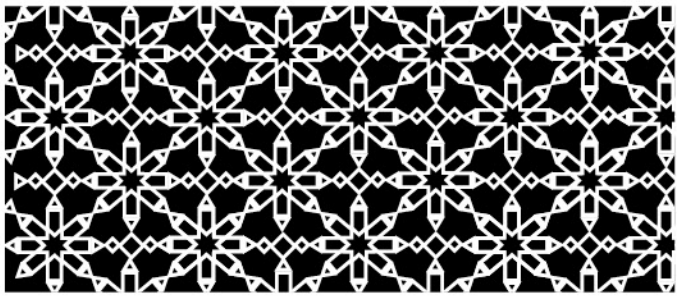




INSIDE ISLAM



INSIDE ISLAM

STORY BY RILEY PAVELICH



SALVATORE FERRARA'S near-death experience at the age of 11 began a spiritual quest that would last his whole lifetime. Casting aside his Catholic upbringing, he began to look for something that answered his most burning questions.

Ferrara asked his mother to drive him to the public library in his hometown of Newark, Del., where he pulled books randomly off the shelf in the World Religion section. Throughout the years Ferrara examined any religion that rang true to him. His search led him from Zoroastrianism to Wicca to indigenous Indian practices, and ultimately, in 2008, to Islam. He has been a devoted Muslim ever since.

Ferrara, 30, is now a student at the University of Montana and the president of the Muslim Student Association, is married to a Muslim woman and gives the weekly sermon at the MSA House.

"For me, I define myself as Muslim... Where I'm going in life, how I act, what I eat, it's all defined by Islam," Ferrara said. "Allah has guided me to the best life anyone can have."

Ferrara said he initially looked into Islam to prove to a woman who he was interested in that a Muslim woman could date a man with tattoos, of which he has several. He said his interest in Islam "sprouted like a tree."

Islam appealed to Ferrara's ra-

tional side, with many scientific claims found within the Quran proved by modern research, such as a rudimentary Big Bang theory and the egg-shape of the earth. He found nothing to discredit the Islamic holy book and began to identify with the moral uprightness espoused by the Prophet Muhammad.

Ferrara admits that initially he didn't know much about Islam, but the more he studied the more his faith grew.

Ferrara still remembers the exact moment when his religious revelation dawned on him. He was driving his truck in Missoula, while listening to an Islamic sermon on tape.

"I didn't understand the tightness in my chest," Ferrara said. "I was bitter and felt like my heart was turning cold. Suddenly, my heart felt touched by the beams of the sun and a tear fell from my eye."

Americans' understanding of Islam is largely ignorant of the social, political and historical tensions prevalent in the Middle East, said UM Professor Mehrdad Kia, originally of Iran. Kia now heads the Central and Southwest Asian Studies Center.

Western perceptions of Islam, he said, have been informed by acts of terror and aggression perpetrated by a tiny minority of Islamic extremists, such as the recent assassination of U.S. Ambassador Chris Stevens in Libya.

Islam is the fastest growing religious group in the United States, Kia said, and has an increasing presence in Montana. Kia said Muslims fear marginalization in mainstream American culture and complain of being used as an easy scapegoat.

Anti-American violence in the Muslim world has dominated recent headlines because of a YouTube clip called "The Innocence

of Muslims," which portrays the Prophet Muhammad as a blood-thirsty pedophile.

UM professor Samir Bitar, who teaches Arabic studies, was born in Jerusalem and came to the United States at age 16. He explained that it is against Islamic principals to speak the names of any of the prophets in vain or to depict the Prophet Muhammad.

"Muslims take the Prophet as an exemplar and the highest level of piety is to lead your life in the ways of the Prophet," Bitar said. "Having said that, when people depict the Prophet in vulgar ways, it's very insulting not just to Muslims. It's an insult to humanity."

Professor Kia expressed outrage that a small group of Islamic radicals endangered the interests of all Libyans by killing the U.S. Ambassador, who had been a friend and advocate of the people. He said the media used the tragedy to paint an "us versus them" view of Middle Eastern relations.

"The large majority of Muslims didn't care to watch (the video) and recognized it for the piece of trash it was," he said. "Nothing in Islam justifies the killing of innocent human beings."



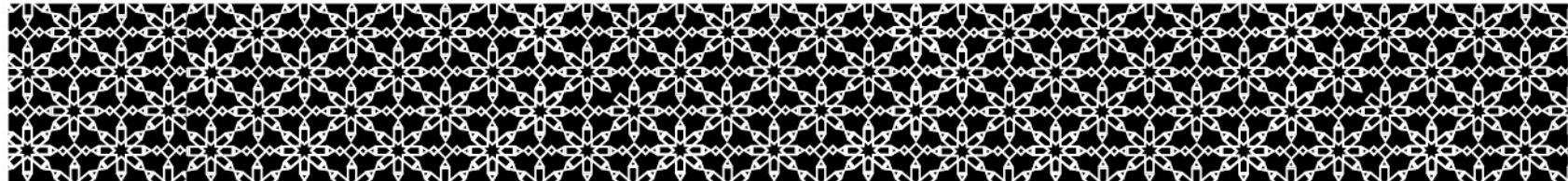
Meghan Nolt/Montana Kaimin

Salvatore Ferrara, left, leads Abdulaziz Almedaimigh, right, and other Muslims in prayer at the Muslim Student Association house Thursday afternoon.



Abby Redfern/Montana Kaimin
Alina Calianu, who converted from Orthodox Christian to Islam last January, said she has complete peace about her choice because she knows she is doing the right thing.

THROUGH THEIR EYES



FAR AWAY FROM THE turmoil in the Middle East, UM's Foreign Student and Scholar Services report nearly 140 students and faculty members at the University of Montana come from a Muslim-majority country. Islam is no longer a distant, inaccessible religion for UM students. The MSA house, owned by UM, acts as the Islamic center for the Muslim community in Missoula. Muslim Awareness Week begins Oct. 22, offering free lectures, movies and events for those interested in expanding their knowledge of this complex, multifaceted religion. Many of the worshippers at the MSA house are Middle Eastern foreign exchange students, but a growing minority is made up of Anglo converts and first-generation Americans.

Alina Calianu came to the United States from Romania six years ago to study as an exchange student in Havre. She graduated from UM in 2011 with a bachelor's

degree in international business marketing. Now she's working on a master's thesis on integrating culturally diverse individuals into mainstream American society through higher education.

A tiny woman with bright eyes, a ready smile and high-heeled boots, Calianu describes herself as motivated and goal-oriented. She converted to Islam in January 2011. Previously, she was a part of the Christian Orthodox Church like most Romanians.

"It didn't make sense anymore," she said. "When I looked into Islam I found answers. I'm a reasonable, logical person, so the scientific proof in the Quran drew me in."

Calianu said she knew her parents would disapprove of her choice.

"It was a bold move for me," she said. "I was scared and confused at first, but I just knew it was the right path, and the more I researched Islam, the more I fell in love with it."

Now, Calianu said she has

found her peace in Allah. Calianu covers her hair with the hijab (headscarf) and wears modest clothing. She said when she looks back, she feels as if she was objectifying herself and now acts more respectfully.

"You see so many people sucked into the trivialities," she said. "If you focus on being a good Muslim, being kind to people, praying and remembering God, you'll find that peace."

Faisal Alanazi, a UM exchange student from Kuwait, said westerners frequently misunderstand the lives of women in Islamic countries. Stories of female oppression in Islamic countries are widely reported in the United States by diverse media outlets.

Alanazi, who has studied in Missoula for five years, said his five sisters have careers as translators, doctors and nurses. However, women are not required to work in Islam, but they are allowed to keep any money they earn, Alanazi said.

Another chapter of the Quran reveals "heaven is at the feet of the mother." The Muslim tradition

"I was scared and confused at first, but I just knew it was the right path and the more I researched Islam the more I fell in love with it."

**Alina Calianu,
UM student**

does not blame Eve for the expulsion from the proverbial garden. Bitar said women have served as heads of state in many Islamic countries, such as Pakistan, Jordan, Kyrgyzstan and Senegal. Ferrara

said the sexes each have their own responsibilities and rights within their own domains.

"People say there is no gender equality in Islam, and they're right," Ferrara said. "There's something better: equity."

Ferrara said that men are responsible for providing for the family and women are charged with raising children. Calianu said she likes the way women are viewed in Islam.

"Women are like a jewel to take care of and protect," Calianu said. "That's how I see women in Islam. Very protected and very respected."

Islam's religious traditions are similar to that of Judaism and Christianity, Kia said. United by a common link to the prophet Abraham, they share some spiritual beliefs and claim the same sacred lands. Bitar said the actual tenants of Islam are often jumbled with fundamentalist sects' radical opinions.

"If Americans want to understand Islam, they need to study Islam, not Muslims," Bitar said.

Islam began in the seventh century in the deserts of what is now Saudi Arabia, after the establishment of Christianity and Judaism. Ferrara said Muslims accept that God sent several prophets to mankind, including Adam, David, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and finally Muhammad. Allah (the name of God in Islam) sent the angel Gabriel to a man named Muhammad ibn Abdullah, understood by Muslims to be the final and ultimate prophet, Ferrara said. He said the Prophet Muhammad recorded verbatim the revelations sent by Allah, and those recordings became the Quran, or the foundational text of Islam. Muslims consider the Quran as the word of God undistorted, perfect and the complete guide to following his will, Ferrara said.

"The human is always looking for guidance, in a guru or a person," Ferrara said. "In Islam, it's a

direct, personal relation to the Quran. There are no intermediaries."

Bitar said Allah sent the Prophet Muhammad detailed instructions on morality and appropriate social behavior.

"Human interpretation of the divine is highly flawed," Bitar said. "So when Allah completed his message with Muhammad he gave us the details: what to eat, how to dress, how to handle inheritance."

Ferrara said he believes that Islam is more challenging to follow than other religions. He said it's not only a belief system — it's also a lifestyle. He said the Quran prescribes almost every aspect of life.

"It's the only religion that teaches you how to use the bathroom," Ferrara said.

In the Islamic view, he said, this world is a prison for believers and a paradise for non-believers. Islam demands self-submission and obedience to Allah. Ferrara said he

See ISLAM, next page

ISLAM

From previous page

understands the Islamic concept of Jihad to mean putting forth effort and struggling with yourself.

“People are people, and we always have to fight for what is important and what is going to fall by the wayside,” Ferrara said.

Traditional Islam intertwines with daily life. Ferrara said that a devout Muslim’s every waking moment should be in remembrance of Allah. Alanazi said a member of the family supervises any time an unmarried couple spends together. Dating is rare in Islamic countries. Premarital sex is strictly forbidden, Bitar said, and couples don’t touch or kiss before they are married.

Muslims must stop what they’re doing five times a day to pray in the direction of Mecca.

Before they make their prayers, they clean their hands and feet. In addition, Muslims traditionally do not eat pork or any meat that was not slaughtered according to the specifications found in the Quran. Pious Muslims dress modestly, and women are encouraged to cover their hair. Once a year, for the month of Ramadan, Muslims fast during daylight

hours. Of course, Bitar said, like any religion, different sects have interpreted the rules of Islam in different fashions. Some

“People say there’s no gender equality in Islam, and they’re right. There’s something better: Equity.”

Salvatore Ferrara, President of the Muslim Student Association

Muslims adhere to a very conservative reading of the Quran, and others allow a looser understanding. Levels of devoutness vary depending on country, culture and personal practices.

“There is one, and only one, Islam. There are many Muslims,” Bitar said.

There are 50 Muslim-majority countries in the world, according to the Pew Research Center, and more than 1.3 billion Muslims. Although the Quran is traditionally recited in Arabic, the religion of Islam

has spread all over the world. “This perception of Islam as an Arab religion is very, very wrong. It’s a huge mistake,” said Serdar Poyraz, a professor of Middle Eastern history at UM.

The image of Muslims, or followers of Islam, as dark-skinned, Arabic-speaking people only encompasses a small minority of all Muslims, Poyraz said. The entire Arab ethnicity group consists of just 300 million people. Indonesia claims the largest Muslim population, and India alone hosts 170 million Muslim inhabitants. Islam has permeated the world far beyond its historical homeland and is second only to Christianity in number of adherents, according to the BBC.

“In general in the West, religion has been left behind,” Bitar said. “That’s not the case in Islamic countries. It’s part of almost every conversation.”

Muslims use Dhikr, or remembrances of Allah or the Prophet, in casual conversation. Bitar said that when Muslims talk in the present or the past, they close their statement with “praise be to Allah,” and when they speak in the future, they close with “Allah willing.” He said that this level or religious fervor sometimes makes Westerners nervous.



Abby Redfern/Montana Kaimin

Alina Calianu’s prayer rug lies in the basement area of the Mansfield Library. Calianu said when she first converted she had a hard time finding places on campus where she could pray, until she discovered the little prayer area in the basement.

States, Poyraz said, the perception of Muslims as hostile and savage spread throughout the American consciousness.

Kia said Americans are generally woefully ignorant of other cultures. He describes the average American awareness of Islamic cultures as a vacuum, which is filled only by TV reports depicting them as a monolith of fanaticism and terrorism.

“I don’t equate Christianity to the Ku Klux Klan burning crosses or to David Koresh in Waco, Texas,” he said. “Every religion has its fringe groups who use it for political and ideological reasons. In our perception of the Muslim world, they are just waiting to burn an American flag. Most Muslims have their own worries, their own problems.”

Mehrdad Kia

Tyrannical regimes silence any protest and use Islam to justify their practices, Kia said. It is important to differentiate between political Islam and Islam as a personal religion, he said.

“Unfortunately, political Islam has a very unique and reactionary interpretation of Islam, which they try to impose on the rest of the Islamic world,” Kia said.

Poyraz said after the breakup of the Islamic Empires following World War I, France and Britain divided sovereignty of the Muslim world, but by the end of World War II, the colonizing forces retreated from the Middle East, and the Islamic countries began to form independent states, generally autocratic dictatorships.

“The hatred of Western governments has nothing to do with Islam, Christianity or Judaism. It is caused by the partitioning of other people’s land into artificial, dysfunctional states,” Kia said.

He said that some Muslims view what happened during the 19th and 20th centuries as

a Christian-waged holy war against Muslims. He credits these ingrained memories for fundamentalist groups’ continued success in recruiting members.

“Osama bin Laden and other leaders of Islamist movements use the discourse to remind Muslims of the humiliation of

“In our perception of the Muslim world, they are just waiting to burn an American flag. Most Muslims have their own worries, their own problems.”

colonization, and they manipulate the raw sentiments of the street,” Kia said.

Within these states there are also moderate Muslims and left-wing Muslims who advocate modern policies for the well-being of the people, Kia said. He said not all Islamic nations have fallen into this abuse of the division of church and state. Turkey, Indonesia and Malaysia have predominantly Muslim populations, but democratically elected leaders allow for minority groups to practice their beliefs unmolested.

During the Cold War, American foreign policy with the Middle East centered on preventing Soviet states from forming. Poyraz said the U.S. government aided oil-rich nations with disregard for the governmental system in place or for the treatment of the people under these rulers. He said the U.S. supported unethical regimes such as Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak, Saddam Hussein and the current Saudi

Arabian government, which Poyraz said has no respect for human rights.

“When the perception of the United States actually became negative was when American obsession with stability in the region turned to actual support of the autocratic regimes,” Poyraz said.

Poyraz said this profit-centered American foreign policy fueled anger and aggression in the Middle East. However, Poyraz hurries to point out that, in his experience, Middle Easterners make a clear distinction between the American population and the actions of the American government.

Jane Smith wrote in her book “Islam in America” that a negative stereotype of Muslims may be deeply rooted in the American’s European religious heritage, as far back as the times of Charlemagne. Although these fears appear rational to a populous indoctrinated by alarmist media coverage, the Quran does not condone violence or hate.

According to the Pew Research Center, Americans have seen a slow trend away from organized religion in the past decades, which perhaps is a clue about our changing perception of the role of religion in society. However, the Pew Center predicts a world Muslim population of 2.2 billion by 2030, a trend impossible to ignore in the United States, or in Missoula.

Every Friday afternoon, a member of the MSA chants in Arabic, calling the faithful to prayer, a ritual performed the same way all over the world. Ferrara stands before the congregation, offering words of encouragement to those struggling to live by the ways of the Prophet. The believers kneel and place their foreheads on the floor in submission to Allah.

“I don’t even like the word ‘religion’ anymore; it’s so divisive,” said Bitar. “I just tell people I’m a man of faith.”

riley.pavelich@umontana.edu

ONLINE ONLY

SEE HOW MUSLIMS AT UM WORSHIP AT THE MUSLIM STUDENTS ASSOCIATION HOUSE AT

WWW.MONTANAKAIMIN.COM



Tim Goessman/Montana Kaimin

Salvatore Ferrara gives the weekly sermon at the Muslim Student Association house Friday.



LIVE MUSIC EVERY SATURDAY NIGHT!
THIS SATURDAY:
BLUE COLLAR

CALL ABOUT THE SHUTTLE BUS AND CABINS

(406) 273-6264
LUMBERJACKSALOON.COM
7000 GRAVES CREEK RD. LOLO

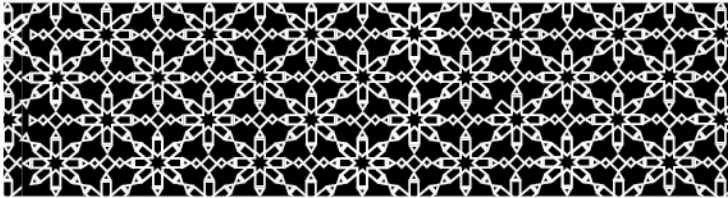


ONE STOP PARTY SHOP
MISSOULA'S MOST LIBERAL CASINO!
ALL THE LATEST GAMES! PLAYER'S REWARD CLUB!!

HUGE SELECTION ON:
LIQUOR
WINE/BEER
MIXERS

Open Everyday 8AM-2AM
2230 Brooks St 542-8761
ACROSS FROM ACE HARDWARE

DIFFERENT PERCEPTIONS



Abby Redfern/Montana Kaimin

Alina Calianu, a graduate student at the University, works in customer service at Dining Services. Caliana, a devout Muslim, said her workplace is great about accommodating her prayer practices (Salat), a Muslim practice that has her pray five times a day.

THE RELATIONSHIP between the Islamic world and the West has been strained since the first crusades of the 11th century, said Bitar. During the Middle Ages, Christian Europe was locked in conflict. Seeking an external enemy, Bitar said the West demonized Islam and Muslims.

When he first came to America 37 years ago, Bitar said he encountered more genuine interest in his religion. Americans would support his choice, referencing the pilgrims on the Mayflower who fled Europe to escape religious prosecution and established the United States, with one of the founding doctrines being freedom of religion. Now, he said, in the post-9/11 climate, questions posed come with built-in bias, approaching hostility.

Muslims in Missoula face a mixed bag of reactions. Ferrara said members of the MSA report hearing “This is America, go back to your country” or “terrorist” shouted outside their house. However, many local Muslims credit Montana

as being a more accepting place than most.

“Every Muslim in this country, or almost all, has had bad experiences,” Bitar said. “I’m very lucky that I’ve been here a long time and live in Montana. People are more curious than anything.”

For a woman, evidence of being Muslim is easily visible. Calianu, who works for Dining Services at UM, said her co-workers have been very accommodating of her conversion to Islam.

“This community is supportive and inclusive,” she said. “It’s very healthy for me. People might be confused if they see a woman wearing a hijab, but if you smile at them, they smile back.”

America’s image of the Middle East has been formed by key events, Poyraz said, from 9/11 to the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the American Embassy hostage crisis that followed, as well as the attack on Israeli athletes at the 1972 Olympics. From these acts of aggression against the United