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A Clash of Culture, Faith

Latinas Balance Catholic Upbringing, Adoption of Islam

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Every morning, Jackie Avelar wakes up to a predicament. On one side of her bed is a clock that sounds the Islamic call to prayer five times a day. On the other side is a statue of Mary. As a Muslim, she wants to remove it. As a Latina, she can't.

Her father, who is a Catholic from El Salvador, wants the statue to stay.

"I have to respect him," Avelar said.

So she has found a comfortable balance: She covers the statue with a photo of her family.

Avelar, 31, constantly struggles to find balance within her family, within the outside world, within herself. Growing up, she was a beach-going, tank top-wearing, salsa-dancing girl. Now, she's a devout Muslim who favors Islamic garments and avoids socializing with men.

She is the first Muslim in a family that has never known any religion but Catholicism.

Across the nation, thousands of Latino immigrants are redefining themselves through Islam, including a few hundred in the Washington region, according to national Islamic groups and community leaders. Precise numbers are not available, but estimates range from 40,000 to 70,000.

The conversions speak to a larger evolution of immigrant identity, as a new generation ingests a cultural smorgasbord of ideas they were rarely exposed to in their homelands. Today, it's easier than ever to learn about Islam from Spanish translations of the Koran, Islamic magazines and Web sites.

But as they embrace a new faith, Latinos face struggles, ranging from guilt to discrimination, as Muslims in a post-Sept. 11 America.

"Sometimes you feel like you are betraying who you are, that you are abandoning your family," said Avelar, who is small and round-faced with a soft voice.

The converts hail from throughout Latin America. In Islam, some say they see a devoutness and simplicity they find lacking in Catholicism. Like the tightknit Latino culture, Islam places emphasis on family, which can make it easier for converts to adjust.

Yet some are as motivated by feelings of alienation in a nation that is divided over immigration. Latino women find what most westerners rarely see -- a respect for women, unlike, some converts say, the machismo culture in which they were raised.

On the Friday before Easter, a day that no longer holds religious significance for Avelar, she took part in the *juma*, the weekly group prayer all practicing Muslims attend. She drove to a small Annandale mosque in a silver Honda, with a license plate holder that reads "Don't drive faster than your angels can fly."

Dressed in a pink *hijab*, or headscarf, and a black shoulder-to-ankle garment, she melted into the tide of immigrants.

The men entered the front door. Avelar glided to a side entrance with the other women and vanished inside.

Questioning Catholicism

For Priscilla Martinez, a third-generation Mexican American, conversion began with a question. For Margaret Ellis, a first-generation Panamanian American, it ended with an answer.

Growing up in Texas, Martinez asked her priest why Catholics believe in the Holy Trinity -- the Father, Son and Holy Spirit -- but said she never got a satisfactory explanation.

Then more questions, until: "I felt I didn't have a relationship with God," said Martinez, 32, who lives in Ashburn with her Muslim husband and their children.

At the University of Texas, she was introduced to Islam in a Middle East history course and during Muslim student events. At the end of her freshman year, Martinez recited the *shehada*, the vow a person takes to become a Muslim. When she told her Catholic family, they gave her an ultimatum: Leave Islam or leave their house. Martinez left.

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"It was more cultural than anything else," recalled Martinez, of medium height and wearing a green hijab. "It was something foreign to them, and it solidified the fact that I wasn't returning to the church."

Today, she said, she's on good terms with her family. Swimming is the only thing Martinez misses about her old life. Now, she swims only in private or with other women, and never in front of men, aside from her husband.

Ellis, too, was unsatisfied with Catholicism and said in Panama, the Catholics she knew were not religious. She wanted a deeper connection with God.

After she converted, her great-aunt demanded, "How could you leave your mother's faith?"

In the United States, Ellis kept asking herself: Where do I fit in? As a black Latina, she found many black Americans didn't accept her. And Latinos she met were largely from nations without many blacks.

"For me, the perfect niche was the Muslim community, because for us it doesn't matter where you are from or what you look like," said Ellis, 44.

She is now called Farhahnaz Ellis.

In public, her Latino identity, like those of most converts, is often invisible. Ellis remembers the day in a bodega in Reston when she overheard two women looking at her Islamic garment and speaking aloud in Spanish: "Oh my God, look at her. She's crazy. It's so hot."

Ellis, who is tall and slender, walked up and broke out in Spanish. The startled women quickly headed out the door.

Religious Curiosity

When the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks occurred, Avelar, then a George Mason University student, was dating a Pakistani American Muslim. One day, she angrily asked him: How could Muslims commit such acts? Yet she also grew curious. When her anger died down, she asked him to tell her about Islam. After they broke up, her interest continued.

"I absolutely had no intention of converting," Avelar recalled. "Even though I felt Islam was inside my heart, I didn't want to admit it to myself."

She was thinking about her father.

On the night of her senior class photography exhibition, Avelar's family and friends sat in the audience. Here, a photo of Avelar wearing a necklace with a cross, only dangling from her back. There, a photo of Jesus on his cross, only his face was smeared.

Millie Jimenez, 31, who grew up with Avelar, caught on. "It symbolized that she was turning her back on Catholicism," she recalled.

Avelar wanted her father to understand this. But on that night, his children said, he felt something else for his only daughter. (He declined a request to be interviewed.)

"He seemed proud that she had an art show," said Selwyn Avelar, 25, her brother.

Two weeks later, she converted.

Avelar told her mother, then Selwyn. They gave support. But it would take her two months to work up the courage to tell her father.

When she finally did, she said he replied: " 'You're a grown woman. I believe I've raised you well.' "

Then, he said: " 'Before your grandmother died she left us specific instructions to never abandon or change our religion.' "

His attempt didn't work.

'I Love Islam'

Avelar stopped eating *pupusas revueltas*, *tamales de cerdo* and any other Salvadoran dishes with pork. In her house, she stopped eating any meat that wasn't *halal*, or permissible under Islamic dietary laws.

Alcohol was out, as were tank tops. On Christmas Eve, she drove her family to midnight Mass and dropped them outside the church.

Avelar's beliefs are shaped neither by politics nor injustice toward Muslims, she said. In her mind, she's still a hyphenated immigrant -- only with one more hyphen.

"I love my country. I love living here. I love being Latina," she said. "But more than anything else, I love Islam."

Avelar's family held out hope that her conversion would be just a phase. That changed the day she came home with a Muslim man. He

was also Latino. They had met two weeks earlier. They wanted to get married.

Her father angrily said no and blamed Islam. "They want to marry you off to a man you don't even know," she remembered him saying. Then, he took away her Islamic books and said: It's either Islam or the family.

Avelar replied: "Don't ever ask me to choose between you and my religion because I won't choose you."

"That was the day he realized how serious I was," she said.

Later, Avelar and her boyfriend had differences. They did not marry.

Portrayals of Women

After the *juma*, where Avelar recited verses from the Koran in the back of the mosque with the other women, she left through the same door she had entered.

She said it doesn't bother her that women in Islam have different roles, roles that many westerners describe as repressed. Where they see inequality, she sees respect. A respect, she said, she doesn't see often in Latino culture.

"The way Latin men portray women, it's terrible," Avelar said. "You look at Spanish CDs, and you see women in bikinis on the cover."

Before Islam: The day laborers at a nearby 7-Eleven whistled and cat-called -- "*¡Oy Mamacita!*" -- as she passed them.

After Islam: The day laborers stared in silence as she, in her hijab, passed them.

"The fact they stayed quiet, I was like, '*Alhamdulillah!*'," said Avelar, reciting the Arabic phrase "Praise be to Allah."

"I love the respect that I get from the opposite sex [when I'm] in hijab."

Her relationship with her brother also changed.

Before Islam: "We were close," said Selwyn Avelar. "We used to go out and have a drink. We used to talk."

After Islam: "I felt like she was a different person," he said. "She wasn't the girl I had known for 25 years. . . . I felt like she was trying to convert me."

Yet she's also his sister. And he loves her. In recent months, he said, he's grown to admire her, for learning Arabic, for using her time wisely and for living a healthier and more constructive life.

"Maybe there are times I don't talk to her about my life because she'll give me advice on the Muslim way," he said. "But she's become more of an interesting person. I can learn more from her."

And what about Avelar's father?

Now, whenever a man visits their home, she said, he waits to see if his daughter is properly covered. He likes it that men don't ogle her and she doesn't drink alcohol and stay out late.

His daughter believes he has found a comfortable balance.

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