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## **Islam in Mexico and Central America**

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### **Abstract**

The arrival of Islam in Mexico and Central America is sometimes dated back to the days of slavery following the discovery of the Americas, and immigration records show clear evidence of the migration of Muslims to the region from the nineteenth century onwards. Over the past fifty years, Islam has begun to find support amongst the populations of Mexico and Central America and, as a consequence, there has been a growth in religious conversions to Islam during this period. Each country, like each individual, has its own story as to why Islam has captured the imagination of people new to the religion: for some, Islam has provided the opportunity for them to explore their spirituality further; for others, who have carried a sense of marginalisation, Islam has acted as a liberating force.

### **Key words**

Islam, Mexico, Central America, Religious Conversion, Religious diversification

The twenty-first century is witnessing interesting demographic changes in the religious make-up of Mexico and Central America. The gradual transformation of the religious composition of the states, together with an increase in the elasticity to religious identity, has resulted in a dynamic culture in which religious identity has become more malleable and individuals have found new forms of expression for their faith. The increasing presence of Islam in the region is a marker of, and contributor towards, this changing environment.

The earliest record of a presumed Muslim presence in Central America dates back to arrival of Africans from the Mandinka, or Malinke, tribe into Panama in 1552 (Westerlund and

Svanberg 1999). The five centuries in the interim period lead us onto the contemporary situation where Latin Americans are choosing to adopt Islam as their religion in the present day. A feel for how these transformations have come about can be gained by looking at Mexico as a detailed case study. This reveals how Latin America has benefited from immigration and how Islam has enabled people to explore their spirituality, with marginalised peoples finding a voice within the religion.

## **MEXICO**

At the time of the conquest of Mexico under Hernán Cortés, a translator was required for the Spaniards to communicate with the country's indigenous inhabitants. Thankfully for Cortés, two Spanish crew members, who came to the New World on a voyage of discovery, survived their ship being wrecked some years earlier and found their way to land, where they integrated into the local community, intermarrying and learning to speak in the native tongue. They became the gatekeepers to the Spanish dominion of this territory. According to the year 2010 census of the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística Geografía e Informática* (INEGI), the percentage of Mexicans aged five years or over who are declared as speaking an indigenous language now stands at slightly less than seven per cent (INEGI 2011a). The same census reveals that a little less than eighty-three per cent of the population identify themselves as Roman Catholic at present (INEGI 2011b), such has been the impact of Cortés stumbling upon two Spaniards who were washed up by the sea.

Present-day Mexico is a country of extremes. Mexico City is home to the now richest man in the world, Carlos Slim Helú (Forbes.com 2012), with an estimated family wealth of sixty-nine billion US dollars, but Chiapas, Mexico's south-easternmost state, has had 'no

telephones or electricity at all in most of the rural areas' (Froehling 1997: 291). The country's most Catholic state, Guanajuato, with its well-respected university established by the Jesuits in 1732, has marginally less than ninety-four per cent of its population claiming a Roman Catholic religious identity. Mexico's least Catholic state, however, with the smallest number of people identifying themselves as Roman Catholic, is Chiapas, where (at fifty-eight per cent) this is a little over half of its population (INEGI 2011b). Often identified as a Roman Catholic nation, Mexico is beginning to increase in its religious pluralism.

Anthropologist Peter Cahn (2003: 64-65) tells us that religious freedom in Mexico was established under the 1857 Constitution, after which, in 1870, Benito Juárez suggested that the introduction of Protestantism might help to bring the indigenous peoples of Mexico under federal control. Accordingly, under the presidency of Lerdo, missionaries from the United States were welcomed in 1872. This is clearly a contributory factor to the heteropraxy that can be found in Mexico today.

Mexico is a large oil producer with substantial reserves. Nearly one-third of the government's revenue comes from this sector and it is one of the United States' major suppliers (BBC 2005a). Mexico's oil reserves are one of the contributory reasons for Chiapas having been called 'a rich land and poor people' (Benjamin 1989). Despite their ongoing and co-dependent trade relationships, the *Entente* between Mexico and the United States has not always been *Cordiale*. The USA's annexation of Texas, and then California, between 1845 and 1846, helped lead to the United States-Mexican war of 1846 in which Mexico was heavily overpowered by its much more developed, and heavily populated, neighbour (Zoraida Vázquez 2000). In more recent history, on the issue of the war in Iraq for example, Mexico, together with Chile, held the view that the evidence of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction

was inconclusive and recommended the continuation of weapons inspections rather than the use of force. This position led former President George W. Bush to refuse to take the Mexican president's phone calls and a rejection of the reopening of discussions regarding positive USA immigration reform (Valenzuela 2005). Many Mexican families are dependent on revenues earned in the United States, with migratory work being a norm. A few years ago, however, the USA reviewed the transient nature of the USA-Mexican border as not only a problem of illegal immigration, but also a security issue. In May 2005, former President George W. Bush instituted a new law permitting the building of a security fence along parts of the border and that would render it illegal for temporary migrant workers to drive in the USA without having a special permit (BBC 2005b). The profile of this issue has been heightened by Republicans' claims that 'poor security on the Mexican border could be used by terrorist groups to move their members into the US' (ibid.). It is under these circumstances that religious conversions to Islam are taking place.

### **The arrival of Islam in Mexico**

The circumstances of the arrival of Islam in Mexico are left to speculation since there is no firm documentation to confirm when the first Muslims came. The broader literature on the relationship between the slave trade and the wider Americas suggests that the first Muslims in the New World were brought over from Africa under slavery. Sylviane Diouf (1988) estimates that out of around fifteen million Africans taken to the Americas, about two and a quarter million to three million were Muslim.

There is also the possibility that Muslims travelled over with the *conquistadores* or as a result of the Spanish conquest of Muslim Spain. In 711 C.E. Umayyad Muslims conquered the

Kingdom of the Visigoths, an area comprising the majority of present-day Spain, and by 1200 C.E. eighty per cent of Iberia's population was Muslim (Segal 2001). As Henry Charles Lea (1901) has pointed out, following the accomplishment of the *Reconquista*, on the Christian conquest of Granada in 1492 C.E., Iberian Muslims had the option to convert to Christianity or face expulsion. Some religious leaders, such as Fray Jayme Bleda, remained suspicious that the Muslim converts to Christianity were awaiting the aid of Moors and Turks in order to recapture the peninsula, and called for the annihilation of the Muslims of Spain as a consequence (ibid.). Such threats could have caused true Muslims to hide their identities and to pretend to be Christian in order to avoid massacre or expulsion. Seth Kunin (2001: 42) documents that Crypto-Jews in New Mexico claim descent from 'the Jews forced to convert to Catholicism in Spain between 1390 and 1492', showing how the threat of forced conversion has led to the occultation of religious identity and migration.

The notion that Islam may have been present in Mexico for as long as Catholicism has received widespread support from the Muslim community. An historical novel set in the sixteenth century, *Un hereje y un musulmán* by Pascual Almazán (1962 [1870]), which has a Muslim as one of its chief characters, is often cited as proof of Islam's age-old presence in the country. This text is quoted regularly as though it were a primary source, even though it was written much later, in the nineteenth century.

It is not until the nineteenth century that we have any firm evidence regarding Muslim migration to Mexico, although even this does not permit us to build a comprehensive picture. Teresa Alfaro Velcamp (2002) rightly comments that post-revolutionary perceptions of ethnicity in Mexico have discouraged any focus on immigrants since they do not fit neatly into the tripartite model of a society composed of Spaniards, indigenous Mexicans and the

hybrid *mestizo*. More recent academic work has moved on to consider migration from the Middle Eastern region, with scholars such as Martha Díaz de Kuri and Lourdes Macluf (1995), Roberto Marin Guzman (1997), Luz María Martínez Montiel (1992), Jorge Nacif Mina (1995) and Carmen Mercedes Páez Oropeza (1984) having examined migration from the Lebanon, and with Doris Musalem Rahal (1997), María Elena Ota Mishima (1997) and Zidane Zeraoui (1997) having moved on to consider Palestinian and Arab immigration more broadly. Alfaro Velcamp's (2007) new work is the most thorough study of Muslim immigration to Mexico to date.

Mexico's openness to immigration stems from The Immigration and Naturalisation Law of 1886, created under Porfirio Díaz, which automatically naturalised property owners. While immigrants suffered some torment, and in some cases murderous violence, from the nationalism evoked during the Mexican Revolution of 1910, it was not until 1922 that immigration law was tightened and immigration fees heightened dramatically for 'Chinese and Negroes' (Wood 1922, quoted in Alfaro Velcamp 2002: 282). This situation barely changed until World War II had passed, when the government realised that a certain amount of immigration would be beneficial to national development.

There is something of a consensus that the majority of Mexico's first Muslims came as immigrants from the Greater Syria area of the Ottoman Empire, as of the late nineteenth century. Alfaro Velcamp (2002) observes that out of 8,240 Arab immigrants coming to Mexico between 1878 and 1951, 343 were Muslim, constituting a little over four per cent. Over half of these are documented as having arrived during the five-year period from 1922 to 1927. Increased immigration in the second half of the last century has seen the population rise

since and this increase in immigration has been complemented by a number of conversions to the religion.

Abdullah (Gregory) Weston, brother of Omar Weston, the founder of the Islamic Cultural Centre of Mexico (*el Centro Cultural Islamico de México*, or CCIM), a Sunni organisation also known as the *Muslim Center de México* (MCM), explains that a man called Yasin Ramirez is thought to have been Islam's first Mexican convert:

As far as I know he was the first community in Mexico. He was a convert, he was about fifty years old in 1990, and he had been a Muslim for ten years. He was a bit of a Sufi. And he used to teach here; he used to have a small mosque here, in Mexico City, and there was a committee of about ten people.

Abdullah, a Sunni Muslim with empathy for Shiite Islam, explained how he ceased to worship with this group when he discovered it to consist of "Qadiyanis", or Ahmadiyya people who he saw as unorthodox Muslims for not accepting Mohammad as the Seal of the Prophets, and expressed his remorse that Yasin "died in unorthodox Islam".

It is thought that the Murabitun Sufis came to carry out missionary work in Mexico in the mid-1990s, which is about the same time that the *Centro Cultural Islamico de México* was founded, in 1994, which is dedicated to calling native Mexicans to Sunni Islam. Since this time, proselytism has been active.

### **Mexico's Muslim Population**

In 1986 Mohamed Ali Kettani estimated that there were approximately 15,000 Muslims in Mexico (Kettani 1986). The World Christian Encyclopaedia upped this estimate to 39,000 in

the year 2000, based on the calculations of Mohammad Bin Abdullah Noor (Barrett 1982). Some figures as high as 318,608 have been brandished (Wikipedia 2007), however there are no known sources to substantiate such a high level, albeit that Mexico's vast population would not seem to prohibit such a statistic, at about 0.3% of the total population, yet the census of the year 2000 clearly counters this claim. In 2005, the government released more detailed statistics on the religious composition of Mexico based on data from the year 2000 census and population studies. This revealed that there were 1,421 Muslims recorded as living in Mexico at this time (INEGI 2005). This figure has more than doubled over the ten year period to 2010 with there now being 3,760 Muslims in the country according to official statistics (INEGI 2011b). While these statistics stem from a reliable source, we cannot be entirely certain about how dependable they are, since people may have reasons for wishing to hide their religious identity, they may not participate in these official data-gathering exercises, relations who report such data may not acknowledge their family members' religious conversion, and the population is not static due to the regular inward and outward flow of migrants, so these factors all make the official figures questionable. It was reported that there had been over 500 conversions to Islam in Mexico City for one religious community alone by 2003 (MCM 2003), and the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (2009) calculated that there were approximately 110,000 Muslims in Mexico in 2009, although warned on the reliability of the data.

### **Divergent Communities**

In 2002 Teresa Alfaro Velcamp carried out a cursory study of the Mexican Muslim population in English. Recent writings by Mexican researchers have complimented these findings (Ismu Kusumo 2004; Sanchez García 2004). The Muslim community is composed

of a mixture of immigrants, descendants of immigrants, diplomats and converts, although these groupings are not entirely discrete with some individuals falling into more than one of these categories. There are Sufi and Sunni communities present in Mexico City, a group of Shiite immigrants from Lebanon in Torreón, an active Shiite community in the northern state of Chihuahua, some small Sunni Muslim groups in Zacatecas and Monterrey, and some Muslim medical students in Guadalajara. There are also converts to Islam in Chiapas, Aguas Calientes, Morelia, Morelos, Puebla and Veracruz, where small communities exist.

Mexico City shows some of the religious diversity to Islam that we might expect from a capital. Natascha Garvin (2005) comments on the presence of Nur Ashki Jerrahi Sufis, informing us that they are said to mix feminism with New-Age mysticism in a relatively unorthodox form of Islam. Alfaro Velcamp (2002) points to the presence of Baha'i practitioners, and also "Qadiyanis". She also describes her attendance at a gathering of the Halveti-Jerrahi Order of Dervishes, in Colonia Roma, and that the twenty to thirty people present were mainly women of European appearance, commenting:

The service began at around eight in the evening and lasted until midnight, with breaks to eat and smoke cigarettes. The group differed from [a Sunni organisation] not only in its predominantly female constituency but in what seemed to be its much more tolerant interpretation of Islam. As was expected, its prayer service had a more mystical feel than the Sunni service I attended, which was more structured and formal.

(Alfaro Velcamp 2002: 288)

The Halveti-Jerrahi Order of Dervishes describe themselves as a traditional Sufi Muslim order and are international in scope, with branches in western and central Europe, Latin America, and the United States (Jerrahi.org 2005).

Back in 2002, the Iranian Embassy co-ordinated meetings and events for Shiite Muslims and diplomats in Mexico City. Now they refer worshippers to an educational centre and prayer hall in Polanco that is not exclusively Shiite (*el Centro Educativo de la Comunidad Musulmana*, CECM). They have held occasional conferences on Islam and have sponsored annual book fairs. The employees of the embassies of a number of Muslim countries often work with CCIM, which actively propagates the Muslim message and now operates a missionary programme called '*DawAmigo*'.

CCIM is slowly building a mosque in Mexico City and has an educational and recreational centre in Tequesquitengo in the state of Morelos. The latter site has a resourceful library, a mosque area, living accommodation, hotel accommodation for raising capital, and a swimming pool. They no longer rent the house from the Saudi Arabian Embassy as they were doing at the time of Alfaro Velcamp's (2002) study, but most Muslims attending the CCIM's prayer services are still male and the services are quite structured and formal. More recently, they opened a *dawah* office in Coyoacán in Mexico City, near to the National University, UNAM, where they discuss Islam, hand out promotional literature, observe the five daily prayers, and sell goods imported from Muslim countries. This office has large ground-floor display windows facing out onto a main road very close to the Miguel Angel Quevedo metro station and it attracts a number of curious passers-by with its Arab curios and its posters about the religion.

The CCIM has ten key objectives: to facilitate prayer; to educate about Islam; to teach Arabic; to nurture Muslim children; to organise social events; to provide scholarships to Islamic universities; to translate and publish works on Islam; to disseminate Muslim literature from elsewhere in the world; to establish *musallahs* (prayer halls); and to fundraise. A

number of community members have been to study at the Medina in Saudi Arabia or at al-Azhar University in Egypt. Public education about Islam has taken a number of forms, including handing out leaflets to passers-by; making speeches on the metro; praying in public spaces; operating shops; ‘flashing’ prominent signs at media-concentrated events; and travelling to other cities to speak about Islam. Since Alfaro Velcamp (2002) wrote, the building of *Dar as Salām*, its educational and recreational centre next to Lake Tequesquitengo in Morelos, has been completed and CCIM has helped to establish *musallahs* in Guadalajara and Chiapas, in addition to Mexico City. They have also certified establishments preparing *halal* (permitted) food, which raised funds for a number of early *dawah* (missionary) projects. They presently produce a journal on Islam in Spanish (*islamentuidioma*), have a comprehensive website with a chat room facility, and co-ordinate a discussion list on *yahoo.com.mx*. The group attracts converts from all over the Mexican nation via the Internet, in addition to those who approach them, or whom they approach, in person. Its director, Omar (Mark) Weston, a former junior water-skiing champion, was born in the UK in 1968 and was raised in Mexico, having converted to Islam at the central mosque, Orlando, Florida in 1988.

Omitted from Alfaro Velcamp’s original study are the Salafi centre, run by a convert named Mohammad Abdullah Ruíz, and the educational centre and prayer hall in the district of Polanco (the CECM). Only a handful of converts belong to the Salafi group, and the majority of the city’s Sunni Muslims (of whichever affiliation) attend the Friday prayer at the prayer hall in Polanco. This educational centre admits to being primarily Sunni when asked, although it is visited by Muslims of varying traditions within the faith. Often there are thirty to eighty people in attendance. Men and women are segregated, the men praying on the first floor while the women congregate to the rear of the building downstairs. The *hutbah* (or

sermon) is delivered in Arabic and then Spanish. There are washing facilities for *wuduh* (ritual ablutions) and there is a kitchen area, where a meal is prepared for all those in attendance at the Friday prayer. There are some deep divisions between the leaders of these competing communities, many of whom having worked together at some point in the past, usually in fundraising, from which their competition principally stems (Lindley-Highfield 2008).

All three of the CCIM, the educational centre in Polanco and the Salafi centre operate on a national scale, seeking to represent Islam in Mexico. They compete in terms of attracting converts to Islam in addition to their sourcing of financial support for the Muslim community from abroad. CCIM has had historical ties with Saudi Arabia and more recently has benefited from assistance from Muslims in Britain and Kuwait. The CECM educational centre in Polanco is connected most strongly with Syria and Pakistan. The Salafi centre is thought to be funded independently, although indubitably has Saudi connections.

Outside of Mexico City, where there is the largest concentration of Muslims, the second most substantial communities may be found in Torreón and Chiapas. More recent waves of immigration have come from Syria and the Lebanon and there is now a strong group of Shiite Muslims in Torreón, in northern Mexico, from these parts. The first generation of these immigrants have retained a large amount of Lebanese culture and of their Islamic faith. They tend to know Arabic and are thus able to read the Qur'an. Most have managed to marry endogamously, and some even to patrilineal parallel cousins. The second generation, however, have intermarried more widely with Catholic Mexicans and, even though their spouses are unlikely to practice their faith, a Muslim marital setting has been the norm. Many are unable to read Arabic and thus approach the Qur'an in translation. Dietary prescriptions

are followed by almost all although Arabic food in particular is, in some cases, eaten only occasionally. With regard to worship, some of the group choose to pray privately at home, whereas others attend Torreón's Shiite mosque, Suraya, which was constructed in 1989 as a memorial to the daughter of a wealthy merchant family who was killed tragically in a car accident. These Shiite Muslims 'do not appear to be actively reaching out' in so far as proselytism is concerned and produce literature for their community's sole use (Alfaro Velcamp 2002). Alfaro Velcamp (ibid.) asserts that this group cannot be considered *fanaticos*, or fundamentalists, considering their intermarriage into Mexican society and wider integration into the community.

In addition to those Chiapanec converts affiliated with the *Centro Cultural Islamico de México*, there is a Sufi group in Chiapas which belongs to the worldwide Murabitun movement (Garvin 2005). Marco Klahr (2002) reveals that a Spanish missionary, named Mohammad Nafia, came to Mexico not long after the *Zapatista* uprising of 1994 and tried, without much success, to convert EZLN members (a revolutionary group). It was thought that these revolutionaries, who fight for the rights of indigenous peoples, might relate well to the ethos of this particular brand of Islam, yet the dialogue was inconclusive. He did, however, have success with the leader of a Protestant organisation who – together with his followers – had been driven out of his home in San Juan Chamula in Chiapas because of his Protestant conversion. The subsequent conversion of this group to Islam laid the foundations for what is now said to be a community of some 200 members, made up of a mixture of Tzotzil and Tzeltal Maya Indians, '*mestizos*', other Latin Americans and Spanish immigrants (Garvin 2005). The group now lives in a self-contained commune in the impoverished outskirts of San Cristobal de las Casas, and they have their own Islamic 'school' and kindergarten, and skills workshops where they can learn carpentry and tailoring. Although it is mentioned that

there are women and children within this community, its precise gender composition remains unconfirmed. Garvin (ibid.) has suggested that the people of Chiapas are the most open to other religions, since official statistics reveal it to be Mexico's most religiously plural state, yet stories such as that of the Protestant who was run out of his home leave this 'openness' in question. Some of this religious plurality may come from religious mobility however, where people chop and change religion, which could lead to fluctuating community populations.

The Murabitun movement has members in Africa, Australia, Europe, Southeast and Central Asia and the United States, having originally been set up in the UK by a Scotsman, Ian Dallas, who is now known as *Shaykh Abd al-Qadir as-Sufi al-Murabit*. The group belongs to the Darqawi order, sympathetic to Sunni Islam, which was established in Morocco in the late eighteenth century and stresses the relationship between Islam and the cultural heritage of the West. Garvin (2005) relays that the group has been associated with Nazism and Islamic fundamentalism and that they are prone to target heavily politicised areas such as Chiapas. She also repeats the allegations that Mohammad Nafia has been imprisoned in the past for Islamist activities and that weapons were offered to Zapatistas on the condition that they converted to Murabitun Islam (ibid.). While the strength of the source for the linking of the Murabitun movement to Nazism appears tenuous (a disgruntled former member of the group), the group's *shaykh* is publicly critical of Western hegemony, positivist science and capitalism, as Garvin suggests. Garvin (2005) echoes heavy criticisms of the radicalism of this group's leader, however the views of Murabitun Sufis may be broader than the particular depiction Garvin propagates.

## Perceptions of Islam within Mexico

Teresa Alfaro Velcamp (2002: 278) labels the ‘*turco*’ stereotype as ‘perhaps [Mexican Muslims’] biggest challenge’. Based upon an article by Ignacio Klich and Jeffrey Lesser (1996) and witnessed in the *telenovela*, or soap opera, *El privilegio de amar* on TV Azteca, which ran from September 1998 to February 1999, Alfaro Velcamp discerns that this stereotype ‘is associated with Muslims throughout Latin America’. She explains:

In a recent episode of a popular Mexican *telenovela* (soap opera), for example, the heroine whispers to her friends, “The Turk is cheap.” The Arab merchant has a large hooked nose and sports a comical bushy moustache with the ends twisted up. While this character is not particularly important to the storyline, he does make an appearance, with his stereotypical features, trying to swindle these Mexican women.

Alfaro Velcamp describes this stereotype as ‘inextricably linked to the issue of Muslim identity’ (Alfaro Velcamp 2002: 279). More recently, many contemporary Mexicans do not make this connection, which is perhaps more of an indication of how radically the perception of Muslims has changed in Mexico rather than as any statement as to the invalidity of the particular association at this earlier date. Since Alfaro Velcamp’s article was written (although before it was published) the colossal event of the destruction of the twin towers in New York has taken place, 9/11, which has totally transformed the general associations with Muslim identity. While *Milenio* carried quite a balanced article on Islam in 2002 entitled ‘Changing religion’, which gave a convert to Islam the opportunity to explain that Islam denounces terrorism and violence (de la Cruz 2002), a number of derogatory news headlines have been published since; for example ‘Radical Islamic groups present in Mexico’ (Jimenez Caliz 2003) and ‘Chiapas: Islamism and family breakdown’ (Yahoo! Noticias 2004). In 2005,

Gaspar Morquecho published an article in the National University, UNAM's newspaper on 'Gender equality in speech, traditional servitude in reality', in which he characterised the Murabitun Sufi group in Chiapas through its 'authoritarianism, fidelity, subordination, violence, obedience, growth and splits, revolt, disobedience' (Morquecho 2005). The article reached some balance by painting the local Sunni community in a more positive light, to which some of the Sufis had 'defected'.

In the environs of the Muslim community at their educational and recreational centre in Tequesquitengo, the local community's perception of the Muslims can be told by the nickname attributed to the property: "the Taliban's house" (*la casa de los Talibanes*). This 'negative' depiction of Muslims is echoed by a primary school teacher who had converted to Islam, who states that the biggest stereotype with which he has been confronted is the association with "terrorism and Bin Laden".

H. G. Reza (2005), writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, quotes Marta Khadija Ramirez, who encountered Islam at a British school: 'Islam was unknown in Mexico then. It wasn't easy for my family to accept my decision.' Because Mexico's Muslim community is small, it has to struggle to communicate exactly what Islam is about, where perceptions of what it is to be a Muslim are created more forcefully via television and the media. It is clear that there has been a shift in the news-driven perception of Muslims in Mexico since the attacks on the World Trade Centre, which is partially fuelled, both positively and negatively, by Mexico's proximity to the United States. Clearly, Muslim identity in Mexico is not perceived apolitically.

## **Perceptions of Islam in Mexico from the outside**

The advent of Islam in Mexico has received the greatest attention in the media of the United States, far beyond the scholarly attention it has received, which has led to the transmission of the news on a global scale. A version of a US news article has, for example, been reproduced in the German newspaper *Der Spiegel* (Glüsing 2005). A brief survey of some of the articles communicates how the phenomenon has been received.

An Associated Press (2002) report entitled ‘Official says Mexico will expel some Islamic missionaries’ admitted that the action ‘was apparently based on the alleged violation of immigration laws, not terrorism concerns’ yet repeated a Mexican commentator’s remarks that ‘Authorities began investigating the group, which is linked to the Morocco-based Murabitun World Movement, following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks’. Jan McGirk (2002) wrote, in the *San Antonio Current*, ‘Radical Islam takes root in Chiapas’ beginning ‘In a volatile corner of southern Mexico...’. Susana Hayward and Janet Schwartz (2003) described the phenomenon as a ‘battle for converts’. Such language, focusing on issues of conflict, reinforces an association of Muslims with violence. In its extreme, such an association can reinforce extreme right-wing prejudices, as responses to a *Houston Chronicle* article, entitled ‘Islam taking root in southern Mexico’, posted to FreeRepublic.com demonstrate. The following is an example of one of the posts:

Make no mistake, Islam is attempting a full blown invasion of North America.

Apparently they see south america is our “soft underbelly” and the abject poverty and misery of these people as fertile breeding ground for their propaganda, false promises and anti-America hate.

(FreeRepublic.com 2007)

Interestingly, as Derek Copold (2001) has pointed out critically, some writers have used Mexico as an analogy for Palestine in comparing how America would act if it were attacked by Mexicans as a mode of justifying the Israeli position. Copold quotes Russell Smith: 'if Mexican militants were lobbing shells across the border and sent suicide bombers to discos in Los Angeles, the US would immediately act.' Copold finds a similar comparison drawn by Jonah Goldberg:

A Mexican suicide bomber walked into a pizza restaurant in a Santa Fe, N.M. mall this morning, killing at least 15 people, mostly children. Up to a hundred others were wounded... Militia in Tijuana, Mexico, fired rocket grenades into downtown San Diego, killing 20, wounding 50 and, once again, snarling morning traffic.

These jocular attempts to authenticate the Israeli position do little to dampen any fears that the presence of 'radical' Muslims in Mexico would be detrimental to the U.S.-Mexico border issue. These particular slants on the issue tend to dominate the output of the media in the American Southwest, where the readership is in closer proximity to the border.

In contrast to this negative focus, North America's Hispanic Muslim groups have responded to the advent of Islam in Mexico very positively. Michelle al-Nasr (2002) writes of 'a monotheistic revolution', celebrating that 'people are embracing Islam by the thousands jettisoning the Catholicism imposed upon their ancestors in Spain.' In Shamim A. Siddiqi's (1993: 95) *The Dawah Program*, a guide for Muslims who are to carry out missionary activity, he points to the Hispanic people's receptivity to Islam:

It has been noted through Dawah efforts in this community that very often [Spanish-speaking people] are found akin to Islam. They express less indifference to Islam and the Da'ee [the individual carrying out missionary work] in comparison with other

Christian communities. It is easy to talk with them with reference to their Spanish origin and its past Islamic culture, the evidences of which are still very much visible in Spain a country they fondly relate to. Many of them, I have found, are in search of literature on Islam in the Spanish language. Many a time when they saw the Qur'an in Spanish in our hands or on display on the table at marketplaces, they rushed to it with reverence. Some of them held it with tears in their eyes. In view of this, Spanish-speaking people should be given special attention by the Islamic Movement in the American perspective.

This special attention is increasingly present in Mexico.

The broader Muslim world has acknowledged the potential for Islam in Mexico and also the economic needs of the Mexican people. As a consequence, Muslim individuals and organisations have supported Muslim missionary activities in Mexico morally, logistically and financially. For example, the University of Cambridge's Muslim Community Services group hosted Omar Weston, Director of CCIM, on 15 November 2003 for a lecture and video presentation on Islam in Mexico to promote CCIM's work and to raise funds for the Mexican Muslim community. These changes taking place in Mexico need to be understood in the context of broader transformations occurring around the world, with which the Mexican situation is inextricably linked.

### **Islam in Mexico in relation to the wider global situation**

Alfaro Velcamp (2002) acknowledges the identification of Mexican Muslims with the wider Islamic world and insightfully notes the arrival of a more pan-American Muslim consciousness. A foundation for this is present in the historical ties between Latin America

and Muslim Spain. Hisham Aidi (2003) points to an affinity that has existed between the Latin American states and the Arab region:

Throughout the past century, particularly during the Cold War, Latin American leaders from Cuba's Fidel Castro to Argentina's Juan Peron would express support for Arab political causes, and call for Arab-Latin solidarity in the face of imperial domination, often highlighting cultural links to the Arab world through Moorish Spain. Castro, in particular, made a philosophy of pan-Arab pan-Africanism central to his regime's ideology and policy initiatives. In his famous 1959 speech on race, the *jefe maximo* underlined Cuba's African and Moorish origins. "We all have lighter or darker skin. Lighter skin implies descent from Spaniards who themselves were colonised by the Moors that came from Africa. Those who are more or less dark-skinned came directly from Africa. Moreover, nobody can consider himself as being of pure, much less superior, race."

Venezuela's Hugo Chavez also called on his people to 'return to their Arab roots' in an attempt to gather up support from Venezuela's mestizo and black majority to act against the white Bush administration's alleged support for a coup against him (Aidi 2003). Such statements attest to cross-cultural commonalities, which add to a favourable perception of Islam for some people in Latin America.

A number of the factors attracting Muslim immigrants to Mexico, and that also draw native Mexicans into contact with Islam, are the hallmarks of secularisation: industrialisation, urbanisation, rationalisation, bureaucratisation and societalisation (Wilson 1966). While globalisation and the presence of Islam in Mexico facilitate the growth of the religion in this region, as Bowman et al. (2001: 73) narrate, 'Wilson sees the increasing number of new

faiths as part of the secularisation process.’ In such circumstances, we might enquire if the advent of religious pluralism in Mexico will begin to affect the social significance of religion in Mexicans’ everyday lives.

With Islam’s historic connection with Spain and its alternative perspective to a white-Western-dominated discourse, the divergent Muslim communities of Mexico call for our attention, while a new chapter of Mexico’s history is unraveled. It is clear that a Muslim identity carries a number of strong symbolic associations with other factors in Mexican society and there is clearly a politics to these.

## **BELIZE**

Nunez (2010) looks to the 1920s and 1930s for the arrival of Muslims in Belize, citing the example of Arab males who came to the then British Honduras for trade purposes and who married local British Honduran Christian women. It was a condition of marriage at that time that the offspring of the union received a Christian education, so these settlers were integrated into the Christian-majority culture of the country. Nevertheless, Muslim names persisted in families where there was later no known Muslim relative as a consequence, leaving Islamic cultural markers within Belizean society.

After this initial migration, Islam in Belize grew particularly during the late twentieth century through the popularity of the teachings of Elijah Mohammad of the Nation of Islam. Visits from prominent Muslims such as Elijah Mohammad’s son, Wallace Deen Mohammad, and the boxer Mohammad Ali encouraged the adoption of the faith. The independence movement of the 1960s and 1970s saw a rise in Black Nationalism through organisations such as the

United Black Association for Development, and the Nation of Islam gained prominence in the country owing to an identification with the teachings and experience of the Nation's prominent members such as Malcolm X. The Nation was led in Belize by Charles Eagan, who adopted the name Charles X after encountering the teachings of the Nation of Islam whilst in prison in the USA. Initially, the government was suspicious of the Muslim group's activities to the extent that one of their meetings was disbanded in 1962, however the government later eased its position, allowing Wallace Deen Mohammad's visit of 1978, in which same year an organisation called the Islamic Mission of Belize came into being and received official governmental recognition.

Islam in Belize matched to some degree the trajectory of the Nation of Islam, so when the Nation returned to core Islamic beliefs, such as the equality of the races (having previously seen whites as inferior in terms of their perceived inherent evil under Elijah Mohammad), the Muslims of Belize moved on to more orthodox Islamic positions. The Islamic Mission has a pan-Islamic focus, seeing the *ummah*, or Muslim people, as a single community and avoiding the age-old divisions between different factions of the faith, such as can exist between Sunni and Shiite Islam.

During the 1970s the country's first private Islamic schools were founded. In 1979, the first of these was assessed as entitled to governmental aid (Nunez 2010), providing an elementary education in addition to supporting their spiritual needs. Pupils do not need to be Muslims to attend despite the Islamic character of the school.

Muslims from Belize visited the embassies of a number of Middle Eastern countries in Mexico City in the 1980s with the intention of creating trade links between Belize and the

countries. In response to this contact, the Iranian Embassy granted financial aid to help the group to secure part of a 350-acre site leased from the government by the Mission in the Jannahville area of Belize City to provide a Muslim quarter in which they can combine homes, occupations and education in a self-sufficient community. Other aid came in the form of security fencing for the community's school. Islam now has an observable presence in the country. It is said that the community owes its public awareness in Belize to the women of the community, who openly embrace Islamic dress.

## **COSTA RICA**

The Muslims of Costa Rica are composed of both religious converts, most of whom are from Costa Rica and some are from Colombia, and people who have emigrated from Palestine, the Lebanon, Egypt, Libya, Iran, Iraq, Morocco, Algeria, Syria, India and Pakistan, although numbers remain small. In an interview of 2008, Dr. Abdulfatah Sasa Mahmoud, president of the *Centro Islámico de Costa Rica*, estimates that there are approximately 500 Muslims in the country (Leff 2008). Dr. Mahmoud describes Costa Rica as a hospitable environment for Muslims with their having been no objections to their establishment of a place of worship for the community (ibid.), although Espinoza (2008) reports on misconceptions and negative stereotypes in the community principally down to media representations.

While some Costa Ricans have chosen to adopt Islam in their own country, some female Costa Rican immigrants have adopted the tradition in the USA too. Yvonne Haddad (cited in Martin 2008) explains that while Islam may restrict the liberty of converts more than their previous religion did, it brings them greater respect than they otherwise enjoyed, with Islamic

values matching their Latin American ideals better, such as the status of a woman as wife and mother.

In addition to the *Centro Islámico de Costa Rica*, in the country's capital San José, there is an organisation known as the *Centro Cultural Musulmán de Costa Rica*, which also has its own place of worship, and a Tablighi Jamat missionary group called *al-Markaz* in Desampardos, which actively promotes Islam, particularly amongst those who would benefit from a reformed lifestyle. Other Muslims reside in the Alajuela city region.

## **EL SALVADOR**

While there is possible evidence that there was a Muslim in El Salvador as early as 1619 through the identification of someone as a Moor in inquisitor proceedings (Escalante and Daura Molina 2001), Marín Guzmán (2000) attributes the arrival of Islam in El Salvador to migration from the Lebanon, Syria and Palestine in the early 1900s, however the most prominent members of El Salvadorian society are Christian rather than Muslim immigrants, and the presence of Islam is thought to be sparse since there has not been much promotion of the faith in the country to date. There is, however, a Shiite group operating the *Fátimah Az-Zahra* centre, which has been circulating an Islamic magazine and offering the country's sole Muslim library over the past eight years. The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (2009) gives an estimated population of 2,000 Muslims in El Salvador in 2009.

The first Muslim community to establish a place of worship was the Sunni *Centro Islámico Árabe Salvadoreño*, which was established in San Salvador in 1994. Members of this

organisation make public appearances to dispel inaccurate portrayals of Islam and to try to increase popular awareness. A third mosque was founded in the capital in 2007.

## **GUATEMALA**

Alike other Central American countries, Guatemala has also had its flow of immigrants from Palestine. The community is active and offers classes on Islam to interested parties. Their mosque, *Mezquita Al Dawah Islámica*, is not the sole place of worship for Muslims in the country; there is also an Ahmadiyya Muslim group, who believe that, although Mohammad was the last prophet to receive the divine laws, other prophets have followed and will follow him; a position which some Muslims consider to be unorthodox. The Guatemalan Muslim population was estimated to be approximately 1,000 in 2009 (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life 2009).

## **HONDURAS**

The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (2009) identifies the Muslim population of Honduras as being about 11,000 in 2009. Arab immigration to Honduras is thought to have commenced at the tail end of the nineteenth century and to have carried on ever since. While the minority of these immigrants have been Muslims, the proportion of Arab immigrants to Honduras is higher than anywhere else in Central America and numerically, rather than proportionately, the population size is significant. Two principal Islamic religious centres exist, the *Centro Islámico de Honduras* in San Pedro Sula and the *Comunidad Islámica de Honduras* in Cortés.

## NICARAGUA

Differing strands of the Muslim faith compete in representing their interests in Nicaragua. This was seen in 2007 when the Sunni leader of the Islamic Cultural Center in Managua was ousted to be replaced by a Shiite figurehead, as the balance of Shiite Muslims increased in the centre (Embassy of the United States Managua Nicaragua 2007). Most of Nicaragua's Shiite immigration hails from Iran, and this community has established the *Centro Cultural Islámico Nicaragüense* as an outreach organisation to help to draw people to Islam.

In terms of overall immigration however, a greater number of Muslims have come from Palestine, beginning in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (2009) places the estimated Muslim population of Nicaragua at 1,000 Muslims in 2009, which is slightly less than the US government's approximation of 1,200 to 1,500 people as at 2007. The principal place of worship and cultural centre is the *Asociación Cultural Nicaragüense-Islámica*. The Islamic Cultural Centre, Managua, offers a substantial mosque, which accommodates Muslims from the differing sections of the faith.

## PANAMA

The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (2009) estimates that the number of Muslims in Panama stood at 24,000 in 2009. At 0.7 per cent of the country's population this is perhaps the highest proportion of Muslims in a Central American country, albeit that the reliability of all the statistics is questionable. Immigrants to Panama came from India, Pakistan and the Lebanon, amongst others, particularly during the twentieth century. Despite this more recent influx, Westerlund and Svanberg (1999) attribute to Panama the earliest arrival of Muslims to

the Central American region, in 1552. Conversions, or reversions as they are referred to in Islam, occurred in the late twentieth century, particularly during the 1970s, when the ideas of the Nation of Islam gained prominence in the country.

Community groups for Muslims have existed in Panama for a longer period than in the rest of Central America. The Indo-Pakistani Muslim Society, of Sunni persuasion, later known as the Panama Muslim Mission, was established at the close of the 1920s. In the present day, there are now four places of worship in Panama that Muslims can attend.

As the history of colonial Mexico began with a shipwreck, so does the narrative of the advent of Islam in Panama. The Mandinka, or Malinke, were an African tribe who were thought to practice Islam. Hundreds of their number were transported from West Africa to the Americas by Spanish colonialists with the intention that they would work their copper mines. They were shipwrecked and almost five hundred of their number swam for the shore, arriving in Panama. The Mandinka sought someone to represent them in the face of their slavery and nominated a man called Bayano. Bayano led a revolt of the Mandinka, which ultimately saw him exiled to Spain for the remainder of his life. It is suggested that the alleged early presence of Islam in Panama died with him. The Muslim community of Panama in the present day points to this narrative as an indication that Islam is part of Panama's past and that some Panamanians are possibly descended from Muslims themselves, which is an argument that may be employed when someone approaches the faith.

## CONCLUSION

The origins of Islam in Latin America are at least partially lost in the mists of time, however myths perpetuate about the antiquity of the religion's presence in the region. The connection with Moorish Spain and the Spanish colonisation of the Americas contribute to the perception that Islam may have been in the context for as long as Catholicism has been. More recent waves of immigration are more clearly documented and illustrate how religious diversity has developed through the movement of peoples to the New World. The presence of Islam in Mexico and Central America has provided the people of the region with an opportunity to explore their spirituality further and, for some, it has presented a response to marginalisation and an opportunity to respond.

Although Mexico is officially a secular state, Roman Catholicism is heavily intertwined with its lived culture. Through the diversification that the presence of other religious traditions brings, religious pluralism has grown in the country, seemingly symbolising a movement to a more rationalised approach to religion whereby the individual has the agency to adopt the religion that best fits. In this context, Islam fits well, and it seems that the position of the marginalised is respected within this religious tradition to the extent that the religion acts as a liberating force, on an ideological level at the very least.

The development of Islam in the Latin American region has only recently captured the attention and scrutiny of scholars and there is room for much work to be done to bring further light onto this engaging environment of religious change.

Notes:

1. I am grateful to the UK's Economic & Social Research Council for providing the funding that facilitated this research.
2. In addition to a review of the literature, this work is based on a prolonged period of anthropological research spent living with the Muslim community in Mexico over a thirteen-month period from 2006 to 2007.

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