

# Latino Muslims in the United States: An Introduction

## The Gottfried and Martha Lang Student Prize Paper<sup>1</sup>

Abbas Barzegar<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction

In recent years discussion of the role of Islam in American society as portrayed in mainstream discourse has been mostly associated with the “war on terrorism;” As such, it has been concerned with political conflicts abroad and the threat of international terrorism. In doing so, however, the rise of Islam as a means of religious conversion in the United States has been downplayed if not completely ignored. Surprisingly, statistics such as those presented by national Islamic organizations show increased conversion rates after September 11, 2001. Even more interesting is the presence of tens of thousands of Latino Americans who have chosen Islam as their faith. This essay introduces the rising phenomenon of Latino conversion to Islam in the United States.

Current figures estimate the number of Latino Muslims in the United States to be between 25,000 and 75,000.<sup>3</sup> While the steadily increasing growth in the number of Latino Muslims is a phenomenon, little to no information exists to explain in an analytic fashion the new religious community. However, the dozens of journalists that have covered the phenomenon in their local communities have enabled its increased visibility, which has now reached national and international news outlets. This article introduces the growing Latino Muslim community of the United States by outlining different trends and concerns taking place within the group, provides an introduction to Islam as a faith, and comments on possible future study.

### Islam and Muslims

Islam is a strictly monotheistic faith with theological and historical roots in the Abrahamic religious tradition. As such, Islam shares beliefs with Judaism in the Torah and Christianity in the Old Testament and the majority of their mythologies and prophetic figures. Elements of the New Testament are also shared as religious references to Muslims. As a movement Islam began in the 6<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> century under the guidance of the Prophet Muhammad, whom Muslims hold as the last in a long series of messengers sent by God to the world with the purpose of calling humanity to His worship.

Islam, in a broad sense, inclusive of its various subsets, is characterized by a strict sense of monotheism which aims at providing a complete

system of life as inspired by God and conveyed to mankind through the life and activities of Muhammad. Ritualistically, Islam is marked by the so-called five pillars, which characterize the lifestyle of its adherents. The pillars include: 1) the Testimony of faith, wherein Muslims proclaim the oneness of God and the authority of Muhammad as His Messenger; 2) the Ritual Prayer, which is to occur five times daily at specified times; 3) the Annual Fast, wherein believers abstain from food and drink during the daylight hours for the period of one month; 4) the Almsgiving, which serves as a type of yearly charity incumbent upon all believers with the means; and 5) the Pilgrimage, which demands that Muslims make a journey to the holy city of Mecca – again, for those who possess the means. Further staples of the faith include the prohibition of alcohol, pork, and premarital sex.<sup>4</sup>

Islam as a historical phenomenon had a civilization peak during the same period that marked the Dark Ages of Europe. Prominent centers of learning included Baghdad, Cairo, and Toledo, where major advances in the arts and sciences were realized and then transmitted to the surrounding cultures. Today’s Muslim population around the world is estimated at nearly 1.2 billion, the majority subscribing to the orthodox Sunni branch while a powerful minority, most visible in Iran, subscribes to the Shiite branch. Another manifestation of Islam is Sufism, a popular branch of religious orientation in Islam that stresses the gnostic or mystical dimensions of religious life.

Heuristically, the study of Muslims is fairly easy due to the monotheistic and holistic dimensions of Islam. Conventional definitions of religion apply to Islam, such as that promoted by Clifford Geertz which considers religion to be a system of worldview maintenance and development.<sup>5</sup> Muslim thinkers, such as the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s Sayyid Qutb, consider religion to be a system of life governance or a *manhaj rabani*, or divine program.<sup>6</sup> In terms of experience, a Muslim’s faith might be characterized by Charles Long’s definition of religious experience as an all-encompassing orientation that locates the individual within local, macro, and universal environments.<sup>7</sup> While the religious dimensions of Muslim life may be straightforward, the lived experiences of Muslims, like all other people, is complicated by the interplay between culture, religion and social environment.

## Latino Muslims in the United States

When discussing the phenomenon of Latino Muslims in the United States one risks falling into the trap of identifying a homogenous Latino culture or identity. To attempt to bundle together more than a dozen distinct national and ethnic identities whose geographic region spreads over thousands of miles is as impossible as it is irresponsible. In terms of religious homogeneity the Latino community is by no means a singular entity. Nonetheless, a few broad generalizations about the Latino world are in order.

The 2000 U.S. Census documents the presence of nearly 33 million Latinos in the United States. The term "Latino" is inclusive of all ethnic and national peoples from the Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking worlds. Most Latinos come from a Catholic religious heritage; however, regardless of whether or not one is active in the religion, there usually exists a high amount of religiosity in the community. Other religious communities include various Protestant denominations (whose numbers are increasing) and a small number of Jews. While most Latinos in the United States identify immediately with their respective ethnic or national communities, e.g., Mexican American or Cuban, a broad historical attachment to Spain is reflected in the language, religion, and historical consciousness of their respective cultures.

Current estimates conducted by national Islamic organizations such as the Council for American Islamic Relations (CAIR) and the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) show the number of Latino Muslims in America to be roughly 40,000, with some estimates reaching as high as 75,000 or as low as 20,000. The largest communities of Latino Muslims exist in areas which, unsurprisingly, have the highest concentrations of Latinos. As such, Latino Muslim communities are most visible in large metropolitan areas such as New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami, and other urban centers. Individuals in the developing community often express their newfound faith through nonprofit community organizations that are dedicated toward providing Islamic services to the Latino community.

Organizations such as the Latino American Dawah Organization (LADO), based in New York with chapters growing across the country, provide information about Islam in Spanish to those seeking it. They also maintain an active website which publishes a monthly newsletter that reflects the tones and currents of the new community. Other organizations such as PIEDAD (Propagacion Islamica para la Educacion e la Devocion a Ala' el Divino) concentrate their efforts on reaching the female component of the Latino community.

LALAMA (Los Angeles Latino Muslims Association) began as a Spanish-speaking Islamic study group at the Islamic Center of Southern California. The high demand and popularity of the group's activities led the informal study group to formalize into a visible and service-providing community organization. Similar organizations have begun to appear in Houston, Chicago, and other metropolitan areas.

Perhaps the best-established Latino Muslim organization, Alianza Islamica, was founded in East Harlem and is now located in the Bronx. Alianza was established in 1975 by a group of Puerto Rican Muslim converts who found in Islam the principles of universal brotherhood and equality that were so prominent in the civil rights activities of the era. Ibrahim Gonzales, one of the founders of the Alianza Mosque, says:

we didn't want to give up the struggle, so we looked to different places. Islam represented a place for us to be part of a larger community. When we realized that within Islam there was every spectrum of people, regardless of class, regardless of race, we were attracted to that universal principle of human interaction and communion with the divine" (*New York Times* January 2, 2002).

Alianza provides services to its surrounding community including AIDS awareness campaigns, education services, and religious activities.

As yet there has been no widespread and detailed study of the Latino Muslim population in the United States. An initial investigation conducted by Samantha Sanchez, one of the founders of LADO and a graduate student in Cultural Anthropology at New School University, offered insight into the new community. Her study reports that the majority of Latino converts to Islam were pursuing a spiritual path and encountered Islam through outreach activities of organizations such as those described above, other Islamic organizations, or individuals. Her study also finds, in contrast to popular opinion, that the majority of converts are college-educated women between the ages of 20 and 30. Sanchez finds that the most attractive part of Islam to spirituality-seeking Latinos is its strict monotheistic orientation and structured belief system. Sanchez also finds that a large number of female conversions occur due to marriage with Middle Eastern Muslim men. Further research is being conducted in part by the Muslims in New York City Project of the Middle East Institute at Columbia University. Findings from the project suggest that the presence of Latino Muslims in American cities is a phenomenon connected to a much larger matrix of social, political, and cultural factors.

One salient finding is the tendency for Latino Muslims to place a high emphasis on the historical connection between Latino culture and Islam. This largely unknown marriage is a product of the 800-year-long presence of Islamic culture and civilization in Spain. During this period of Islamic history some of the most profound advances in science, culture, architecture, and philosophy were accomplished in centers of learning that included Christians, Muslims, and Jews. In fact, many of the developments of renaissance and enlightenment-era Europe can be attributed to discoveries made by Muslims in Spain. Many Latino Muslims find solace in the fact that their newfound religion also shares with them a historical and ethnic connection. Accordingly, many of the organizations mentioned above provide information on this lesser-known part of Spanish history. Latino Muslims are often quick to point out the existence of hundreds, if not thousands, of Spanish words with Arabic origins and meanings. This may explain why many Latino Muslims prefer the term “reversion” to “conversion” in describing their experiences. However, this could also be explained by the Islamic belief that all humans are born Muslim and, by their environments, are turned away from Islam. “Reversion” would imply returning to a natural state of being, which is Islam.

Regardless of what Latino Muslims experience in terms of a convergence between their religious and ethnic identities, a strain is felt in most Latino Muslims’ lives when it comes to their families and immediate communities, who see the embracing of Islam as an abandonment of Latino culture. Most published testimonies of Latino Muslim converts address this issue as one that permeates their day-to-day functioning as Muslims. Some community organizations publish materials designed specifically to help new converts deal with questions posed by family members.

The process by which Latino Muslims identify with pre-Columbian Islamic Spain is fairly similar to the way in which many African-American Muslims have identified with the role of Islam in African history. In fact, many Latino Muslims have been drawn to Islam by way of the African-American Muslim experience and its cultural outpouring. The high visibility of African-American Muslims throughout inner-cities across the United States has made many Latinos familiar with Islam. Organizations like the Nation of Islam have stressed the applicability of Islam to the needs of ethnic communities in America; whether or not this type of rhetoric is a motivating force behind conversion is subject to debate. Nonetheless, it would be difficult to deny that African-American conversion

to Islam has set the tone for other communities of Islamic conversion in America.

Religious conversion in and of itself is a highly complex and opaque phenomenon. At this point, due to the lack of any comprehensive data, we can only make assumptions as to the reasons for conversion to Islam among Latinos. It seems that the newly forming community is so multidimensional that to assess outright conclusions at this point would be impossible. One thing that is for certain is that the Latino Muslim community of the United States has effectively built a niche within the larger spectrum of the American Muslim population, adding to the plurality and diversity of religious life in the United States.

### Questions for Further Inquiry

Future research aimed at understanding the significance of the rising role of Islam among Latinos in the United States needs to be placed along a comprehensive matrix that allows for the simultaneous analysis of a number of variables. Some of the factors that need attention include the religious tone of the Latino community, the role of Latinos in the United States, the location of Islam in American civic life, the relationships between immigrant Muslim communities and Latinos, and a host of other concerns. I briefly present a few directions for possible future research.

As previously alluded to, the presence of African-American Muslims in major metropolitan areas has, in various ways, contributed to the rise of Latino Muslim conversion. Islam’s visible presence in the Black community dates back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and has grown exponentially since. Today the African-American Muslim community is extremely diverse in its makeup, which has produced multiple layers of cultural contribution to American society by way of religious orientation. Furthermore, because most Latinos live in metropolitan centers and share the same space as many African-American Muslims, it is safe to say that Latino Muslims have been influenced, whether directly or indirectly, by the African-American Muslim community. Researching the correlation between African-American Muslim cultural visibility and contribution and its effect on Latinos who convert to Islam may require more than survey questions and interviews. An ethnographic assessment of Islam as it is portrayed in inner-city life may produce the information we need to examine the larger implications of Latino conversion to Islam. We may soon be in a position to ask whether or not there exists an identifiable indigenous American Muslim culture – that is, a culture of Muslims in America that is a product of conversion and not immigration.

The fact that Latinos and African-Americans are converting to Islam begs the question of race and ethnicity in America. Why is it that segments of these two historically disenfranchised communities have found meaning in the religion of Islam? Does Islam provide something unique to these communities that they have not found in other religions? Many testimonies of both African-American and Latino-American Muslims address the ways in which the structure of Islamic beliefs serve to combat deteriorating social conditions in both communities, such as drug and/or alcohol abuse, gang and domestic violence, the decline of traditional family settings, and so forth.

It is also interesting to note that at a time when Islam is dubbed in public discourse as a hateful, dangerous, and violent religion, conversion rates increase. What might explain this phenomenon? Can it be related to the different ways different communities perceive Islam? If so, what are the contours of these differences? Furthermore, there seems to be a tendency to emphasize religious identity above cultural and ethnic identity in most Muslim communities; how might this factor into the lived experiences of community members who occupy Latino and Islamic worlds simultaneously? Are communities forging new identities or manipulating old ones? It is also necessary, no matter how fascinated we are with the idea of Latino Muslims, to ask why dozens of millions of Latinos have chosen not to convert to Islam, and perhaps why thousands were interested but decided against it. Opening a discourse on Latino Muslims in the United States can be a fruitful endeavor and should be considered.

The simultaneous presence of Islam in the national consciousness of the American public and its rapid growth among various groups in the United States raises an interesting set of questions. To treat the phenomenon of Latino Muslim conversion laxly would be a mistake. Roughly a half-century ago there existed a group of so-called African-American Muslims. Leading opinions of the time considered the movement to be a temporal one based on the charisma of various leaders. However, today there are more than four million African-American Muslims in America.<sup>8</sup> The empirical trend leads us to question the potential future of the current 40,000 or so Latino Muslims. If the trends continue, the landscape of American society may look dramatically different in just few decades. The study of Latino Muslims as a component in the Muslim American landscape may yield insights not only in related academic fields but into the uncertain yet impending future of American society.

## Notes

1. The Gottfried and Martha Lang Award is an annual, competitive award for which the student awardee receives recognition at the annual meeting of the High Plains Society for Applied Anthropology, a cash prize of \$100.00, and publication in the *High Plains Applied Anthropologist*. Students are encouraged to submit papers by January of each year to the Editor's Office, *High Plains Applied Anthropologist*. See "Guidelines for Authors" at the end of this issue for further information on submission requirements.
2. Abbas Barzegar is currently a graduate student in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Colorado, Boulder. His research interests include the effects of religion on resistance movements and the interplay between culture and religion in Muslim societies. He also is Production Manager at the Palestine Education Network, a nonprofit organization dedicated to educating the public on the Palestinian Human Rights issues.
3. Sanchez, Samantha and Galvan, Juan. Latino Muslims: The Changing Face of Islam in America. *Islamic Horizons*, July/August 2004.
4. For a thorough introduction to Islam please see *An Introduction to Islam* by Frederick Denny.
5. This definition is outlined in Geertz's classic essay, "Religion as a Cultural System."
6. Please see William Shephard's translation of *Social Justice in Islam* by Sayyid Qutb.
7. Charles Long's understandings of religious experience are outlined in his *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*.
8. For a thorough outline on the African-American Muslim experience see Aminah Beverly McCloud's *African American Islam*.

## Resources for Further Reference

### Texts:

Denny, Frederick

1995 *An Introduction to Islam*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.

Geertz, Clifford

1973 *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

Long, Charles

1995 *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*. Aurora, CO: The Davies Group.

McCloud, Aminah Beverly

1995 *African American Islam*. New York: Routledge.

Websites:

[www.LatinoDawah.org](http://www.LatinoDawah.org)

<http://HispanicMuslims.com>

<http://IslamiCity.com/LatinoMuslims>

<http://HispanicMuslims.com/Piedad>

<http://www.BismRabbik.org>

<http://www.alianzaislamica.org>

<http://latinmuslims.com>

