, halal butchers and Egyptian jewelers. But the newest settlers have not always been welcome.

"It became, 'This ain't Bay Ridge anymore, it's Beirut,' " said Russell Kain, a retired community affairs officer from the 68th Precinct.

America has brought the imam his own share of taunts. A woman on a plane once asked him if he was Muslim and then demanded to change seats. Mr. Shata grew up wearing the long robes of his Egyptian homeland. He now travels in a suit.

But in Bay Ridge, he fights alienation with an open heart. He is increasingly a blend of East and West, proudly walking to the mosque in a robe and sandals, while warding off the cold with a wool Yankees hat. "I feel like I'm living in my country," he said.

It is a message he repeats everywhere he goes, one he says is the antidote to hatred. He meets with Muslim youth groups at mosques around the city, telling them not to wait for an invitation to embrace America. Even if Muslims feel singled out, Mr. Shata often says, America is still the freest country in the world.

The imam plans to stay for "as long as God wills it," he said. He got his green card in November.

Mr. Shata knows most of his congregants by face, and the 400 who pray daily by name. If he sees a young person taken by sudden devotion, his impulse is to probe. Is the person driven by faith or isolation? He can't always be sure.

The imam's concerns are shared by the F.B.I. Several officials said the bureau had recently focused its surveillance on the city's Muslim youth after learning that the London bombings last July were mostly carried out by South Asians raised in Britain. Mr. Shata and the authorities agree that young Muslims are most captive to the messages of militant sheiks.

"Islam is a religion based on intellect," he tells his young listeners. "Islam says to you: 'Think. Don't close your eyes and just follow your emotions. Don't follow the sheik. Perhaps you have a better mind than his.' "

"If you do wrong," he says, "you do wrong to the whole Islamic world."

One Imam, Many Audiences

One evening in July, Mr. Shata sat in the neat, air-conditioned living room of a brick row house in Queens. An Egyptian family had invited him over to bless their newest member, a 5-week-old girl.

The infant, swathed in soft pink cotton, slept in a car seat on the floor as her mother and grandmother offered tea and pastries. On a wide-screen television, Al Jazeera flashed news that two Algerian diplomats had been killed in Iraq.

Mr. Shata was bothered by the killers' description of the victims as "infidels." The world, he said, needed to agree on a definition of terrorism. "What I may see as terrorism, you may not see that way," he said.

Few subjects pose a more complicated test of loyalties for Mr. Shata than the struggle between Arabs and Israelis. Many Palestinians attend his mosque. When he discusses the conflict, one gets the sense that he is, again, speaking to several audiences.

Like Arabs around the world, Mr. Shata disagrees profoundly with the United States' steadfast support of Israel, and views the militant group [Hamas](#) as a powerful symbol of resistance.

When Sheik [Ahmed Yassin](#), the founder and spiritual leader of Hamas, was killed by Israelis in March 2004, Mr. Shata told hundreds who gathered at a memorial service in Brooklyn that the "lion of Palestine has been martyred."

Mr. Shata is also acutely aware that the United States classifies Hamas as a terrorist group. In the same speech, he condemned all violence. "We don't hate Jews," he recalled saying. "To kill one man is to kill all mankind."

Yet in another sermon, the imam exalted a young Palestinian mother, Reem Al-Reyashi, who blew herself up in 2004 at a crossing point between Gaza and Israel, killing four Israelis. Mr. Shata described the woman as a martyr.

When asked about the speech, Mr. Shata seemed unusually conflicted. He has forged friendships with rabbis in New York — something he never imagined in Egypt. Engaging in a discussion about the Arab-Israeli struggle would invite controversy, he said, both within his mosque and outside it. "I worry this will cause trouble with my Jewish brothers," he said. He rarely broaches the topic in sermons and addressed it only reluctantly in interviews.

"I do not accept suicide operations that target civilians at any time or place," Mr. Shata said. But striking Israeli soldiers "as a means of defense" was justifiable.

The Israelis, he said, have "killed Palestinian women, destroyed their homes, taken their land and materials and made them into refugees," while Palestinians lack the military means to fight back. Islamic law forbids suicide, he said, but the Koran says Muslims

can defend themselves if attacked. Ms. Al-Reyashi killed two soldiers, a border police officer and a security guard, though Palestinian and Israeli civilians were hurt.

Mr. Shata acknowledged that his opinion, while common among Arabs, is strongly opposed not only by many non-Muslims, but even by some of his congregants. "Some Muslims, if they hear this, would make me out to be a nonbeliever because they see that all these suicide operations are a must," he said. "And there are other Muslims who feel that all of these operations are forbidden.

"My nature is always to be in the middle," he said. "It's always the person in the middle who ends up being the enemy of the right and the left. I don't want to open up two fronts against me."

Mr. Shata is forceful in his condemnation of terrorism in the West, a message he feels is rarely heard. After the suicide bombings in London last year, he and other Muslims called a news conference in Brooklyn to denounce the violence. Nobody came.

In his sermons, Mr. Shata repeatedly makes the point that terrorism violates the tenets of Islam. "I feel that I breathe underwater, or that I cry in a desert," he said recently. "That nobody responds."

It was part of Mr. Shata's annual Sept. 11 speech, a tradition he began in 2003. Recordings of the sermon, titled "What Muslims Want From America," sold out at the mosque overnight.

The three Sept. 11 speeches echo the imam's journey in America. His first speech was conciliatory in tone; a treatise on the peaceful nature of Islam. In 2004, he urged Muslims to respect the law, and trust that America is not "the enemy." Last September, his message hardened.

"We want the U.S. to be just in dealing with our issues," Mr. Shata declared. A man "should not feel that he is under surveillance for every word he says, every move he makes and every piece of paper he signs."

Muslims feel isolated, yet crave acceptance, he said, likening them to their ancestors 14 centuries ago, who sought refuge from the king of Abyssinia.

"O king, we have come to thy country having chosen thee above all others," he said, reciting the words of the group's leader, Jafar Ibn Abi Talib.

"It is our hope, o king, that here, with thee, we shall not suffer wrong."

AN IMAM IN AMERICA

Tending to Muslim Hearts and Islam's Future (3)

By [ANDREA ELLIOTT](#)

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The young Egyptian professional could pass for any New York bachelor.

Dressed in a crisp polo shirt and swathed in cologne, he races his Nissan Maxima through the rain-slicked streets of Manhattan, late for a date with a tall brunette. At red lights, he fusses with his hair.

What sets the bachelor apart from other young men on the make is the chaperon sitting next to him — a tall, bearded man in a white robe and stiff embroidered hat.

"I pray that Allah will bring this couple together," the man, Sheik Reda Shata, says, clutching his seat belt and urging the bachelor to slow down.

Christian singles have coffee hour. Young Jews have JDate. But many Muslims believe that it is forbidden for an unmarried man and woman to meet in private. In predominantly Muslim countries, the job of making introductions and even arranging marriages typically falls to a vast network of family and friends.

In Brooklyn, there is Mr. Shata.

Week after week, Muslims embark on dates with him in tow. Mr. Shata, the imam of a Bay Ridge mosque, juggles some 550 "marriage candidates," from a gold-toothed electrician to a professor at [Columbia University](#). The meetings often unfold on the green velour couch of his office, or over a meal at his favorite Yemeni restaurant on Atlantic Avenue.

The bookish Egyptian came to America in 2002 to lead prayers, not to dabble in matchmaking. He was far more conversant in Islamic jurisprudence than in matters of the heart. But American imams must wear many hats, none of which come tailor-made.

Whether issuing American-inspired fatwas or counseling the homesick, fielding questions from the [F.B.I.](#) or mediating neighborhood spats, Mr. Shata walks an endless labyrinth of problems.

If anything seems conquerable, it is the solitude of Muslim singles. Nothing brings the imam more joy than guiding them to marriage. It is his way of fashioning a future for his faith. It is his most heartfelt effort — by turns graceful and comedic, vexing and hopeful — to make Islam work in America.

Word of the imam's talents has traveled far, eliciting lonely calls from Muslims in Chicago and Los Angeles, or from meddlesome parents in Cairo and Damascus.

From an estimated 250 chaperoned dates, Mr. Shata has produced 10 marriages.

"The prophet said whoever brings a man and woman together, it is as if he has worshiped for an entire year," said Mr. Shata, 37, speaking through an Arabic translator.

The task is not easy. In a country of plentiful options, Muslim immigrants can become picky, even rude, the imam complains.

During one date, a woman studied the red-circled eyes of a prospective husband and asked, "Have you brought me an alcoholic?"

On another occasion, an Egyptian man stared at the flat chest of a pleasant young Moroccan woman and announced, "She looks like a log!" the imam recalled.

"This would never happen in Egypt," said Mr. Shata, turning red at the memory. "Never, never. If I knew this boy had no manners I never would have let him into my office."

The Imam's Little Black Book

The concept of proper courtship in Islam, like much about the faith, is open to interpretation.

Islamic law specifies that a man and woman who are unmarried may not be alone in closed quarters. Some Muslims reject any mingling before marriage. Others freely date. Many fall somewhere in between, meeting in groups, getting engaged and spending time alone before the wedding, while their parents look the other way.

For one Syrian in New York, a date at Starbucks is acceptable if it begins and ends on the premises: The public is his chaperon.

Mr. Shata is a traditionalist. There were few strangers in his rural town of birth, Kafr al Battikh, in northeastern Egypt. Men and women often agreed to marry the day they met, and a few made the deal sight unseen. It was rare to meet anyone from a distant province, let alone another country.

New York is not only the capital of the world, imams often joke, but also the crossroads of Islam, a human sampling more diverse than anywhere save Mecca during the annual

pilgrimage known as the Hajj. Beyond the city's five boroughs, Muslim immigrants have formed Islamic hubs in California, Illinois, Michigan and Texas.

At the center of these hubs stands a familiar sight in a foreign land, the mosque. What was a place of worship in Pakistan or Algeria becomes, in Houston or Detroit, a social haven. But inside, the sexes remain largely apart.

A growing number of Muslim Web sites advertise marriage candidates, and housewives often double as matchmakers. One mosque in Princeton, N.J., plays host to a closely supervised version of speed dating. And so many singles worship at the Islamic Society of Boston that a committee was formed to match them up.

Fearing a potential surplus of single Muslim women, one Brooklyn imam reportedly urged his wealthier male congregants during a Ramadan sermon last year to take two wives. When a woman complained about the sermon to Mr. Shata, he laughed.

"You know that preacher who said [Hugo Chávez](#) should be shot?" he asked. "We have our idiots, too."

More than a matchmaker, Mr. Shata sees himself as a surrogate elder to young Muslims, many of whom live far from their parents. In America, only an imam is thought to have the connections, wisdom and respect to step into the role.

Mr. Shata began the service three months after arriving in Brooklyn in 2002, recruited to lead the Islamic Society of Bay Ridge, a mosque on Fifth Avenue.

Dates chaperoned by Mr. Shata — or "meetings between candidates," as the imam prefers to call them — often take place in his distinctly unromantic office, amid rows of Islamic texts. As a couple get acquainted, the imam sits quietly at his desk, writing a sermon or surfing the Arabic Web sites of CNN and the BBC.

If there is an awkward silence, the imam perks up and asks a question ("So tell me, Ilham, how many siblings do you have?") and the conversation is moving again.

Candidates are vetted carefully, and those without personal references need not apply. But instinct is Mr. Shata's best guide. He refused to help a Saudi from California because the man would consider only a teenage wife. Others have shown an all-too-keen interest in a green card.

Those who pass initial inspection are listed in the imam's version of a little black book — their names, phone numbers, specifications and desires. Some prefer "silky hair," others "a

virgin." Nearly all candidates, men and women alike, want a mate with devotion to Islam, decent looks and legal immigration status.

Scanning the book, the imam makes his pitch with the precision of a car salesman.

"There is a girl, an American convert, Dominican, looks a little Egyptian. Skin-wise, not white, not dark. Wheat-colored. She's 19, studies accounting," Mr. Shata told a 24-year-old Palestinian man one afternoon.

"This is my only choice?" replied the man, Yamal Othman, who lives in Queens.

Such questions annoy Mr. Shata. An imam, he says, should be trusted to select the best candidate. Often, though, his recommendations are met with skepticism.

"It's harder than choosing a diamond," said Mr. Shata.

Sometimes, on the imam's three-legged dates, no one seems more excited than Mr. Shata himself. He makes hurried, hearty introductions and then steps back to watch, as if mixing chemicals in a lab experiment. Love is rarely ignited, but the imam remains awed by its promise.

Mr. Shata discovered love 15 years ago, when he walked into the living room of the most stately house in Kafr al Battikh.

The imam was tall, 22, a rising star at the local mosque. For months, Omya Elshabrawy knew only his voice. She would listen to his thunderous sermons from the women's section, out of view. Then, one evening, he appeared at her home, presented as a prospective groom to her father, a distinguished reciter of the Koran.

The young woman, then 20, walked toward Mr. Shata carrying a tray of lemonade.

"She entered my heart," said the imam.

After serving the drinks, she disappeared. Right then, Mr. Shata asked her father for her hand in marriage. The older man paused. His daughter was the town beauty, an English student with marriage offers from doctors. The imam was penniless.

But before Mr. Elshabrawy could respond, a sugary voice interrupted. "I accept," his daughter said from behind a door.

"I loved him from the moment I saw him," Ms. Elshabrawy said.

They now have four children.

The family posed last year for a Sears-style portrait, taken by a woman in Bay Ridge who photographs Muslim families in her basement. A blue sky and white picket fence adorn the background. The imam sits at center, with the baby, Mohammed, in his lap, his three daughters smiling, his wife wrapped in a lime-green hijab.

Mr. Shata carries the picture in the breast pocket of his robe. It is as close as most people get to his family. At the mosque, they are a mystery. His wife has been there twice.

Their years in America have come with great hardship, a subject the imam rarely discusses. The trouble is the illness of his 7-year-old daughter, Rawda, who is severely epileptic. She has dozens of seizures every day and rarely leaves home. No combination of medicine seems to help.

"Rawda is the wound in my heart," the imam said.

Mr. Shata offers long, stubborn theories about the value of marriage, but to observe him at home is to understand the commitment he seeks to foster in other Muslims.

The family lives in a spare, dimly lighted apartment two blocks from the mosque. Headscarves are piled over Pokémon cards. The gold-painted words "Allah is Great" are framed over a threadbare couch. In the next room, an "I {sheart} New York" bumper sticker is slapped on the wall.

Mr. Shata spends long hours away from his family, lecturing at mosques, settling disputes, whispering the call to prayer in the ears of newborn babies. On his walk home at night, he shops for groceries, never forgetting the Honey Nut Cheerios, a favorite American discovery of his children.

When he walks in the door, his face softens. Loud kisses are planted on tender cheeks. Mohammed squeals, the girls smile, sweet laughter echoes.

But then there is Rawda.

"My beautiful girl," the imam says softly one evening, holding his limp daughter in his lap after a seizure has passed. He places one pill in Rawda's mouth, then another. She looks at him weakly.

"There we go," he whispers. "Inshallah."

Her lids close with sleep. He lays her in bed and shuts off the light.

Hardship, the imam believes — like marriage, like life — is a test from God.

Foreign and Familiar

It is proof of the imam's uncommon popularity among women that he is trusted with roughly 300 female marriage candidates.

The mosque on Fifth Avenue is a decidedly male place. Men occupy every position on the board of directors. They crowd the sidewalk after prayer. Only they may enter the mosque's central room of worship. Only men, they often point out, are required to attend the Friday prayer.

One floor below is the cramped room where the women worship. On Fridays, they sit pressed together, their headscarves itching with heat. They must watch their imam on a closed-circuit television that no one seems to have adjusted in years.

But they listen devotedly. Teenage girls often roll their eyes at foreign imams, who seem to them like extraterrestrials. Their immigrant mothers often find these clerics too strict, an uncomfortable reminder of their conservative homelands.

Mr. Shata is both foreign and familiar. He presides over a patriarchal world, sometimes upholding it, and other times challenging it. In one sermon, he said that a man was in charge of his home and had the right to "choose his wife's friends."

Another day, to the consternation of his male congregants, he invited a female Arab social worker to lecture on domestic violence. The women were allowed to sit next to the men in the main section of the mosque.

The imam frowns at career women who remain single in their 30's, but boasts of their accomplishments to interest marriage candidates. He employs his own brand of feminism, vetting marriage contracts closely to ensure brides receive a fair dowry and fighting for them when they don't.

Far more than is customary, he spends hours listening to women: to their worries and confessions, their intimate secrets and frank questions about everything from menstruation to infidelity. They line up outside his office and call his home at all hours, often referring to him as "my brother" or "father." He can summon the details of their lives with the same encyclopedic discipline he once used to memorize the Koran.

"Are you separated yet?" Mr. Shata asked a woman he encountered at Lutheran Medical Center one day last July. She nodded. "May God make it easier for you," he said.

A Chaperoned Date

By most standards, the Egyptian bachelor was a catch. He had broad shoulders and a playful smile. He was witty. He earned a comfortable salary as an engineer, and came from what he called "a good family."

But the imam saw him differently, as a young man in danger of losing his faith. The right match might save him.

The bachelor, who is 33, came to Brooklyn from Alexandria, Egypt, six years earlier. He craved a better salary, and freedom from controlling parents. He asked that his name not be printed for fear of causing embarrassment to his family.

America was not like Egypt, where his family's connections could secure a good job. In Brooklyn, he found work as a busboy. He traded the plush comfort of his parents' home for an apartment crowded with other Egyptian immigrants. His nights were lonely. Temptation was abundant.

Women covered far less of their bodies. Bare limbs, it seemed, were everywhere. In Islam, men are instructed to lower their gaze to avoid falling into sin.

"In the summertime, it's a disaster for us," said the bachelor. "Especially a guy like me, who's looking all the time."

Curiosity lured him into bars, clubs and the occasional one-night stand.

But with freedom came guilt, he said. After drifting from his faith, he visited Mr. Shata's mosque during Ramadan in 2004.

The imam struck him as oddly disarming. He made jokes, and explained Islam in simple, passionate paragraphs. The bachelor soon began praying daily, attending weekly lectures and reading the Koran. By then, he had his own apartment and a consulting job.

Now he wanted a Muslim wife.

If the bachelor had been in Egypt, his parents would offer a stream of marriage candidates. The distance had not stopped them entirely. His mother sent him a video of his brother's wedding, directing him to footage of a female guest. He was unimpressed.

"I'm a handsome guy," he explained one evening as he sped toward Manhattan. It was his second date with Mr. Shata in attendance. "I have a standard in beauty."

From the passenger seat, the imam flipped open the glove compartment to find an assortment of pricey colognes. He inspected a bottle of Gio and, with a nod from the bachelor, spritzed it over his robe.

The imam and the bachelor were at odds over the material world, but on one thing they agreed: it is a Muslim duty to smell good. The religion's founder, the Prophet Muhammad, was said to wear musk.

The car slowed before a brick high-rise on Second Avenue. Soon the pair rode up in the elevator. The bachelor took a breath and rang the doorbell. An older woman answered. Behind her stood a slender, fetching woman with a shy smile.

The young woman, Engy Abdelkader, had been presented to the imam by another matchmaker. A woman of striking beauty and poise, Ms. Abdelkader is less timid than she first seems. She works as an immigration and human rights lawyer, and speaks in forceful, eloquent bursts. She is proud of her faith, and lectures publicly on Islam and civil liberties.

She was not always so outspoken. The daughter of Egyptian immigrants, Ms. Abdelkader, 30, was raised in suburban Howell, N.J., where she longed to fit in. Though she grew up praying, in high school she chose not to wear a hijab, the head scarf donned by Muslim girls when they reach puberty.

But Sept. 11 awakened her, Ms. Abdelkader said. For her and other Muslims, the terrorist attacks prompted a return to the faith, driven by what she said was a need to reclaim Islam from terrorists and a vilifying media. Headscarves became a statement, equal parts political and religious.

"There's nothing oppressive about it," said Ms. Abdelkader. "As a Muslim woman I am asking people to pay attention to the content of my character rather than my physical appearance."

The pair sat on a couch, awkwardly sipping tea. They began by talking, in English, about their professions. The bachelor was put off by the fact that Ms. Abdelkader had a law degree, yet earned a modest salary.

"Why go to law school and not make money?" he asked later.

Ms. Abdelkader's mother and a female friend who lived in the apartment sat listening nearby until the imam mercifully distracted them. The first hint of trouble came soon after.

It was his dream, the engineer told Ms. Abdelkader, to buy a half-million-dollar house. But he was uncertain that the mortgage he would need is lawful in Islam.

Ms. Abdelkader straightened her back and replied, "I would rather have eternal bliss in the hereafter than live in a house or apartment with a mortgage."

An argument ensued. Voices rose. Ms. Abdelkader's mother took her daughter's side. The friend wavered. The bachelor held his ground. The imam tried to mediate.

Indeed, he was puzzled. Here was a woman who had grown up amid tended lawns and new cars, yet she rejected materialism. And here was a man raised by Muslim hands, yet he was rebelliously moderate.

After the date, the bachelor told the imam, "I want a woman, not a sheik."

Months later, he married another immigrant; she was not especially devoted to Islam but she made him laugh, he said. They met through friends in New York.

Ms. Abdelkader remains single. The imam still believes she was the perfect match.

That evening, the imam stood on the sidewalk outside. Rain fell in stinging drops.

"I never wanted to be a sheik," he said. "I used to think that a religious person is very extreme and never smiles. And I love to smile. I love to laugh. I used to think that religious people were isolated and I love to be among people."

The rain soaked the imam's robe and began to pool in his sandals. A moment later, he ducked inside the building.

"The surprise for me was that the qualities I thought would not make a good sheik — simplicity and humor and being close to people — those are the most important qualities. People love those who smile and laugh. They need someone who lives among them and knows their pain."

"I know them," said Mr. Shata. "Like a brother."