

Exploring Islam in the Americas from Demographic and Ethnographic Perspectives

Ken Chitwood

Research on Muslim communities in the Americas is on the rise.¹ There are now entire books and numerous journal articles, encyclopedia entries, and conference presentations on the topic (Khan 2015b; Chitwood 2014, Narbona, Pinto, and Karam 2015; Morales 2012). But why? Are the numbers appreciating? Or is the community a particularly ripe field for understanding currents in race, culture, religion, globalization, and other relevant topics in the social sciences?

Researchers can learn much about the way religion and culture act upon, and relate to, today's globalized world from studying Muslims in the Americas. Furthermore, demographic data can prove an *ad rem* avenue into the field. This chapter discusses some population data concerning Muslims in the Americas and offers pathways for further research based on these statistics. These demographics invite a more thorough study of under-appreciated religious populations that present ample opportunities for research in cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, and specifically apropos to the ethnographic study of religion.

The Value of an Interdisciplinary Approach to American Islam

Considerable debate exists concerning the demography of Muslim populations across the globe and discussions of the number American Muslims is no different (Foroutan 2015). Demographic data provide a valuable snapshot of various populations and offers worthwhile entryways into further study of a region's population. Moreover, using demographics as a point of departure offers opportunities for sociologists, ethnographers,

¹ In this chapter, America, American, and Americas are all used hemispherically, including North America, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Furthermore, the terminology 'American Islam' is here preferred to 'Islam in the Americas' in order to highlight, in the words of Hammer and Safi (2013: 14), the fact that 'American Muslims have indeed forged their own version of Islam' and to implicitly reject 'the assumption that Muslims are somehow a temporary or simply migratory phenomenon in America.' While I appreciate the notion that American Muslims are formed both by migratory and local conversion processes and part of a global *umma*, the use of this terminology is to acknowledge the local, and hemispheric, distinctives of the American Muslim community. Furthermore, as I have intimated, the term 'American' is used broadly and not just according to the 'limited geographic understanding' encompassing solely the United States and sometimes conflated with the Canadian Muslim community as it is in the Hammer and Safi.

anthropologists, and other researchers to not only discover more about American Islam, but better understand currents in global Islam.

Demography and ethnography have long benefitted from the respective work of each discipline (Coast 2001). Particularly in the Americas, and specifically in relation to popular or subaltern groups such as Muslims, an interdisciplinary approach (or even ‘transdisciplinary’ one; Canclini 1995) is advantageous for researchers who can no longer rely on methods that isolate and bifurcate.² In the Americas and elsewhere, the reality of (post) modern populations invokes a complex blurring of boundaries. American Muslims are a test case of ‘hybrid cultures’ existing betwixt and between the false binaries offered above. While there may indeed be discomfort in amalgamating more traditional sociological and anthropological methods and findings, a hybrid methodology combining the most up-to-date demographic data and nuanced ethnographic exploration can help elucidate understudied and often misunderstood subaltern populations, such as American Muslims.

Combining the frames of reference provides a more holistic strategy, not absolute in its understanding but at least more comprehensive. For example, in the case of the field of American Islam the demographic data—despite it being an understudied area—are vital to give research in this area greater exposure and legitimacy in the eyes of both the academy and the greater public. Still, ethnographic emphases on emic definitions and perspectives will yield data that may or may not correspond to the demographic categories provided; for example, the potentially blurred identities that many Muslims and non-Muslims live with in Latin America and the Caribbean. In such cases further research and investigation are required to compare insider/outsider claims. Furthermore, ethnographic stories of individual actors and their self-styled hybrid realities in the Americas invite demographic exploration and reification in data, tables, and concrete analysis. Together, they work together in a feedback loop to potentially present a more intact picture of the field of study.

Highlighting Muslim Populations in the Americas

From this perspective, demographic research serves as an invitation to whet the ethnographer’s appetite concerning understudied Muslim populations throughout the Americas and provide nuanced representation of them.

The *World Religion Database* (WRD) presents some of the best statistical estimates of Muslim populations in the Americas (Johnson and Grim 2014). It is reported that,

² For example, rural/urban, stories/data, subaltern/hegemonic, microsocial/macrosocial, indigenous/immigrant, orthodox/heterodox, tradition/modernity, general/particular, authentic/constructed, deductive/inductive, mass/popular, interviews/surveys, action/acting, being/becoming, marginal/central, established/manifesting, abstract/hypostatized, or anthropological/sociological. See Canclini 1995: 199–200.

‘[w]hile experiencing steady growth in both Africa and Asia, [Islam] has grown significantly faster than the general population in Latin America, Northern America, and Oceania’ between 1970 and 2000 (Johnson and Zurlo 2015: 60). In Latin America the growth rate was 4.14% and in Northern America 5.41%. The hard numbers are 1.4 million Muslims in Latin America and 4 million in Northern America. Breaking this down by region the *WRD* estimates 107,000 in the Caribbean, 133,000 in Central America, and 1.2 million in South America (Johnson and Zurlo 2015: 56–60). I posit that the most significant—not just in terms of sheer size, but also cultural impact and visibility—Muslim populations in the Americas are found in Argentina (784,000; Pew 2011), Brazil (191,000; Galvan 2008),³ Canada (940,000; Pew 2011), Columbia (94,600; Pew 2011), Mexico (110,000; Pew 2011), Panama (24,000; Pew 2011), Trinidad and Tobago (72,400; Pew 2011), the United States (2 million; Pew 2011), and Venezuela (100,000; Pew 2011). Furthermore, according to Juan Galvan, there are 35 organizations that ‘attend the annual meeting of the heads of Islamic associations and cultural centers in Latin America and the Caribbean to discuss fostering Islamic values and education in Latin America along with other common interests’ (Galvan 2008: 28).⁴ Thus, there are growing communities of converts across the Americas both joining existing Muslim communities and creating their own. To parse out the unique narratives of each community is to first appreciate their numbers and explore the stories behind the data. Certainly, such populations are statistically significant in the study of minority religions, their historical antecedents, contemporary impact, and relevance to studies of globalization.

In studying Islam in the Americas we must recognize its polydoxy and multivalent interpretations wherein various communities according to their particular context, culture, and contemporary conversations determine their own bent on beliefs and peculiar practices. As Aisha Khan said, ‘[v]ast geographical expanses, extensive passage of time, great cultural heterogeneity, and religious variability characterize the flow of Muslims and Islam to [and within] the Americas’ (Khan 2015a: 32). Thus, instead of attempting to delineate what Islam *is* or *is not* in the Americas, the study of American Islam presents the opportunity to discuss ‘how it is decided who Muslims are and, reciprocally, what Islam is’ (Khan 2015a: 32). To do so begins with correcting the misunderstanding of multiculturalism in the Americas as the performance of particular essentialized, or bounded, ethnicities and religious identities. As Asad declares, there is no ‘Islam’ per se, but a ‘discursive tradition’ that informs itself with the Qur’an and the Hadith and ‘addresses

3 Galvan estimates that Brazil is home to over 1 million Muslims (Galvan 2008: 27), but this number is so different than those found in the *World Religion Database* and lacks corroboration or proper source information that it is not treated seriously here.

4 Including the Islamic Charity Center of Bogotá, Columbia (1979), the Muslim Community Educational Center in Anzures, Mexico City, Mexico (post-1994), and the *Círculo Islámico (CIRD)* in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic (1994).

itself to conceptions of the Islamic past and future, with reference to a particular Islamic practice in the present' (Asad 1986: 14). Thus, scholars of American Islam face a twofold challenge: they must be flexible enough to follow Islam's fluid forms in this hemisphere, but at the same time well-versed enough in classical and canonical displays of Islam that they can recognize divergent beliefs and practices. In this way, studies of American Islam can appreciate both creativity and durability, spontaneity and conventionalism, new and old, in ways that move beyond basic, and unsubstantiated, binaries.

Historical Entrees into the Study of Globalization and American Islam

Before digging into the multiple approaches possible to the study of Islam in the Americas an appreciation for historical antecedents must first be, briefly, apperceived. While there is a certain sense of rupture implied in the study of Islam in the Americas, theorists must also be aware of the historical predecessors of it and how Islam has not only been present, but prevalent, in the past. Not only have multiple authors shown how Islam arrived via colonial explorations and slave and exploration ships from Europe and West Africa,⁵ but others have shown how explorers and colonizers carried in their imaginations the contest between Christianity and Islam and the *reconquista* of the Iberian Peninsula and conflicts in Western Africa and map those onto their new social worlds—wherein indigenous peoples often became representative of the expelled Moors (Silverblatt 2004; Dean 1999). While their impact on New World politics, economy, and religion is perhaps negligible due to a necessitated *secretism of survival* in the context of boundary making state-craft in the Americas, the transatlantic slave trade's importation of Islam into the Americas did have some long-lasting affects. Indeed, in some cases—as in the Muslim Malê revolt in Bahia, Brazil in 1835—Muslims leveraged their multiethnic religious appeal, West African history, embodied spiritual practices (such as Arabic inscribed amulets, prayer gatherings, Islamic garb), and religious calendrics to impact colonial politics in significant ways (Reis 1993). These histories would leave a lasting legacy of Muslim impact and presence in the Americas as immigrants from places such as Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, and elsewhere began to arrive in the late nineteenth century and early-to-mid twentieth century. It is through which, and from, these populations that modern Islam in the Americas both took root and began to emerge in both real numbers and in the imagination of Americans and the world.

5 There has even been some speculation that Muslims from West Africa came to the 'New World' before Columbus. Turkey's president Recep Tayyip Erdogan claimed that Muslims discovered the Americas as evidenced by Columbus's sighting of a 'mosque' in the Caribbean during his voyages. He made this claim while addressing a summit of Muslim leaders from Latin America, where Turkey is competing for economic and religious hegemony to counter Saudi Arabia, Iran, China, and the United States. See Tharoor 2014. However spurious these claims may seem, there are scholars who agree. See Quick 1996; Gomez 2005; Diouf 2013; and Cook 2008.

American Muslim Hybrid Cultures

Indeed, in this latest era of globalization and transmigration, in which a new world order was/is emerging and decolonization occurs concurrently, hybridity has come to be the new norm, in place of the dichotomous and essentialized 'purity' and 'authenticity' discourses of modernity. Pieterse, who advocates for the idea of a 'global *mélange*,' (Pieterse 2009: 66) argues against the understanding of globalization as Westernization, or some other form of homogenization, as in the theories of McDonaldization or CocaColonization (Cf. Ritzer 2007). Instead, he contends that globalization is multidimensional. Indeed, he argues that there are multiple globalizations and that they are inherently fluid, multitudinous, and open-ended. These notions of the liquidity, porousness, and indeterminacy of the globalizing world also undercut any notion of a 'clash of civilizations' since the 'civilizations' under question are shot through with inconsistencies, contestations, and multiple discourses. The world is multi-polar and globalization happens from both above and below. In fact, as Robertson argues, globalization is neither a process of homogenization (à la Ritzer) nor is it a solely heterogeneous exercise (à la Pieterse). Instead, the two are in tension as individual agents are constrained by, and resist, large structures even as structures seek to impose themselves over, and above, local impediments (Friedmann 1997). The local and the global, the universal and the particular, the micro and the macro are constantly in tension with each other in the multilevel, multiscale, multipolar networks and actors of globalization. Often, religion acts as a mediator between the two, allowing the local to become global through transposition (or cosmologizing universalizing) that which is individual or local either within, or against, macro structures while simultaneously translating (or localizing) that which is universal into the particular for individual actors.

The case of the Muslim community in Chiapas, Mexico is illustrative of the above (Cuevas 2013; Farooq 2013). In 1995 members of the Murabitun Global Movement (Movimiento Murabitun Mundial, or MMM) arrived in Chiapas to present their vision of society to the Zapatistas and to proclaim their message of global Islam in Mexico (Cuevas 2006). Although their contact with the Zapatistas was limited, and fruitless, the Spaniards connected with Tzotzil people in, and around, San Cristobal de las Casas. An entire Tzotzil family converted and several other Tzotzil families joined the missionaries in founding a new community settled in the outskirts of the town—thus founding a self-sustaining Islamic community in southern Mexico. The community is isolated from other Muslim constituencies (e.g., in Mexico City) and have often refused socialization with journalists, researchers, and fellow Muslims. In 2001 the community ruptured and two groups were formed: one linked to the Sunni-led Muslim Cultural Centre of Mexico (Centro Cultural Islámico de México A.C., CCIM) and another group linked to the MMM. The split occurred due to a double consciousness in the community, wherein tensions between the global vision of the Murabitun and the local concerns of the Tzotzil people—in addition to sentiments regarding the isolation of the community from the wider *umma*—came to a head. In this instance, tensions between the global and the local, and vice versa, proved schismatic.

The mid-1990s conversion of Maya Muslims, and its subsequent fallout a decade later, are demonstrative of 'the selective appropriation of Islamic doctrine' (Cuevas 2006) by local communities throughout the Americas and both the preservation and reshaping of ethnic identities in conversation with global Islamic movements therein. Furthermore, it is evidence of not only the validity of hybridity in analyzing the tension between the global and the local as it concerns Islam in the Americas, but also the necessity of globalizing the study of American Islam as a whole. Indeed, as Canclini wrote of the Latin American context in particular, '[t]oday we conceive of Latin America as a more complex articulation of traditions and modernities (diverse and unequal), a heterogeneous continent consisting of countries in each of which coexist multiple logics of development' (Canclini 1995: 9). Thus, Maya Muslims in Chiapas are indicative of broader trends in multi-scalar, multidimensional, and hybrid identities being constructed across national, religious, class, and ethnic boundaries throughout the Americas. This case illustrates the necessity of interrogating demographics and digging deeper through textured ethnographic research to discover the multivalent expressions of Muslim faith behind, beyond, and between the interstices of the numbers presented here in this book. While the numbers of Muslims in Mexico may invite curiosity, they cannot quite encapsulate the complexity hiding behind the numeric data.

Furthermore, virtual spaces such as the Latino Muslim Facebook Group (LMFG) can act as a platform wherein a new 'borderland' emerges where Latina/o Muslims can navigate their hybrid identity and attempt to merge the multiple cultures within, and around, them. As Manuel Vásquez and Marie F. Marquardt explain, community and identity can be centered around things other than temples, synagogues, churches, and mosques: 'In allowing congregations to make their boundaries more flexible and permeable, [computer mediated communities] turn them into border zones where the global and the local, the sacred and the profane, and face-to-face, and virtual networks meet' (Vásquez & Marquardt 2003: loc. 1602–4). Thus, in this digital borderland a hybrid Latina/o Muslim identity is formulated through posts concerning everyday piety that include discussions of what it means to cook halal Puerto Rican dishes or whether or not to celebrate Christmas with family. Identity formation is wrapped up in 'Muslim memes' and video testimonies that help establish a 'new Muslim cool' and validate the conversion narratives of the LMFG members. The community is consolidated in a shared sense of persecution, the navigation of tension, and through the dissemination of stories that underscore a Latina/o Muslim combined mythos. It is also concomitantly informed by a global Muslim discourse that occurs on multiple levels and is communicated in various languages. There are forces that unknowingly shape the community as well: videos, images, and political discourses that passively inform what it means to be Latina/o Muslims even without their direct engagement. Through all of these processes a hybrid narrative is being crafted so that Latina/o Muslims can feel in control of their identity on the margins, in the borderlands between the digital and the 'real,' between being Latina/o and Muslim.

Conclusion

This chapter emphasizes population data concerning Muslims in the Americas and offers enlightening cases that might illumine pathways for further research based on statistics. The demographics invite a more thorough study of under-appreciated religious populations that present ample opportunities for research in cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, and specifically apropos to the ethnographic study of religion. The demographic exploration of American Islam presents ample opportunities for academic research and discourse in accordance with theories concerning religion and globalization broadly, in addition to historical perspectives on globalization, theories of migration, transnationalism, diaspora, media and communication technologies, global economic flows, and cultural hybridity. Further, demographers can benefit from rich ethnographic studies and, likewise, ethnographers can use numbers to springboard into new research in the field of Islam in the Americas. While the importance of studying American Islam should not be valued on the strength of demographics alone, more accurate numbers shine light on an important, but understudied, field of religion and invite researchers to dig deeper into history and to learn more from an ethnographic approach to the topic of American Islam.

Essentially, the contention here is that demographic data helps quantitatively answer the question of why this area of study needs more research from other disciplines. Experts in the fields of ethnography, media studies, anthropology, and others can then follow-up with qualitative research projects that can help us understand the ‘what’ of the field and ‘how’ the individuals and communities represented in the numbers live in the negotiated contexts, discourses of power, global circumstances, and historically, geographically, situated sodalities they find themselves in. Numbers are necessary for giving validation to a field of study too often left by the wayside in considerations of global Islam. However, it is imperative to get behind and go beyond the numbers to find the messy, sticky, mixed-up interstices between data and the numinous experience of ‘believers and practitioners’ in the field. This is true of multiple demographics presented in this work, but it is most certainly the case with the study of Islam in the Americas.

■ Reference Pew Research Center (2013) is provided in the reference list, but not cited in the text. Please check.

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