

Islam in Latin America

Matt Cook, March 2007

Islam and Christianity stand in stark contrast to one another. As one author contends, "It must be understood that orthodox, biblical Christianity assumes the existence of truth. Truth implies the existence of error and mutually exclusive claims of truth cannot both be correct. Such is the case with Islam and Christianity...They cannot both be correct" (Caner and Caner 16). Because of this stark contrast and the Christian's belief that Jesus Christ is the "way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14.6; ESV), the Christian understands the responsibility he has to share his faith with Muslims. The ability to share one's faith with a Muslim, though, requires knowledge of Islamic beliefs. It is also necessary to understand the history, practice, and presence of Muslims in certain geographical areas. It is with this latter "necessity" in mind that this student set out to research this topic. Planning to do evangelistic work in Cusco, Peru, he desires to understand the presence of Islam in Latin America. At the very beginning, it must be noted that the presence of Islam is very minimal in Latin America. It is generally agreed that there are somewhere around two million Muslims in all of Latin America (Central and South America). As might be expected, some Muslim sources have inflated this number to as many as four million. Veteran missionaries also report a small number of Muslims in Latin America. Glen Henton, a missionary in Argentina, referring to himself, writes, "at least you know that someone that has lived here for nearly 15 years has never had contact with Muslims." Bryan Gibbs noted that all the people he met, who were of Middle Eastern origin, were Christians. Still, though, this under-researched topic needs to be studied. As this subject is addressed, this paper will first focus on the history and geographical presence of Islam in Latin America. Then, the practice of Latin American Islam, Latin American prejudice against Islam, and the presence of radical Islam in Latin America will be addressed.

HISTORY OF ISLAM IN LATIN AMERICA

It may seem strange that the history of Islam in Latin America stretches back to the time of the "famous" Spanish and Portuguese explorers who first "discovered" the Americas. First, the very background of the first explorers of the Americas was one of war with the Muslims. In the year 1492, the year that Columbus sailed to America, Ferdinand and Isabella "ended the Muslim domination in Spain and the Iberian Peninsula and reestablished Roman Christianity in Spain" (Caner and Caner 76).

Years of fighting had also occurred in northern Africa between Spain and the Muslim Turks. It is certain, then, that some of the soldiers who accompanied the explorers to the Americas had also “taken a direct part in the struggle against the Muslims either in Africa or Spain” (Bazan, “Muslim” 173). The explorers may have even felt that their voyage to the New World served the purpose of conquering and defeating Muslims. Lewis writes, “For many, the great voyages of discovery were themselves part of a religious war, a continuation of the Crusades and of the reconquest, against the same Muslim enemy” (18). Bazan, commenting on the conquests of Cortez, writes, “And when he embarked upon the conquest of this new land, he did not feel that he was coming to a new world, but to a part of the Islamic Empire, worthy of being incorporated into the Christian dominions of Spain” (“Some” 286). Significantly, some of these explorers referred to the natives of South America in terms based on their experience with the Muslims in Europe and North Africa. The men of Cortez called the Indian temples *mezquitas*, from the Arabic *masjid*, or mosque. Columbus referred to the natives as “infidels” and Jerez once said that the Inca army “recalled that of the Turks (Bazan, “Muslim” 173). Clearly, the attitudes of the early explorers of Latin America had been influenced by their experience with the Muslims.

It is probably true, though, that this experience with the Muslims was more than just a memory of times in the Old World. Islamic historians suggest that Muslim astronomers and mariners had an important role in the discovery of the New World. It is possible, also, though no written records prove it, that “Muslim navigators from Spain and Africa had developed contacts with Mexico and other parts of Central and South America well before Columbus” (Ahsani 454). Ahsani provides this proof: “Along the coast of South America Arab coins have been found dating back to 800 AD” (454). It is known that Vasco da Gama consulted with the famous Muslim astronomer Ahmad b. Majid, “whom he met on the west coast of Africa” (Bazan, “Some” 285). A map of the western hemisphere created by the famous navigator and map-maker Piri Muhyi I-Din Reis was found in 1929. He died around 1554 and it is suggested that this map could only have been created through his first-hand experience in the Americas. Further, Portuguese and Spanish discovery missions “were led by Muslim mariners—Moriscos” (Ahsani 454). It is also notable that the very first Christian to see the Americas converted to Islam. Bazan records, “By a rare paradox of history, the first Christian to see the American land, Rodrigo de Triana, or Rodrigo de Lepe, on his return to Spain became a Muslim, abandoning his

Christian allegiance 'because Columbus did not give him credit, nor the King any recompense, for his having seen—before any other man in the crew—light in the Indies'" (Bazan, "Some" 289).

Additionally, Ahsani suggests that after the fall of Islam in Spain, that "many displaced Muslim artisans...brought their art to the New World. In the 16th and 17th centuries, they came to the colonies without their families and their descendants—Mestizos –born of local women, preserved their art in Mexico, Guatemala, Cuba, Columbia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, and Brazil" (454). That there were some Arab Muslims settling in the New World is evident from the restrictions that were put into place by Spain. The Spanish did not want the Muslims to have anything to do with the New World. In fact, "A whole body of laws and regulations was created by Spain to build a wall of defense against Muslim infiltration" (Bazan, "Muslim" 175). Despite the regulations, some Muslims succeeded in entering the Americas with the hope of finding an opportunity for free exercise of faith. Eventually, this illegal immigration became so prevalent that the Queen of Spain issued an edict, which made the transportation of Muslims to the New World not illegal, but only legal with the possession of a royal license. This edict caused an increase, rather than decrease, of the flow of Muslims *and* Jews that came to Latin America. Finally, in 1539, when Spain was in open conflict with the Muslims of North Africa, a decree was issued, which, "in energetic terms, prohibited the transfer to the West Indies of sons or grandsons of persons" who were of Muslim or Jewish descent. Then, in 1543, Charles V ratified these decrees and "ordered the expulsion" of Muslims who were already living in the Americas (Bazan, "Muslim" 175-76). Clearly, Muslims had some role to play in the discovery and habitation of the Americas.

The Muslims' role in the habitation of Latin America is most apparent in the African slaves that were brought to the Americas. These slaves, "brought by the conquerors from the north and west of Africa, introduced Islam, staying in countries like Brazil, Venezuela, Colombia and some Caribbean islands" (Yusuf Hallar). Yusuf Hallar probably exaggerates when he says that the "majority" of these slaves were Muslims. The Muslim scholar Diouf suggests that according to records, African tribes like the Wolof, Mandingo, Fulani, and Susu "represented fifteen percent of the Africans there, and many, if not most, would have been Muslims" (47). Chickrie agrees that Islam first came to Latin America "largely because of the institutions of slavery and indentureship" (181). Although some of these slaves

remained faithful to Islam, most of them were forcefully converted to Christianity. Diouf describes the situation:

Baptism thus became a moral obligation of the masters toward their slaves...As a consequence, the newly arrived Africans were converted on a large scale. The Jesuit Pedro Claver, who officiated in Cartagena, Colombia, in the first half of the seventeenth century, reportedly baptized more than three hundred thousand Africans and was canonized for this good work... Conversions—at least superficial ones—were thus achieved through harsh punishment...the non-Catholic Europeans were allowed to continue their rites in the privacy of their homes, but the slaves' religions became illegal. After the Muslim revolt of 1835, the Brazilian masters had six months to baptize their slaves and give them some religious education, after which they were liable to a fine for each non-Christian slave they owned. (51-53)

This sickening situation of forced conversion ultimately caused Islam, as had been brought to the Americas by the slaves, to become non-existent. As Yusuf Hallar notes, many African slaves were “forced to leave their religious beliefs or be executed instead. Thus, with the passing of time, Islam started fading away in Latin American countries.” “With a documented presence of five hundred years, Islam was, after Catholicism, the second monotheist religion introduced into post-Columbian America. It preceded Lutheranism, Methodism, Baptism, Calvinism, Santeria, Mandible, and Voodoo to name a few...but, not one community currently practices Islam as passed on by preceding African generations” (Diouf 179). As history progressed, Islam as it is practiced in Latin America today, was brought by “a new massive immigration of Arab Muslims” (Yusuf Hallar). A description of the more recent immigration to Latin America will be taken up at a later point in this paper. Undoubtedly, Islam has had a rich, interesting, and somewhat tragic history in Latin America.

GEOGRAPHICAL PRESENCE OF ISLAM IN LATIN AMERICA

The following portion of this paper will seek to examine the presence of Islam in the specific countries of Latin America. The following will be representative of the best data available on each country. A detailed, country-by-country study has been largely overlooked by Muslim, Christian, and Latin American scholars. Some countries will only be mentioned in passing in the following

descriptions because Islam is virtually non-existent in the country and therefore, nothing has been written. The most detailed study of this nature was written in a two-part journal article by Ahsani and Kasule. Unfortunately, these articles were written in 1984. Much of the information listed here will come from that study.

First, this section will begin by describing the situation of Islam in the countries of South America, alphabetically. Beginning with Argentina, as of the year 2000, just fewer than 500,000 Muslims lived there, about 1.3% of the total population ("Muslim"). This percentage has not changed since 1980 (Ahsani 455). Most of the Muslims here are of Syrian descent. "They started migrating in the 1880's, with the bulk migration taking place in between the two World Wars" (455). There are several mosques throughout the country, with the most prominent one erected in the capital, Buenos Aires. In 1980, Buenos Aires was home to over 50,000 Muslims. Argentina actually had a two-term president (1989-1999), named Carlos Saul Menem, who was originally a Muslim from a Syrian family. Qamber writes, "When Carlos Menem made his initial plans to run for the Presidency, he realized that under Article 76 of the Constitution (formed in 1853), only Catholics could compete for that office, or that of Vice President, in his country. Thereupon he converted from Islam to Catholicism. However, his wife and children remain Muslim" (Qamber 654). It is interesting, as was mentioned before, that longtime missionary to Argentina, Glen Henton, has never had any contact with Muslims.

As for the country of Bolivia, in 1980, there were ten Muslim Arab families (Ahsani 456). Internet sources do not include Bolivia in the lists of countries with Muslims. Next, Brazil is home to around one million Muslims, less than one percent of the nation's population (Moreira). "The majority of Muslims hail from Lebanon, next come the Syrians and the Palestinians" (Ahsani 456). Many of the Palestinians came after the establishment of the Israeli state (456). Brazil has a rich history of "Black Islam," dating back to the days of Muslim slaves. "It is of interest to notice that Brazilian 'Black Islam' has preserved many clear traces of the diverse origins of these Muslims" (Bazan, "Some" 290). Interestingly, only about 10,000 of the Muslims in Brazil are native converts (Moreira). Chile, on the other hand, had only 2,000 Muslims in 1980 and is not listed in the current population charts (Ahsani 457). At the time, a Syrian, Tewfiq Romiah, ran an Islamic Center at his residence. Similarly, Columbia has approximately 5,000 Muslims, far less than one percent of its total population of forty-six

million. Additionally, Ecuador, as is the trend among the Andean nations, has very few Muslims. Current statistics do not include this country while Ahsani reports a very small number in 1980 (457).

Guyana, on the other hand, has over 90,000 Muslims, about twelve percent of the total population (Chickrie 181). What makes Guyana unique is that these Muslims are not of Middle Eastern origin. Rather, they are mostly of South Asian origin, namely India. In fact, the majority of the total population of Guyana (51%) is of South Asian descent. The majority of the South Asians, though, are Hindu in religious belief. African slaves brought Islam to Guyana in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but like the rest of Latin America, their influence died out (181). Islam was reintroduced "with the arrival of South Asian Muslims in the year 1838" (Chickrie 182). From 1835 to 1917, over 240,000 East Indians immigrated to Guyana. Sixteen percent of these immigrants were Sunni Muslims. Only a very small number of Shia Muslims came and no tensions exist between them today in Guyana (183). It is historically important that Islam had traveled to the Indian subcontinent. As Chickrie notes, "If Islam did not travel to the subcontinent it would have never had such an impact in Guyana" (184). Today, there are basically two "camps" among Guyana's Muslims. The younger generation desires to become more "Arab" while the older generation desires to keep their Indo-Iranian heritage. "The movement to pure Islam of Indo-Iranian traditions continues unabated in Guyana today. Friction between the younger and the older generations, or the Arab camp and the Indo-Iranian camp, continue to stifle the full potential of this minority community that has done well for itself in Guyana in the past" (195). Ties have been mostly severed with India and Pakistan in favor of the Arab world. This proves the point that Islam is not culturally adaptable. It fits only in an Arab culture. This, of course, is contrary to Christianity, which can be culturally acceptable among any ethnic group, whether Indo-Iranian or Arab (Hooper). Despite the division that exists in Guyana, there are numerous mosques throughout the country.

Paraguay, although it is listed as having no Muslims in the current internet Muslim population lists, is known to have a fairly significant population of Muslims. No numbers are available, but it is recognized by even the United States Department of State that there are Muslim terrorist groups active in the country. Perry Hardin, a current missionary in Paraguay, writes, "I have not had any direct contact with Islam during my time in Paraguay, but there is a large population of Muslims living in Ciudad Del Este, which is about 4 hours from Asuncion. It is rumored that there are al-Qaida cell

groups and that Osama Bin-Laden receives a large amount of financial support from the Muslims there." He also stated that he once passed by a restaurant called "Bin Laden's Chicken Shop." More will be said later concerning the radical element of Islam that operates in Paraguay.

Peru, like the other Andean nations, boasts a very small population of Muslims. In 1980, about 5,000 Muslims lived in Peru, mostly in Lima (Ahsani 458). Like other Latin American countries, they are mostly of Palestinian, Syrian, and Lebanese origin. Interestingly, at that time, "a Peruvian Muslim, newly converted to Islam, Muhammad Ali Louis Castro was studying at the Islamic University in Medina" (458). Surinam is home to over 80,000 Muslims, nearly twenty percent of the total population ("Muslim"). This is largely due to the fact that many indentured servants came from India and Indonesia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1984, there were over seventy mosques in Surinam; undoubtedly, there are more today (Ahsani 459). Interestingly, "since in Indonesia to pray toward the Ka'aba they faced west, many of them continue to do so in Surinam also. Hence, half the mosques face west while the other half face the east" (459). Uruguay has an unknown number of Muslims, likely a very miniscule number (Ahsani 459). Finally, Venezuela is home to approximately 90,000 Muslims, about .35% of the total population ("Muslim"). Islam was not reintroduced in Venezuela until the early part of the twentieth century by Syrian, Lebanese, and Palestinian immigrants (Ahsani 460). Notably, in light of the political tensions between the United States and Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez, Chavez has been supportive of Arab Muslim countries. As one article notes, "Chavez's efforts to build alliances with Libya and Iraq—where he enjoyed a much photographed limousine ride with Saddam Hussein—strike many in Washington as confrontational" (Sanin, Hershberg and Hirst 187).

As Central America is considered to be a part of Latin America, a brief look at the Islamic presence in these countries is necessary. Of these countries, Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua have only a small, relatively unknown population of Muslims ("Muslim"; Ahsani 460-61). Honduras has about 130,000 Muslims (two percent of total population) and Panama has more than 150,000 Muslims (five percent of total population). Mexico, home to over 107 million residents, has only about 1,000 Muslims. Teresa Alfaro Velcamp, who has done fairly significant research into the Muslims of Mexico, writes, "Preliminary research shows that the majority of Muslim immigrants settled in northern Mexico, in particular in the Laguna area of the states of Coahuila and

Durango, probably because of the region 's religious toleration and the social networks of the North" (279). She adds, "Currently, the only mosque in Mexico is located at 1007 Guadalajara Street in the Colonia of Nueva Los Angeles in Torreón...the mosque was completed in November 1989. In 1993, it received official status from the Mexican government as a religious association" (285). About 500 Muslims live in Mexico City, where they congregate at the Islamic Cultural Center (286). As of 2002, twenty Mexicans have been converted to Islam since the center opened (287). Finally, of the Caribbean islands, only Trinidad and Tobago has a significant number of Muslims. About 110,000 Muslims live here, approximately eight percent of the total population ("Muslim"). Most of them are originally from the Indian subcontinent (Kasule 467). In 1984, there were "70 mosques with Quranic schools. Twelve Primary, three Middle, and one Secondary school have been set up. The Muslims are fairly well organized and participate in the political life of the country, some of them being Cabinet Ministers and Members of Parliament" (467). The preceding has provided a glimpse of the geographical presence of Islam in Latin America.

THE PRACTICE OF ISLAM IN LATIN AMERICA

The majority of Latin American Muslims are orthodox in their beliefs. Their distance from the Arab world makes the connection difficult, but as more diplomats from Arab countries are stationed in Latin American countries, the gap is narrowing. Muslims from Guyana have had problems keeping their Islamic practices pure from Indo-Iranian tradition. The *qasida* has always been a part of Islamic tradition, but "what Guyanese Muslims know about *qasida* is what has been handed down from one generation to another. It is not a written tradition, but rather an oral one which inevitably has lost its scholarly character" (Chickrie 188). The younger generation, many of whom have studied in the Arab world, does not accept such traditions. In fact, "Guyanese Muslims returning from the Arab world to Guyana began introducing changes that irked the local Muslims" (188). The younger generation has been taught that to produce a uniform orthodox practice, it will require denying one's "Indian-ness," which "helps to bring one closer to the 'Arab-ness' of Islam. Arabic and Arab-ness, it would seem today in Guyana, legitimizes Islam, and South Asian 'cultural Islam' is now viewed as un-Islamic and polluted with innovations" (189). This battle continues to create tension and limit the productivity of Islam in Guyana. A "folk" Islam and its unique characteristics can also be found among the

descendants of slaves in areas surrounding Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paul, Brazil. "These regions retain a strong West African, particularly Gege and Hausa, influence" (Ahsani 455).

Practicing Islam in a culture that is predominantly Roman Catholic also poses a major barrier to faithfully adhering to Islam. The second and third generations of Muslim immigrants to Mexico have slowly integrated themselves into the Mexican culture. They identify themselves as "Mexican" instead of Muslim. Some of them have intermarried with Catholics and most are unable to read the Qur'an in Arabic (Velcamp 284). Velcamp comments, "They see themselves as spiritual people who accept interfaith marriages and are open to the changes taking place in their community. This community illustrates how Mexican Muslims negotiate a space within Mexican society in which to practice their faith, at the same time that they are accommodating to Mexican culture by assuming a Mexican identity. This fusion of culture and identity makes the Mexican Muslim experience unique" (285). These Muslims are also finding it difficult to pass their religion on to often-resistant children (285). Moreira, a convert herself, notes the difficulty of Latin American converts remaining faithful to Islam. She notes, "When a Brazilian decides to go against their "plans," he or she is treated as an intruder in the Arab-Muslim community. All his/her misbehaviors concerning religious teachings are highlighted and pointed out, even if the same mistake is occurring among the Arab-Muslims. Normal mistakes due to lack of experience in the religion are presented as 'proof' of an 'incapacity' to practice and understand the religion." Not only do these converts have to deal with the difficulty of a new religion, but they also must "fight alone against the criticism of his/her family, friends, the Brazilian society...The feeling of isolation leads some to abandon Islam" (Moreira). Islam is also in danger of integrating so deeply into Latin American culture, that some fear that it may some day be extinct in this region of the world. Ahsani writes, "But having lived for three generations in the area they are slowly getting integrated into the majority, losing contact with the motherland and forgetting their native languages—Arabic and Urdu. Unless concerted efforts are made to preserve their cultural identity and religious traditions they may go the way of the early African immigrants to Latin America" (455).

LATIN AMERICAN PREJUDICE AGAINST ISLAM

An important study was done by Muslim scholar Rukhsana Qamber delving into the Latin American prejudice against Islam, especially as it is seen in Latin American literature. The following is

a summary of his research. First, he found that in comparison to the Roman Catholic Church and its system, "Islam was perceived as particularly backward because of its lack of hierarchies, icons, and other structural ordering" (Qamber 653). Qamber expected to find a bias that has existed since the era of the Crusades, which is exactly what he found (653). He notes, "What the research revealed was that the bias was rampant and clear-cut... The research findings further demonstrate that the authors whose works have been consulted would have the reader believe that mere personal and political contact with Islam, or Muslims, had deleterious and debilitating consequences for non-Muslims" (683). Further, it is notable that most of the literature reviewed was before 1992. This bias, then, existed "almost a decade before the infamous bombing of New York's twin towers and the resultant anti-Islamic outbursts in American society and particularly in many parts of academia" (684). From Qamber's experience, he notes, "Latin American scholars appear to have an even greater prejudice against Islam than English speaking writers" (684). In addition to this bias found in literature, Muslims have a certain stereotype, found in the Spanish nickname *turco* (Turk) (Velcamp 278). This stereotype is found in Mexican television shows, when Arab merchants are often referred to as "cheap." Velcamp tells of one such show: "The Arab merchant has a large hooked nose and sports a comical bushy mustache with the ends twisted up. While this character is not particularly important to the story line, he does make an appearance, with his stereotypical features, trying to swindle these Mexican women" (278). Just as Arabs have a certain stereotype in the United States, they also face this prejudice in Latin American countries.

RADICAL ISLAM IN LATIN AMERICA

This writer had heard rumors of Islamic terrorist cells in Latin America, especially Paraguay. Missionary Perry Hardin hints at this problem when he writes of the Paraguayan city, Ciudad Del Este, "It is rumored that there are al-Qaida (spelling) cell groups and that Osama Bin-Laden receives a large amount of financial support from the Muslims there." Further research indicated that such activity was occurring. One journalist pointed to this area and wrote, "In the so-called Muslim triangle, where the borders of Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay meet, a growing number of Arab-owned businesses are being forced to identify with the Palestinian cause" (Farah). He also notes, "Pentagon officials have confirmed human smuggling rings in Latin America are attempting to sneak al-Qaida operatives into the U.S. Anti-terrorism experts say extremist cells tied to Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad and al-Qaida

network are operating in Argentina, Ecuador, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay and Uruguay.” This student still was wary of this source, because it seemed to be an ultra-conservative and biased source against Islam. There were multiple internet news agencies that reported the same thing, but none of them are considered credible news agencies. Then, research led this student to the United States Department of State’s annual Country Reports on Terrorism. This fascinating government document verified the concerns that Farah discussed. The document specifically mentioned the “Triborder Area.” “The U.S. government has long been concerned with arms and drugs smuggling, document fraud, money laundering, and the manufacture and movement of contraband goods through this region.” “Potential terrorist fundraising activities” is specifically mentioned as a concern of the United States as well as the concern that “Hezbollah and HAMAS were raising funds among the sizable Muslim communities in the region and elsewhere in the territories of the Three, although there was no corroborated information that these or other Islamic extremist groups had an operational presence in the area.” Multiple meetings between Paraguay, Argentina, Brazil and the United States have occurred to thwart any such illegal and dangerous activity. Although such activity is occurring, it is important to note that the majority of Muslims worldwide, including in Latin America, are not a violent people determined on destroying the United States (Hooper).

The Muslims of Latin American, though small in number, have a rich history. This paper has focused on the history and geographical presence of Islam in Latin America, the practice of Latin American Islam, Latin American prejudice against Islam, and the presence of radical Islam in Latin America. Although there may not be Muslims in the area of Peru where this student plans to work, he will be better prepared to understand the situation of a Muslim in Latin America, if he does encounter one. Then, by building on the foundation of their beliefs, the Muslim could be taught about Jesus Christ by contextualizing the Gospel message. Helping the potential convert to understand the honor of the cross would be of utmost importance. Further, much time, patience, and prayer would be necessary in converting a Muslim. Finally, if an entire family can be reached, such would be more effective than trying to reach only one Muslim (Hooper). May God provide open doors to reach Muslims in Latin America and throughout the world!

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