

# Islam in Latin America

*M. David Sills and Kevin Baggett*

## INTRODUCTION

**I**T TOOK THE tragic events of 9/11 for Islam to register on the radar screen of many Americans. Since then, a growing awareness of Islam's strength and influence in our world is causing an uneasiness among Westerners. This growing awareness is not only fueled by the daily news of revolts and riots in the predominantly Muslim countries of the world, but also by Islam's burgeoning global advance. The contemporary resurgence and rapid spread of Islam evokes words of caution and concern from conservative Western politicians, but also from theologians and missiologists. A recent installment of the *Kairos Journal*, reporting on current trends in world religions and world-views states:

This new phase of Islamic resurgence is funded by wealthy, oil-rich Muslim nations and is facilitated by the movement of Islamic populations into post-Christian Western societies. These new Muslim

immigrant communities jostle for power with declining European societies that have lost much of their confidence and sense of pride in their own heritage. Western government policies on multiculturalism facilitate the empowerment of well-organized Muslim minorities. In turn, these increasingly dynamic Muslim immigrant communities throughout the West are undergoing a process of creeping militancy, increasingly influenced by Islamic activists seeking to gain strategic advantage.<sup>1</sup>

Remarkably, while the prevalence of Islam in Europe is frequently addressed, most Westerners are unaware of the growing presence of Muslims in Latin America. This growing population and influence has come about through immigration as well as conversions of Latinos to Islam. A Google search of the terms "Islam in Latin America" returned over 10,000,000 results. These results included blogs, websites, organizations, and even Wikipedia entries dedicated to the presence of Islam in Latin America, all of which are divided between those in favor and those opposed to Islam's growth. Less well known is the common history they share.

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## MUSLIMS AND LATIN AMERICANS

The close proximity of Spaniards and Moors in the Iberian Peninsula for almost 800 years (A.D. 711-1492) resulted in many cultural, linguistic, worldview commonalities, and even a shared ancestry in some cases through physical relations, forced and otherwise. The U.S. has an increasing interest in and curiosity about Islam, nervously noting Muslim arrivals at U.S. airports. Yet, many fail to realize that Muslims have found a home in the countries of our southern neighbors in Latin America. What is the origin of the interface of the Muslim world and Latin America? What evangelistic and missiological strategies and methodologies are suggested by this reality? And what are the missiological implications for engaging the U.S., Latin America, and the world of Islam? To understand the current reality, one must be aware of the origins of Islam and how it came to Latin America.

### **ISLAM: FROM THE ARABIAN PENINSULA TO THE AMERICAN PRESENT**

In the early seventh century, Muhammad's claims of divine revelation formed Islam. From this isolated beginning, one of evangelical mission's most daunting challenges has grown from a regional faith to a global movement. As Islam matured, several distinct branches developed. The major branches are well-known, such as the Sunni, Shi'ia, and Sufi. Others are lesser known but still find their roots in Islam, such as the Druze, Alawi, and Ismaeli. Folk Islam appeared when tribal groups fused traditional animistic beliefs with Islamic traditions. Radical Islam and groups such as the Nation of Islam further complicate the task of the evangelical world's attempt to understand this world religion.

### **HISTORICAL SPREAD OF ISLAM**

Islam has historically spread in two distinct and deliberate ways: peacefully and forcefully. J. Dudley Woodberry emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between either the military

or political rule of Islam and spiritual conversion to Islam.<sup>2</sup> Woodberry writes, "The adoption of Islam ranged from total conversion, to allegiance for expediency because of its advantages, to forced submission."<sup>3</sup>

### **A.D. 630-1258**

Islam was not born in religious isolation. Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism were all present in Mecca—among Muhammad's own polytheistic tribe—when he began proclaiming his revelations from Allah. These revelations subsequently formed the Quran. The monotheistic teachings of Muhammad and his subsequent persecution led him to move with his followers outside of Mecca to Yathrib, later named Medina. In Medina, the number of followers of Muhammad grew through spiritual conversion and the political submission of fellow tribal groups. Two key events happened within the initial few years of Islam's existence. In 630, with little resistance, Muhammad subdued the people of Mecca and integrated the Meccan tribes into his followers. Later, after Muhammad's death in 632, his followers were left to develop a new Islamic leadership structure.<sup>4</sup>

Abu Bakr became the first caliph, or Muslim leader, chosen in the new structure. A dissenting group claimed Ali ibn Abu Talib, a blood relative of Muhammad as well as Muhammad's son-in-law, to be the rightful leader of Islam. This group eventually formed the Shi'a division of Islam. Abu Bakr not only sustained Islam by compiling primary accounts of the teachings of Muhammad, but he also used military force to expand Muslim territory to the north and south. Abu Bakr's two-year reign ended with his death in 634.<sup>5</sup>

Umar ibn al Khattab succeeded Abu Bakr and reigned for ten years. Umar called himself the "Commander of the Faithful." He further expanded the borders of Islam through the use of military force. Umar, selected by Abu Bakr on his deathbed, also changed the procedure for selecting a new caliph by entrusting the transfer of power to a "selection committee."<sup>6</sup> The commit-

tee chose Uthman ibn Affan to be the next caliph. Uthman reigned from 644-656 and continued the trend of conquering territory by force. Donner describes the conquered territory: "By the mid-650s the Believers ruling from Medina had loose control over a vast area stretching from Yemen to Armenia and from Egypt to eastern Iran."<sup>7</sup>

Uthman died in a rebellion caused by his appointment of his nephew, Mu'awiya, as governor of Syria. Ali ibn Abu Talib was chosen as the fourth caliph. Ali was passed over in each of the previous three successions of power, despite his familial tie to Muhammad. Following two civil wars over the rightful caliph, the followers of Islam were essentially left with Ali and Mu'awiya. The Shi'a and Sunni orders of Islam were formed from the followers of these two men.<sup>8</sup> After the death of Ali and Mu'awiya, followers of Islam "embraced their identity as Muslims—that is, as a monotheist confession following the teachings of Muhammad and the Quran."<sup>9</sup> The years between 700 and 950 represented "an age of political and communal expansion, great institutional and cultural development, and economic growth."<sup>10</sup> Shari'ah law was developed, and Muslim territory continued to expand including North Africa, Spain, Syria, Persia, and even "black Africa."<sup>11</sup>

By the eleventh century, the caliph's power was eventually limited to religious authority as political and military power was siphoned away by regional camps. The Sufis, Ismaelis, and Druzes developed during this time.<sup>12</sup> By the twelfth century, Ghana and Mali contained Muslim communities as well.<sup>13</sup> The official caliphate era ultimately ended when the Mongol dynasty entered Muslim territory by force in 1258.

#### *A.D. 1258-1453*

The Mongol dynasty of Genghis Khan stormed into Muslim-held territory in 1258. Led by Genghis's grandson, the Mongols gained control of significant portions of Iran and Iraq before stalling in Syria. Future Muslim leaders were,

therefore, influenced by Mongol culture. Leaders began claiming descent from Genghis Khan and believed the ruler could form law, introducing the "notion of the ruler's decree as law."<sup>14</sup> The strength of Islam was also proven during Mongol rule as the religious beliefs and culture of Islam persevered in spite of foreign control.

Beginning in 1095, Muslim nations also defended themselves against the Christian Crusaders. The Crusades ended in 1453 when Turkish Muslims claimed Istanbul, where the Ottoman Empire's headquarters were established.

#### *A.D. 1454-1879*

Despite opposition, Islam continued to spread. The Mamluks, who had turned back the advancing Mongols in France, gained power and ruled Egypt until 1517. Several Muslim sultans regained power, and the Muslim world "extended from Africa to Southeast Asia, from Timbuktu to Mindanao, as Islam penetrated Africa, Central and Southeast Asia, and Eastern Europe."<sup>15</sup> In their sketch of the history of Islam, Peter Riddell and Peter Cotterell describe Islam's spread during the Ottoman Empire:

The issue of conversion is key. Before the Turkish migrations into Asia Minor, the vast majority of the population was Christian. By the fifteenth century, over 90 percent of the population was Muslim. Lapidus comments that "some of this change was due to immigration of a large Muslim population, but in great part it was due to the conversion of Christians to Islam."<sup>16</sup>

While the Ottoman Empire was the most notable, it was not the only significant Muslim empire established prior to the twentieth century. The Persian Empire was primarily Shi'a, located in present-day Iran, and ruled from 1501-1722. The Mughal Empire was another significant Muslim empire, and its seat was Delhi, India. The Mughals reigned in India until Britain colonized the territory. Islam was also propagated through Indian

trade routes to Southeast Asia until the British gained control.<sup>17</sup>

#### *A.D. 1880-1905*

The time period of 1880-1905 is called the time of New Imperialism. The Industrial Age changed the landscape of global power. Much of the Muslim world fell under the control of the industrial West. Many viewed the declining Ottoman Empire as equal to Western rulers. Muslims felt the loss of power was a result of spiritual negligence, so they began to rid themselves of foreign powers and desired a return to Islamic traditions.<sup>18</sup>

#### *A.D. 1906-1948*

World War I ended in 1918, with the Ottoman Empire being divided between its conquerors, the French and the British. European leaders divided up the Arab world into different countries and appointed leaders over certain territories. World War II quickly followed. By the conclusion of the Second World War in 1946, most of the Arab world was independent; but the world would soon change. In 1947, the United Nations approved the division of Palestine into two separate states. A year later the State of Israel was formed. The existence of Israel in Palestine is still viewed as foreign occupation by many in the Muslim world.<sup>19</sup>

#### *A.D. 1949-Present*

Since the end of World War II, the Muslim world has not used traditional military force to broaden its territory. However, it has been through the prolific violent revolutions and terrorism of jihadists that the attention of the Western world has turned in an effort to understand Islam. As it does, a key challenge is to understand its spread, influence, and ideology while recognizing the distinctions between culture, religion, and splinter groups. As we in the West seek to understand Islam better, Islamic advancement continues through immigration, religious conversion, and social, political, and economic influence.

### **REASONS FOR ISLAMIC RESILIENCY**

An outsider may look at Islam and wonder how it has survived so many occupations, wars, and periods of foreign rule. The reason is that Islam is more than an empire or a religion. Islam is a culture that does not compartmentalize the varying areas of life, society, or religion. A Muslim's allegiance is to Allah *and* Shar'iah law. The ultimate goal of Islam is a Muslim world, and the means for achieving such a world are not limited to either spiritual influence or military conquest. Religious conversion, democratic takeover, peaceful submission to Muslim influence, and a forceful jihad are all seen as means to achieve a Muslim world by various Muslims. Muslims "do not envision two civilizations living in harmony, but one, Islam gaining world domination."<sup>20</sup>

### **INTRODUCTION OF ISLAM IN LATIN**

#### **AMERICA**

Three waves of Muslim immigration have landed on the shores of Latin America. Muslim scholars believe the first wave of Muslim immigration arrived in the Americas in the sixteenth century with Spanish and Portuguese armies. The Muslims were required to claim Catholicism as their religion, but many secretly remained faithful to Islam. Those who remained faithful were referred to as Moriscos. Researchers believe this initial wave of Muslim immigration was eradicated during the Catholic Inquisition when the Moriscos were burned at the stake for apostasy.<sup>21</sup>

The second wave of Muslim immigration originated in Africa. Africans were brought to the New World as slaves. As the New World "imported" workers, it also imported a new religion: Islam. In 1758, Muslims led an armed revolt in Haiti. Less than a century later, African Muslims in Brazil formed a short-lived Muslim state in 1830.<sup>22</sup>

Around 1830, a third wave of Muslim immigration began to arrive in the Americas from Asia. Originally, these devoted adherents of Islam arrived as indentured servants. But by the end of the century, Syrian and Lebanese followers

of Islam were arriving as legal immigrants. The immigration from Greater Syria to Latin America lasted from 1880 to 1955.<sup>23</sup> Most immigrants from Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine settled in urban areas such as Buenos Aires, Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Santiago de Chile.

## **CONTEMPORARY EXPANSION OF ISLAM**

### ***GLOBAL SPREAD OF ISLAM***

The increasing numbers of Muslim immigrants to Europe, Canada, and the U.S. has caught the attention of the Western world. Additionally, Muslim birthrates are dwarfing those of Europeans and Americans. While some scholars try to calm the fears of Westerners about the possibility of terrorism, the impact of never before seen Islamic immigration rates is changing the landscape of the Western world.<sup>24</sup> Once immigration connections are formed, the rate of immigration usually increases exponentially, and the host country can do little to slow immigration flow.<sup>25</sup>

### ***SPREAD OF ISLAM IN LATIN AMERICA***

While Europe and the U.S. have seen significant Muslim immigration in recent years, Latin America has not previously experienced such surges. Jack Goldstone points to the aging populations in Europe, Canada, and the U.S. in contrast to the more youthful populations in Africa, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and Latin America as an explanation for the former being preferred immigration destinations. In addition, Latin America has a much younger generation of citizens in the job market but fewer opportunities than those in Europe, Canada, and the U.S.<sup>26</sup>

In spite of fewer job opportunities, new waves of Muslim immigrants are arriving in Latin America today, mainly from West Africa. African refugees illegally board ships bound for Argentina and Brazil, unaware of the ship's destination. While the number of African immigrants to Latin America is less than similar movements have been to Europe, the numbers are still significant. These

immigrants flee civil war and poverty in hopes of a better life, and they ultimately find strict immigration regulations in European countries less inviting than those in Latin America. Currently, Brazil's largest refugee population is African. At the turn of the twenty-first century, seeing an African on the street in Buenos Aires was rare, and less than fifty Africans existed in the country. But in 2009, the number of African immigrants in Argentina increased to over 3,000 as they traveled from Senegal, Egypt, Nigeria, and Ghana. Brazil has experienced additional immigration from Angola, Congo, and Gambia.<sup>27</sup> Growth in these populations in Argentina has been so substantial that the most recent Argentine census made counting African immigrants a priority.<sup>28</sup>

As the missionary considers the status of Islam in Latin America, he should beware of some common misconceptions. First, all Arab immigration is not Muslim immigration. The largest population of Palestinians outside of the Middle East is in Santiago de Chile, but the vast majority of these Arabs are not Muslims.<sup>29</sup> Second, all Muslim immigrants are not Arabs. For instance, many Muslim immigrants to the U.S. are from countries such as Bosnia, Herzegovina, and Indonesia. With the status of Muslim immigration to Latin America as well as these misconceptions in mind, an exploration of key sociopolitical factors and trends will help to understand the missiological implications of Islam's place in Latin America.

## **SOCIOPOLITICAL FACTORS AND TRENDS**

### ***CULTURAL AND WORLDVIEW CONNECTIONS***

In *The Cultural Imperative: Global Trends in the 21st Century*, Richard D. Lewis compares various global cultures and categorizes each culture as linear-active, multi-active, or reactive. He describes the degree to which each of these cultures corresponds to the respective cultural category. Lewis identifies Latin American, African, and Arab as three of the most representative

cultures in the multi-active category and demonstrates their similarities.<sup>30</sup>

Lewis describes multi-active cultures as “emotional, loquacious and impulsive people; they attach great importance to family, feelings, relationships and people in general.”<sup>31</sup> Lewis notes common qualities such as a dislike for schedules, the importance of relationships both socially and professionally, and a preference for a strong leader.<sup>32</sup> When one puts aside religion, the culture of Latin America and the Muslim world are very similar.

Another similarity between these cultures is a mutual dislike for the U.S. In a Pew Research Center global poll, the seven countries whose respondents articulated the least favorable view of the U.S. were Turkey, Pakistan, Egypt, Jordan, Argentina, Lebanon, and Mexico. Of those, Mexico had the highest favorable impression, with 56% of those polled viewing the U.S. favorably. Turkey, Pakistan, and Egypt had the least favorable opinions, with only 17% of each viewing the U.S. favorably. Argentina was the Latin American culture most likely to have an unfavorable attitude toward the U.S.<sup>33</sup>

The significance of gender within Muslim culture is also well documented. Are the challenges facing Latin American women similar to those of Muslim women? Inter-American Dialogue recently analyzed the Gallup Latin American Women Leadership Study. The study observed that in many circumstances, women in Latin America had fewer opportunities than men. The analysis also considered presidential victories by female candidates in places like Chile and Argentina.<sup>34</sup> The simple fact that discussions concerning opportunities for women are taking place demonstrates a general contrast between Latin America and the Muslim world.

Much has been written about the oppression of Muslim women. Would women in Latin America embrace strict regulations on dress and male leadership as taught in the Quran? One Gallup poll asked Muslim women what they admired least

about the West.<sup>35</sup> The women listed moral decay, promiscuity, and pornography.<sup>36</sup> Is the general liberality of Latin America conducive to a religion that will demand a strict cultural change? Will Islam be willing to compromise its spiritual law to proselytize?

The question observers of Islam in Latin America are trying to answer is whether Muslims are trying to win individual religious converts or if Islam is working toward the Islamization of Latin America as a whole. Does Islam want to propagate itself in the lives of Latin Americans or simply control Latin America legally, politically, and economically?

### **ECONOMICS**

Besides cultural similarity, a mutual dislike for the U.S., and a history of Muslim immigration, why would Latin American countries unite with the Muslim world? The answer is as simple as it is obvious—money. Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez has made at least nine visits to Tehran, Iran, during his presidency, and Venezuela is an observing member of the Arab League.<sup>37</sup> Peruvian President Alan Garcia describes the growing alliances between the Muslim world and Latin America: “This is an unprecedented step toward joining our two cultures, our two worlds, until now, we have always dealt with the United States, China and Europe. But now, we are seeing the rise of Arab nations that have immense resources.”<sup>38</sup> Former president of Brazil Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva used similar words to describe new alliances with predominantly Muslim countries: “The wealth of the Arab world is now becoming a factor of development ... and you have to protect it.”<sup>39</sup> Current economic insecurity in the Western world has led Latin America to turn its eyes to the Arab world for security. The oil industry is another common link between these economic regions. Chavez has suggested the formation of an alliance that would use “petro-currency” rather than the dollar or euro.<sup>40</sup> Is the Muslim world gaining power over Latin America with its wealth?

## **GLOBAL TERRORISM**

Most of Latin America has gone untouched by Muslim terrorism. There have only been two acts of Islamic terrorist attacks in Latin America. Both cases occurred in Buenos Aires, Argentina. On March 17, 1992, the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires was attacked when an assailant drove a pickup truck loaded with explosives into the front of the embassy. The terrorist and twenty-nine others were killed in the blast, with another 242 people wounded. The second attack occurred at the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina building on July 18, 1994. Eighty-five people died and more than three hundred people were wounded when a car bomb was detonated outside the building. Both attacks have been linked to Hezbollah and Iran. Unfortunately, convictions have not been won for either of the cases. Members of the police department and even former president Carlos Menem have been accused of being involved in the attacks.<sup>41</sup>

Each of the attacks operated through an area called Tres Fronteras, although it is believed they were conceived in Tehran. Tres Fronteras is located where the borders of Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina meet. Ciudad del Este in Paraguay was developed by President Alfredo Stroessner to be a free trade zone. But, with the financial decline of the 1990s, Ciudad del Este has become “a city without law.”<sup>42</sup> The city is now home to a significant Muslim population with origins in Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt. Worldwide security agencies also believe the city is the home to Hezbollah’s Latin American headquarters.<sup>43</sup> Even though Latin America has not seen a large number of terrorist attacks, the potential for terrorist activity still exists.

## **ISLAM IN SPECIFIC LATIN AMERICAN CONTEXTS**

### **ARGENTINA**

The first wave of Muslim immigration to Argentina took place between 1880 and 1955. The immigrants were primarily of Syrian and Leba-

nese descent. Census data from the beginning of the twentieth century showed Syrian and Lebanese people were the third largest ethnic group in Buenos Aires.<sup>44</sup>

The majority of Syrian and Lebanese immigrants arriving in Buenos Aires originated from Mount Lebanon, a province in Ottoman Syria. The first immigrants to arrive from the region were Christians of Orthodox and Catholic backgrounds. Religious persecution and constant political turmoil were the primary reasons for their immigration, but financial factors also impacted the decision.<sup>45</sup> The initial immigration of Lebanese Christians was followed by subsequent migrations of Druze, Alawi, and Muslims. The original immigrants were male and worked as street salesmen. These businessmen chose exogamous marriages with Argentine women. The diffusion of Islam into Argentine society may have been hampered by these multi-faith marriages more than any other single factor.

The first Islamic association was founded on the outskirts of Buenos Aires in 1917, and a year later an Islamic center was formed inside the city. Prior to owning their own buildings, Muslim families practiced their faith in their homes with other families, but in 2000 the largest mosque in South America was erected in Buenos Aires. The President of Argentina at the time, Carlos Menem, whose parents were Muslim immigrants from Syria, was central to its establishment. Memem donated the land for the mosque while Saudi Arabia funded the project and continues to provide the leadership for the mosque.<sup>46</sup>

No definitive statistics exist on the Muslim population in Buenos Aires. One Arab group, la Confederación de Entidades Argentino Arabes, uses the census data gathered in the early twentieth century—the last census to ask questions about ethnicity—to project as many as 3.5 million people of Arab descent in Argentina.<sup>47</sup> Interviews with Muslim leaders and people who regularly attend the mosques in Buenos Aires reflect that they do not believe there are such high numbers

of practicing Muslims. One prominent Muslim leader in the city believes the maximum number of practicing Muslims of Arab descent is a little more than seven thousand.<sup>48</sup>

The majority of these Arab descent Muslims are part of a fourth or fifth generation immigrant community. These later generation immigrants are not centrally located into a specific area of the city. They are dispersed throughout the city with some modestly higher population densities in two or three “barrios” with mosques.

The recent African immigration has also changed the face of Islam in Buenos Aires. In 2000, the average Muslim in Buenos Aires was a middle-aged man of Syrian descent. His primary language was Spanish, and he was a small business owner. Today, the average mosque attendee in Buenos Aires is a young Senegali male. He is learning Spanish, but he speaks French and Wolof. He sells jewelry and watches from a briefcase on a busy street corner somewhere in the city. He returns to an area of town known as “Little Dakar” each night. At the close of the meeting in the mosque, a participant will hear both Arabic and African languages.<sup>49</sup> In spite of this recent immigration, religious conversion among the general Argentine population is rare. One Muslim leader, who understands the reality of Islam in Buenos Aires, believes the goal of Muslims in Buenos Aires should be to “color the Argentine culture with Muslim cultural paint” rather than expect large numbers of Argentines to convert to Islam.<sup>50</sup>

The recent African Muslim immigration and the terrorist attacks in the early 1990s have impacted the evangelical church in Buenos Aires. Prior to 1990, the Muslim community in Buenos Aires went unnoticed. Today, cross-cultural evangelism is no longer a task left for missionaries who travel to the far reaches of the globe. The local church in Argentina must also cross cultural barriers.

## **BRAZIL**

Brazil is experiencing recent immigration similar to that of Argentina, as immigrants from

Africa comprise the largest refugee group in Brazil. According to Henao, “the largest black population outside of Africa” resides in Brazil.<sup>51</sup> African immigration to Brazil is no recent phenomenon. As early as 1538, African slaves arrived in Brazil. The first slaves were from Guinea. Next to arrive were the Fulani people and Bantu tribesmen. By the end of the sixteenth century, more than twenty thousand people of African descent lived in Brazil. New slaves arrived from the regions of present day Senegal, Gambia, and Angola. By 1822, over two-thirds of the population of Brazil was categorized as “people of color.” Research indicates thirty to forty percent of Brazil is currently of African descent.<sup>52</sup>

Many of the original Africans to arrive in Brazil were Muslims. Muslims from the Hausa, Mandinga, Fula, and Nago all arrived in Brazil. History tells of Muslim rebellions that occurred in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>53</sup> Among the Africans arriving in Brazil were Muslim intellectuals and religious leaders; the latter helped maintain literacy.<sup>54</sup> Unfortunately, the assimilation rate was slowed by the short lifespan of slaves, but new slaves were always arriving to reinforce the religion. Muslim Africans arriving today in Brazilian ports share the same destination as their ancestors years ago.

Brazil experienced the third wave of Latin American Muslim immigration similar to Argentina. From the late nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, large numbers of Syrians, Lebanese, and Palestinians arrived. While significant Arab Muslim immigration eventually stopped in Argentina, the immigration of Arabs to Brazil slowed without stopping. Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and the area known as Tres Fronteras still receive small but significant numbers of Arab Muslim immigrants.

The first Muslim charity association was founded in 1929. The next was not established until the late 1970s. During this time, the majority of Muslims arriving in Tres Fronteras were from Baloul, Lala, the Bekaa Valley, and South Lebanon.



In 1987, after six years of work, the first mosque was opened in Foz de Iguazu. The Sunnis and Shi'as were of equal number during the early 1990s.<sup>55</sup>

In light of such historical and current Islamic presence in Brazil, one might expect Islam to be thriving in this Latin American country. But, Maria Moreira, a Brazilian Muslim living in Egypt, says Islam is not succeeding in winning Brazilians. She quotes Khalil Saifi, sheikh and coordinator of the Center of Divulcation of Islam to Latin America: "Our main concern is to attend to the Muslims who descended from Arabs to help them preserve their link to their language and culture. The Brazilians who come to us come through the contact with Muslims out there."<sup>56</sup> She argues that neither the strong Catholic presence nor Latin culture is the primary reason for the lack of Brazilian converts to Islam. Instead, Muslims in Brazil see non-Arab Muslim descent people as "intruders." She points to a lack of resources in Portuguese to inform people about Islam as evidence of the lack of evangelistic effort.<sup>57</sup>

#### **VENEZUELA**

Before "the largest mosque in South America" was erected in Buenos Aires, the mosque in Caracas held that distinction. The ties between Venezuela and Iran have already been discussed in this article. Venezuela claims to be home to 100,000 Muslims.<sup>58</sup> When evaluated in light of similar projected adherent populations elsewhere in Latin America, this number most likely represents the number of Arab descent people in Venezuela rather than the actual number of people practicing Islam. But as one considers Islam's historical spread, it will be seen that Islam does not always spread by religious conversion or military conquest. Islam also spreads by gaining political control of countries. If religious matters are laid aside, the governments of Venezuela and Iran appear to have similar goals and aspirations. The fraternal relationship between these two nations should be considered when one evaluates the current impact of Islam on Latin America.

#### **MISSIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS**

Eugene Nida wrote, "Good missionaries have always been good anthropologists,"<sup>59</sup> teaching the truth that those who have the greatest impact on cultures are those who take the culture into account and so reach and teach those within it in culturally appropriate ways. To reach and teach the Latin Americans to our south as well as those who have immigrated among us, we must tailor outreach efforts to each people group and not minister generically to Latinos. Accordingly, to realize fruit in this ministry, we must take into account the historic interface of Islam with Latinos as well as the resurgence of Islam that targets them specifically.

#### **CULTURAL OBSERVATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

In A.D. 711 the Moors of northwest Africa invaded the Iberian Peninsula, beginning a back and forth struggle that lasted almost 800 years. During this time, most of the battles were not to accomplish total domination or destruction, but rather to achieve the upper hand. When the Muslims ruled, the Catholic Spaniards were typically allowed certain freedoms, lands, and continuation of their culture. Similarly, the Spaniards typically allowed Muslims these freedoms when they held the upper hand. These cultures shared ideas in medicine, art, architecture, philosophy, mathematics, and language. Spaniards and Arabs also share many anthropometric markers such as height, facial features, and skin color—the result of relationships through the 800 years they both lived in the Peninsula, as well as intermarriage of Arab immigrants with Latin Americans in recent centuries. In 1469, when Ferdinand and Isabel united their powers into a common effort, they shared the dream for a pure Catholicism. This, in turn, gave rise to the Spanish Inquisition—whose harsh measures sought to purify the Spanish Roman Catholic Churches from witches, Jews, and Muslims.

When the battle of Granada was over in 1492,

the Spanish victory resulted in the expulsion of all Muslim Moors who did not submit or convert. It was only then that the Spanish king and queen could turn their attention to the insistent would-be discoverer of a westward route to the spice lands. Columbus was granted permission to sail, and he carried with him a zealous Catholicism that was pre-Reformational and inquisitional, but it was also a Spanish Catholicism that was heavily influenced by almost 800 years of close proximity to and interaction with another world religion: Islam.

The result of this history is that Arab Muslims and Latin Americans share much in common. The cultural implications of this commonality are many. In addition to the previously mentioned shared ideas in medicine, art, architecture, philosophy, mathematics, language, and, in some cases, ancestry, both Latinos and Muslims share a cultural affinity in other ways. They both tend to have indirect communication styles, strong multi-generational family bonds, and find their identity in group/collectivistic orientations. Both share the concept of society working through the networks of family and fictive ties in social interaction, business, and government. Both cultures stress shame and honor rather than a dichotomistic guilt-innocence orientation, which includes a strong uncertainty avoidance. Latinos and Arab Muslims are notoriously patriarchal and masculine in their perspective of gender roles in society. All of these factors must be incorporated into successful missiological strategies and methodologies.

#### **STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT NEEDS**

With the increasing spread of Islam and its concomitant influence, missiological strategies are needed to engage Muslims effectively. Some have suggested blurring the lines between evangelicals and Muslims, stressing what we have in common to relieve the gospel-hostile stance often taken by Muslim extremists. However, what is needed is a clear word, not a diluted common word that would make embracing Christianity easier. Some Christian missionaries have sought

to emphasize Christian and Muslim commonalities such as monotheism, Abraham as a religious forefather, submission to the will of God, prayers, prophets, alms, angels, a historical Jesus (Isa), and so forth. Yet, in their effort to do so, the distinct lines between the Christian and Muslim understandings of these commonalities have become unrecognizable in some contexts.

Indeed, one strategy seeks to foment insider movements using a controversial contextualization model that has been promoted for several decades.<sup>60</sup> In this effort, Muslim converts to Christianity are encouraged to remain in Islam culturally, legally, and socially (and in some forms, even in religious identification) until a critical mass of believers arises to provide protection and support of Christianity. The controversy and rhetoric relating to this method are exacerbated and complicated by divergent views of the definition of Christian, as well as whether proponents of this method are promoting syncretism.

Other methodologies within this strategy grant credibility to the Quran as they uncritically use it to evangelize, while others refer to Jesus as the Prince of God rather than Son of God so as to avoid offending Muslims which they maintain would risk closing the door to further evangelism efforts. The limitations of space preclude a thorough explanation of the model, its risks, dangers, and logical outcomes. However, it must be noted that Christian missionaries are not alone in employing such a model. Muslims intent on winning Christians to Islam have been seen using similar models in the southern cone of South America, encouraging Catholics to remain in the Church while turning slowly to Islam.

Many missionaries working in Muslim contexts report that a blurring of the lines and removal of Christianity's offense and stumbling stone is not what is needed, but rather a clear presentation of the gospel. Some missionaries are making the case for speaking plainly, defining very clear lines between those who are in Christ and those who are in darkness, calling to repentance those who

have rejected him, and offering hope to all who are willing to repent and believe in Jesus as the Son of God and Savior of the world who died on the cross for our sins and rose from the dead on the third day, who ascended into heaven where he reigns and intercedes for his own.

#### **GLOBAL MISSIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS**

The global missiological implications are too numerous to develop fully in the space of one article, but some must be mentioned. The cultural, linguistic, ancestry, and worldview affinity that Latinos and Arab Muslims share is exploited and strengthened by leftist Latino governments that pander to wealthy Arab nations who share a distrust and dislike for the U.S. Add to this volatile mix the fact that the oil-rich Arab nations have vast resources which they are eager to invest to win friends and influence, and there is a potential powder keg worth watching.

However, just as the nearly 800 years of Spaniards and Muslims sharing the Iberian Peninsula resulted in a blending and commonality of many aspects of their cultures that allows Arab Muslims to pass for Latinos very easily, the reverse is also true. Latin American evangelicals are very effective missionaries to Arab Muslim lands. The very fact that they do not have U.S. passports grants Latinos a certain freedom and a pass on the scrutiny that blocks many Westerners from living and serving in Arab countries. The Latin American church is maturing in their Christianity, and many believers are hearing God's missionary call. Unfortunately they lack the advantages of financial and educational training resources that benefit North Americans.

Contemporary Western missionaries must devise platforms for creative access to countries that forbid Christian missionary activity and refuse to grant Christian worker visas. Many missionaries struggle to develop and maintain platforms as business consultants, English teachers, and a host of other options in order to gain access to "closed" countries. Indeed, it is often noted that an average

of three countries per year close their doors to Christian missionaries.<sup>61</sup> Sadly, many missionaries who find a believable platform are frustrated in ministry since they must keep a very low profile to avoid detection from government monitors. This low profile often results in very little ministry, and many do little more than simply live in the target country. The most effective creative access strategy may be very nearby, sitting in the shadow of the U.S.

The churches in Latin America have much to teach the churches in the West (and North). They have numbers, youth, commitment, enthusiasm, and zeal. However, much of their zeal is without knowledge. What the Western church could bring to the equation is training and financial resources. In most instances we have been so burdened to reach the unreached, that when we reached one group, we left as soon as possible to reach the next, and so on. We have overlooked the truth that Jesus sent us to reach and teach the nations of the world, making disciples and teaching them to observe everything he has commanded us. At the same time, the U.S. is one of the wealthiest and most powerful nations in the world. We are spending vast amounts of money to get people into creative access countries and maintain them there, oftentimes crippled in their ministries by the need for secrecy.

A wiser strategy might be to equip those Christians whom the Lord is calling to missions, who do not have passports from Western nations, and who would fit in culturally and linguistically much more quickly than most Westerners. The unfortunate identification of Western culture with Christianity has resulted in a view of Christianity as an inferior, sinful, and shameful way of life. Much of the world believes that the U.S. is a Christian nation. With the Muslim understanding of the intertwined relationship between religion, culture, and law, they assume that this means what they see from us is synonymous with Christianity. This is problematic as our largest export is the entertainment industry's films, television shows, and music; therefore, the behavior, clothing, lifestyles, habits,

and morals of these products are understood as what characterizes Christianity. Effective missiological models will be those that emphasize the truth that we represent the Lord Jesus Christ, and not the West in general or a specific country. Latin American Christians are able to represent the gospel without the stumbling block of this perception.

Western missionaries could establish programs in Latin American settings offering intercultural training, theological and missiological education, and pastoral preparation as their part of the effort. The financial resources that the West brings to bear on the challenge to reach and teach Arab Muslim people groups would be more wisely invested in the equipping and sending of many of these missionaries. Such a new missiological model would not have to be mutually exclusive with traditional models; Western missionaries would still go as called, led, and able, but the newer model would result in more effective missionaries and better stewardship. These well-equipped Latino missionaries could then establish similar training programs in near neighbor nations for the equipping of still others in a model of 2 Timothy 2:2 faithfulness.

## CONCLUSION

The rapid growth of Islam and the recent revolutionary activity in many Arab Muslim countries have kept them in the news, on the hearts, and in the prayers of Christians around the world. Many missions-minded Christians are burdened to reach them as quickly and effectively as possible. A natural affinity exists between Latin Americans and Arab Muslims that would result in more rapid cultural adjustment and relationship building between them. The nearly 800 years that Spaniards lived in close proximity to Muslims resulted in a blending of many aspects of the cultures, which allows Arab Muslims to pass for Latinos very easily. Shortly after 9/11, an agency of the U.S. government ran a full-page advertisement in the national paper of Ecuador posting the pictures of dozens of Al Qaeda operatives who were believed

to be living in hiding there. Those scanning the pictures realized that these operatives could be any one of the people they saw everyday on the streets. These similarities are not inconsequential. Western Christians could take their considerable resources, teachers, educational programs, and passion for missions to eager Latin American believers. In doing so, they would assist them to reach unreached Arab Muslims, those with whom they already share cultural, linguistic, and worldview commonalities. While Western mission agencies brainstorm to find creative access platforms to get their people in to reach the unreached in Arab lands, the most effective creative access may be right next door.

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