Exploring Islam in the Americas from Demographic and Ethnographic Perspectives

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

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

The Value of an Interdisciplinary Approach to American Islam

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

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

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

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

**Highlighting Muslim Populations in the Americas**

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

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