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from the December 27, 2004 edition



**A NEW PATH** : Jasmine Pinet is one of a number of US Latinas who have converted to Islam. Ms. Pinet says she feels more comfortable in Muslim garb as she walks the streets of her home in Jersey City, N.J.

ANDY NELSON - STAFF

## US Latinas seek answers in Islam

**It surprises many of their friends and family, but some young US Latinas say Islam offers women more respect.**

By **Christine Armario** | *Contributor to The Christian Science Monitor*

**UNION CITY, N.J.** — Jasmine Pinet sits on the steps outside a mosque here, tucking in strands of her burgundy hair beneath a white head scarf, and explaining why she, a young Latina, feels that she has found greater respect as a woman by converting to Islam.

"They're not gonna say, 'Hey *mami*, how are you?' " Ms. Pinet says of Muslim men. "Usually they say, 'Hello, sister.' And they don't look at you like a sex object."

While some Latinas her age try to emulate the tight clothes and wiggling hips of stars like Jennifer Lopez and Christina Aguilera, Ms. Pinet and others are adopting a more conservative lifestyle and converting to Islam. At this Union City, N.J., mosque, women account for more than half of the Latino

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Muslims who attend services here. Nationwide, there are about 40,000 Latino Muslims in the United States, according to the Islamic Society of North America.

Many of the Latina converts say that their belief that women are treated better in Islam was a significant factor in converting. Critics may protest that wearing the veil marks a woman as property, but some Latina converts say they welcome the fact that they are no longer whistled at walking down a street. "People have an innate response that I'm a religious person, and they give [me] more respect," says Jenny Yanez, another Latina Muslim. "You're not judged if you're in fashion or out of fashion."

Other Latina Muslims say they also like the religion's emphasis on fidelity to one's spouse and family.

But for many family members and friends, these conversions come as a surprise - often an unwelcome one. They may know little of Islam other than what they have heard of the Taliban and other extremist groups.

That creates an inaccurate image, insists Leila Ahmed, a professor of women's studies and religion at Harvard University. "It astounds me, the extent to which people think Afghanistan and the Taliban represent women and Islam." What's really going on, she says, is a reshaping of the relationship between women and Islam. "We're in the early stages of a major rethinking of Islam that will open Islam for women. [Muslim scholars] are rereading the core texts of Islam - from the Koran to legal texts - in every possible way."

New views of women and Islam may be more prevalent in countries like the US, where women read the Koran themselves and rely less on patriarchal interpretations.

"I think the women here are asserting more their rights and their privileges," says Zahid Bukhari, director of the American-Muslim Studies Program at George- town University. "

Some Latina Muslims say they harbored stereotypes about Muslim women before deciding to convert, but changed their minds once becoming close friends with a Muslim.

"I always thought, geez, I feel sorry for women who have to wear those veils," says Pinet. Then she met her Muslim boyfriend and began studying the Koran with a group of Muslim women. She says she was impressed with the respect they received.

"A women is respected because she is the mother, she takes care of

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the children, and she's the one that enforces the rules," Pinet says. "They're the ones who are sacred."

Critics of the decisions of Latinas to convert to Islam say they are adopting a religion just as patriarchal as the Roman Catholic faith that many are leaving behind.

"While it's true the Latino culture tends to be more male-dominated, and there's a tendency toward more machismo, I would venture to say it exists [in Islam] as well," says Edwin Hernandez, director of the Center for the Study of Latino Religion at the University of Notre Dame.

Latinos account for six percent of the 20,000 Muslim conversions in the United States each year, according to a report published by the Council on American-Islamic Relations. Anecdotal evidence suggests this number may be rising. But that doesn't mean it's getting any easier for the women who make this choice.

"At first it was anger and then more like sadness," Nylka Vargas says of her parents' reaction when she told them she was converting to Islam and began dressing more conservatively. "They would sometimes feel strange being around me."

Pinet's family has been more accepting, but she too has encountered some resistance in her community. It's as if you've betrayed your own kind," she says.

For some, the cultural differences are the most trying.

"I can't eat pork, I can't wear [form-fitting] clothing, I can't dance in the clubs, I'm not gonna attend church," says Ms. Yanez, who is of Cuban and Spanish descent. "But I keep my language, and there's still things that we do as Latinos that they don't have to change."

Within the Islamic community, Latina Muslims report being warmly received, although language barriers sometimes exist for Latinas who only speak Spanish. There are few Spanish services at mosques and a limited number of Islamic texts in Spanish.

Grassroots organizations specifically for Latino Muslims have been created in recent years. They function in part as an informational resource for new converts and but also as a support group for those who encounter difficulties at home.

Ultimately, Latina Muslims say that time heals the divisions and angst their conversion sometimes causes among friends and family.

"What I had to learn was patience," says Vargas, whose family came to accept her religious beliefs after several years. "Sometimes things are not as we want them."

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