

Some South Florida Latinas Converting to Islam for Emphasis on Family, Women's Roles

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Melissa Matos slips into an easy communion with her newest circle of friends.

At regular meetings, they invoke their families' native towns in Cuba or the Dominican Republic, or recipes for arroz con pollo. English is interspersed with Spanish. And, posing no incongruity to the women, hijabs, or Muslim head scarves, frame their faces.

When she converted to Islam in May, Matos, a Dominican-American raised as a Seventh-day Adventist, expected the passage to be lonely.

"I said to myself, 'Great, I'm going to be the only Muslim Latina in the whole world,'" said Matos, 20, a student at Florida International University who recently joined a group of Latina converts to Islam.

Scholars say Matos is part of a growing number of Latin women converting to Islam for its emphasis on family, piety and clearly defined women's roles, values converts say were once integral to Hispanic culture but have waned after years of assimilation.

The women are among 40,000 Hispanic converts to Islam in the United States, according to the Islamic Society of North America. About a decade ago, Latino converts began forming Internet groups such as the Latino American Dawah Organization and the women's group Piedad that trace Hispanics' ties to Islam back to the Spanish Moors.

Grass-roots leaders say the number of converts grew sharply after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, bucking a trend of thought among Americans that links Islam to terrorism.

Sofian Abelaziz, president of the Miami-based American Muslim Association of North America, said one indication of the conversions is the demand for Spanish-language copies of the Koran, which spiked after Sept. 11. In the past two years, the group has filled orders for 5,500 Spanish-language Korans for schools, cultural institutes and prisons around the country, out of 12,000 orders total.

Matos and other converts say the recent media spotlight on Islam was their first exposure to the faith and spurred further learning.

"[Before] I picked up the Koran, my attitude was, 'There's something wrong with this religion,'" said Matos, 20, of Miramar. A friend gave her a copy of the Koran. "But then I saw it was filled discussions of grace from God, of the protection of things we talk about as human rights, of a universal brotherhood. ... This is a religion that encourages

thinking and contemplation," she said. In May, Matos converted by reciting the shahada, a prayer in which converts attest to their belief in Allah and Mohammed in front of Muslim witnesses. Islam now circumscribes her life. She is studying Arabic, prays five times a day, wears a hijab and follows Islamic dietary laws.

"There is no conflict between my Dominican heritage and Islam. I grew up in a culture where you have a family you love and you take care of one another, and Islam complements those values," Matos said.

Matos' conversion rattled friends and family members who linked Islam with Taliban-style oppression, but scholars say Latina converts are practicing a confessional Islam that offers strong moral guidelines.

"People might ask, 'Why would women convert to a religion that is so traditional in its gender roles?' But that's part of the appeal. There's a recovery of dignity," said Manuel Vasquez, religion professor at the University of Florida. "Second-generation Latinas are caught between the morality of their parents and the morality of the larger mainstream society. Islam offers a clear code. Women ... know they are respected, taken care and protected from the negative influences of secular society. It's a kind of empowerment they don't experience in a culture that is constantly sexualizing them, and Latinas are particularly sexualized."

The converts may be fashioning a form of Islam that meets their needs in a country that allows them to do so.

"It's a comment on our society, on the fragmentation of American family life," said Leila Ahmed, a Harvard University professor who has written extensively on gender in Islam. "We have to bear that this is happening in America, where there is freedom of choice. These women are not converting in order to go and live in Saudi Arabia. We also don't know how permanent these conversions are in a country where people convert two or three times in their lives."

Like many converts, Matos calls herself a "revert," a reference to the Muslim belief that everyone is born in a state of submission to Allah. Being Hispanic and following Islam now are inextricable.

"When I meet with [my group] we speak in Spanish," she said. "We'll talk about what it was like back in Cuba or the Dominican Republic. And yet we're all wearing hijabs. It reminds me of the universality of Islam."

Religious leaders say the Latina converts assimilate easily into Islam.

"What they see in Islam is what their parents used to practice: that respect for elders, the care and protection that husbands are obligated to give their wives," said Maulana Shafayat Mohamed, director of the Darul Uloom Islamic Institute in Pembroke Pines. "Many converts tell me, 'This is how my parents grew up.'"

When a Hispanic Muslim friend slipped a copy of the Koran into her hands, Marie Hernandez found "a total way of life."

"I started reading about the life of the Prophet Mohammed, and I was convinced that this is the true prophet of God," said Hernandez, 22, of Boca Raton. "This is the message I have to follow."

Islam also was a powerful antidote to a troubled adolescence, during which Hernandez left home for two years.

Conversion meant the end of partying, very little television and waking up at 5 a.m. for her first prayers. It also meant reconciling with her Honduran-born Catholic parents and becoming a Muslim wife. She met her husband, an Egyptian, through a meeting arranged by her imam. They have a 20-month-old toddler, Fatimah, named for the Prophet Mohammed's iconic daughter.

"At first my parents thought it was weird, and they were scared," Hernandez said. "They thought I might get too extreme in my worship. But now we have a beautiful relationship. Part of being a Muslim is to honor your parents, and I started treating my dad the way I should have."

A strong draw for Hernandez was the idea that for Muslims, Islam is the culmination of all religions. In the Koran, Jesus is venerated as a prophet, and entire passages are devoted to the Virgin Mary -- a ubiquitous figure in Latin American culture.

"It's important to know that Jesus and Mary play a role in Islam. Most Latin Americans are Catholic because that's all they know, that's what their predecessors were," said Hernandez, who cooks tamales to celebrate the end of Ramadan.

Converts say they are evidence that Latino identity is in flux.

"One reaction Latinos have with regard to Latinos who come to Islam is, 'You're leaving your religion! You're leaving your culture!' But Latino culture is evolving," said Juan Galvan, president of the Texas chapter of the Latino American Dawah Organization.

"It's quite possible that Islam will one day be inseparable from Latino culture just as Christianity is."

Roraima Aisha Kanar, 52, is from a family of Cuban exiles who fled Cuba in 1959 and settled in Miami. Dissatisfied with Catholicism, she converted to Islam 30 years ago.

"My mother was devastated. I couldn't go to the beach and wear a bathing suit. I had to be covered and not wear makeup. I couldn't wear low-cut dresses. I felt like telling her, 'Do you mean to tell me that's what's important in life?'" she said. "I think Latinas who convert are looking for a culture that we'd always had and then lost: strictness in the family, respect towards the elderly, moral and spiritual ties and the importance of having

God in your life. Our grandparents had values similar to that. As converts we're just coming back to our roots."

After her conversion, she grew apart from her nightclub-hopping friends. She married a Turkish man with whom she has three children.

For Kanar, wearing the hijab, which some see as a sign of subjugation, is liberating.

"I lived through the '70s women's-lib movement," said Kanar, who works in accounting and owns a real estate business. "As a woman you wanted to be accepted as a person with a brain and not just a sexual object that had to be looking pretty to men all the time. I saw covering as something that would give me a lot of self-esteem. It did."

Kanar says she has straddled her Latino heritage and Islam comfortably.

"As soon as you speak to me you forget I'm wearing a hijab. I'm Cuban, and I speak with my hands. I love Celia Cruz. We don't go to Calle Ocho and we don't celebrate Christmas. We eat Spanish food, and though we won't have pork, we can do a nice lamb. What does it mean to be a Cuban, really? I feel Cuban, but I'm a Muslim Cuban."

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