María del Mar Logroño Narbona, Paulo G. Pinto & John Tofik Karam (eds.)
Crescent Over Another Horizon: Islam in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Latino USA. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015. viii + 344 pp. (Cloth US$60.00)

Crescent Over Another Horizon is a welcome addition to the growing but still relatively sparse literature on Muslims in the Americas. It offers a range of essays from Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Latino United States to illustrate the spatial distribution and longue durée of the Muslim ummah (global community) and the formative role Islam plays in the region. The editors approach the ummah as an entity whose recitation across space and time is a useful point of departure for rethinking ways in which the geographies of the Americas have been understood, particularly the interconnections between the Americas and the Islamic world. The book investigates how “the unity of Islam took shape through thoroughly plural formulations of identity, power, and belonging in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Latino USA” (p. 2).

The essays continue the current turn in ethnic and area studies toward hemispheric approaches, particularly through critique of the notions of universality, discrete territories, and persistent ethnocultural traditions. They raise interesting questions about how the ummah and the unity of Islam can be envisioned in ways that do not recapitulate the assumptions of conventional scholarship. How might these claims of universality differ from other depictions of universals? What constitutes a comparative project that deals with these kinds of ideas and claims? Although not raising these questions directly, the book's focus on Muslims' plural perceptions and histories in multiethnic societies can be interpreted as its answer. As the editors argue, “Muslims in the Americas claim and strive to be part of the ummah, but they do so in a variety of ways” (p. 9).

In Part One, “Reconsidering History,” Karoline P. Cook looks at Muslims and Moriscos in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish America, where both colonial rulers and the ruled struggled by means of the legal system to assert ethnic and religious identity and belonging. John Tofik Karam draws on scholarship on African and Afro-Atlantic Muslims in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to review the ways Islam was used for rebellion (defying the status quo) and refuge (communal worship and commiseration). Ellen Bal and Kathinka Sinha-Kerkhoff examine Indian indenture in Suriname, highlighting oral histories and an autobiography written by an indentured laborer in the mid-1940s to explore processes of community formation.

Part Two, “Contemporary Cartographies,” moves on to the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Silvia Montenegro discusses Sunni and Shi’a identities and institution-building in Argentina. Paulo Pinto shows that converts
to Islam in Brazil selectively employ Arab and other cultural diacritics as they contend with hierarchies that structure Muslim communities and Brazilian society. Camila Pastor de Maria y Campos argues that conversion to Islam in Mexico offers access to alternative identities that can evade racial, class, and civilizational hierarchies through Islam’s association with foreignness and cosmopolitanism. Luis Mesa Delmonte suggests that in Cuba conversion to Islam is a new phenomenon distinct from the histories of enslaved African Muslims in the island, and that Muslim communities there today are best understood in terms of recent domestic and international political transformations. Liliane Kuczynski discusses the origins of Muslims in Martinique, where converts are attracted by membership in the ummah, which imparts a new identity based on “a sense of freedom, equality, and universality” (p. 211) derived from Islam’s rejection of racial and color hierarchies. Halima-Sa’adia Kassim assesses the use of social networking sites among Muslim young adults in Trinidad, arguing that they are additional rather than competing or displacing arenas in public-sphere discussion of Islam and religious identity.

The United States is the focus of Part Three, “Islam Latina/o.” Hjamil A. Martínez-Vázquez considers conversion to Islam among urban Latina/os, framed by the concept of “discovery,” a process of uncovering what has been hidden by those in power rather than one of encountering something new. Mirsad Krijestorac explores “Hispanicized” South Florida, focusing on Islamic centers and Muslim organizations and arguing that there is little evidence of “a significant Hispanic Muslim community” (p. 276); rather, it is non-Latina/o Muslims who shape local Islam there. Yesenia King and Michael P. Perez redress the “nearly nonexistent” scholarship on Latina/o Muslims by analyzing “double-edged marginality, multilayered identities, and multiple consciousness” (p. 304), approaching Islam as a basis of empowerment and highlighting Latina Muslims’ spiritual connections to Islam that help them to cope with marginalization.

Crescent Over Another Horizon is most interested in locating and documenting the variegated presence of Islam in the Americas and should be on the bookshelf of any reader wanting to learn more about the activities and histories of Muslims. Comparative anthologies on Islam in this hemisphere remain few in number. In joining the growing body of scholarship on Islam in “Muslim minority societies,” such as M. Ali Kettani’s Muslims in the World Today (1986), this collection will inspire further study of Islam’s half-millennium presence in the New World.

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