

Islam in Colombia: Between Assimilation and Exclusion¹

The Colombian religious scene is complex because of the existence of a dominant culture and of minorities that, one way or the other, have resisted assimilation. Currently, emergent religious phenomena, many of foreign influence, have successfully entered and settled in various cities. This way, new Pentecostal movements have developed side by side to oriental spiritualities and other reformulations of ancestral practices.

The presence of Muslim communities has been outlining itself, especially within the last 40 years, as one of the religious realities best consolidated in terms of infrastructure and formation of its members. The current presence of Muslims and the emergence of their first communities are connected to the arrival of Arab immigrants, who have arrived to Colombian territory at different intervals since the end of the nineteenth century.

Among these, the following migratory stages can be distinguished after the political conflicts in Middle East countries: violence of Muslims against Christians initiated by the falling Ottoman Empire that pushed minorities Arabs to American lands; Palestine migrations (specially after the second world war and after the creation of the Israel State en 1948) and the Lebanese migrations in the sixties with the beginning of the hostilities in that country.

Muslims that arrived initially in minor numbers did not find favorable conditions to practice their religion. For this reason, the majority limited themselves to carry out their faith in a private manner, and when the conditions permitted it. Their stay in Colombia was seen as transitory while they achieved the sufficient means to re-establish themselves comfortably in the region of origin. The transmission of religious values and cultural transitions to their descendants turned out difficult because of the influence of the larger society, the lack of religious guides (leaders) and the inexistence of text or other study materials.

The last years have brought the consolidation of the Muslim presence, which aside from appearing in a greater number of intermediate cities and making more homogeneous its population, it has achieved a greater visibility in multimedia communications and before the rest of the Colombian society. Although there has been an effort by Muslim groups to show themselves before the national opinion, it is also true that the interest for Islam has increased as a result of the events of 2001.

¹ Summary of original full-text article by Diego Castellanos entitled "Islam en Colombia: Entre la Asimilación y la Exclusión". This article was presented as collaboration in the *Islam in Latin America* project at Florida International University.

Conversion

The increase in the Muslim community was attributed to immigration; recently it is attributed to conversion. Only in the instances where there was an institutional space, with places for prayers, the number of converts augmented. Although this phenomenon began in the eighties, a significant growth in conversion phenomena took place during the last years of the previous decades and on. Some of the reasons for conversion are the internal strong logic that Muslim religiousness offers constructed along the belief in one God and trust in the divine justice, the inexistence of dogmas that are too complicated to assimilate, the strong feeling of community that its members develop and the universal character that transcends ethnic, racial or national aspects.

It's possible to classify in three groups the Colombian Muslim communities in terms of its size, historical process and current development status. The most important are those in Maicao, Bogotá, Buenaventura and San Andrés; followed by those in Barranquilla, Bucaramanga, Cartagena, Valledupar Cali and Medellín; and finally those in Pasto, Santa Marta, Pereira, Armenia and Villavicencio. These cannot be understood as fixed or static communities. On the contrary, once the first stage of settlement or adjustment has occurred, Muslims have seen how many events seem to be in favor of the growth of their communities.

Each one of the communities have created their own Islamic institutions, essentially mosques, schools and Islamic centers, in the cities in which they have been settling in, even monopolizing the religious discourse in such a way that possible conversions of the local population are not an objective in themselves, but the perpetuation of ethnic-religious values to the extreme that religious leaders hired in each of the centers, always from the University of al – Azhar, almost never have the need (or actually do) dominate the Spanish language.

The conversions augmented, particularly since 2001, when the notoriety of Islam in the media and its ever more recurrent boarding in the academic sphere led it to increase the interest of a sector of the population from the capital that for diverse reasons resolved to adopt Islam as a belief.

Bogotá

The origins of Islam in the city go back to the start of the Arab migration from the Middle East. In the 1920s, some Muslims of Palestine origin settled in the center of the city in hopes of better life conditions and to reunite some capital with which they could return to their native land, generally by commerce. Initially their life was difficult; they came to the country without knowing the language or the customs, but they learned to manage quickly. The lack of specialized material led these first forms of Islamic religious life in the capital to debilitate until slowly disappearing altogether.

Still, the constant flux of immigrants since the 50s, due to the beginning of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the preexistence of previously settled relatives, facilitated the process of adaptation and settlement. Since the increase of immigrants in the sixties, a resurgence of the Muslim life for the capital was possible. At the same time, Islam in Colombia benefited from its image as a religion that generates identity and moral values against the failure of many of the national paternalists' regimes that had not fulfilled the expectations of democracy and development of its populations, frequently turning into dictatorial regimes.

In the nineties, Muslims of other regions of the world such as Africa, Central Asia of the Far East, started to come in and settle in Bogotá; on the other hand, the number of Colombian converts increased significantly. This meant a growth in the community and thus, the burgeoning of diverse points of view.

Up until the eighties, almost the total of Muslims in the capital self identified with Sunni. In the nineties, the Shiite presence increased, initially with the arrival of some Iranians and Lebanese, but significantly due to the Islamic Shiite advertising and publications, sponsored by Iranian organizations. Due to the increase of the diplomatic relations between Colombia and some Muslim countries, Colombian Muslims has the opportunity to study and get in contact with Koranic schools or Islamic universities. As a result of this, other tendencies and schools of thought were introduced into the country, such as Salafi, Sufism and Shia.

In this manner, there is the intent of separating the political issues of the Middle East from the community's everyday practice of their faith. It is constantly emphasized that one thing is to adopt Islam and another one very different is to transfer problems of other regions into Colombia.

Islamic Charity Association of Bogotá

Being the oldest Islamic organization in the city (1979), it reunites the largest number of Muslims. Due to its financing by Arabs, the Colombian faction was excluded from the decision making process for a long period. Protectionism still persists by those who are Muslim since birth, not just Arabs, but immigrants from Muslim countries in general. It is composed of Muslims from every tendency, national and ethnic origin. The majority of the visitors of the mosque consider that it is necessary to respect the different points of view of the Shiites, which are welcomed into the same space without inconveniences.

Islamic Cultural Center

Center dedicated to the diffusion of knowledge about Islam and the culture of Islamic countries to the non-Muslim population. In spite of the closeness to the Shiite tendency, the center tried to show the different existent positions within Islam, its richness and diversity. Its purpose is to create a space where the community is able to perform their religious rituals, independently from the Sunni but without looking to break with the Islamic Charity Association.

Currently, it hosts all the religious festivities, those that are common to all Muslims and the specifically Shiites, except the Friday prayer, for which they usually go to the mosque in the center of the city.

Islamic Center of Colombia – Istanbul Mosque

It is composed of local Muslims who have volunteered to work towards the proper functioning of the mosque given that it has no support from any foreign government or Islamic organizations. The mosque does not close or limits itself to any of the four Sunni schools of law (Hanafi, Maliki, sha'afi o hanbali), but as his founder states, it exists some preference for the Maliki.

Conclusion

The Muslim presence in Colombia is seen even in the twentieth century when it is possible to encounter Muslim groups dispersed throughout the country. In the seventies, Lebanese migration enriched many of these communities and it is precisely during this time that the first Islamic institutions emerged in Bogota, Maicao and Buenaventura. This development has been consolidated and currently, there are Muslim communities in practically every important Colombian city.

During this process, the communities have suffered certain changes in their composition. Besides from the heterogeneity of the Muslim immigrants to their country, (that has currently extended to diverse countries of Asia, Africa and even Europe), the dominant group after the Arabs are the converts. Even if it is not possible to speak of massive conversions to Islam, being a country still predominantly catholic, these represent an expansion phenomenon.

The current Muslim communities present adaptations to the national and local context, by way of the immigrants and the converts. The Muslim communities have been concerned with the issues that they share with other social groups in Colombia, evidenced by a growing appearance in the media and in their participation in interreligious events. Definitely, Islam has enriched the already complex Colombian religious sphere.