

Latin America and Islam

By Lynda Hausfeld



Cubans in Waiting. M. and Y.¹ are young church planters in Cuba. In the fall of 2013 God used a local prayer for the nations event to call them beyond their community to share Jesus with the Muslim world. Their new passion has since driven their prayer lives and has become the focus of their plans for future and mission.

There is irony in their passion. The spiritual burning that wakes them up in the morning and seals their prayers in the evening is a call to mission that would seem foolish outside the dynamic of the Holy Spirit's leading. In spite of the fact that travel bans and economic hindrances currently impound Cuba's global outreach, the national church's fledgling world

missions program proactively anticipates the day when Cuba's closed doors will give way to God's will for the nations through them.

Cuban workers are already pressing against the barred posts, preparing themselves for effective service among Muslims wherever God wills that they go. A very confident M. says, "We know the great barriers that [currently] separate us from access to the Muslim world, but the One who called us, God of the Angel-armies, will crumble all obstacles so that His purpose can be fulfilled. We want to be in the center of God's will; like the prophet Isaiah we say 'Here I am Lord, send me.'"

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Until All Have Heard

How then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? – Romans 10:14

Mark Hausfeld
International Director
Global Initiative:
Reaching Muslim Peoples




Many people assume that most of the world's Muslims are from the Middle East. The fact is that only 20 percent of the world's 1.6 billion Muslims speak Arabic and live in the Middle East and North Africa. The remaining majority of Islam's followers live in places as diverse as Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Pacific Islands and the West. The media streams substantial information about Muslims in Asian and some European cities, but we don't generally hear much about Muslims in Latin America. Since what makes news is generally connected with terrorism, when we don't hear it, we don't consider that there exists any activity at all. This edition of the *Intercede* will give you insights into Latin America's connection with the world of Islam, and how the Church is responding.



The Latin American Church testifies to the great work of missionaries and national leaders of previous generations whose missiology established strong indigenous churches. They are self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating. They are ambitious about winning the lost for Christ; many Latin American nations have their own missionary sending mechanisms that create and sustain powerful missional ethos at local church levels. These represent the ultimate success of missions by sending locally supported missionaries in substantial, growing numbers. This is the plan of God for such a time as this in a world in which we pray and strategize to see the Great Commission of Jesus fulfilled.

Hispanic believers make tremendous missionaries. They are planting the local church in Muslims contexts where many North Americans and Europeans cannot reside. The geo-political and economic challenges of this era increasingly make USA, British and French passports more of a liability than a reliable means of entry. It is not so with Mexicans, Colombians or Brazilians. Culturally and sociologically they hold more in common with Muslim host countries. As Pentecostals they rely on the Holy Spirit for signs and wonders to confirm their proclamation. They are heeding the call to the world's unreached Muslims in restricted areas.

The Latin American Church faces the challenges of Islam on the home front, as well. In July of 2014, *The Religion and Ethics News Weekly* reported that Muslims are reaching out to Hispanic immigrants in the United States who are in turn converting to Islam faster than any other group. The numbers and trends of Hispanic converts to Islam in Latin American countries is not measurable, but remarkable conversion growth is taking place. The Latin American Church is reaching out for help to equip their leaders for the task of inspiring and educating the local church toward outreach to Muslims in local communities.

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What makes Cuba's forthcoming impact among Muslims so hopeful is not unique. Latin Americans from Mexico, Central and South America and other Spanish-speaking Caribbean countries are heeding the call to serve unreached Muslims with the Good News of Jesus Christ. Brad Walz of the Assemblies of God World Missions documents that at least 13 percent of Latin America-sent AG missionaries outreach specifically to Muslims in Islamic contexts.ⁱⁱ This noteworthy statistic reflects the narrative that already bears fruit in the lives of Muslims who know Christ because of Latin American missionary influence. Although ministry sensitivities make it difficult to gather more comprehensive agency-wide Evangelical statistics, the trends show that God is calling Latin Americans to mission among Muslims on a global scale.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Start of it All. The development of the Latin American/Muslim narrative dates back to Islam's early expansion into vast world regions. North African Muslim Moors invaded Spain in 711 and maintained an invasive presence until the early 13th century. Their gradual decline finally ended in 1492, when the last Moorish stronghold surrendered to King Ferdinand V and Queen Isabella — the same year that Columbus sailed to the New World.

Columbus left Spain as an ardent Catholic who had become part of a national ethos that had freed itself of oppressive Muslim rule. However, Islam's nearly 800 years of presence had by this time woven cultural influence into the fabric of Spain's distinctiveness. It was by most means a tenuous weave; nevertheless, it formed the essence of identity that Columbus inadvertently carried with him to the New World.

Columbus expected to discover trade routes that would circumvent the existing Muslim-dominated Silk Road enterprises. He intended to reach the Orient, and thought he was in China when he first set foot on the island of Cuba, just prior to his travel to Hispaniola. By the end of his life Columbus's journeys had not yielded new trade routes to India, but had indeed planted the Muslim-influenced Spanish narrative in what are now the West Indies islands, in Venezuela and along the Central American coastline.

Spain's subsequent growth into the Americas took the form of conquests that mirrored the violence and control Muslim jihadists had forced upon Spaniards for almost a millennium. Some scholars to this day attribute Spain's militaristic colonialist (missionary) advances into the

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Americas at least in part to the jihadist ethos they endured and so desperately fought against for over 700 years. By the end of the 15th century, Islam had established its rule across the Middle East and in North Africa. It had forcibly advanced to the gates of Vienna, Austria. It had also expanded all the way to western China, north to what is now the southern border of Russia and into northern India.

The Narrative Grows. Although there is ample, very interesting evidence to prove Muslim presence in Latin America prior to Christopher Columbus' travel^{iv}, scholars also believe that Muslims (called *moriscos* — possibly forced converts to Christianity) arrived in the New World on Christopher Columbus's ships. This movement represents the first surge of Muslim migration to what would become today's Latin America.

Spain continued to colonize Latin America, and in the 16th century demands for workers in rapidly growing settlements in South America and later the West Indies inspired a wave of African slave trade that lasted through the 18th century. African Muslim tribes would conquer other Muslim and animistic tribes in Africa and sell them to European traders who in turn sold them in the Americas; hence, the second surge of Muslim immigrants mostly to South America and the West Indies.

The third flow of Muslim immigrants into Latin America arrived mostly from Asia, in the early 1800's. Many were indentured Muslim servants, but by the early 1900's this work force was migrating legally from Syria, Lebanon and Palestine. It wasn't entirely a Muslim people movement, but was largely so. Most of these people settled in Argentina, Brazil and Chile's large cities. To date, these countries host most of the Hispanic world's highest concentrations of Muslims.^v

Twenty-first century Muslim immigration to Latin America has not been as notable as it has been in North America and Europe, but increasingly Muslims are finding Latin American entry laws more lax and welcoming than Europe's and the United States'. Although work opportunities in Latin America are typically not prolific, some Latin American governments are partnering economically with wealthy Arab ones because they lack faith in the western world's economic condition.^{vi}

The ASPA [Spanish abbreviation for Summit of South



American and Arab States] is a very significant example of this kind of partnership. It is a coalition of 34 South American and Muslim nations, which has for the past decade grown deliberate relationships and strategies for mutually beneficial economic, environmental and cultural advances. Peru hosted their most recent meeting in October of 2012. The result of this event was a 178-point resolution^{vii} that delineates positions for political dialogue and the coordination of such, as well as agenda for economic, financial, cultural, educational and environmental cooperation that includes science/technology innovations, and social and development affairs. It includes statements that condemn Israel as an occupying power, espouse the promotion of Islamic civilization and art as an entry for Islam, and prohibit the negative stereotyping of religions and their holy figures.

I believe this may create a friendly climate for possible future implementation of sharia law and practice. Gustavo Bravo, Charge d'Affaires at the Peruvian

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Embassy in Kuwait, suggests that this ASPA coalition will help “consolidate world peace for which both regions aspire.”

For many reasons Latin America is becoming an attractive option for Muslims who want to immigrate to the West. Perhaps the biggest enticement is indeed the commonalities Muslims and Latin Americans share that resulted from that first Muslim invasion into Spain in 711.

Cultural Commonalities.^{viii} Moorish rule and presence in Spain from 711 to 1492 fomented a melding of cultures that perhaps today makes the Latin American Christian the Muslim's best hope for Heaven. Spanish conquest that started in the 15th century made Catholicism Latin America's main religion today. Catholicism and Islam are both monotheistic religions. Although there are stark core differences between them, faith practices resemble one another at many junctures. These are commonalities that the Latin American

Christian understands and can use for greater witness in relationship with Muslim counterparts.

The following is a summation of major, but not exhaustive similarities that give Latino Christians an upper hand in outreach to Muslims.

First, there are 2,000-4,000 Arabic words or word roots in the Spanish language. Language familiarities are natural cultural links. Only about 20 percent of the world's Muslims are Arabic speakers, but Arabic is the language of the Quran and is core to religious practice. Latin Americans and Muslims have shared ideas in medicine, art, architecture, philosophy, and mathematics, as well.

Islamic and Latin American cultures are, for the most part, honor-shame based. They place strong emphasis on community, especially on family within the community context. Individual identity is intertwined with group identity. The shaming of one member generally shames the whole; likewise, the honor of one belongs to the whole. Family members respect their elderly; grandparents often reside with their children. Both cultures are patriarchal, with motherhood roles that are exalted in the Quran and in Latino cultures.

Latino and Muslim communications are indirect, often reflected in language that distances blame from an offender, or bad news from its deliverer and/or the person the news impacts. This has a lot to do with the upholding of honor and the distancing of shame from individual and group identity. Hospitality is key to relationship in both cultures, forming the basis for a community's support structure, with a strong ethic of honoring guests.

From Familiarity to Future. The Latino Christian and the Muslim have one final, but very important joint characteristic: mandated evangelism. Muslims proselytize out of belief that the world as it is (the World at War) will become the World at Peace only when the whole world has submitted to Islam.^{ix} Contrarily, all Christians are commissioned to share God's Good News with the nations, so that they might know Christ's love and accept Him as eternal Lord.

Muslims are deliberate proselytizers. It is important to know that Muslims strategize for Islam's growth in Latin America and North America. They have structures set up in many countries that are meant to host Islamic

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da'wa (evangelism). Their presence in immigrant contexts is creative and missional. For years they have drawn on commonalities to convert Latin Americans to Islam. They offer community and rootedness to Latinos by promoting Islam as the faith into which they were born. In fact, when a Latino becomes a Muslim, it is called a “reversion” rather than a conversion.


Wilfredo Amr Ruiz is a Puerto Rican convert from Catholicism to Islam. He is an attorney with the Council on American-Islamic Relations in Miami. Ruiz says, “More and more Hispanics are embracing Islam, in part, because they find familiarity that stretches back centuries, to the Moors in Spain...Islam is not really that foreign to us. Islam is us. It's part of us.”^x

Ruiz uses the phrase “familiarity that stretches back centuries” to persuade Latinos into believing they have been Muslim all along. It is part of Satan's scheme that extends back to his own fall and condemnation, and where Islam got its start. Now, as the enemy attempts to seduce Latinos back into that same death trap, Jesus says, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”^{xi} The “familiarity that stretches back centuries” is actually the work Christ did on Calvary when He conquered death and called those who believe on Him to tell the world! For Latino Christians, it becomes a two-pronged opportunity.

Latin Americans are keepers and growers of a strong indigenous church. For the past 14 centuries God has prepared them for this time in history, to infuse the Muslim world with the love of Christ through presence and good news proclamation. Satan's agenda is about conquering, but Jesus' agenda is about victory in Him, made accessible to everyone who will hear and believe Christ's good news narrative. The Latin American church is poisoning itself to receive the Muslims God sends them into loving community. Her members are also making their way to the nations — proclaiming Christ to unreached Muslims in places that are impenetrable to most anyone except for them.

M. and Y. have prayed incessantly that doors would open for them to church plant among Muslims. Recently M. found herself begging the Lord to make good on His word to them — to let them serve among Muslims soon. God has already made M.'s and Y.'s hearts home to the plans He has for them, and M. especially struggles with the wait. M. says that as she clamored the Lord told her to

open her eyes and see that His eye is fixed on her...that His plans are sure. When she looked into the sky, she saw an eye looking at her from the clouds! She shot a picture of it with her cell phone, and she keeps it as her constant reminder. A few weeks later a church member had a word from God for her. She told M. that by Dec. 18, she would know what God has been doing in spiritual realms, He will do in physical ones. On Dec. 17, M. sent an email detailing the dancing in Cuban streets — over the Castro/Obama plans for restoring relations with Cuba. The doors have been unlatched!

Please pray for M., Y., and all the Latin Americans God is using and positioning for a great Muslim world harvest! God is shouting His love for Muslims to Latin Americans who are ready to serve. When God affirms our passions, He affirms afresh His love to us, as well. What a privilege is ours to have the smallest part in this battle for Muslim souls, as we uphold our Latin American brothers and sisters in their mission callings! 

i Due to political/religious sensitivities, we cannot mention the complete names of M. and Y.

ii Personal interview by author: 2013.

iii Andrew Kingston-Smith, “Out of Latin America - Impact and Assessment of the Latin American Missionary Movement out of Latin America.” Accessed January 5, 2015. <http://www.academia.edu>.

iv Dr. Abdullah Hakim Quick. “The African, and Muslim, Discovery of America - Before Columbus.” Accessed January 4, 2015. <http://www.historyofislam.com>.

v The three waves of Muslim immigration as defined by David Sills and Kevin Baggett in the following: Sills, M. David and Kevin Baggett. “Islam in Latin America.” Accessed December 21, 2014. <http://www.galaxie.com>

vi Sills, M. David, and Kevin Baggett. “Islam in Latin America.” Accessed December 21, 2014. <http://www.galaxie.com>

vii Lima Declaration. ONLINE. Accessed Jan.7, 2015. <http://www.rree.gob.pe/politicaexterior>.

viii Much of the compilation of cultural commonality traits between Latinos and Muslims comes from Sills and Baggett, above.

ix See citation vii, referring to world peace. Note that Gustavo Bravo connects the works of ASPA with the establishment of “world peace.”

x Newcomer, Carrie. “Latino Converts to Islam.” Accessed July 25, 2014. <http://www.pbs.org/wnet>.

xi John 10:10, ESV.



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Friday, March 6, 2015. Please pray

...for a **Global Initiative team member** who is conducting an Institute of Islamic Studies during March 5-22 in Papua New Guinea.

...for **church planting efforts** in the tension-filled Peshawar area of Pakistan.

...for **Global Initiative team members** who will assist in orientation sessions for new missionaries going to the Muslim world during March 7-13.

Friday, March 13, 2015. Please pray

...for **missionaries in Bulgaria** who are ministering to newly-arrived Muslim refugees.

...for **Global Initiative team members** who are conducting Muslim Awareness sessions in a major Midwest U.S. city during March 13-15.

...that **key Islamic leaders** around the world would come to a saving knowledge of Jesus.

Friday, March 20, 2015. Please pray

...for **Christian believers in Mozambique, Africa** to be bold in witnessing to their Muslim neighbors. New mosques are being constructed throughout the country.

...for the **growing number of Latino missionaries** serving in Muslim countries.

...for **outreaches to Muslims in the U.S.**, especially in Dearborn, Michigan.

Friday, March 27, 2015. Please pray

...for the **estimated 200,000 Iraqi Christians** who have been displaced from their homes due to attacks from Islamic State (IS) terrorists.

...for the **courage** to make Christ our response to radical Islamic oppression of believers world-wide.

...for the **Bangladeshi state of Khulna**; 89 percent of its 10.2 million people are Muslim.



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Friday, April 3, 2015. Please pray

...for the North African country of **Tunisia**. 99 percent of its 10.2 million people are Muslim.
...for the **331,000 Indonesians** in the Netherlands; 84 percent are Muslim.
...for **Nigerian pastors** ministering to their flocks as a result of attacks by the Islamic terror group Boko Haram.

Friday, April 10, 2015. Please pray

...for a **Global Initiative-sponsored World Consultation on Islam** in a Latin American country during the dates of April 13-17; that every session will be guided by the Holy Spirit.
...for **Iranian Muslim background believers** who have been jailed for participating in the Farsi Jesus Film Project.
...for a **recently-opened coffeehouse** near an Islamic university in a Middle East country.

Friday, April 17, 2015. Please pray

...for **Ahmad (pseudonym)**, a Middle Eastern Muslim background believer, who says "During beatings from family members I felt like a nail — and each blow drove me deeper into Christ."
...for the country of **Kazakhstan**. 50.1 percent of its 16.5 million people are Muslim.
...for **church planting efforts** among Muslim unreached people groups in India.

Friday, April 24, 2015. Please pray

...for the **408,000 Kotokoli people** in Central Togo, Africa. 89 percent are Muslim.
...for **more churches and church networks** to catch a vision for sharing the loving truth of Jesus Christ with the Muslim world.
...for **strong anointing** to rest upon ministry outreaches to Muslim women in France.

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P. O. Box 2730, Springfield, MO 65801-2730
1-866-816-0824 (toll free)
www.globalinitiativeinfo.com
www.jumaaprayers.org