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**“MUSLIMIZATION,” MISSION, AND MODERNITY IN MORELOS:  
THE PROBLEM OF A COMBINED HOTEL  
AND PRAYER HALL FOR THE MUSLIMS OF MEXICO**

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A recent visitor to Mexico, from Muslim Aid, commented on the necessity for religious projects to exhibit self-sufficiency. In such a climate, the need for entrepreneurial ingenuity is essential to the successful operation of any religious enterprise. *Dar as Salām* is the product of a pioneering Mexican project to bring a place of worship and conference center to the Mexican Muslim convert community. To provide itself with some revenue, it opened the doors of its residential accommodation to the public for visitors to the popular Mexican weekend retreat of Tequesquitengo in Morelos. With the opening of these doors coincided a critique of the relationship between the place's Mexican and Muslim identities. Tequesquitengo provides the Muslim converts of Mexico with a retreat from the ordinary pressures of Mexican life, which has been likened to the *hijra*, or exile, performed by the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). Yet, non-Muslim visitors who come to stay have brought with them the indulgences of their modern lifestyle, including the drinking of alcohol, “inappropriate” dress, and fornication. Some Muslim visitors to the mosque have therefore been critical of the *harām*, or forbidden, nature to some of the activities taking place there, yet the center remains dependent on such sources of revenue for its existence. In this article, I examine how, through a process I call “Muslimization,” moral critiques of tourism practices at *Dar as Salām* are employed as a mode of situating the individual in relation to varying dynamics of power existing between competing elements within Mexico's Muslim community. Yet this contention is an inevitable product of the desire of external investors to minimize a venture's dependency on external resources in a context where the Muslim community is still developing.

Key words: Muslimization; Tourism; Religion; Identity; Islam

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#### Introduction

In 1996 Vukonić declared, “Religion and tourism are intertwined: the activity of one creates the conditions for the activity of the other” (p. 188).

While scholars such as Rinschede (1992) view religious tourism as constituting just one particular kind of tourism, others acknowledge pilgrimage and religious migration as tourism's proto-form (Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005; Sigaux, 1966; Vu-

konić, 1996). In this article, I consider how a disjunction between tourism and religion causes frustrations in relation to a combined hotel and prayer hall for Muslims in Mexico and examine what entices this displacement.<sup>1</sup>

### Islam in Mexico

Alfaro Velcamp (2002) attributes the arrival of Islam in Mexico to bouts of immigration from the Greater Syria area of the then Ottoman Empire in the late 18th century. The Muslim community has, however, located a text, *Un hereje y un musulmán* by Pascual Almazán, which suggests that Mexico's first Muslim immigrant arrived in the 16th century, coming from Spain via Morocco.<sup>2</sup> Most conversions to Islam have stemmed from proselytization work, which gained its greatest momentum in the mid-1990s.<sup>3</sup> While the exact extent of Mexico's Muslim population remains unknown to any accurate degree, the most recent statistical estimates have placed its level at 39,000 with in the region of 1,000 converts (Garvin, 2005).<sup>4</sup>

The two largest concentrations of Muslims in Mexico may be found in Torreón in the north and just outside San Cristóbal de las Casas in Mexico's south. The former is composed of Shi'a immigrants, mainly from Lebanon, who have their own mosque and are relatively integrated into Mexican life. The latter is a Murabitun Sufi community of converts, who live a separatist existence, restricting relations with non-Muslims almost exclusively to commerce. Mexico's Sunni Muslims are sporadically located throughout the country with the largest concentration in Mexico City.

The sparse literature on Islam in Mexico supports Alfaro Velcamp's (2002) view that Mexican Muslims exist in four principal forms: descendants of immigrants, recent immigrants, Muslim diplomats, and converts to Islam.<sup>5</sup> As pointed out in a recent article, while Alfaro Velcamp indicates that there are four different types of Muslims in Mexico, these groups would appear to be neither mutually exclusive nor discretely bound because, for example, some of the individuals coordinating Muslim missionary activity in Mexico are both immigrants and converts.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, these groupings

themselves can be composed of divergent forms of Islam. Converts who discovered Sunni Islam through an organization called the *Centro Cultural Islámico de México* (CCIM) constitute the informants to this study.<sup>7</sup> The data upon which this research is based were collated through participant observation and both semistructured and informal interviews carried out during a year of fieldwork, 6 months of which were spent living at the site that is the focus of this article.

### The Hotel and Prayer Hall

As you pass around the road that circumnavigates Lake Tequesquitengo in Morelos, you cannot help but observe the scenery. Rolling mountains lie in the backdrop while the expansive lake sits below you to one side. Yet as you continue on your journey another structure calls upon your attention: a white tower reaching up to the sky; a decorative minaret marking the presence of Muslims in Mexico, making it evident you have arrived.

*Dar as Salām* (the domain of peace) is situated between the villages of Tequesquitengo and San José Vista Hermosa and occupies a hillside position set off the circulatory road that runs around Lake Tequesquitengo. The Hacienda of San José Vista Hermosa is the ancient seat of Hernán Cortés; a colonial mansion, now serving as a hotel, which draws tourists both from within Mexico and from abroad. Tequesquitengo is the home to a number of hotels and is a renowned center for aquatic sports, such as water and jet-skiing. The resort is a popular location for second homes and is a recipient of what Nuñez (1963) has famously called *el weekendismo*. Located nearby are the pyramids of Xochicalco, the caves of Cacahuamilpa, and the mineral-rich water springs of Las Estacas. Beyond its sporting and sightseeing activities, the Tequesquitengo area also draws visitors due to its attractive climate, enjoying hot temperatures and an average of 360 days of sunshine a year. The area's appeal as a tourist resort could not be clearer.

In January 2003 the *Centro Cultural Islámico de México* (CCIM), a business established to promote Islam in Mexico, officially opened *Dar as*

*Salām* as a center for education and worship for Mexican converts to Islam. The development project started in 2000 and the place was used as a meeting point for the convert community even before its construction was completed. Speaking to an ethnohistorian in the context, Omar Weston (the Managing Director of CCIM) described *Dar as Salām* as a short-term residential school open to Muslims from all over the Mexican Republic with the aim that they may learn more about Islam, get to know other Muslims from other parts of the country, and, afterwards, teach what they have learned to other Muslims when they return back home (Ismu Kusumo, 2004).

The Tequesquitengo area has provided Mexican Muslims with a quiet retreat from the hustle and bustle of city life, in which most of the converts are ordinarily situated. Owing to a lack of funds among the new Muslims, and foreign investors' reluctance to create a dependency on external aid, not all of the residential accommodation has been completed and the finished rooms have had to be rented out to weekenders to generate income. As many of Mexico's Muslims do not have the resources to holiday here (although they have often been allowed to stay without charge), non-Muslims have been taken in as paying guests to allow for some flow of revenue. For some of the community these visitors have not been their guests of choice.

#### The Prayer Hall

*Dar as Salām* is accessed via the unpaved street Bajada Molachos, which runs off Tequesquitengo's circulatory road. After a small parking area, the most noticeable feature is the garden, which is lush and green, like a paradise in the midst of a desert. When I arrived at *Dar as Salām* in February 2006, the surrounding countryside had dried out and most of the grass was yellow or dead despite the area's lakeside situation. Yet in the midst of this dry landscape stood this colorful garden, withstanding Morelos's heat.

A small pathway through some foliage leads to a large, open plan space. The vast majority of the ground floor is open air, the prayer hall itself being composed of almost a quarter of this surface

area, separated from the rest only by curtains. The open plan nature of this floor echoes the fact that there are more male converts within this community than female, because there is no separate area sectioned off for women. At prayer times, women simply pray a small distance behind the men. On the far side there is a kitchen leading through to a small yet resourceful library with office facilities and audio-visual equipment. A balcony off the library looks out over the rear garden on to the lake. Beside the kitchen there is a staircase up to the minaret tower and the main roof terrace, where there are two dormitories and a barbecue area. This level offers impressive and extensive views over the lake. An Arabian archway takes you from the ground floor down to the rear garden via a broad staircase, where we can find a washing area for carrying out *wūdūh*, or ritual cleansing, a bathroom, and a storage shed. This garden is split into two sections by a row of young bamboo plants and on the far side of these lies the accommodation of Hotel Oasis. A small division permits the passage between the two sections and this row of young plants is the sole barrier separating the two different functions of the site: prayer hall and hotel.

As Omar Weston explained in his interview with Ismu Kusumo (2004), *Dar as Salām* is open to Muslims from all over Mexico. In this sense it is the sole retreat to which all Mexican Muslims have access. Its comprehensive library provides Muslims with otherwise inaccessible material, owing to the cost of books and the paucity of literature available on Islam in Castilian. It contains a number of works in English that are not yet available in Spanish translation. The collection is not restricted to books, but also includes audio cassettes, videos, and DVDs. A number are in Arabic. The Islamic theme to *Dar as Salām* does not end in its library. The prayer hall's residential accommodation provides the opportunity for Muslims to live together in unison, providing a sense of community, and the *adhān* (the call to prayer) is sung five times a day to draw residents to worship. When residential conferences have taken place, delegates have not had to pay for their stay.

The vast majority of converts to Islam live in cities, where the Muslim immigrant communities are larger but also where the pressures to stray

from Islam can be the greatest. In a conversation with me, Omar Weston of the CCIM likened the opportunity to come to Tequesquitengo to the *hijra*, or exile, performed by the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). Omar explained:

In the year 622 CE, Muhammad and his followers regrouped in the city now known as Medina in exile from persecution under the Quraysh. It was from here that the Muslims then went on to conquer Mecca in 630 CE. The exile was an escape from idolaters and the conquest was a conquest over idolatry. The retreat to Tequesquitengo is an escape from the idolatry of the cities and an opportunity for Muslims to renew themselves with the message of *tawhīd*, or the oneness of God.<sup>8</sup>

While the original idea behind the *hijra* was migration from non-Muslim territory to Muslim territory, or from *dar al-kufr* to *dar al-Islām*, as Vukonić (1996) points out, “For some people, *hijra* signifies the transition from poverty to a better life through affiliation with specific Islamic movements” (p. 29). Also, the semirural location provides the opportunity for Muslims to work the land, which is a form of labor exalted by the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) in a *hadīth* narrated by Al-Miqdam, “Nobody has ever eaten a better meal than that which one has earned by working with one’s own hands. The Prophet of Allah, David used to eat from the earnings of his manual labor.”<sup>9</sup>

#### The Hotel

The name Hotel Oasis is apt owing to the vibrancy of the vegetation growing around the accommodation. During the first few months of my stay, daily deliveries of water used to feed through to hoses that kept the grounds of *Dar as Salām* in bloom even when the surrounding area was bereft of water.

Hotel Oasis consists of two blocks of ensuite accommodation. One block of three rooms lies beside the site’s swimming pool and faces out onto the prayer hall *Dar as Salām*. Above it, a second level of two rooms is being constructed. There is a further block of five more rooms, which are split over two levels. At the time of my visit, the two first-floor rooms of this second block were still under construction and the three ground floor rooms required fitting. These look out over open

scrub land to the side of the site. There is a further barbecue area on their first-floor terrace, which is accessible from the garden and gives impressive views out onto the lake, in addition to some communal space for the hotel’s visitors. Behind the swimming pool and the completed accommodation is a parking area, which has goalposts for football. There is another, smaller terrace beside the swimming pool, which provides a further communal space for hotel guests. The rooms are large and each has two double beds. The ensuite facilities have wash basins, lavatories, and showers. Two of the three completed rooms have working air conditioning. The amenities are basic; however, this is reflected in the hotel’s very competitive pricing which places it among the cheapest of options in the area.

The competitive pricing, the spectacular scenery, the excellent climate, and the good location all add to Hotel Oasis’s appeal as a resort for weekend breaks. Until recently its accommodation had not been overly publicized and the flow of business that had been coming was a product of drive-by inquiries, because the fact that the site rents out rooms is advertised on a large sign beside the main circulatory road. Tequesquitengo is popular as a weekend destination for people who live in Mexico City, as it is only a short drive away and it provides an escape from the stresses of the city.

#### Halāl and Harām

The first comments I heard voiced about the operation of *Dar as Salām* were criticisms that came from a Kenyan Muslim visitor, who I shall call Isa, who was staying at the site while awaiting deportation to his home country. Isa explained to me that what was happening was *harām* (forbidden) and that a Muslim must earn his living through *halāl*, or permitted, means:

A Muslim should do business that is *halāl*. He [sic] cannot earn from things that are *harām*. If people come here to do drinking or fornication or to listen to loud music, that is *harām*. Because this is a mosque, these people should not come.

Isa’s comments reminded me of an evening just a few days before. Some guests were staying at Hotel Oasis and had gone for a swim in the pool

on the site. They had left the doors of their car open in the car park behind the accommodation so that they could listen to their music, which was playing at a considerable volume. This helped me to understand Isa’s perspective. Also, Isa considered *Dar as Salām* to be a mosque, as this, to him, was its function. The site was actually labeled a prayer hall within a hotel and conference center owing to a Mexican law that makes wholly religious buildings State property. This meant that legally the property was not wholly religious, but Isa saw the situation differently, viewing it as dominated, if not wholly defined, by its sacred nature. Such a position was common to immigrants from Muslim majority countries.

Another Muslim from abroad, this time from Somalia, came and stayed at the site. Ahmad, as I will call him here, lived at the mosque for a number of months and arrived at having strong opinions about the visitors who came. In the absence of the resident caretaker, Ahmad spoke to a couple who turned up late one evening looking for a room. He told them that we had no space, even though, in fact, we did have one room available. Afterwards I asked him what had happened. He replied, “He was drunk. We don’t want that type here. It is best they go.”

During my 6 months at *Dar as Salām*, I witnessed a number of guests come and go. The site’s caretaker of the time, a convert to Islam from Chile, allowed people to stay who often ended up drinking alcohol. It was not uncommon to find these people on the terrace by the poolside, listening to loud music and drinking beer. Such behavioral patterns have been associated by Passariello (1983) with Spanish and Indian cultural traditions and the liberation of the Mexican *bourgeoisie* from “Victorian-like” social regulations. From such practices and from the perceptions of people such as Isa and Ahmad, I became aware of a conflict between the identities of the hotel and the prayer hall, which both occupy the same site. David Herbert succinctly sums up the nature of this social contest in the subtitle of his new Open University course, *Islam in the West: The politics of coexistence*. *Dar as Salām* had two contesting identities that were struggling to coexist. I put this situation to a number of Mexican converts to the religion to hear their perspective.

Faisal, a Mexican convert to Islam in his early twenties, affirmed confidently that the place is an Islamic hotel, adding, “Yes, I see it that way.” When I asked him if it was, then, compatible with non-Muslim visitors, he replied:

There’s no problem. For example, music is forbidden in Islam (*harām*), but when I went one time, a family had a stereo and they were playing music and nobody said anything to them. . . . It would be preferable if it were a hotel for Muslims, but that’s not possible, because the bad thing is that if we open it just to Muslims people won’t come. And it’s a good opportunity for the people who do come to get to know Islam.

Abul Khayr, a convert in his mid-twenties, explained about the problem of the perception of what *Dar as Salām* is doing:

The problem is that people in Mexico misunderstand the role of this mosque. All the world’s Muslims are accustomed to asking other Muslim countries, such as Saudi Arabia, for money to build a mosque, but never do they realize how much upkeep a mosque is going to need. And it is a tidy sum! In just electricity and water, it’s a big upkeep. So what we are trying to do in Tequesquitengo is to run a business to generate the upkeep needed for maintaining the mosque. And they look down on this. The people who don’t agree with this perspective, they look down on it and criticize it, calling it *harām*.

One brother, Asif, in his late teens, exhibited a tolerant perspective, considering the hotel and the prayer hall as entirely distinct entities:

Well, I believe that, yes, one can’t be responsible for the behavior of others. Obviously, first of all they are separate, right? There’s the hotel and there’s the mosque. It might be the same piece of land, but nevertheless they are separate. And beyond this, you can’t look at the behavior of the people and pay too much attention to it, because this isn’t right either. Simply because they’re not Muslims, they can behave in a different way, right? You can hardly watch over them. To be honest, I’ve never had any problem with this. If it were possible to have it as a place just for Muslims, yes, of course I would like that, but in the situation that we’re in, that’s not possible. You have to be realistic too.

Husaam, a convert in his late-forties, explained how he had come to view *Dar as Salām* from his

attendance at conferences. He saw the place as a model for Islamic behavior and as an opportunity to call others to Islam:

When I go there, obviously I follow the rules of the place. This space is for praying. You can't drink there. You have to follow a dress code. I think they have the right to expect that the people who go there observe the rules of the place. All hotels have rules. If you accept the rules, on you go. If not, no. If you publish the rules, there's no problem. People will decide to go by whether or not they accept them, right? So if they say, no, it's not what I'm after, on they go. Carry on with their journey. And there is always the chance that if they say yes, they will ask questions and learn about the behavior of others. And we can invite them to reflect on their beliefs and customs and to adopt Islam.

Abul Khayr gives an example of the kind of criticism he has heard said within the community:

"They criticize the mosque, but it doesn't count as far as I'm concerned, as I've been there since the beginning and the majority of what they say is untrue; 99% of it. For example, they say that women go around naked there. And I've never seen that." He jokes, "If I'd seen it, I wouldn't have come back!"

The "They" who are doing the criticizing in this case are converts belonging to a competing Muslim group in Mexico City.

Ahmad once commented to me that a female guest, "shouldn't walk around naked like that." He made this remark as she was wearing a very short skirt and a skimpy top. These differing views of what constitutes "naked," in one case being literally unclothed and in the other being inadequately dressed, provide the basis for the urban myth that has circulated among the convert community. This enables moral judgments to be given about the operation of the site. Isa, too, exhibited the same perspective as Ahmad, as he revealed when he described to me how he chose to whom to speak at an Immigrant Detention Center in the US:

I met a girl from Belize, who dreamed she was visited by the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. She was at the Immigrant Detention Center. I talked to her about Islam, which was a blessing because I helped her move closer to Is-

lam. I thought it was alright to speak to her as she was properly dressed. There used to be other women wearing what I think they call bikinis. They used to stand at their doorways, but I looked away because they were naked.

Ahmad and Isa's views on clothing come from their past immersion in a culture following Islamic dress codes. That they come from this culture is seen to authenticate their views among converts, because they come from an authentic Islamic setting, confirming them as knowledgeable about Islam. Jensen (2006) acknowledges, "a need for the convert to demarcate and affirm his or her new identity convincingly" (p. 646), which can include not only the emulation of a perceived authentic form of Islam, but its reapplication critically against even those born Muslim.<sup>10</sup> This position facilitates misunderstanding in relation to cross-cultural terms, such as "naked," simplifying how rumors have started among Mexican converts as to "naked" people having been running around at Hotel Oasis, while in literal terms being quite untrue.

#### Contested Hermeneutics and Dynamics of Power

The use of the word 'naked' as it is understood in Islam, in not being properly dressed, rather than in its more literal meaning within Mexican culture, sets a convert aside from his or her contemporaries, situating him or her in a special position in terms of power relations with others. Here we see the true significance to the third dimension of power as espoused by Lukes (1974), because it is the contextual significance of the word that brings the convert authority and empowers him or her to morally evaluate. As Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) suggest the body is established to do, the convert embodies the ideology thus exhibiting their absorption both *of* Islam and *by* Islam, putting them in a superior position to morally criticize from a Muslim point of view. By using the word in the Muslim way, the convert earns more respect among born-Muslims and other converts well versed in Islam than does a convert applying the word in a literal sense. So, similarly to how the concept of *kalstom*, or custom, is applied among the Tolai in East New Britain, Papua New Guinea (Martin, 2006), "nakedness" is best understood not

as an idea with a fixed meaning, but rather as a socially contested metaphor utilized for the moral evaluation of others. The terms *halāl* and *harām* are also similarly employed.

Doi (1987) informs us, “whatever is *harām* (forbidden) in Muslim states remains equally unlawful for Muslims in non-Muslim states” (p. 43) before going on to explain that the only exception is in the “extreme” circumstances when the rule of *dārurāh*, or necessity, is applicable. Yet, here is where the room for difference lies. Johansen (1999) clarifies how “the closing of the gate of *ijtihād*” relates solely to the modes of teaching and learning Islamic law, rather than its application, explaining how the commentaries (*sūrūh*), legal rulings (*fatāwā*), and treatises on particular points of law (*rasā’il*) each can offer “new solutions” and particularly so, “in light of the conditions under which the commentators live and write” (p. 448).<sup>11</sup> Clearly, what constitutes necessity may vary from jurist to jurist, which legal scholars are able to express through such rulings. Johansen’s remarks presuppose the privileging of the *fiqh* method (Islamic jurisprudence) over its resultant conclusions, suggesting that it is the method that empowers, permitting diversity to the judgments. Accordingly, embodiment of this method empowers converts in their argumentation. Such judgments are voiced as being experienced by informants.

#### Muslimization

Faisal works in a shop that educates about Islam and carries out *dāwāh* (missionary) work in Mexico City. He explained how the shop has to work in a similar way to *Dar as Salām*:

The *nargilāhs* are *harām*, but we need revenue. . . . I don’t like to sell [them]. In fact, I don’t smoke. I don’t like smoking. I’d prefer that, instead of these, we sold other things, but they are what people want. What can we do? Some Mexican Muslims who come, say, “*Harām! Harām! Harām!*” I feel like saying, “So you’re going to give us the money to run the office then, right?”<sup>12</sup>

Jensen (2006) reports that converts to Islam in Denmark suffer from what is locally entitled “convertitis.” She elucidates:

The newly converted often exhibit a so-called fanaticism with their new religion, which is gener-

ally expressed with very ritualized behavior, such as taking on the entire Islamic dress code and forming a preoccupation with Islamic rules of what is *harām* (“forbidden”) and *halāl* (“allowed”), of doing things “right.” This often leads to ironic situations in which converts repudiate people who are born Muslim for not doing things “the right way,” or for not living up to the “definition” of being “a Muslim.” (p. 646)

While “convertitis” itself is not diagnosed in these terms within the Mexican community, a similar practice is indubitably present and is recognized by members of the community. One informant explained to me how some converts “Arabize,” by changing their names to Muslim names, by dressing in Arabic or Muslim clothes and by insisting on carrying out *salāt*, or the five daily prayers, at the correct time wherever they may be. Indeed one convert attending a competing community’s prayer hall I visited in Polanco, Mexico City, even dressed like a *sheikh*. As Jensen (2006) suggests, there is a clear sense in which the converts feel a need to authenticate their conversion. This is expressed in their personal *Muslimization*, as I see to be a more fitting term for this response. By *Muslimization*, I refer to the process through which a convert or a born-Muslim authenticates their position as a Muslim by embodying characteristically ritualistic Muslim traits pertaining to their particular community in order to earn the social acceptance of their peers. Through entering into other cultural spheres of discourse via such modified actions and the embodiment of a particular set of beliefs, a convert can legitimate his or her own conversion and the extent to which they are (perceivably) truly Muslim. What is authentic Islam, then, becomes a response in relation to one’s communal affiliations and thus moral judgments become an expression of these.

Cook (2003), in his excellent *Forbidding Wrong in Islam*, for example, demonstrates how culture and community ties have impacted on the interpretation of what is *harām*:

We have taken for granted . . . that all liquor and all musical instruments in the hands of the Muslims were to be destroyed. This, however, is not quite right. Thus the *Hanafās* had a category of licit liquor; under the doctrine that the duty had no application in matters over which the law-



schools differed, this loophole had to be tolerated. Likewise many scholars made an exception for the tambourine, especially at weddings, where it performed the useful function of publicizing the marriage. Others, however, were virulently opposed to tambourines, even at weddings. (p. 32)

A similar diversity of positions can be seen in relation to what constitutes *halāl* meat. In an ethnographic study of Maghrebi Muslims in France, Bergeaud-Blackler (2004) reports three principal positions among her informants: that one may only buy meat certified as *halāl* by exclusively *halāl* butchers, that all (non-pork) meat is acceptable in a Christian country as Christians are “People of the Book,” or that the only safe way to eat meat is to slaughter it one’s self. In such circumstances, what is *halāl* or *harām* is not fixed, but is a socially contested value that is context dependent. This gives Muslims the opportunity to attest to their religiosity by demarcating clear boundaries between their community and another through the adoption of one of these positions.<sup>13</sup>

#### Tourism as the Site of Social Contest

Tourism sites can readily be understood to be “contact zones,” or as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (Pratt, 1991, p.34). Also, the liminal, or ambiguous, position of the tourist is well documented in the literature (Chambers, 2000; Harrison, 1992; Nash, 1989); the liminal being a state in which boundaries become blurred (Turner, 1969). It is understandable how social boundaries may become contested in this context, for global tourism is, as Turner (1994) has pointed out, “a particularly potent force in the postmodern diversification of cultural experience” (p. 185). Furthermore, scholars have highlighted perceptions of an incompatibility between “hedonistic Westernised international tourism” and “the Islamic religion and way of life” (Burton, 1995; Henderson, 2003; Henderson, 2006, p. 88). This incompatibility would seem even more pronounced when the role of the mosque is understood to be “keeping the community disciplined,” as one of Bolognani’s informants points out (Bolognani, 2006, p. 239). Hence the collocation of a mosque and hotel is likely to cause frustrations.

Debates about authenticity litter the tourism literature so profoundly that saturation and incommensurability have led to calls for the term to be abandoned (Reisinger & Steiner, 2005). In the present case, the debate centers round what constitutes authentic Islam. The need for this social contest to be taken seriously, and thus for the perceptions of what is authentically Islamic to be explored, is exhibited in the discourse of these informants, whereby the whole legitimacy of the project in question rests in dispute. The experience of this community usefully highlights that authenticity need not only be an issue in terms of the cultural interchange taking place between guests and hosts, which is crucial to this study, but also that authenticity is an issue internal to the host community itself, whereby conceptual divisions between what is authentic and what is inauthentic are still drawn in relation to the tourism encounter, albeit here from a religious point of view. It becomes clear that there is no one static model of what is authentic, but that authenticity is shaped and manipulated in order to create, reinforce, and challenge boundaries to the social structure, which in this case are vocalized in terms of moral evaluations.

Criticisms of tourism practices at *Dar as Salām* are made on three key levels: as a broader criticism of morality in Mexican society; as a criticism of the moral impropriety of those running *Dar as Salām* as a hotel; or as a general criticism of the need to run the center as a hotel at all. In some cases an individual holds more than one of these positions, but they generally may be attributed to individuals coming from specific communal settings.

Muslim immigrants tend to hold the first position, viewing the tourism practices at *Dar as Salām* as emblematic of wider Mexican society and thus not Islamic. Their perspective comes from relating their experiences here to those in their home country. Criticisms of the impropriety of those running the center come from both immigrants and converts who are affiliated with the leader of a competing group who meet in Mexico City. By denying the legitimacy of the activities of the other group, they can seek to enhance the perceived authenticity of their own. Some Muslims without communal ties or a few of those who are

associated with the group running the project voice general criticism of the need to run the center as a hotel, seeing it as a compromise they would rather not have to make. In each of these cases the hotel is described as being *harām*, but in each case this has a contextually different meaning; and what is particularly interesting is that none of them choose to describe it as *mubāh*, being neither forbidden nor recommended, which would make it religiously neutral. Such ambiguities are deliberately avoided so as to make a clear distinction. As Douglas (1966) points out, ideas of purity (or *halāl*, the permitted) and pollution (or *harām*, the forbidden) maintain the social structure. Bolognani (2006) similarly found that the use of the terms *halāl* or *harām* is “strictly linked to the preservation and well-being of the social structure” (p. 156) in that what supports the social structure would be considered *halāl* and that which goes against it would be *harām* in relation to perceptions of youth crime among Bradford’s Muslim community. It is through the rejection of the “other” that the “self” is affirmed, thus different usage of the label *harām* can manipulate one’s social relations with others, whether the aim is to Islamize society, to express opposition to a competing group, or to voice dissatisfaction with economic inequalities.

Those seeking to castigate the hotel for failing to apply Islamic rules for non-Muslim guests find superficial support in the writings of Sayyid Qutb, who argues that the fault in modern societies is that “debauchery and sin are considered to be ‘personal matters’ in which no one has a right to interfere” (Cook, 2003, p. 115). However, even for Qutb, the first step to preventing moral wrongs is the establishment of the Islamic State, which would provide legitimacy for CCIM’s priority of growing the Mexican Muslim community first, rather than focusing on forbidding wrongs (Cook, 2003, p. 121). Also, some members of this group emphasize the importance of a well-integrated community and see the production of capital as fruitful to the Islamic project. A convert called Musad, in his late twenties, remarked, “In the days of the *Sahābāh* (the companions of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)), there were those dedicated to money and those dedicated to religion—this is the best example of a good community.” Behind the

contested practices at *Dar as Salām* there are external factors at work that limit the organization’s activities and these illustrate the importance of funding in relation to the site’s openness to criticism.

#### Behind the Contest

A British Muslim visitor from Muslim Aid was due to come to visit *Dar as Salām* while the Director, Omar Weston, was going to be away. He asked me if I could show the gentleman round. I agreed. During his visit, we discussed *Dar as Salām* and he commented on its suitability for some sort of external aid. Key in his analysis was the fact that the project would be self-sufficient. He explained that none of the charities are looking to burden themselves with long-term dependencies, so they prefer to identify entrepreneurial religious projects that provide some form of sustainable revenue to keep themselves going after receiving an initial financial injection.

*Dar as Salām*’s problem can be part summed up in the words of Abul Khayr:

When you have a hotel and you want it to work, if you start to introduce rules like “no drinking permitted here,” “no music allowed,” ashamedly you are never going to have people, in Mexico.

Abul Khayr’s comments reveal that operating a hotel as a *halāl* enterprise is going to be difficult in Mexico. The costs for water, electricity, and the telephone line at *Dar as Salām* are sizeable, but Mexico’s Muslim community is small. The resources held by Mexico’s converts to Islam and Muslim immigrants are at present insufficient to support the upkeep of this prayer hall and educational centre and the incomes of most would prevent them from being able to pay to stay at the hotel, which would have been one way of assuring its *halāl* nature. Also, the incomplete state of some of the buildings on site at present means that the accommodation might not meet with the expectations of the international Muslim traveler, seeking an Islamic holiday abroad. Furthermore, the completion of such building works is dependent on future capital injection, which will only come from an external source if they are happy that the project will prove self-sustainable. Mexican legislation

also encourages the dual use of properties, as purely religious buildings become the property of the State. This returns to us having to open up the accommodation to non-Muslims and leaves us placed in the center of the social contest between competing factions, and in the middle of the debate about whether such an operation can be ethical from a Muslim point of view. There would appear to be no easy solution.

#### The Way Forward

Clearly *Dar as Salām* cannot simply withdraw from interaction with Mexican society, particularly as part of its mission is to teach people about Islam and to help to draw new people to the religion. There is thus a need for a balance between the place's Mexican and Muslim identities, without reaching the extreme in either. It would appear that too many restrictions might frighten non-Muslims away, while the center needs to remain open to non-Muslims if it is to carry out *dāwāh* or missionary work.

There is a need for recognition among charitable organizations providing aid to projects in contexts where the Muslim community is in the developmental stages that self-sufficiency isn't an immediate process and that some sort of gradual withdrawal from dependency is the method most likely to lead to success. Hotel Oasis could benefit from being marketed to a greater extent as a cultural experience and from reducing its dependency on drive-by custom, which leaves it open to customers who do not relate to the ethos of the institution. The hotel could be marketed broadly as a retreat and in this sense it could attract people who are more understanding of its aims and sympathies. This might include marketing to other religious groups or people on spiritual quests, which would promote interreligious understanding in addition to greater knowledge about Islam in general in Mexico. Also, if external aid is not forthcoming to support *Dar as Salām's* activities that benefit the Mexican Muslim convert community, the center could consider charging those who can afford it for attending conferences and awarding bursaries, exempting fee payment, to those who cannot.

#### Conclusion

Without ongoing aid, a new Muslim organization will be dependent on supplying services that

are in demand in the society in which it finds itself in order to survive until the community has arrived at a state of self-sufficiency. In this sense, the external society can exert pressure upon such an organization to conform to the society's needs, which can mean that the organization needs to operate in ethically contested fields in order to remain financially viable. If external investors were able to make longer term commitments to such projects, until the communities were to reach such a size that they can finance themselves, there would be much more autonomy for both individuals and such organizations and a more purely Islamic identity could be observed. In the meantime, the divisions in this developing Muslim community will continue while they are fueled by this opportunity to exert influences of power by socially contesting the moral authenticity of activities that such local organizations find it impossible, economically, to avoid.

With a lack of Muslim tourists coming into Mexico from abroad and with no attempt to draw spiritual tourists from within Mexico herself, the historic connection between tourism and religion becomes dysfunctional in this case and the imagined religious "Oasis" is seen to be continually invaded by nonbelievers, causing a corollary drought in the spiritual fulfillment of Mexico's developing Muslim community.

#### Notes

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<sup>2</sup>The reference to this text was published on CCIM's old webpage, which is now only available in archives (Muslim Center de México, 2003).

<sup>3</sup>I use the word "conversion" here, although it should be noted that this process is often argued to constitute "reversion" from a Muslim point of view, as in Islam people are

held to be born into Islam, but then later stray from it. Accordingly, this return to the original religion is sometimes termed a reversion, although the word was not used with me by my informants.

<sup>4</sup>The statistic of 39,000 comes from Adherents.com (2007), which calls upon Kamal bin Mohamad Noor’s (1982) projected population levels quoted in Barratt’s, *The World Christian Encyclopedia*. There are no official statistics as the Muslim community in Mexico is fragmented and because the Mexican census does not break “other religions” down into minority groups.

<sup>5</sup>There is very little academic literature on Islam in Mexico to date, contrary to the broad media attention the phenomenon has received. In addition to Alfaro Velcamp’s (2002) work, these are some of the extant studies: Garvin (2005), Ismu Kusumo (2004), Kettani (1986), Klahr (2002), Morquecho (2005), Ruiz Ortiz (2003), Sanchez García (2004).

<sup>6</sup>The lack of mutual exclusivity to these groupings was a point made earlier in an article examining motivations for religious conversion to Anglican Christianity and Islam in Mexico, presented at ENAH-INAH, Mexico (Lindley-Highfield, 2007).

<sup>7</sup>The names of all informants in this study have been changed to protect their identity and to provide them with anonymity.

<sup>8</sup>Idolatry in Islam need not only be the literal idolatry as is seen in Mexico’s plethora of Catholic statuary, but also the metaphoric idolatry of valuing other things more than God, such as, for example, capital in the case of capitalism.

<sup>9</sup>USC-MSA (2007): Sahih Bukhari, *Volume 3, Book 34, Number 286*, narrated by Al-Miqdam.

<sup>10</sup>I use the term “born Muslim” here to distinguish between converts and people born into Islam, although of course in Islam itself we are all born Muslim, as mentioned in note 3 regarding reversion.

<sup>11</sup>The “closing of the gate of *ijtihad*” relates to the end of innovation in Sunni Islamic law as of the 10th century.

<sup>12</sup>The *nargilāhs* are the Arabic *hookāh* water pipes, which are sold as they are popular with young Mexicans.

<sup>13</sup>The “People of the Book,” or Christians and Jews, is a contested term locally, in Mexico, which is also used in boundary setting. While in the Qur’an it is structurally possible to see society as divided into three main categories [Muslims; People of the Book; *kafir* (infidels)], some Mexican Muslims makes it a binary distinction, simply between Muslims and *kafir*.

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