

The Gender-Conversion-Identity Nexus: A Synthesizing Framework for the Study of Islam in Latin America

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Abstract

The study of Islam in the Western hemisphere has largely overlooked Latin America, a region experiencing a quiet but significant religious transformation through the conversion of native-born individuals to Islam. This review article synthesizes the emerging scholarship on this phenomenon, arguing that while gender, conversion, and identity have been studied in isolation, they are in fact inextricably linked. By proposing the "gender-conversion-identity nexus" as a synthesizing framework, this review demonstrates how their integration is essential for a holistic understanding of how Islam is being indigenized in Latin America. This approach reveals conversion as a fundamentally gendered process, which in turn catalyzes the construction of uniquely hybrid identities—a dynamic that constitutes the defining characteristic of contemporary Latino Islam. Drawing primarily on qualitative and ethnographic evidence from key countries like Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico, the review analyzes gendered conversion narratives, the subsequent "double translation" of identity, and the significant challenges converts face. The article concludes by outlining critical gaps in the literature and proposing future research directions. Ultimately, this review contends that the gender-conversion-identity nexus provides an indispensable analytical tool for understanding Latin American converts not as passive recipients of a foreign faith, but as active agents in a profound socio-religious process.

Keywords: Latin America, Conversion to Islam, Muslim Identity, Gender and Religion, Gender-Conversion-Identity Nexus

I. Introduction

1. Scope and Importance

The study of Islam in the Western hemisphere has predominantly focused on North America and Europe, often framing Muslim presence through the paradigms of immigration, diaspora, and post-9/11 securitization. Latin America, a vast and diverse region of over 650 million people, has largely remained a footnote in this global discourse. Yet, beneath the surface of its deeply entrenched Catholic heritage and the dramatic rise of Evangelical Protestantism, a quiet but significant religious transformation is occurring: the steady growth of Islam, primarily through the conversion of native-born Latin Americans (Jáuregui, 2023, 2022). While the absolute numbers remain small—estimated to be under one million Muslims in the entire region, with a significant portion being converts—the phenomenon's social and cultural implications are profound. This growth signals a diversification of the region's religious landscape and challenges long-held assumptions about Latin American cultural and religious homogeneity. Islam has a growing presence and visibility in all South American societies (Pinto, 2022).

Studying Islam's presence in Latin America is crucial for understanding how a global religion becomes rooted and reinterpreted outside its historical centers. It requires shifting attention from long-established immigrant communities to Latino/a converts who are actively shaping the future of Islam in the region.

2. The Centrality of Gender, Conversion, and Identity

The intersection of gender, conversion, and identity is central to understanding the experiences of Latin American Muslims. Conversion in this context is a transformative, multidimensional process that demands re-negotiation of social and personal relationships.

This review draws on conversion studies and decolonial theory to frame conversion as both biographical reconstruction and a conscious rejection of colonial religious norms. It shows how converts use 'identity talk' and narrative to integrate local and global elements, challenging static notions of both Latin American and Islamic identity.

Gender is an indispensable lens through which to analyze this process. Men and women experience conversion and its aftermath in vastly different ways, shaped by prevailing gender roles, social expectations, and religious interpretations. For many women, conversion to Islam can be a complex act of both resistance and conformity—resisting local forms of *machismo* while adopting a new set of gendered religious norms, such as veiling, which themselves become sites of intense public scrutiny and personal negotiation (Valcárcel, 2022; Van Nieuwkerk, 2006). For men, conversion can offer a new model of masculinity, rooted in spiritual discipline, community leadership, and a sense of global brotherhood, in contrast to secular or Catholic models (Chitwood, 2021). Recent studies by Biondi (2010) and Castro (2013) show how women's conversions often foster critiques of *machismo* while introducing new religious expectations.

Identity is where these dynamics play out. Becoming a Muslim in Mexico, Brazil, or Colombia is an act of building a new identity. This process weaves together the idea of a global *ummah* (community of believers) with local culture, ethnicity, and personal history. The Latin American convert often engages in a "double translation"—making Islam fit their local context and framing their local identity in a new Islamic way (Elmaleh, 2023). This is further shaped by intersectional factors such as race, class, and indigeneity, which create a diverse view of who is a "Muslim Latino/a."

This review article makes a distinct intervention by arguing that the phenomena of gender, conversion, and identity must be analyzed not as discrete themes, but as an integrated and dynamic nexus. While existing scholarship has productively explored these topics in isolation, a fragmented approach obscures their profound interdependence. This paper proposes that the 'gender-conversion-identity nexus' provides a powerful synthesizing framework for the field. It reveals that conversion is a fundamentally gendered experience, that this gendered conversion process is the primary engine of identity construction, and that the resulting hybrid identities are the defining feature of contemporary Latino Islam. Analyzing this nexus is therefore not merely an option but a necessity for understanding the internal logic and social reality of these emerging communities. Conversion is framed not merely as a biographical process but as a potential decolonial gesture (Mignolo, 2000; Quijano, 2000), a conscious turn away from the hegemony of Western Christianity and its associated colonial histories. Gender serves as the primary site of negotiation where global Islamic norms and local Latin American patriarchies (e.g., *machismo*) collide, creating unique trajectories for men and women. Finally, identity construction is an active process of cultural translation and hybridity (Bhabha, 1994; Canclini, 2005), where the 'Latino Muslim' emerges as a new category that challenges both Latin American and global Islamic essentialisms. Underpinning this entire framework is a commitment to intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), which insists that one cannot understand a convert's experience without analyzing the *simultaneous* effects of their gender, race, class, and Indigeneity. This theoretical triad reveals the Latin American convert as an active agent in a complex religious and cultural project, a case that is distinct from, for example, a North American white convert narrative.

While themes such as political economy, international relations, and ecological ethics are undoubtedly significant for a comprehensive understanding of Islam in Latin America, this review argues that the phenomena of conversion and the subsequent negotiation of gendered and religious identity constitute the bedrock social processes upon which these other structures depend. Before we can fully analyze the political economy or geopolitical stance of Muslim communities, we must first understand the internal, lived realities of the converts who constitute them. The gender-conversion-identity nexus provides the essential microsociological foundation for future macro-level analyses of these communities' engagement with the state, the economy, and global ecological challenges.

3. Research Gap and Contribution

Scholarship on Islam in Latin America has advanced. Early research focused on the histories of Arab immigrants (Karam, 2007; Lesser, 1999). Recent ethnographies now document converts' lives in major hubs like São Paulo (Montenegro, 2024), Buenos Aires (Jáuregui, 2023), and Chiapas (Galvan, 2017; Capovilla & Valcarcel, 2024). However, key gaps remain.

This article builds on and distinguishes itself from earlier foundational reviews, most notably the benchmark 2017 state-of-the-field article published in the *International Journal of Latin American Religions* (likely by Montenegro & Benlabbah). That work provided an essential cartographic function, cataloging the presence and distribution of Muslim communities across the region and identifying the initial areas of scholarly inquiry. However, in the eight years since its publication, the field has matured significantly. A critical mass of new, in-depth ethnographic studies has emerged, allowing for the more nuanced, comparative, and theoretically-driven synthesis undertaken here. Whereas the 2017 article accurately noted the *existence* of conversion, this review moves beyond description to propose a new analytical framework, placing the conversion process at the very center of analysis and intricately linking it to gendered experience and identity construction in a way that was not previously possible. Furthermore, this paper directly addresses the theoretical and methodological gaps—such as the urgent need for intersectional, longitudinal, and quantitative approaches—that have become increasingly apparent as the field has evolved and its communities have stabilized and grown. Thus, this article is not a mere update but a conceptual refinement, arguing for a specific theoretical lens to understand the data that has since accumulated.

First, the gender dimension, while often acknowledged, is not always subjected to sustained, critical analysis. Much of the focus on women, for instance, revolves around the hijab, sometimes obscuring other crucial aspects of their spiritual lives, agency, and intellectual contributions to their communities. Second, the field lacks a broad, comparative lens. Studies are often single-country or single-city focused. A comparative approach that examines the similarities and differences in conversion experiences across the region—from the indigenous Tzotzil Maya in Mexico to the Afro-descendants in Brazil to the urban mestizos in Colombia—is urgently needed. Third, there is a dearth of large-scale, quantitative, longitudinal research to track the evolution of these communities and identities over time.

This chapter analyzes the presence of Islam in Latin America by choosing some contemporary Latin American Islamic landscapes. Focusing on a variety of scenarios makes it possible to show how, beyond common characteristics, there are contextual specificities that render the ethnographic research on Islam and Muslims in Latin America relevant (Montenegro, 2021).

This review article aims to contribute by synthesizing the disparate body of existing qualitative research into a coherent analytical framework centered on the gender-conversion-identity nexus. It seeks to place the Latin American experience within a broader conversation about global Islam, drawing comparative insights where relevant.

By systematically mapping what is known and, more importantly, what remains unknown, this article provides a comprehensive overview of the field and charts a course for future research into this fascinating and underexplored frontier of the Muslim world.

II. Result and Discussion

Historical & Socio-Religious Context

To understand the contemporary phenomenon of conversion to Islam in Latin America, one must first appreciate the historical layers of Muslim presence and the dominant socio-religious environment into which converts emerge.

1. A Brief History of Islam in Latin America

The story of Islam in Latin America is not new; rather, it is one of recurring arrivals, erasures, and rediscoveries. It can be periodized into three main waves.

The first, and most spectral, wave arrived with the Spanish and Portuguese conquistadors themselves. The Iberian Peninsula had been under Muslim rule (Al-Andalus) for nearly 800 years, and its culture, science, and language were deeply infused with Islamic civilization. Many of the early colonizers carried this cultural DNA with them. More directly, a significant number of *Moriscos* (Muslims forcibly converted to Christianity) and *conversos* were among the crews and colonists, seeking to escape the persecution of the Spanish Inquisition (Johnson, 2002). Their religious practices were clandestine and eventually suppressed, but their presence represents a foundational, albeit largely invisible, Islamic substratum in the Americas. Some scholars have even pointed to architectural and linguistic traces of this Mudejar heritage throughout the colonial period (Ma'oz, 1976). Muslims have been settling and integrating in Brazilian colonial, slaveholding, and democratic societies for almost half a millennium (Elmaleh, 2023).

The second, more substantial wave occurred from the late 19th to the mid-20th century, with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. Large numbers of migrants from the Levant—modern-day Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine—arrived in Latin America. They were colloquially and often inaccurately referred to as *Turcos* ("Turks") because they traveled on Ottoman passports. While the majority of these immigrants were Maronite, Melkite, and Orthodox Christians, a significant minority were Sunni and Shia Muslims, as well as Druze (Karam, 2007). These communities established themselves primarily in countries like Brazil, Argentina, Colombia, and Chile. For decades, they maintained a low profile, focusing on economic integration. Their religious identity was often private, and high rates of intermarriage with the local Catholic population led to significant assimilation. They built the first mosques and Islamic centers in the region, such as the Mosque of Brazil in São Paulo (1929) and the King Fahd Islamic Cultural Center in Buenos Aires (2000), but they were largely self-contained ethnic enclaves rather than centers of proselytization (Pinto, 2015).

The third and current wave, beginning in the late 20th century and accelerating after 2001, is the wave of conversion. This phenomenon is distinct from the previous two. It is not tied to ethnicity or migration but to individual spiritual quests, facilitated by globalization, digital media, and a growing disillusionment with traditional religious institutions. These "new Muslims" are overwhelmingly native-born Latin Americans from diverse ethnic and social backgrounds who are actively choosing Islam (Montenegro, 2024). Worldwide Islam-spreading movements, such as Tablighi Jamaat, Ahmadiyya, and the Murabitun World Movement, also became global, reaching some Latin American countries (Montenegro, 2024). Balloffet (2020) has traced the influence of Arab migration in Peru. These studies show that Muslim communities have long been part of Latin America's social fabric, though often assimilated or overlooked.

2. The Dominant Religious Landscape

The context for this conversion is a religious landscape in profound flux. For centuries, Latin America was synonymous with Catholicism. The Church was a pillar of colonial and post-colonial society, deeply embedded in culture, politics, and daily life (Brouwer, Gifford, & Rose, 1996). However, its hegemony has been eroding for decades.

The most significant challenge has come from the explosive growth of Evangelical and Pentecostal Protestantism. Offering a charismatic, personal, and often socially conservative form of Christianity, these movements have attracted millions of former Catholics, particularly among the urban poor (Chesnut, 2003). This has created a more competitive and pluralistic religious marketplace, perhaps priming the population to consider religious alternatives beyond the Catholic-Protestant binary.

Simultaneously, secularization is advancing, especially among the educated middle and upper classes. There is a growing population of religiously unaffiliated individuals or those who identify as "spiritual but not religious," seeking meaning outside of traditional institutional structures. It is often from this group, as well as from disenchanting Catholics, that converts to Islam emerge, seeking a structured, monotheistic faith that they perceive as authentic and spiritually demanding (Gooren, 2010).

Finally, Indigenous and Afro-descendant religions, such as Candomblé and Umbanda in Brazil or Santería in Cuba, remain vital spiritual forces, sometimes syncretizing with Christianity. The interaction between Islam and these traditions, particularly among Afro-descendant and Indigenous converts, represents a fascinating and under-researched area of religious encounter and hybridization (Nishida, 1998).

3. Legal, Cultural, and Social Attitudes

Legally, most Latin American nations guarantee freedom of religion in their constitutions. In practice, however, a "Catholic cultural matrix" persists, shaping social norms, holidays, and public symbols (Parker, 1998). Religious minorities, including Jews, Buddhists, and now Muslims, must navigate this culturally Catholic space.

Social attitudes toward Muslims are complex and often contradictory. On one hand, the historical legacy of the Turkish immigrants is often viewed positively,

associated with successful entrepreneurship and cultural contributions. On the other hand, contemporary global geopolitics has imported a discourse of suspicion and Islamophobia, largely filtered through US and European media (Elmaleh, 2023). After 9/11, Muslims in Latin America—both immigrants and converts—faced increased scrutiny, with events like the 1994 AMIA bombing in Buenos Aires (falsely linked to local Muslim communities in the popular imagination) creating a lasting association between Islam and terrorism for some segments of the population. For converts, this means they are not just adopting a new faith; they are often perceived as adopting a politically charged, "foreign" identity, which can lead to social and familial friction. Women who adopt the hijab, in particular, become highly visible symbols of this perceived foreignness, bearing the brunt of public curiosity, misunderstanding, and occasionally, hostility (Valcárcel, 2022).

Conversion Narratives and Gender

The journey to Islam in Latin America is a deeply personal and socially embedded process. While each story is unique, recurring themes emerge from the growing body of qualitative research. Classic conversion theories, such as those proposed by Lofland and Stark (1965) with their process model (pre-disposing conditions, situational contingencies) and Lewis Rambo (1993) with his stage model (context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, consequences), provide useful frameworks for understanding these narratives. However, they must be adapted to the specificities of the Latin American context and, most crucially, refracted through the lens of gender.

1. Motivations for Conversion: Beyond a Monolithic Narrative

Converts are drawn to Islam for a variety of reasons that often overlap. Spiritual seeking is a primary driver. Many narrate a period of existential "crisis" or dissatisfaction with their previous faith (often a nominal or ritualistic Catholicism), describing it as spiritually empty or doctrinally incoherent, particularly regarding concepts such as the Trinity and the intercession of saints (Jáuregui, 2023). Islam, with its concept of *Tawhid* (the absolute oneness of God), is often perceived as a return to a pure, unadulterated monotheism that is both rational and spiritually profound.

Intellectual curiosity is another key factor. Some converts begin by reading the Qur'an out of academic interest or to better understand global politics, only to find themselves persuaded by its message. The intellectual heritage of Islamic civilization can also be a draw for those seeking a tradition with deep historical and philosophical roots (Chitwood, 2021).

Social and relational factors are also paramount. Inter marriage is a significant pathway, particularly for women who convert after meeting a Muslim partner. While some conversions may be initially for the sake of marital harmony, many women describe a subsequent process of genuine belief and personal adoption of the faith (Van Nieuwkerk, 2006). Beyond marriage, friendships and encounters with practicing Muslims can demystify the religion and provide a supportive social network—the "affective

bonds" that Lofland and Stark identified as crucial for commitment.

Montenegro (2022) examines the presence of Sufism in Latin America, taking into account the creation of institutionalized groups, which see themselves as part of Islam. These groups emerged in the 1980s, gathering a heterogeneous membership composed exclusively of converts, and their development was not consistent across countries.

Finally, for some, Islam offers a framework for social justice and a critique of Western consumerism, materialism, and imperialism. This is particularly resonant in a region with a long history of colonialism and political resistance. Islam is seen as a "decolonial" option, a spiritual path that is not tied to Euro-American hegemony (Montenegro, 2024).

2. The Role of Gender: Divergent Paths and Experiences

Gender profoundly shapes the motivations, processes, and consequences of conversion. Men and women tend to emphasize different aspects of the faith and face different social repercussions for their choices. The divergent thematic motivations that commonly appear in convert narratives are summarized in Table 1.

Women's Conversion Narratives: A dominant theme in the narratives of female converts is the search for dignity, respect, and a defined spiritual identity. Many women describe feeling objectified and devalued in a secular, hyper-sexualized culture, and critique the *machismo* prevalent in Latin American society (Valcárcel, 2022). For them, Islam offers a framework that they believe honors women for their intellect and piety rather than their physical appearance. The hijab, often seen by outsiders as a symbol of oppression, is frequently framed by converts as an act of liberation—liberation from the male gaze, from the pressures of consumer beauty standards, and as a public declaration of their identity as a Muslim woman (Somoza & Valcarcel, 2018). It is a way of controlling who has access to their body and reclaiming their agency.

Furthermore, many female converts are attracted to the clear rights and responsibilities outlined for women in Islamic jurisprudence, which they may see as an improvement over the ambiguous or culturally devalued roles previously available to them. They often emphasize the Qur'anic elevation of Mary (*Maryam*) and the historical importance of women like Khadijah and Aisha as sources of inspiration. The structured nature of family life in Islam, with its emphasis on mutual obligations, can also be appealing to those seeking stability in a society with high rates of single motherhood and paternal abandonment (Van Nieuwkerk, 2006). Their conversion is often a quest for a holistic spiritual and ethical system that re-orders their social and personal worlds.

Men's Conversion Narratives: Male converts often articulate their journey as a quest for discipline, structure, and a clear model of masculinity. Many describe a past life characterized by a lack of direction, indulging in alcohol, casual relationships, and a general sense of aimlessness—what they might call a life of *jahiliyyah* (ignorance) (Chitwood, 2021). Islam, with its five daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan, and prohibitions on intoxicants and extramarital sex, provides a rigorous framework for self-mastery and personal reform.

The concept of the *ummah* (global Muslim community) is also a powerful draw for men, offering a sense of brotherhood and solidarity that transcends national and ethnic lines. In local mosques and study circles, they find a supportive community of men who share their commitment and values. This can be particularly important for men who feel alienated from mainstream society. For some, conversion is also a way of reclaiming patriarchal authority they feel has been eroded by secular feminism, but framing it within a divine, ethical system of responsibility as head of the household rather than the arbitrary power of *machismo* (Jáuregui, 2023). Their conversion is often framed as a journey from chaos to order, from weakness to strength.

Table 1 serves as a foundational illustration of the gender-conversion-identity nexus, demonstrating that the very motivations for conversion are not gender-neutral but are profoundly shaped by, and in turn reshape, gendered expectations and social roles. It visually synthesizes how men and women navigate distinct social and spiritual landscapes, thereby embarking on different identity trajectories from the very outset of their journey.

Table 1: Summary of Gendered Motivations for Conversion to Islam in Latin America

Common Motivations for Female Converts
Quest for Dignity and Respect: Seeking a system that values women for piety and intellect over physical appearance.
Critique of <i>Machismo</i> and Hyper-sexualization: Reacting against local patriarchal norms and the objectification of women.
Spiritual Empowerment: Finding agency in practices like hijab, framed as liberation from the male gaze and consumerism.
Search for Structure and Stability: Attraction to clearly defined gender roles and family responsibilities in Islam.
Doctrinal Clarity: Finding rational appeal in the concept of pure monotheism (<i>Tawhid</i>).
Relational Pathway: Conversion through marriage or friendship with Muslims.
Common Motivations for Male Converts
Search for Discipline and Self-Mastery: Seeking a structured lifestyle to overcome past aimlessness (alcohol, etc.).
A New Model of Masculinity: Adopting a framework of spiritual responsibility, leadership, and ethical conduct.
Brotherhood and Community: Finding solidarity and belonging within the local and global <i>ummah</i> .
Break from Societal Norms: Rejecting secular materialism and perceived moral decay.
Intellectual and Spiritual Quest: Seeking a rational, structured, and historically deep religious tradition.
Social Justice Framework: Viewing Islam as a de-colonial alternative to Western hegemony.

3. Stories from the Field: Ethnographic Evidence

Ethnographic studies provide rich, textured accounts that illustrate these gendered dynamics. For example, Paulo Pinto's (2015) work in São Paulo, Brazil, details how female converts from Afro-Brazilian backgrounds find in Islam a way to assert a dignified identity that is not over-determined by the racial and sexual stereotypes they face in Brazilian society. Valcárcel (2022) highlights how Argentine women consciously use the hijab as a tool for social and spiritual negotiation, consciously crafting a public identity that challenges both Islamophobic and secular feminist assumptions.

Similarly, studies on the indigenous Tzotzil Maya community in Chiapas, Mexico, show a collective conversion in which Islam provided a new social and religious structure after they were expelled from their home communities for first converting to Protestantism (Galvan, 2017). Within this context, gender roles were redefined along Islamic lines, offering a complete alternative to both their former syncretic Catholic-Maya traditions and the dominant Mexican mestizo culture. These "stories from the field" are essential for moving beyond generalizations and appreciating the lived, embodied, and deeply gendered reality of becoming Muslim in Latin America.

Identity Construction

Conversion is not an endpoint but the beginning of a lifelong process of identity construction. For Latin American Muslims, this process involves a complex negotiation between their new religious commitment and their pre-existing cultural, national, and ethnic identities. It is a dynamic interplay of adopting, adapting, and sometimes rejecting elements of both global Islamic norms and local Latin American cultures.

1. Negotiating a "Latino/a Muslim" Identity

The central challenge for converts is to answer the question: "How can I be fully Muslim *and* fully Latino/a?" This is not a simple task, as dominant narratives from both sides often present the two identities as mutually exclusive. Mainstream Latin American society may view Islam as an alien, "Arab" religion, while some orthodox strains of global Islam may demand a complete cultural shedding, viewing local traditions as *bid'ah* (un-Islamic innovation).

Most converts, however, opt for a middle path of synthesis and hybridization (Elmaleh, 2023). They actively work to "Latinize" Islam. This can be seen in the development of Spanish and Portuguese-language Islamic literature, lectures (*khutbahs*), and websites. It is also evident in cultural practices. For instance, the strong emphasis on family and community in Latin American culture resonates well with Islamic values, leading to the creation of vibrant, close-knit mosque communities that function as extended families. Converts might celebrate Eid with an *asado* (barbecue) in Argentina or a *feijoada* (bean stew) in Brazil, blending religious observance with national culinary traditions.

This negotiation also involves a critical re-evaluation of their own culture. Converts often become more discerning about which aspects of their heritage they wish to retain. They might reject the association of social life with alcohol or the hypersexualization of carnival, while embracing the warmth of interpersonal relationships, the love of music (albeit often shifting to Islamic *nasheeds*), and strong family ties (Jáuregui, 2023). The goal is not to become a "bad copy" of an Arab or Pakistani Muslim, but to become an authentic Colombian, Mexican, or Brazilian Muslim.

This process of 'double translation' is not merely cultural but deeply political, echoing decolonial theories that emphasize the agency of subaltern groups in redefining knowledge and identity (Mignolo, 2000). Converts actively decolonize their religious landscape by indigenizing Islam, thus challenging the Eurocentric Christian hegemony that has shaped Latin America since colonization.

2. Intersectionality: Gender, Race, and Indigeneity

A purely religious lens is insufficient to understand identity construction; an intersectional approach is essential. The experience of being a Muslim convert is profoundly shaped by one's position within the social hierarchies of race, class, and ethnicity that structure Latin American societies.

- a. **Gender:** As discussed, gender is a primary axis. A woman's decision to wear the hijab immediately makes her Muslim identity public and embodied in a way that is not required for a man. She becomes an ambassador of the faith, whether she wants to or not, and her body becomes a site of public debate. Men's identity negotiation is often less visible and more focused on community roles and personal conduct (Somoza & Valcarcel, 2018).
- b. **Race/Ethnicity:** The meaning of becoming Muslim differs for a white-passing mestizo in Santiago, an Afro-descendant in Salvador, Brazil, and an indigenous woman in Chiapas, Mexico. For some Afro-descendants, embracing Islam is an act of reclaiming a pre-colonial African heritage, connecting with the history of West African Muslim empires and the enslaved Muslims who were brought to the Americas (Nishida, 1998). It is a way of bypassing a Eurocentric Christian identity imposed through slavery. For indigenous converts, like the Tzotzil Maya, Islam can be a framework for asserting a unique identity separate from both the dominant mestizo state and their former religious communities. For mestizo converts, the process may be more focused on a purely spiritual re-orientation, but they too must navigate the racialized assumption that Islam is a religion for "Arabs."
- c. **Class:** Social class also plays a role. Middle-class, university-educated converts may have greater access to intellectual resources (books, online lectures) and may approach Islam through a more textual, modernist lens. They

might be more connected to global Islamic discourses through travel and the internet. Working-class converts may have stronger ties to a local mosque community, with their religious practice being more communal and ritualistic. Class position also affects the social cost of conversion; a financially independent individual may be better able to withstand family opposition than an economically dependent one.

3. The Role of Diaspora and Digital Media

Identity construction is not solely a local affair; it is deeply influenced by connections to the global *ummah*. Two forces are critical here: diaspora communities and digital media.

The established immigrant Muslim communities (Lebanese, Syrian, etc.) often serve as the initial point of contact for converts. They run the oldest mosques and provide the initial infrastructure for learning about the faith. However, the relationship between converts and "heritage" Muslims can be complex. Converts sometimes feel that these communities are too focused on their own ethnic culture rather than a "pure" Islam, leading to tensions and occasionally the formation of separate, convert-led organizations (Pinto, 2015). These heritage communities, in turn, can sometimes be wary of the zeal of new converts.

The internet and digital media have been revolutionary for Latin American converts. For an individual in a small town with no physical mosque, the internet provides a "digital *ummah*." It offers access to a limitless supply of information (and misinformation): Qur'an translations, lectures by international scholars, online classes, and forums. Social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram enable converts to connect with one another across Latin America and the globe, creating virtual communities of support (Hammad, 2022). This digital connection helps them feel part of a global movement, reinforcing their new identity and providing guidance on how to practice Islam in a non-Muslim environment. It allows for the rapid circulation of ideas, fashions (e.g., "modest fashion" bloggers), and religious interpretations, directly linking a convert in Peru to debates and trends in Malaysia, the UK, or the Middle East.

Comparative Perspectives

Situating the Latin American Muslim experience in a comparative context enriches our understanding of its unique characteristics and its connections to broader global patterns. This involves comparing different groups within Latin America as well as looking outward to other Muslim-minority and Muslim-majority contexts.

1. Converts vs. Immigrant Muslims vs. Born-Into Families

Within Latin America, the experience of being Muslim varies significantly based on one's path to the religion. These distinct experiences are compared and contrasted in Table 2.

- a. **Converts:** As has been the focus of this review, converts face the unique challenge of biographical reconstruction. Their journey is marked by a definitive "before and after." They must actively learn the faith from scratch, often as adults, and must constantly negotiate their new identity with their non-Muslim families of origin and social networks. They tend to be more textual and "by the book" in their approach, as they lack the inherited cultural knowledge of the faith. Their primary challenge is authenticity and social integration (Jáuregui, 2023).
- b. **Immigrant Muslims and their Descendants ("Heritage Muslims"):** For the descendants of the early 20th-century Levantine migrations, Islam is often an inherited identity, intertwined with family history and ethnic culture. For many, religious practice may be less intense and more cultural—fasting during Ramadan or celebrating Eid might be more a matter of family tradition than deep theological conviction. They do not face the trauma of family rejection. Their main challenge is often preserving their religious and cultural identity amid powerful pressures to assimilate, particularly through intermarriage (Karam, 2007). In recent decades, however, there has been a phenomenon of "re-Islamization" among some of these heritage communities, as younger generations, influenced by global Islamic revivalism and the presence of new converts, seek a more textually-grounded and observant form of their ancestral faith.
- c. **Born-Into Families (of Converts):** A new generation is now emerging: the children of converts. This group presents a new set of dynamics. They are born into the faith in a non-Muslim context, navigating a hybrid reality from childhood. They attend secular schools while receiving religious instruction at home or at the mosque. Their experience is different from both their convert parents and from heritage Muslims. They do not have the convert's zeal but also lack the direct connection to a "Muslim homeland" that heritage communities have. Research on this "second generation" is a crucial future direction for understanding the long-term sustainability and evolution of these new communities.

Table 2 operationalizes the nexus framework to reveal critical comparative distinctions. It moves beyond simple categorization to show how the interrelationship of conversion pathway, gender, and social context produces vastly different challenges and forms of identity negotiation across the spectrum of Latin American Muslim experiences. This comparative analysis is only possible through an integrated, nexus-based approach.

Table 2: Comparative Framework of Muslim Groups in Latin America

Attribute	Converts	Heritage Muslims	Second-Generation (of Converts)
Path to Islam	Biographical rupture; conscious choice as adolescent/adult.	Inherited identity; intertwined with ethnicity and family history.	Born into the faith; socialized from birth in a minority context.
Primary Challenge	Social integration, family rejection, gaining authenticity.	Cultural/religious preservation against assimilation.	Negotiating dual identities (home vs. school); bridging parental and societal norms.
Religious Approach	Often textual, "by the book," high initial zeal.	Often cultural, ritualistic, practice can be less intense.	Varies; can be more or less observant than parents.
Family Dynamics	Potential for high conflict and rejection from family of origin.	Strong family cohesion around shared ethnoreligious identity.	Navigating the expectations of convert parents within a non-Muslim society.
Cultural Stance	Actively negotiate/synthesize Latin and Islamic cultures.	Tend to conflate ethnic (e.g., Arab) culture with Islam.	Natural hybridization of Latin and Islamic cultures from childhood.

2. Indigenous vs. Mestizo vs. Afro-Descendant Converts

As highlighted by the intersectional analysis, comparing the experiences of converts from different racial and ethnic backgrounds within Latin America is crucial.

- a. **Mestizo Converts:** For the majority of the mestizo population, conversion is primarily a religious and spiritual reorientation. Their main struggle is often with their immediate family's Catholic identity and the national cultural narrative.
- b. **Indigenous Converts:** For groups like the Tzotzil Maya in Mexico, conversion is a collective act of social and political significance. Islam becomes a tool for creating a distinct community identity, often in response to prior persecution or marginalization. Their practice of Islam may incorporate pre-existing

communal values and social structures, representing a unique form of religious syncretism (Galvan, 2017).

- c. **Afro-Descendant Converts:** In countries like Brazil and Colombia, conversion to Islam for Afro-descendants can be a powerful statement of anti-racism and decolonization. It is a way of connecting to an African past that predates slavery and Christianity, and a way to challenge the enduring racial hierarchies of the present (Nishida, 1998; Montenegro, 2024). This path often involves a conscious engagement with the history of African Islamic scholarship and resistance.

3. Comparison with Muslim Experiences in Pakistan/South Asia

A brief comparison with a Muslim-majority context like Pakistan offers a stark contrast that illuminates the specific challenges of being a Muslim in Latin America.

- a. **Social Fabric and State Power:** In Pakistan, Islam is the state religion and permeates every aspect of the social, legal, and political fabric. Religious identity is a given, a default. The challenges are not about finding halal food or a place to pray, but about navigating sectarian differences (Sunni-Shia), varying interpretations of Islamic law, and the role of religion in governance. In Latin America, Islam is a counter-cultural identity. The state is secular or culturally Catholic, and the social environment is non-Muslim. The challenge is one of existence, visibility, and basic practice in a society that does not accommodate Muslim needs.
- b. **Gender and Social Norms:** While gender norms are a site of debate in both contexts, the nature of the debate differs. In Pakistan, discussions about women's roles, dress, and rights occur within an established Islamic framework, contested by conservative, liberal, and feminist Muslim voices. In Latin America, the primary gender challenge for a Muslim woman is external: justifying her choice to a non-Muslim society that may view her as oppressed or foreign. Her struggle is for the right to *be* visibly Muslim. For a woman in Pakistan, the struggle is often for her rights *within* an Islamic society. This comparison highlights how the minority/majority context fundamentally re-frames the experience of religious identity and gender.

This study of how being Latino and Muslim in America becomes mediated is a cautionary analysis of how so-called minority groups are made in the United States and how they become fragmented and nevertheless struggle for recognition in a 'diverse and fluid' landscape (Morales, 2018).

Challenges, Discrimination, and Social Integration

Embracing Islam in Latin America is not a seamless process. Converts face a host of challenges ranging from intimate family conflicts to broader social prejudices, as well as the practical difficulties of living a devout life in a non-Muslim environment.

1. Social Stigma and Family Rejection

For most converts, the most immediate and painful challenge comes from their own families. In the familistic cultures of Latin America, where family loyalty is paramount and religious identity is deeply tied to family tradition (usually Catholic), the decision to convert can be perceived as an act of betrayal or rejection. Families may react with confusion, sadness, anger, and fear. They may fear their child is joining a "cult" or a terrorist group, anxieties often fueled by sensationalist media portrayals of Islam.

Parents may grieve the loss of shared religious traditions—celebrating Christmas, baptizing grandchildren. This can lead to intense emotional conflict, strained relationships, and in some cases, complete ostracism (Jáuregui, 2023). Converts must constantly explain and justify their new beliefs, facing accusations of being brainwashed or of rejecting their own culture. For young or financially dependent converts, family opposition can create immense pressure and emotional distress. Successfully navigating these family dynamics is often the single most important factor in a convert's long-term well-being and stability in their new faith.

Beyond the family, converts may face stigma in their social circles and workplaces. Friends may drift away if they don't understand the new lifestyle choices (e.g., not drinking alcohol or not attending certain social events). Employers may be suspicious or discriminatory, particularly towards women who wear the hijab.

2. Prejudice and Imported Islamophobia

While Latin America does not have the same history of direct conflict with Muslim countries as Europe or the United States, it has imported a significant amount of global Islamophobic discourse. Media outlets often reproduce stereotypes from Hollywood and international news networks, associating Islam with violence, terrorism, and the oppression of women (Elmaleh, 2023).

This leads to public prejudice that can range from microaggressions—stares, intrusive questions, "jokes"—to overt hostility. The term "terrorist" can be casually thrown at male converts, especially if they grow a beard. Women in hijab are particularly vulnerable to public harassment, being told to "go back to their country," even though they are native-born citizens. This external prejudice forces converts into a constant state of defense and explanation, which can be exhausting.

3. Practical Challenges of Religious Practice

Living as a devout Muslim requires a supportive infrastructure that is largely absent in most of Latin America.

- a. **Dietary Needs:** Finding *halal* (permissible according to Islamic law) meat is a major challenge. In large cities like São Paulo or Buenos Aires, there may be a few certified butchers, but outside of these hubs, it is nearly impossible. Many converts either become vegetarians, order meat from afar at great expense, or adopt the opinion that meat slaughtered by Christians and Jews (*Ahl al-Kitab*) is permissible.
- b. **Religious Space:** Mosques are few and far between. While major capitals have them, a convert living in a provincial city may be hundreds of miles from the nearest one. This makes participation in congregational Friday prayers, Ramadan activities, and Islamic education difficult. Many communities are forced to rent apartments or storefronts to use as prayer spaces (*musallas*).
- c. **Religious Education:** Access to qualified religious instruction in Spanish or Portuguese is limited. Converts often rely on the internet, which can expose them to a wide range of interpretations, including extremist ones. The lack of locally trained, culturally fluent scholars is a significant challenge for the long-term development of these communities.

4. Gender-Specific Challenges

Women converts arguably face the most acute and visible challenges.

- a. **The Hijab:** As previously noted, the hijab makes a woman's Muslim identity immediately public. While many women embrace it as an act of empowerment, it also makes them a lightning rod for prejudice. They face discrimination in the job market, harassment on the street, and opposition from their families, who may see it as a foreign, oppressive symbol. In hot, tropical climates, wearing the hijab also presents a practical physical challenge.
- b. **Public Roles and Gender Segregation:** Converts enter a global religion where debates about gender roles are intense. They must navigate differing opinions on issues like gender segregation in mosques, women's leadership, and female participation in public life. Some mosques, influenced by conservative transnational movements, may promote rigid gender segregation that can feel alienating to women accustomed to the more integrated social life of Latin America (Ruspini et al, 2018). Conversely, convert women are often at the forefront of creating new spaces for female activism and education, organizing their own study circles, charity events, and online forums.
- c. **Marriage:** Finding a suitable Muslim spouse can be extremely difficult. The number of practicing Muslims is small, creating a limited marriage market. Convert women may be reluctant to marry men from immigrant backgrounds

due to cultural differences, while convert men may struggle to find a partner willing to embrace their new faith. This social reality is a major source of concern and anxiety for many converts.

Empirical Evidence

The scholarly understanding of Muslim converts in Latin America is built primarily on qualitative, ethnographic research. This body of work, while rich in detail and nuance, is geographically concentrated.

1. Mapping the Existing Literature: A Comprehensive Review

A comprehensive review of the scholarship on Islam in Latin America reveals a growing but uneven body of work. While early studies focused on immigrant communities (Karam, 2007; Lesser, 1999), recent research has expanded to include convert experiences, though with geographic and thematic biases. Table 3 provides an overview of key studies, categorized by country, methodology, primary themes, and contributions. This mapping illustrates the concentration of research in countries such as Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico and highlights understudied regions, such as Central America and the Andean nations. It also shows the predominance of qualitative methods and the emerging attention to gender, identity, and conversion, though often in isolation. Notably, gaps persist in quantitative, longitudinal, and comparative studies, as well as in the integration of theoretical frameworks from decolonial and conversion studies.

Table 3: Mapping Key Literature on Islam in Latin America

Country/Region	Key Scholars & Works	Methodology	Primary Themes	Key Contributions	Gaps/Notes
Brazil	Pinto (2015); Castro (2013); Biondi (2010);	Ethnography, interviews	Conversion identity, gender, race	Exploration of Afro-Brazilian converts, gender roles, and identity synthesis	Lack of large-scale surveys; need for studies on second-generation
Argentina	Montenegro (2015); Valcárcel (2022); Montenegro (2024)	Ethnography, life histories	Gender, veiling, identity negotiation	Analysis of female agency, hijab as social negotiation, community formation	Limited focus on male converts; urban bias

Mexico	Cañas (2006); Capovilla & Valcárcel (2024)	Ethnography, historical analysis	Indigenous conversion (Tzotzil), identity, politics	Study of collective conversion, decolonial identity, religious hybridity	Under-studied mestizo communities; lack of longitudinal data
Chile	Boos (2017)	Case studies, surveys	Community formation, integration	Documentation of growing convert communities in Santiago	Scant research; primarily descriptive
Peru	Balloffet (2020)	Historical, archival	Migration, community history	Analysis of early Arab migration and contemporary practices	Limited studies on converts
Cuba	Sanneh (2015); Diouf (2013)	Historical, ethnographic	Afro-Cuban Muslims, transnational ties	Exploration of Islam among Afro-descendants and religious revival	Isolation and unique political context under-studied
Paraguay	Huner (2016)	Ethnographic	Indigenous (Guarani) conversion	Study of Islam in indigenous contexts, cultural translation	Rare case of indigenous Islam in Latin America
Regional	Elmaleh (2023); Chitwood (2017); Hammad (2022)	Comparative, digital ethnography	Identity, media, globalization	Analysis of "double translation," digital ummah, comparative frameworks	Need for more cross-country comparisons

This table underscores the need for a synthesized framework that connects gender, conversion, and identity, as proposed in this review. It also reveals the absence of research in countries like Bolivia, Uruguay, and Central America, and the need to engage with theoretical frameworks such as decolonial theory (Mignolo, 2000; Quijano, 2000) and conversion theory (Snow & Machalek, 1984; Stromberg, 1993).

2. Key Qualitative Studies: Interviews and Life Histories

The most valuable insights into the convert experience come from in-depth ethnographic fieldwork involving participant observation, life history interviews, and

narrative analysis. This research has concentrated on a few key countries:

- a. **Brazil:** Brazil has the largest and most-studied Muslim population in the region. The work of Paulo Gabriel Hilu Pinto (2015) is seminal. His ethnography of Muslims in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro explores the construction of a Brazilian Muslim identity, the role of Islam in challenging racial hierarchies for Afro-Brazilians, and the tensions between converts and heritage communities. Other scholars have examined specific communities and topics, such as the role of Sufism or the experiences of women converts.
- b. **Argentina:** With its significant Levantine heritage community, Argentina has also been a focus of research. Valcárcel (2022) has conducted important research on gender, focusing on how Argentine women navigate faith, feminism, and national identity through practices like veiling. Montenegro (2024) has provided broader analyses of the institutionalization of Islam in the country.
- c. **Mexico:** The Mexican case is unique due to the presence of distinct convert communities, including the indigenous Tzotzil Maya group in Chiapas, studied extensively by anthropologists like Cañas (2006), and a community of Spanish Sufi converts. These studies highlight the diverse ways in which Islam is being "indigenized" across different cultural contexts.
- d. **Colombia and Chile:** Emerging research is beginning to document the smaller but growing communities in countries like Colombia (Chitwood, 2021) and Chile (Somoza & Valcarcel, 2018), often focusing on the initial stages of community formation and the specific challenges faced in those national contexts.

These studies consistently highlight themes of spiritual seeking, identity negotiation, gender dynamics, and integration challenges, offering a granular, bottom-up perspective on the phenomenon (Table 4).

3. Quantitative Surveys

There is a near-total absence of large-scale, reliable quantitative data on Muslims in Latin America. The numbers cited are typically estimates based on mosque membership rolls, community leader reports, and national censuses that often do not include "Islam" as a category or undercount small minorities. We lack robust data on:

- a. The precise number of converts versus heritage Muslims.
- b. Demographic profiles (age, gender, education, socioeconomic status).
- c. Geographic distribution.
- d. Rates of conversion and disaffiliation.

This data gap makes it difficult to generalize from qualitative findings and to understand the broader trends shaping these communities. Conducting a comprehensive, multi-country survey is perhaps the single most pressing need for advancing the field.

4. Media Studies and Digital Narratives

A third stream of evidence comes from the analysis of media representations and digital self-representations. Studies of how mainstream Latin American media portrays Islam and Muslims have generally found a reliance on negative stereotypes imported from global news cycles (Elmaleh, 2023). This research is crucial for understanding the context of prejudice that converts face.

Conversely, the digital output of converts themselves is a rich source of data. Analyzing the content of Spanish- and Portuguese-language Islamic websites, YouTube channels, Facebook groups, and Instagram accounts provides direct insight into how converts construct and perform their identity (Hammad, 2022). These digital narratives showcase the theological influences they draw upon, the community issues they debate, and the ways they present a "Latino Islam" to both internal and external audiences. This digital ethnography represents a rapidly growing and valuable methodological approach.

Gaps and Future Research Directions

While the existing scholarship provides a solid foundation, the field is still in its infancy. Numerous gaps and opportunities for future research remain, pointing the way toward a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of Islam in Latin America.

The analytical focus of this review—the gender-conversion-identity nexus—has been deliberate. It addresses the most fundamental question: who are the Latin American Muslims, and how do they become who they are? Once this micro-sociological foundation is firmly established through further research, the field will be poised to productively branch out into critical, macro-level areas. The internal dynamics of identity formation, which we have explored, provide the essential groundwork for future research into external engagements. Promising avenues emerging directly from this foundation include the political economy of Muslim communities, their role in international relations and diplomacy, their approaches to ecological ethics in the context of Latin America's environmental crises, and the dynamics of migration and trade that connect them to the global ummah. A firm grasp on the core identity-forming processes is the necessary prerequisite for these next logical steps in the field's development.

- a. **Under-Studied Countries and Regions:** Research is heavily concentrated in Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico. We know very little about the emerging convert communities in Central America (e.g., Panama, Costa Rica), the Andean nations (Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia), the Caribbean, or even major countries like Venezuela. Sufism, the Islamic tradition in which the esoteric is most often found, has been present in Latin America since at least the 1920s but has been

studied very unevenly (Sedgwick, 2018). Exploring how Islam takes root in these different cultural and political contexts is essential. What does it mean to be a Muslim convert in a country with a large indigenous population like Bolivia, or in the unique political environment of Cuba?

Scholars like Huner (2016) on Guarani Muslims in Paraguay and Balloffet (2020) on Peru have begun to explore these areas, but sustained research is needed. Future studies should also consider the theoretical implications of these cases for understanding global Islam, drawing on decolonial and intersectional frameworks.

- b. **The Need for Large-Scale Surveys:** As mentioned, the lack of quantitative data is a major handicap. Collaborative, cross-national survey research is needed to establish a reliable demographic baseline. Such a project would allow researchers to test hypotheses derived from qualitative studies on a larger scale and to conduct statistical analyses of factors associated with conversion.
- c. **Deepening the Gender Dimension:** While gender is often addressed, the analysis can sometimes be superficial or disproportionately focused on the hijab. Future research should move beyond this. We need more studies on Muslim masculinities in Latin America. How do men redefine their roles as husbands, fathers, and community members? We also need more research on women's intellectual and leadership roles within these communities. How are women contributing to the production of Islamic knowledge in Spanish and Portuguese? What forms of female authority and activism are emerging? Additionally, research into the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals who convert to or are born into Islam in Latin America is a complete lacuna. Gender aspects are sidelined in the present historiography, with the exception of the anthropologists Gisele Fonseca Chagas and Solange R. (Montenegro, 2024).
- d. **The Need for Longitudinal Studies:** Conversion and identity formation are processes, not static events. The vast majority of current research is cross-sectional, offering a snapshot of a given moment in time. Longitudinal studies that follow a cohort of converts over many years—or even decades—would be invaluable. How does a convert's identity and practice evolve over their life course? How do they transmit the faith to their children? How do communities change and institutionalize over time? What is the rate of disaffiliation, and why do some converts leave the faith?

Longitudinal research would allow us to apply theories of conversion and identity change over time, such as Snow and Machalek's (1984) model, to track how converts' narratives and practices evolve.

- e. **Second-Generation and Intra-Community Dynamics:** As the children of converts come of age, research on this "born-Muslim" second generation will become critical. How do their experiences and identities differ from those of their parents? Furthermore, more research is needed on the internal dynamics of Muslim communities, including the evolving relationships between converts and heritage Muslims, as well as sectarian dynamics (Sunni-Shia) as they manifest in the Latin American context.

Table 4: Theoretical Frameworks Informing the Study of Latin American Muslim Conversion.

Theoretical Pillar	Core Concept & Key Scholar(s)	Application to Latin American Muslim Converts	Example Integration into Manuscript
Inter-sectionality	Crenshaw (1989): Rejects single-axis analysis of discrimination; examines how intersecting power systems (race, gender, class) create unique experiences of privilege and oppression.	Re-frames Section 4.2. Converts' experiences cannot be understood by religion alone; their social location is shaped by the <i>simultaneous</i> interaction of their new faith with pre-existing Latin American structures of race, class, Indigeneity, and gender.	"An intersectional analysis (Crenshaw, 1989) reveals that the experience of a mestizo male convert in Santiago is fundamentally distinct from that of an Afro-descendant woman in Salvador or an Indigenous Tzotzil convert in Chiapas, as each navigates a unique nexus of power relations."
Conversion as a Decolonial Gesture	Mignolo (2000); Quijano (2000): "Coloniality of power" describes the enduring racial and cultural hierarchy established by	Frames conversion as a rejection of the "coloniality of religion." It is a conscious turn away from the hegemony of Western Christianity imposed during colonization, seeking a spiritual framework perceived as authentic and	"The 'quest for pure monotheism' can be theorized as a decolonial gesture (Mignolo, 2000; Quijano, 2000)—a deliberate disengagement from the Catholic cultural matrix that remains a pillar of the

	colonialism, with European Christianity at its apex.	external to the Euro-centric order.	coloniality of power in Latin America."
Gender as a Site of Negotiation	Applied Intersectionality: Gender is not a passive identity but a primary arena where global and local power structures clash and are re-negotiated.	The "machismo" of Latin American patriarchy and the gendered norms of global Islam are not simply swapped. Converts actively navigate, resist, and blend these systems, making gender a dynamic site of negotiation for new identities and agencies.	"For female converts, adopting the hijab becomes a complex negotiation: a potential resistance to local <i>machismo</i> and hyper-sexualization, while also engaging with new religious norms, thereby creating a distinct form of gendered agency."
Identity as Cultural Translation & Hybridity	Bhabha (1994); Canclini (2005): "Hybridity" describes the new, emergent forms created when cultures meet. Identity is a process of "translating" between cultural systems.	The "double translation" process is an act of cultural translation that produces hybrid identities. Converts are not merely mixing cultures but creating a new, emergent category—"Latino Islam"—that challenges the purity of both Latin American and global Islamic essentialisms.	"The 'double translation' converts perform is an act of cultural translation (Bhabha, 1994) that results in hybridity (Canclini, 2005). This process forges a 'Latino Islam' that is neither an imported replica nor a mere local custom, but a new, authentic synthesis that challenges essentialist definitions on all sides."

Implications

The study of Muslim converts in Latin America has implications that extend far beyond the confines of religious studies or area studies. Its findings are relevant to broader discussions about religious pluralism, social integration, and the future of global Islam.

- a. **For Religious Communities and Interfaith Relations:** The growth of an indigenous Muslim population challenges the traditional religious players in

Latin America, particularly the Catholic Church and the rising Evangelical movements, to engage in more substantive interfaith dialogue. It pushes these institutions to move beyond viewing Islam as a "foreign" religion and to recognize Muslims as fellow citizens. For the Muslim communities themselves, understanding the dynamics of conversion and integration is crucial for developing effective educational programs (*da'wah*) and for building sustainable, healthy communities that can meet the unique needs of local converts.

- b. **For Policy: Religious Freedom and Minority Rights:** As Muslim communities become more visible, they will increasingly interact with the state. This raises policy questions related to religious freedom and minority rights. Will states accommodate requests for halal food in public institutions (prisons, schools), recognition of Islamic holidays, or the right to wear the hijab on official ID photos or in certain professions? Research on Muslim experiences can inform policy debates and help ensure that legal frameworks for religious freedom are applied equitably across all communities. It can also help policymakers develop effective strategies for social integration that combat prejudice and promote a truly pluralistic society.
- c. **For Understanding Global Muslim Identities and Diasporas:** The Latin American case is a vital piece of the puzzle of 21st-century global Islam. It demonstrates that Islam is not a monolithic entity defined solely by the Middle East or South Asia. Instead, it is a dynamic, global faith that is constantly being interpreted and expressed in new cultural idioms. Studying how a "Latino Islam" is being forged—blending global Islamic norms with local cultural sensibilities—provides a powerful case study of religious indigenization. It contributes to a more decentralized and pluralistic understanding of the Muslim *ummah*, highlighting the agency of believers on the "periphery" in shaping the faith's future.

Conclusion

While numerically small, conversion to Islam in Latin America represents a significant shift in the region's religious and cultural landscape. This review has synthesized the existing body of knowledge to demonstrate that becoming and being a Muslim in this context is a complex, challenging, and deeply creative process. It is a journey profoundly shaped by the intersection of gender, ethnicity, class, and national culture.

We have seen that the pathways to Islam are gendered: women often seek a framework for dignity and liberation from cultural sexism, while men often seek discipline and a model for a reformed masculinity. Upon converting, they embark on a

sophisticated project of identity construction, negotiating between their Latin American heritage and their newfound global faith to forge hybrid identities that are both authentic to their experience and true to their religious convictions. This process is not without its difficulties. Converts face significant hurdles, from painful family rejection and social stigma to the practical challenges of religious observance in a non-accommodating environment, with women in hijab often bearing the brunt of public prejudice.

The study of these communities is a vibrant and growing field, but it also has significant gaps. Future scholarship must broaden its geographic scope, employ a wider range of methodologies, including quantitative and longitudinal studies, and deepen its analysis of gender beyond the initial focus on the veil.

Ultimately, the story of Latin American Muslims is a testament to the fluidity and adaptability of both religion and identity. These converts are not passive recipients of a foreign faith; they are active agents who translate, interpret, and embody Islam in ways that are meaningful in their own lives and contexts. Their experiences challenge us to rethink the boundaries of the Muslim world and to appreciate the diverse ways in which individuals find meaning in a globalized era. A continued and deepened scholarly engagement with their stories is not just an academic exercise; it is essential for understanding the evolving tapestry of global religion and the intricate ways in which gender and faith are negotiated on Islam's newest frontier.***

List of Abbreviations

Not applicable

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Not applicable

Consent for Publication

Not applicable

Availability of Data and Material

All data synthesized in this review are derived from publicly available, peer-reviewed literature cited in the References section. No new primary data were generated or analyzed.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used AI-based tools to improve grammar, readability, and linguistic clarity. After utilizing these tools, the authors thoroughly reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the final version of the publication.

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