

Latinos and Muslims in North America: Colliding or Converging?

Andrés Prins

Latinos and Muslims represent two of the fastest growing minorities in North America—one an ethno-linguistic and the other a religious minority. The relation between these two groupings as well as their increasing convergence (Latinos Muslims are reputed to be the fastest growing demographic within North American Islam, at least a quarter million strong) is a subject on which surprisingly little research seems to have been done.

As someone who over the last four decades has been heavily involved with both of these communities—although only since 2012 more directly in the North American context—I was invited to offer my best answers to a set of five questions pertaining to this subject. My hope is that in some small way this might help stimulate the Hispanic Evangelical churches in North America towards significantly more reflection on, understanding of, and engagement with their Muslim neighbors, be they Latinos or of any other cultural background.

Are Muslims seeking to Islamize Latinos in North America, and if so, why?

The obvious answer is a definite yes. Islam is a missionary faith that, not unlike Christianity, seeks to extend to all of humanity the call or invitation (dawah) to Islam, i.e. submission to God, as revealed supremely in the Qur'an and exemplified in the life of the prophet Mohamed. However Latinos throughout the Americas would seem to have been given special attention in the last decades as a kind of "last frontier of mission" for Muslims, judging by the proliferation of both Sunni and Shia as well as Ahmadiyya missionary endeavors and community centers that one encounters throughout Latin America nowadays.

I believe furthermore that Latinos are viewed in many ways as a kind of long-lost cousin that needs to be brought back into the family from which they have been estranged for too long. Arabized Muslim Moors governed large parts of Spain for almost eight centuries (until the very year that Columbus sailed to the Americas!) and presided over the "golden age" of al-Andalus, famous for its multicultural conviviality, inter-religious tolerance, and scientific and artistic developments (although closer examination would

reveal serious blemishes to that golden image). Also, many of the Iberians who ended up conquering and peopling the New World carried with them a great measure of Arabo-Islamic culture. "Reuniting" the lands—and also the descendants—of al-Andalus with the rest of the "House of Islam" has been a nostalgic dream for many Muslims over the five hundred years since the traumatic Roman Catholic Reconquista of Spain was completed (more of this in the quote under the third question).

Where are the main centers of Muslim outreach to Latinos?

Although there have been Muslim organizations such as the Latino American Dawah Organization (LADO) focused on promoting Islam among Latinos in North America since at least 1997 (with Latino Muslim leaders from the United States training in Arabia to become imams as early as 1984), currently the most influential center would seem to be Islam in Spanish with its IslamInSpanish Centro Islámico in Houston, Texas. This substantial, "showpiece" Centro was inaugurated in January 2016, but its production and dissemination of Latino-focused materials reaches back to the conversion to Islam in mid-2001 of its Colombian-origin founder, Jaime "Mujahid" Fletcher. The Centro claims to be "the Only Latino Led Islamic Center in the U.S." and the only one "that has a Spanish khutbah (sermon) weekly in the US." With branches in Dallas, Atlanta and New York, and their "state of the art [video] production studio," Islam in Spanish, though by no means the only US Latino Muslim organization, would seem to be the most representative and influential.

In visits with mosque leaders in various parts of the United States, I have encountered (or been informed of) numerous Hispanic converts to Islam from Catholic

as well as Evangelical backgrounds, "Open Mosque" days conducted in Spanish with sometimes two hundred Hispanic neighbors in attendance, young Latino imams leading large multi-ethnic mosques (e.g. Corona, California), and many other signs of a rapid growth of interest and involvement in the Islamic religion by Latinos in North (as well as Central and South) America.

What is attracting Latinos to Islam?

Before mentioning some additional factors which I think are leading Latinos to become Muslim, it would seem to me informative to "listen" to the reasons given by non-Evangelicals, especially Muslim converts and leaders. The 2019 Vice Video Minority Report "Why So Many Latinos Are Converting to Islam" explores some of these reasons and has already been watched 2.5 million times in its YouTube version.

In an early endorsement speech, apparently from 2009, of the Islam In Spanish founder and project, Dr. Abdallah Hakim Quick elaborates in some detail on the importance and appeal of Islamic mission to Latinos. Although lengthy, the following transcript by me of the pertinent excerpts of Dr. Quick's video-recorded comments makes for very enlightening reading:

After meeting brother Mujahid [Jaime Fletcher] and understanding more about the Latin American Spanish involvement in Islam, I've come to the conclusion that this is one of the most important areas for us to focus on today, especially in the area of Dawah/outreach and for the future of Islam in North America and even really in the world. And the reason why I say that is because the rich history of Islam in Spain itself and Andalusia really set the stage for Western culture itself.



... It was Muslims living in Spain, in Andalusia—which is now Portugal and Spain—these Muslims were able to take Islamic principles and modernize them, bring together the culture of people all around the world and put it in a modern form. And this is really a balanced approach to Islam that is needed today. So therefore those who are living in the legacy of Andalusia, their ancestors traveled to Latin America, to South America, they were traveling on the boats with Christopher Columbus and many other conquerors conquistadores who came across, they were carrying Moriscos with them and these Moriscos and Morenos [sic. Marranos] were Muslims who were hiding their identity, the Morenos [Marranos] were Jews who were hiding their identity. ... it is now that New World culture which is being globalized around the world.

... If you see the influence Andalusia had on the culture of Spain and then the rest of North and South America, then we realized that not only is this changing the face of the world, but particularly in the United States Spanish is becoming one of the largest languages... By the year 2020 or so a good percentage of America, maybe you know 26% or a very high percentage in America, will be Spanish speaking and so therefore this work is very important.

... There are a lot of great benefits in this work and this is, again, part of the legacy we need to reclaim because Andalusia was part of the khilafa [caliphate] and Andalusia was one of the most virgin lands for Islam and so we look with nostalgia to these lands and to the people to at least give them the opportunity to choose and that's so important today that people should have the ability to choose. But what we're focusing on is really giving positive messages, to show a positive relationship between Muslims and Christians and Muslims and Jews and other religions. We find this in Andalusia itself, in the Golden age of Islam, we find between the 8th and the 16th century there was a golden age of Jewish literature there were also great Christian scientists who studied underneath the Muslims in Spain and so therefore this is an example for the world and that still exists within Spanish Latin culture.

... It's a melting pot culture and that is what Islam is. Islam is a melting pot—it's the filter that we put our cultures through in order to gain the pleasure of Allah subhanahu wa ta'ala [praise be to Him]. ... We pray to Allah ... we will spread Islam in that part of the world and give us all the opportunity to get involved with our [Latino] brothers and sisters who are spreading

the message throughout the Americas and the globe.

Other factors, besides these historical and cultural ones, that I have heard in the testimonies of Hispanic converts (or “reverts” as many of them would say), but which space only allows me to mention in passing, are:

- marriage and family cohesion, especially when non-Muslim Latinas marry and have children with Muslim men,
- the “self-evident reasonableness” of the Islamic concepts and teachings to which Latino converts were exposed (contrasted with their confusion regarding Christian doctrines like the Trinity, the divine-human natures of Christ, substitutionary atonement, etc.),
- the warm, welcoming, hospitable reception they experienced (in total contradiction of the hostile, hateful, demonized image of Muslims they were fed by many Christians),
- the “simplicity” of the rules of Islamic belief and practice, which affect more than just Sunday mornings,
- a stronger group identity and solidarity, especially for those embracing Islam in prison,
- a “logical” system of relating to God and meriting His favor based on personal effort,

- the enchanting mysteriousness of the Arabic language and its historical connection to Spanish (thousands of Spanish words have Arabic etymologies),
- a path of self-discipline that has helped them overcome different vices,
- a faith that historically is not as closely associated as Christianity with racism, colonialism and neo-imperialism.

It strikes me that deeper research into the processes and factors that lead to these conversions, especially out of an Evangelical-Pentecostal church experience, would be a very worthwhile undertaking.

How are Hispanic churches responding to the growing number of Latinos becoming Muslims?

What are these churches doing to share Jesus' Gospel with Muslim neighbors? Sadly, in my experience, the vast majority of Hispanic Evangelical churches (just like their Anglo counterparts) have—in practice—been quite indifferent both to the almost 4 million Muslims who reside with them in the United States, as well as to their fellow-Latinos who are converting to Islam. Mercifully there are some outstanding exceptions, with hopefully many more to be discovered or to soon begin lengthening this list!

Especially encouraging has been my experience with the Hispanic church Iglesia Rescate of Hialeah, Florida. Over the last four years, under Cuban Pastor David Monduy's leadership, they have very intentionally pursued ongoing relationships of hospitality, discovery and witness with their Muslim neighbors, mostly from the Islamic Center of Greater Miami. Thanks in large measure to the friendship developed between pastor and imam during monthly conversations over coffee with no topic off limits, church and mosque members have been able to share in surprisingly meaningful ways.

A couple winters ago the Hispanic Christians organized a celebration of Messiah's birth to which they invited their Muslim friends so they might experience the true meaning of Christmas. Seventy came from four different mosques with many expressing, sometimes through tears, gratitude for finally being able to understand what Christmas is really about! Other events hosted by the congregation have included an evening of intercession for the communities of origin of their mostly Middle Eastern Muslim guests which were suffering ISIS-inspired violence, a Thanksgiving dinner recounting

personal stories of gratitude for God's interventions through healing, liberation and other miracles, and a women's tea around shared concerns for faith and family values being assailed in their broader society.

Also heartening are recent reports from Puerto Rico and other heavily Hispanic regions of North America of church members undertaking their first ever visits to their local mosques. Facilitated by Latino Christians who have lived in Muslim majority societies and speak Arabic as well as Spanish and English, these visits have almost always resulted in Christ-centered conversations, witness, story-telling, and prayer, with some cases of individuals encountering, experiencing or even embracing Jesus the Messiah as much more than simply a prophet.


Are there resources in Spanish and where can they be obtained?

We should not forget that many especially younger Latinos in the US are either Spanish-English bilingual or increasingly only English speaking. However, Spanish does remain a crucial means for more effective communication for many, and, thankfully, there is an expanding list of excellent resources of various sorts available. A wealth of materials, written mostly by Latin American Christians serving in Muslim-majority contexts, can be accessed and freely downloaded from the internet. More directly pertinent to the North American context are the Spanish translations of Crescent Project's Bridges, David Shenk's, A Muslim and a Christian in Dialogue, and Nabeel Qureshi's Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus.

But probably best adapted to the more relational Hispanic cultures would be the growing number of hands-on training opportunities afforded to local churches by a growing number of Latino Christian workers returning or moving to the United States after years of invaluable experience living and sharing Jesus' Gospel with Muslim friends in various parts of the globe. Organizations such as PM Internacional, Manarah Latino, COMHINA, and others could connect interested churches with some of these valuable human resources.

Conclusion

Starting 1,300 years ago in Spain and continuing till this day throughout the Americas, Latinos and Muslims have had very dynamic, history-shaping interactions and relations, sometimes colliding others converging! As someone who has experienced fascinatingly

similar expressions of heart-warming hospitality, passion and friendship from both communities, and has also witnessed firsthand the profoundly beautifying effect on all aspects of life that Jesus the Messiah can have when embraced as Lord and Savior by persons of any culture, it is my hope and prayer that His Latino followers will allow themselves to become bridges of blessing between Him and their Muslim neighbors everywhere! 

Andrés Prins, after completing a Masters degree in Egypt, was sent with his wife Angélica in 1988 by Mennonite churches in South America to serve Christ teaching in North Africa. He is a founding, and still active member, of PM Internacional and since 2012 resides in Lancaster, PA as a consultant on EMM's Christian-Muslim Relations Team. He can be reached for further exchanges at AndresP88@gmail.com.

Notes

1. Lee Adams, "Why So Many Latinos Are Converting to Islam," Vice Minority Reports, video, https://video.vice.com/en_uk/video/minority-reports-why-latinos-are-converting-to-islam/5b7f19dabe40774cbe72f892.
2. Wikipedia, s.v. "Martyrs of Córdoba," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martyrs_of_C%C3%B3rdoba.
3. See Latino American Dawah Organization home page, <https://www.latinodawah.org/>.
4. Isa Parada, "First National Latino Muslim Conference 'Convivencia' in the United States," MuslimMatters <https://muslimmatters.org/2016/12/28/first-national-latino-muslim-conference-convivencia-in-the-united-states/>.
5. "IslamInSpanish Centro Islamico," Islam in Spanish, <https://www.islaminspanish.org/centro-islamico-intro>.
6. Wikipedia, s.v. "Hispanic and Latino American Muslims," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hispanic_and_Latino_American_Muslims.
7. Lee Adams, "Why Latinos Are Converting to Islam," Vice Minority Reports, YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/qOdu-IXCPEI>.
8. "Islam in Spanish - Mujahid Fletcher," Digital Mimbar, YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/guO5AK88UrU>.
9. Besheer Mohamed, "New estimates show U.S. Muslim population continues to grow," Pew Research Center, last modified January 3, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/01/03/new-estimates-show-u-s-muslim-population-continues-to-grow/>.
10. <https://www.facebook.com/pg/MaranathaBIC/about/>.
11. See Muslumania, <http://musulmania.com/>.
12. Crescent Project's Bridges is available in Spanish on their website, <https://bookstore.crescentproject.org/collections/bridges-study>.
13. David Shenk's A Muslim and a Christian in Dialogue is available in Spanish from Faith Alive, <https://www.faithaliveresources.org/Products/601295/dilogo-entre-un-musulmn-y-un-cristiano--a-muslim-and-a-christian-in-dialogue-spanish.aspx>.
14. Nabeel Qureshi's Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus is available in Spanish from Equipping the Saints website, <https://www.etsusa.org/Buscando-a-Ala-encontrando-a-Jesus-Un-musulman-devoto-encuentra-al-cristianismo-p7590.html>.
15. See <https://www.pminternacional.org/>.
16. See <https://comhina.us/>.
17. Learn more about EMM's Christian-Muslim Relations Team (CMRT) on their website, <http://www.emm.org/resources/christian-muslim-relations-team>.