

Book Review

– *The Muslims of Latin America and the Caribbean*, by Ken Chitwood, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2021

Professors preparing courses on Islam in Latin America and the Caribbean find bibliography in the Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts in several languages. However, they face challenges to develop a comprehensive narrative on the subject, considering the cultural, historical, social, and political diversity subsumed under the label “Latin America and the Caribbean”. It was this experience that motivated the theologian Ken Chitwood to write *The Muslims of Latin America and the Caribbean*, after teaching the course “Islam in the Americas”, at the University of Florida, in 2017. Based on extensive bibliographical research, complemented by ethnographic data and specific studies carried out by the author, the book is efficient in demonstrating how Islam is a constitutive part of the Americas and how this region integrates global Islam. As he argues, Latinx and Caribbean Muslims are not foreigners in their land, and their land is not alien to Islam.

The book is divided into an introductory chapter and three parts, one of which is the conclusion. Entitled “Putting Muslims on the Map in Latin America and the Caribbean”, the first chapter states that Muslim contributions have been overlooked across the region’s history. This process is guided by two perceptions. First, Latin America and the Caribbean are usually understood as extensions of the West, disconnected from the “Islamic World”. Second, the idea of a “Islamic World” triggers an imagined geography, limited to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and parts of South Asia. To escape these excluding approaches, Chitwood analyses Islam in the Americas from a global perspective, considering the diversity of religious experiences that make up Islam and the flows of people, practices, and discourses that connect Latin America and the Caribbean to the entire global Muslim community. These points are retaken in the conclusion, where the author argues that the study of Islam in a region seen as a periphery of a MENA-centric system brings little contribution to understanding the structural tensions that act in the production of a truly global Islam.

Part 1 consists of four chapters that aim to present a historical analysis of Islam in Latin America and the Caribbean. The author analyses the controversy

regarding the Islamic presence in the pre-Columbian Americas, the Iberian cultural heritage and its impacts on the promotion and persecution of Islam, the legacies of enslaved African Muslims, and, finally, the impact of waves of migration of Indian, Indonesian, and Arab Muslims to the region, from the nineteenth century onwards. The contemporary discursive use of Islamic identity is a converging point among the four chapters. On the one hand, there is the search by Latin American Muslims for belonging to the region through historical claims that attribute them priority in the face of the European presence, or antiquity and legitimacy when imagining themselves as heirs of the struggles of enslaved African Muslims towards the construction of freedom. On the other hand, such speeches also point to the aversion toward Islam in the region, given the deep roots of Islamophobia, which go back to Iberian colonization.

Part two is dedicated to case studies of contemporary Muslim communities, in an interdisciplinary perspective close to cultural studies. This section demonstrates how the study of Latin American and Caribbean contexts produces understandings that are indispensable for a better knowledge of the Muslim globality. How did Brazil, a country that would hardly be remembered when it comes to Islam, become the largest exporter of halal meat, produced according to Muslim rituals, in the world? How does the region connect to the US-led global War on Terror from its own perspectives? Questions like these guide the 5 chapters that make up the section, showing that, although the number of Muslims in Latin America and the Caribbean is small, they are part of global Islam, participate in its flows and dynamics, and are involved in its main debates.

The book aims to introduce the reader to studies on Islam in Latin America and fulfils this function well. Its approach is not exhaustive, featuring as a starting point of a road that goes far. Its main merit is to centralize in a single narrative diffuse data about the experiences of Muslims in the region, particularly recognizing the contributions of African Muslims – generally ignored or little analysed in texts of this type – and claiming space in Islamic Studies for a geography generally considered outside of the “Islamic World”. And the author’s commitment to the visibility of Latin American and Caribbean Muslims goes beyond the publication. Chitwood is currently chief editor of the newsletter “Latin America and Caribbean Islamic Studies” (<https://www.lacisa.org/>), which has brought together several new works on the subject. Although the book’s theme is not new, it is an important contribution to the making of a field of study, which is just now beginning to take shape.

Thiago Henrique Mota, Federal University of Viçosa
thiago.mota@ufv.br