

# Social Welfare Services and Dawah in “Autochthonous” Islamic Centers in Colombia

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## Abstract

*In various cities throughout Colombia, Islamic centers provide welfare services to both Muslims and non-Muslims. Some organize food distributions in the streets of deprived neighborhoods, while others receive recipients directly on their premises. In each case, the aim is to help people in the name of Islam, including non-Muslims. What are the objectives of the welfare activities developed by Islamic organizations? What are Muslim actors' motivations and expectations for their charity work investments? What is the relationship between philanthropy and dawah? This article takes up these questions through empirical case studies in Colombia in order to discuss how several Islamic centers in the country, whose aim is to attract “autochthonous” Muslims—those not descended from migrants or colonists—concretely organize charitable practices and examine the actors' motivations as well as the theological and ideological rationales that underlie them.*

**Keywords:** *charity, Islam, Muslims, Colombia, welfare*

In recent years, several Muslim communities and Islamic centers in Colombia have begun to carry out philanthropic activities in various areas for both Muslims and non-Muslims. As part of these charitable activities, some communities organize food pantries in disadvantaged neighborhoods, while others receive beneficiaries directly on their premises. The leaders of the Islamic centers express concern about social issues such as poverty, crime, and education. In each case, a common narrative insists on the duty to help people who are impoverished and add value to society. In this context, charity work is implemented in the name of Islam to answer the call of Allah and follow the example of Prophet Muhammad.

Preliminary observations reveal that most of these charitable activities reach a majority of non-Muslim beneficiaries, which seems to indicate the inclusion of a broader public beyond community boundaries. Nevertheless, other concerns besides philanthropical intentions may be behind charity services, which are generally seen as an effective means of expanding a religion's influence and attracting people to the faith (Colonos, 1994; Bastian, 2017). This background observation motivates this article to first analyze the welfare practices carried out by Muslim groups in

the name of Islam in Colombia. In this particular Latin American context, Muslims constitute a very small minority, estimated at only 10,000 followers<sup>4</sup> (Castellanos, 2010), and are located far from the religious and cultural centers of the Muslim world. The fact that the majority of Muslim communities in Colombia provide welfare services or engage in charitable work raises several questions. What are the goals of the welfare activities developed by Islamic organizations? What are the motivations and expectations of Muslim actors through their investments in this field? Finally, in the context of Colombia and beyond, what is the relationship between charity and *dawah*?<sup>5</sup> To answer these questions, this paper discusses the different ways that Islamic centers provide charitable services in several regions of Colombia, while also exploring the actors' motivations and the theological and ideological rationales that underpin them.

Faith-based welfare activities in diverse Muslim-majority societies have been extensively investigated (see, for instance, Ashencaen Crabtree et al., 2008; Harmsen, 2008; Jawad, 2012) as well as Islamic social work in the context of non-Muslim societies (Martens, 2014; Barylo, 2017, Brodard, 2023b). In addition to critically reflecting on this available literature, it was necessary to conduct research in three Muslim communities in Colombia. After a brief reminder of relevant articles on the subject and a clarification of some methodological aspects, I therefore examine case studies that allow for an analytical reflection on various issues related to the link between religious activism and philanthropic work, such as the relationship between *dawah* and welfare activities. In short, this paper sheds light on the link between Islamic activism<sup>6</sup> and philanthropy in Colombia, particularly in Muslim communities characterized by a high proportion of autochthonous converts or direct descendants of converts.

### **The Development of Islam in Colombia: Foreign Islamic Organizations' Activism and Autochthonous Conversions**

Muslim constituencies in Colombia and other Latin American countries are the result of both more or less recent migration phenomena and individual or collective conversion processes.<sup>7</sup> Some literature addresses Islam in Latin America from a transnational and comparative perspective (Delval, 1992; Logroño Narbona et al., 2015; Chitwood, 2021), while other contributions focus on the study of specific Muslim communities, for example in Mexico (Ismu Kusumo, 2004;

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<sup>4</sup> This number must be interpreted with caution, as there are no precise statistics on the number of Muslims in the country. Moreover, given the ongoing nature of conversions/reversions, as well as "exits" from Islam, estimating the number of Muslims is particularly delicate in the Colombian context.

<sup>5</sup> *Dawah*, an Arabic word meaning "invitation," is used in this context to refer to the effort of spreading and preaching Islam to non-Muslims. In some Islamic organizations, it can also refer to spreading the "orthodox" interpretation of Islam to Muslims.

<sup>6</sup> Borrowing Hamid's (2016) definition, Islamic activism refers to "Muslim faith-based religious collective action" (p. 9), which can include both charity work and *dawah* among other spheres of investment.

<sup>7</sup> The phenomenon of conversions to Islam in Colombia, which is not the focus of this article, deserves to be fully addressed in another issue. It relates to diverse motivations including spiritual quest, political engagement, social relation, and cultural influence, among others.

Cañas Cuevas, 2006; Medina, 2014; Garcia Linares, 2020). Regarding Colombia, it remains difficult to find research studies that trace the overall development of Muslim communities in the country over recent decades, which can be explained, among other things, by the recent and rapidly evolving nature of Muslim congregations in the country. Nevertheless, there are several contributions based on case studies focusing on local communities, specifically in Buenaventura (Valencia Potes, 2014; Castellanos, 2014, 2018), Bogotá (Castellanos, 2010), Maicao (García Flórez, 2007, pp. 70–75), and Cali (Murillo Potes, 2012; Tello Neira, 2013). In these cases, the historical evolution of Islam and former Muslim organizations in Colombia must be considered so that the current context and challenges can be understood better. On the one hand, an early Muslim presence in northern Colombia stemmed from important migrations from Lebanon during the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, principally in Maicao. On the other hand, other Muslim communities were formed either through collective conversions, such as in Buenaventura, or following more recent migrations from various Muslim-majority countries (e.g., Pakistan, Morocco). If many Islamic centers gather both Muslim migrants and local converts, a few congregations concentrate almost exclusively on converts or their direct descendants, which justifies the use of the term “autochthonous”<sup>8</sup> to refer to these Muslim congregations.

The case studies in this article focus on such autochthonous local Muslim congregations for the reason that they gather a large majority of Muslims of Colombian background, either men and women who converted to Islam or their offspring. These autochthonous Muslim communities are not representative of the Islamic centers of the country, many of which are still directed and frequented by a majority of migrants and foreigners. Therefore, a distinction between the majority autochthonous Muslim congregations and the others gathering migrants seems to make sense to analyze potentially diverging dynamics of activism and welfare in the name of Islam. In this regard, the three case studies concern Islamic centers led and frequented by local Muslims of Colombian origin, although *mezquita* As-Salam in Medellín still is supervised by a *shaykh* from Egypt.

Although these cases do not represent the country’s Muslim reality in its entirety, they do reflect a significant trend in the organization of the Colombian Muslim community. These three case studies can therefore be used as a basis to address some of the broader research questions mentioned above. As they indicate concrete practices and discourses, they will allow us to reflect on such issues based on firsthand, qualitative evidence. In this regard, field observation and interviews were needed for each case study, mostly based on ethnographic methods like participant observation and informal interviews with both leaders and community members. Only through immersion in the field could accurate data be collected, especially in the Colombian context in which only a few academic studies have been realized about Muslim congregations (García Flórez, 2007; Castellanos, 2010), especially in the related areas.

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<sup>8</sup> This adjective remains relative and debatable, as descendants of migrants can also claim to be autochthonous in Colombia since they are born there. In this context, it distinguishes between Muslims coming from a Muslim-majority migrant background, and the ones who are converted or direct descendants of converts.

Following a brief discussion of the methodology, I share insights based on my observations in Buenaventura, which remains a “hot spot” of Muslim activism in Colombia and whose members often come from the Afro-American Shia Muslim community. The first case focuses on the Fundación Islamica Kauzar in Cali, which is actually an outgrowth of the pioneering Afro-Colombian Muslim community. To keep with examples of autochthonous Muslim congregations, I then introduce *mezquita* Abu Bakr, located in a deprived suburb of Cartagena on the Caribbean coast. Finally, I consider the recently developing Muslim community of *mezquita* As-Salam in Medellín, which has become a major actor in *dawah* and social activities in the region over the last couple of years. In each case, the purpose was to develop an understanding of the welfare activities as well as the perception of *dawah* and wider activism at the social and political levels.

### Methodology

Due to insufficiencies in the literature related to various Muslim communities in Colombia and more particularly their engagement in philanthropy, it was necessary to collect data and reflections on recent trends, discourses, and practices within Muslim congregations themselves. Concretely, the field study first involved repeated visits to numerous Islamic centers and mosques throughout the country, particularly those extending the scope of their activity beyond ritual alone. To be accepted within these communities, ethnographic immersion and participant observation were required. My identification as a Muslim strongly contributed to gaining such access, particularly given the characteristics of both the social environment and studied object. Indeed, Muslim communities in Colombia, particularly in deprived areas, can be considered as “difficult” fields, whose specificities involve suspicion from the interviewees, relational tensions, proselytism, or surrounding danger potentially exposing the researcher to mistrust, misunderstanding, and hostility (Bouillon et al., 2008). In this regard, shared social experiences, common religious beliefs, and cultural affinities tend to reduce the symbolic distance between the researcher and the informants, which significantly improve the researcher’s integration and legitimacy in the field.

From 2020 to 2022, I undertook fieldwork in several *mezquitas* and Islamic centers throughout the country, during which I conducted interviews with approximately 40 people who attended these congregations or who were direct witnesses to the developments of the Muslim organizations involved.<sup>10</sup> In this regard,

<sup>9</sup> *Mezquita* means mosque in Spanish.

<sup>10</sup> In Colombia, I conducted fieldwork (observation and interview) within various Muslim communities in the following places: Maicao (*mezquita* de Omar Ibn Al-Jattab), Santa Marta (Asociación Islamica Santa Marta), Barranquilla (*mezquita* Othman Ben Affan y Musallah El Musulman “La Finca”), Cartagena (*mezquita* de Muhammad y *mezquita* Abu Bakr), Bogotá (*mezquita* Abu Bakr Alsiddiq, *mezquita* Al Qurtubi, *mezquita* Estambul, Tabio [Dergah]), Medellín (*mezquita* As-Salam y *mezquita* de Belén), Cali (*mezquita* An-Nur y Centro Islamico Kauzar), Pereira, Buenaventura (Instituto Silvia Zeneb, *mezquita* del barrio Rockefeller, and the Sunni community), and Guapi (*mezquita* local).

dozens of hours of informal interviews<sup>11</sup> with imams, community leaders, and other Muslims, mostly converts, constitute the bulk of the data collected for this research. Due to the sensitivity of the topic<sup>12</sup> and the profile of the interviewees, almost all the interactions were carried out in informal settings without simultaneous recording (Kaufman, 1996). Beyond the classical dichotomization between overt and covert participant observation (Soulé & Richet, 2010), my approach maintained that the researcher, even when they clarify their identity and their purpose in the field, tends to be identified differently by the actors, who often fail to understand the scope of the research and its consequences for the organization (Brodard, 2020b). Similarly, the difference between the insider and outsider are often not as clear as it seems, as the researcher can partially be perceived as a member of the group and at the same time a stranger. To sum up, as it happens in many ethnographic research studies, I suggest that the classical boundaries between insider and outsider as well as overt and covert approaches remain blurry and ambivalent, depending on each context of observation and interview. Nonetheless, these issues have characterized many ethnographic research studies (e.g., Halloy, 2007) without compromising the quality of the collected data.

### **“Autochthonous” Muslim Congregations in Colombia and Charity Work**

#### ***The Pioneering Muslim Community of Buenaventura***

Buenaventura is considered a disadvantaged city even though it hosts the country’s most important port on the Pacific coast. Its majority Afro-Colombian population<sup>13</sup> has felt unjustly treated and marginalized for decades (Castellanos, 2018, pp. 20–21; Valencia Potes, 2014, p. 19). Many suffer from the problems associated with poverty and displacement caused by various forms of violence. In this particular social context, the preaching of African Americans from the Nation of Islam in the United States met the political and ideological expectations of some locals. According to Oscar Valencia Potes (aka Shej Munir) (2014), who currently leads the Shiite Muslim community in Buenaventura, the Nation of Islam began to have a slight influence in Buenaventura following the arrival of some Afro-American sailors coming to the port for their work, but also through local migrants returning from the United States having come into contact with the Nation of Islam there (p. 60).

However, the first collective expressions of a “Muslim” community began in the late 1950s, when a Panamanian came to teach a group of more than 20 people. He propagated the ideas of the Nation of Islam, which he had previously

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<sup>11</sup> Interviews conducted in informal and comprehensive modes (Kaufman, 1996) constitute an important part of the ethnographic work and usually take place during participant observation. As the nature of the interactions often do not allow the researcher to record the talk, it is necessary to take precise notes of each interview following each sequence of fieldwork.

<sup>12</sup> Several Muslim congregations’ leaders and followers explained that they had already faced prejudice due to their faith and identity, related to global Islamophobia and suspicion from terrorism. Some sayings indicated that they fear being investigated by authorities (police or intelligence), also they had nothing to hide.

<sup>13</sup> Buenaventura is the Colombian city with the highest percentage of Afro-Colombians, estimated at 85% of the population (De Roux, 2010, p. 10).

studied while living in New York. The new community continued to grow and gain members through classes and lectures that focused more on political aspects related more to Black supremacy than on the specificities of religious doctrine or practice per se. The group of about 200 followers eventually formed an official structure in 1974, named the Comunidad Islámica de Colombia (Castellanos & Neira Manrique, 2009, p. 4). It was the first Muslim organization in Colombia.

In the late 1970s, a Guyanese Muslim met with the Buenaventura Muslim group and taught them Islam according to the Sunni tradition, trying to show them the contradictions between the Nation of Islam and what they considered “orthodox” Islam. At the same time, leaders of the Muslim community of Buenaventura traveled to Maicao and Bogotá to visit other Muslim groups in the country, which eventually reinforced the turn toward Sunnism. But a new turning point came when the Muslims of Buenaventura approached embassies for help and funding. Following the community request, the Iranian embassy of Bogotá committed to building a lasting relationship with Afro-Colombian Muslims by helping them open a school for underprivileged children, the Silvia Zaynab Institute, and providing scholarships for converts to study Islam in Argentina and Iran.

Following this, the community turned once more away from Sunnism, definitively embracing Shiism according to the official interpretation of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Fatima Institute, the second school run by the Muslim community of Buenaventura, was founded in 1993. Other young people converted to Islam at this time, and several men and women went to Qom in Iran to study Islamic theology. From the Pacific port, the community eventually expanded to the nearby and larger urban center of Cali and to a lesser extent to other peripheral areas such as the small town of Guapi. The Afro-Colombian Muslim community originating from Buenaventura is estimated to be at least 600 individuals, an important part of whom live in Cali (Giovanni Castellanos, 2018, p. 3).

### ***The Fundación Islámica Kauzar in Cali***

The large city of Cali (population 2.2 million) currently hosts two Islamic centers: the *mezquita* An-Nur led by the Sunni community (Tello Neira, 2013) and the Centro Islámico Al Kauzar, affiliated with the Shia and located in a privileged neighborhood in the south of the city. The Centro Islámico Al Kauzar was created in 2003 due to the growing number of members from the Muslim community of Buenaventura, many of whom had migrated to the provincial capital for study or work opportunities (Giovanni Castellanos, 2018, p. 62). In the 2000s, Cali’s Shiite Muslim community comprised around 60 people, mostly Afro-Colombians (Murillo Potes, 2012, p. 90). Sheikh Abdul Karim<sup>14</sup> is currently the director and Imam of the Centro Islámico. He converted to Islam in 1987 in his hometown Buenaventura, later studying Shiism in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and Qom, Iran. He returned to

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<sup>14</sup> From his original name Javier Orobio, Abdul Karim converted to Islam in 1987 in Buenaventura. He later studied Shiite Islam in Argentina, then in Iran (Qom), before returning to Colombia and settling in Cali, where he currently heads the Al-Kausar Islamic Center.

Colombia and settled in Cali, where he runs the local Shiite Muslim community, which is now estimated at around 100 people (Giovanni Castellanos, 2018, p. 62). In spite of its attachment to the Muslim community of Buenaventura, Cali's congregation has gained autonomy over the last two decades. It attracts almost exclusively Colombian converts and children of converts, including some who are not considered Afro-Colombian.

A regular group usually comes a few times a week for prayers and courses, which generally end with a shared meal. The small number of worshipers and their consistency with attending the activities brings a sense of unity and togetherness among the few dozen of Muslims who attend the center weekly. In addition to prayers and religious holidays, the Islamic center organizes courses and occasional charitable activities. Among the latter, food distributions in the streets take place several times in the year on specific occasions, such as Christmas time.

For example, before December 24, 2021—or Christmas Eve, a Christian religious holiday—the leader of the mosque urged members of the congregation to participate in a food pantry so that poor children and adults could enjoy Christmas with traditional seasonal foods and other items.<sup>15</sup> In this regard, some volunteers brought food in packages to the mosque kitchen, loaded them in a couple of cars, and drove the care packages out to deprived areas in the city center. In these areas of exclusion, called *ollas*, thousands of marginalized people—including a large percentage of individuals with substance abuse issues and without homes—live on the street. When I observed the distribution, Muslims distributed the food and item boxes to dozens of kids and adults quickly and with care. Many among the recipients were under the influence of drugs at the time of distribution. Although they seemed to ignore the Islamic affiliations of the distributors, many of the beneficiaries—all non-Muslims—recognized the religious identity of the group as they thanked them through various traditional formulas, invoking God's blessings on the givers. The Muslim leader himself explained that most people thought that they were a Christian group, totally ignoring what Islam was about. However, he immediately added that this does not matter, as the objective of the activity was not to advertise Islam but simply to help needy fellow humans by showing mercy (*rahma*) to them. Furthermore, he explained that these kinds of activities are useful for himself and his fellow Muslim brothers and sisters, in the sense that it makes them “face reality” by meeting the poor and becoming aware of all blessings bestowed by God in their life.

To sum up, it can be claimed that such welfare activities are inspired by the purpose of spreading compassion and helping people in need, regardless of any *dawah*-related or strategic considerations. Moreover, the charitable activities are seen as a part of local Muslims' own religious self-fashioning and pious practice, reflected in the comment about how doing such work is *useful* for the Muslims' own spiritual development.

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<sup>15</sup> One interesting aspect here is that this Muslim group did not hesitate to portray their action as a Christmas gift, whereas others Muslim organizations may be very reluctant to undertake any project closely or distantly related to a Christian event.

### ***The Mezquita Abu Bakr in the Suburbs of Cartagena***

On the other side of the country, in the impoverished neighborhood of la Boquilla, in the suburbs of Cartagena (population 1,087,599), is *mezquita* Abu Bakr. Built between 2002 and 2004 (Ziabari, 2016), it was initiated by Ibrahim, a Muslim convert from the region. The small community counts only about 20 to 30 members. All are Colombians, although the mosque occasionally hosts foreign Muslim visitors. Ibrahim explains that he knew Islam from a political perspective during the period of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Influenced by communist ideas related to the struggle of oppressed people for liberation and equality, he found in Islam a message in line with both his sociopolitical aspiration and spiritual needs. Only later did he discover the spiritual dimension of Islam that convinced him to become a Muslim. Questioned on his doctrine, Ibrahim explained that he does not appreciate divisions between doctrines and would rather call himself “just a Muslim”, neither Sunni nor Shia.<sup>16</sup>

Little by little, Ibrahim organized a community center in the distressed neighborhood where he is still living, building a small mosque, which loudly broadcasts the call to prayer five times a day. Though this is common practice in Muslim-majority countries, it is quite rare in the Americas. Due to the diffusion of the call to prayer (*adhan*) through the mosque’s loudspeakers, the whole neighborhood is aware of the mosque’s presence. Rather than receiving backlash, Ibrahim said the community started to hold “respect” for the few local Muslims, though this was not the case at the beginning (Ziabari, 2016). Indeed, Ibrahim recalled a time when the new Muslim community faced suspicion in the neighborhood. What helps, Ibrahim said, is the fact that the members of the mosque are involved in daily social services for the local community. In addition to its daily prayers and religious activities, the mosque organizes daily food distributions for impoverished children living in its surroundings. Perhaps unsurprisingly, most of these children are Christian and their families do not express any particular interest in Islam. The fact that free meals are offered by the mosque is perceived as something positive, even vital, for families that often cannot provide more than a daily meal to the children. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that despite these regular social services organized over a long period of time, conversions to Islam have remained very limited and the Muslim community has apparently not grown in number. In line with this observation, the Muslim leader explained that fighting poverty and social problems is an objective in itself, as Islam commands its followers to feed the hungry and help the needy unconditionally.<sup>17</sup> In this regard, Ibrahim does not consider welfare projects as tools

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<sup>16</sup> Although he studied Sunnism and apparently follows this doctrine, Ibrahim does not want to emphasize this denomination. He insists that he holds respect for Shiism and that Shii Muslims are welcome in “his” mosque.

<sup>17</sup> Ibrahim explains that he received a proposition to work in Cartagena’s main mosque, which he considers to be very well funded. He rejected the offer because of some disagreements related to his vision of what a mosque should be and what the funds should be used for. In this regard, he insisted on the need to have mosques in deprived neighborhoods (like the one that houses the Abu Bakr mosque) rather than in the city center, in order to have a positive social impact on the needy. He added that as a Muslim, his primary mission is to take care of the poor children who live nearby through the meal distribution he provides every day or other further projects (Personal Interview, March 19, 2021).

to do *dawah*. Rather, he considers doing social work and helping the poor children as its main purpose, which goes in line with the values of his faith.

According to Ibrahim, the sustainability of the food distributions for the children and even of the existence of the Muslim congregation remains a constant struggle. He argues that funding is insufficient, and the lack of means does not allow him to offer as many meals as necessary to the many hungry children in his neighborhood. Moreover, the mosque's attendance and activities remain weak due to the low number of worshipers, as the few members of the congregation show little motivation to practice and study Islam beyond daily prayers. According to the regular members of the congregation, only an increase in external funding by Muslim donors would enable the Islamic center to extend its food distribution to more children and diversify its welfare projects. Indeed, the hope is that further means would allow the mosque to offer free education and other activities to the children of the neighborhoods in addition to the supply of daily meals.

### ***The Mezquita As-Salam in Medellín***

Situated roughly between Cali and Cartagena, Medellín is the second-largest city in Colombia and one of its most popular destinations for foreigners. Although an Islamic center has already been active in the neighborhood of Belén for about two decades (Buitrago, 2013), the launch of a new mosque in 2017 (Campos Zuluaga, 2019, p. 42) in Guayabal, near the metro station Poblado triggered important changes for the local Muslim communities, which have seen recent growth. Although it was first initiated by the same Muslim community, the new *mezquita* As-Salam quickly gained in independence and began promoting its own ideological views and agenda. In contrast to other mosques in the country, *mezquita* As-Salam is open every day from dawn to night and hosts all five daily prayers. In addition, it organizes the Friday prayer followed by a shared meal and a Saturday religious class, also accompanied by a meal in the evening, which attracts dozens of Muslim men and women, almost all of them newer converts. Indeed, although the mosque attracts a mixed congregation<sup>18</sup> for Friday prayers, its other activities bring together a very large majority of converts of Colombian or Venezuelan origin.

A few months after the mosque's foundation, Egyptian Shaykh Mohammed Ali Matar became its imam and started to insist on the priority of *dawah*, arguing for the need to spread Islam in the city and beyond (Campos Zuluaga, 2019, p. 50). Previously, the Shaykh served as the imam of Valledupar's mosque, in northeastern Colombia. Following his arrival, *mezquita* As-Salam quickly became very active in developing various projects such as religious courses, the active promotion of prayers, community meals, educational workshops, and welfare activities. The

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<sup>18</sup> The weekly Friday prayer, due to its mandatory ritual nature, is attended by a wider variety of Muslims, including a small majority of Latin Americans (Colombians and Venezuelans converted to Islam), numerous recent migrants from Muslim countries (mostly Pakistan and Arab countries) who have settled in Colombia, as well as several Muslim "travelers" who stay in Colombia for a few weeks or months for various reasons (coming from the USA, France, and other countries).

latter include food distributions in the street, delivery of free meals inside the mosque during the weekend, and material support to individuals and families newly converted to Islam. He is helped by a small team of young Colombian Muslims dedicated to working for Islamic *dawah* in the country.

Rather than emphasizing their philanthropic aspects, the emphasis of these activities is placed on spreading Islam. Mohammed Ali Matar and Yusoof, his main assistant,<sup>19</sup> have made it clear that the purpose of social welfare services is to attract people to the mosque so that they hear the Islamic message.<sup>20</sup> In front of the Shaykh, Yusoof summarized the mosque's mission as "an enterprise of *dawah*, with our own style."<sup>21</sup> In this regard, *dawah* appears as the end that justifies social welfare activities, with the latter thus serving as a means for the purpose of disseminating Islam. The success of the Islamic center's involvement is then measured by the number of conversions, regularly shared via digital videos<sup>22</sup> and used for fundraising purposes. A common critique leveled by Muslims from other backgrounds points to the opportunism of what they see as possible "pseudo conversions," which might serve the purpose of obtaining material goods or free meals from the community.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, in the field, some scenes can be seen where social activities undertaken by the Islamic center result in collective conversions to Islam, captured on video, without any follow-up of the new converts' life journey.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Yusoof, a Colombian convert to Islam from Medellín, is in charge of the mosque's administration and management (at least during the period of my survey). At the time, he was the main assistant to the Shaykh.

<sup>20</sup> Following the Shaykh's charismatic authority, the other active members of the congregation also insist on the salience of *dawah*, which they all see as a priority. In my observations, the narratives of the Shaykh and the other committed members of the Islamic center were very similar, which can be explained by the fact that the leader is supported by restricted numbers of active volunteers who tend to strongly acknowledge his religious legitimacy.

<sup>21</sup> The words he used in Spanish were "una empresa de *dawah* con nuestro propio estilo" (field observation in mezquita As-Salam in Medellín, Colombia, on December 10, 2020).

<sup>22</sup> These videos have been shared on social media, mostly in WhatsApp groups. In some cases, they served as evidence sent to the founders to show people converting to Islam by saying the required testimony (*shahâda*). Regarding the case of *mezquita* As-Salam in Medellín, numerous videos have been shared on various social networks, such as WhatsApp groups and Facebook accounts, including that of the Islamic Center (<https://www.facebook.com/MezquitaAlSalam>) and of its imam. Many of them highlighted people converting to Islam by reciting the *shahâda*, while others show groups of people listening to the talk of Islam in a square. In Cartagena, the central mosque's imam asked some of the congregation members to record a video of a couple of Colombians reciting their *shahâda* for the first time.

<sup>23</sup> Three different interviews conducted in various contexts highlighting the same point. First, a convert Colombian woman who was previously active with *mezquita* As-Salam as well as with other Muslim congregations in the city explained being very disappointed of the charity work, which she considered as an alibi for extending the mosque's influence and attracting new people to its doors. Secondly, a Muslim activist from another Colombian city considered that the mosque's leaders use social work as a tool for proselytizing, without worrying about the welfare of the local population. Thirdly, a European Muslim who had tried to work with the Islamic center ended up judging it very negatively, saying its leaders "bought conversions with packets of rice."

<sup>24</sup> In 2021, a video recorded by the staff of the *mezquita* As-Salam and shared on WhatsApp shows a few dozen Colombian women, newly converted to Islam, gathered in the mosque for an event. All of them are wearing exactly the same clothes (jilbab of the same color), which would seem to indicate that these clothes were lent to them for the occasion. Another point that casts doubt on the seriousness of their commitment to Islam—or their conversion—is the fact that many of these women were not seen again in the mosque after the event.

**Social Work as a Means for Proselytizing or as an End in Itself?**

These three case studies, though distinct, highlight the different kinds—and ends—of social services undertaken by Muslim actors in Colombia. Despite the similarity in appearance of these charitable activities inspired or justified by Islam, their underlying motivations and visions differ significantly. But before critically considering the case of philanthropic action in the context of Colombian Muslim communities, it is necessary to consider the broader context of social activism in the name of Islam in other countries. In non-Muslim majority societies, research in western Europe (Barylo, 2017; Brodard, 2020a), the United States (Cantori, 2021), and the United Kingdom has helped develop the concept of “Islamic social work” to refer to this particular form of engagement (Warden, 2013). In various European countries, Muslim organizations show concern for undertaking welfare social activities in line with Islamic teachings (Martens, 2014). If “helping” others or providing welfare social services to the needy is usually justified by actors through religious references, the questions of “how” and “why” remain complex and often under-explored, despite some recent studies on the matter (Barylo, 2017; Mittermaier, 2019; Kayikci, 2020; Brodard, 2020a). In the European context, Muslim FBO’s actors usually conciliate religious and civic social values, as documented in both a study on female Muslims volunteers in Belgium (Kayikci, 2020) and research on charity Islamic organizations in France, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom (Brodard, 2023a, pp. 155–166), while a study of Muslim charity in the context of Egypt demonstrated the prevalence of religious motivations driving social activism (Mittermaier, 2019, pp. 3, 97). In this regard, it is important to critically examine the motivations and objectives behind the involvement of Muslim congregations or Islamic centers in charity work according to their context.

The case studies from the Colombian context illustrate that the vast majority of beneficiaries of the social projects are by and large non-Muslim. This is in stark contrast to many cases in western Europe, where the trend is the other way around, with beneficiaries tending to be Muslim (Barylo, 2017; Brodard, 2020a, 2022). This Colombian exception, which may be found in other Latin American countries as well, must be understood in light of two intertwined circumstances. First, the Muslim population in the areas concerned is extremely small, and any action in the public space will naturally reach a non-Muslim population more easily. Second, the case studies introduced earlier involve autochthonous Muslim congregations, and thus Colombians who are likely committed to working locally with their people. The latter aspect is particularly obvious in the Afro-Colombian Muslim community of Buenaventura and Cali, whose history has consistently shown a central concern for the political and social struggle for justice and liberation of the oppressed (Castellanos & Neira Manrique, 2009; Valencia Potes, 2014). Therefore, in those particular contexts, it is expected to find Muslims struggling for justice and social development beyond the boundaries of their religious denominations, pointing to a more universalist or inclusivist understanding of social work. It would be difficult not to draw a comparison with the US context, where the African American community stands out for its consistent commitment to social welfare and civil rights. Through a long history of civic engagement combining Islam and social activism (Brodard,

2014, pp. 6–8), African American Muslims have demonstrated a larger involvement in both welfare services and social justice activities than “immigrant mosques,” despite having fewer financial resources (Bagby, 2022, pp. 18–22). In addition to the different social realities between African American Muslim converts and those from migrant backgrounds, there is also a divergence of views on the role of Islam in their lives and how their faith shapes their relationship with society: “for many African-Americans, conversion to Islam has meant parting with mainstream culture, while Muslim immigrants have tended toward assimilation” (Elliott, 2007).<sup>25</sup> Despite the divergence in context, this gap should be considered in future studies of Afro-descendant Muslim communities in other American countries.

To return to the question of motivation and purpose related to charitable engagement in the public space, it is important to note that Islamic centers and Muslim leaders opt for different or diverging views and objectives, which hinders any possibility of generalization. Nevertheless, these case studies highlight that some insist on welfare services for anybody with an unconditional understanding of aid, whereas other Islamic organizations consider charity as a means principally for the purpose of *dawah*. When interviewing Muslim actors in the field to understand the motivations and reasons for their charitable involvement, one notices that some emphasize charity and compassion in an altruistic perspective motivated by faith, while others insist on the need to transmit Islam to people unaware of the religious “truth”. In Medellín, a converted Muslim woman recalls the time of the Musallah de Calasanz, explaining that she and her then-husband used to go out to help the young people in the neighborhood by engaging in conversations with them and providing them with food to prevent them from falling into delinquency. She then goes on to explain that, for her, Islam is about love and helping others. She adds that she never urged these young people to convert to Islam because the idea was simply to show them kindness and love.<sup>26</sup> The same woman later expressed criticism toward the As-Salam mosque and its leaders, whom she accuses of using social work as a means of proselytism without considering the needs of the local population. Nonetheless, Yusoof, one of the leaders of the *mezquita* As-Salam, does not consider the use of charity work for the purpose of proselytism as an issue. While explaining a future project that would involve distributing a drink, a sandwich, and a booklet introducing Islam to the poor on the streets, he confidently stated that “the objective is to do *dawah*”.<sup>27</sup>

The factors distinguishing the two perceptions<sup>28</sup> and positions do not seem self-evident at first, for the simple reason that they both claim to apply the

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<sup>25</sup> Despite the very specific context of the United States, this quote from an article in the *New York Times* may spark some further reflection: “For many African American converts, Islam is an experience both spiritual and political, an expression of empowerment in a country they feel is dominated by a white elite. For many immigrant Muslims, Islam is an inherited identity, and America a place of assimilation and prosperity” (Elliott, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> Interview in Medellín on April 6, 2021.

<sup>27</sup> Informal interview in the *Mezquita* As-Salam in Medellín on December 11, 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Obviously, there’s no total dichotomy between these two visions, but they do represent ideal types that are concretely reflected in certain narratives collected in the field.

teachings of Islam and assert to act within the framework of their supposedly common faith. But on closer inspection, it soon becomes apparent that the leaders involved in these charitable or proselytizing projects have diverging religious understandings. It can therefore be surmised that a variety of Islamic discourses contribute to shaping different practices in the field, although there are, of course, other factors motivating actors' practices. Competing views on Islam and its role in society, fomented as much by the sociocultural environment, life experience, and feelings of belonging to a particular religious current, shape how Muslim actors see their responsibility in their surroundings and how they approach their non-Muslim neighbors. In this regard, some genuinely believe that salvation comes only through religious conversion and therefore consider *dawah* as their essential duty, relegating social welfare engagement to a mere means to a greater end. Conversely, other Muslim leaders understand that Islam commands the believer to help the poor unconditionally and to contribute to the common good because of the duty of compassion and altruism mandated by God. This difference in understanding stems from the fact that the stakeholders belong to various religious movements, whose teachings and ideologies must be carefully considered as they shape concrete behaviors in the field.

### **Profile of Leaders and Strategic Positioning of Islamic Centers**

Nevertheless, beyond religious and ideological narratives, a series of other factors play a role in shaping the definitions and orientations of charity among Muslims in Colombia. Indeed, investments in social work and/or in *dawah* highly depend on strategic considerations, including fundraising and political positioning. In Europe, Islamic organizations providing welfare and social services significantly depend on external funding, both from private donations and statutory entities. It has been shown that orientation toward an inclusive opening of social services to a wider public or, conversely, toward a restricted community-based approach is mostly shaped by funding and partnership opportunities (Brodard, 2022). In this regard, Muslim actors tend to adapt their charity practice to broader sociopolitical expectations, which remain tied to the institutional and political context around them.

Another crucial aspect that helps explain differences in terms of distinguishing, or collapsing, charity and *dawah* practices in the name of Islam concerns the identifications and profiles of Muslim communities' leaders. When overlooking the Muslim congregations in Colombia, as well as in other Latin American countries, one may differentiate between the communities led and frequented by local Muslims and the ones led or supervised by migrant Muslims.<sup>29</sup> Fundación Islamica Kauzar en Cali and *mezquita* Abu Bakr in the suburbs of Cartagena are supervised by local, autochthonous Muslims, who show concern for their fellow citizens as well as the

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<sup>29</sup> As mentioned above, a similar distinction takes place in the US context. If the North American history of Muslim communities is long and dense enough to state such distinction, the lack of hindsight on the recent developments within Muslim communities in Colombia prevents making such strong conclusions, even though the question can be raised.

local environment. They insist on the need to tackle poverty and social problems while considering the importance of political engagement not only for Muslims but for society as a whole. Influenced by theologies of liberation (Gutiérrez, 1973; Boff & Boff, 1987), a theological and social movement that emphasizes the role of religion in advocating for the liberation of oppressed and marginalized groups, they believe Islam should play an active role in addressing societal injustices and promoting a fairer, more equal, and just society. In this regard, their Islamic discourses are contextualized in light of sociocultural realities and local issues.

Conversely, other Islamic centers consider that the foremost purpose of the involvement of mosques in the country is to *spread Islam as a religion*. In this regard, *dawah* becomes an end that justifies the means, including welfare social services. *Mezquita* As-Salam is led by Shaykh Mohammed Ali Matar, who explained having migrated from Egypt to Latin America with the clear intention to “do *dawah*”, to preach Islam. Shaykh Matar is also an influential member of a network of around 15 imams, mostly from Egypt, who have been trained in Quito, Ecuador, in the Spanish language to do *dawah* in Latin America. Headed by Shaykh Muhammad Mansour, who has been active for several years at the mosque in Mexico City’s Polanco district, this network of imams is expanding in various Latin American countries, particularly in Mexico and Colombia, where the group is supposed to already supervise four Islamic centers.<sup>30</sup> The network is centered on both a shared motivation and project focused on spreading Islam in Latin America through preaching. It is said to have significant financial resources, which explains its rapid rise and takeover of places of worship in various regions of Colombia and Mexico.<sup>31</sup>

Shaykh Matar explained clearly that the organization’s central objective is to spread a proper understanding of Islam in a context where it remains largely unknown. In this regard, the fundamental purpose of proselytizing overshadows other concerns for the local population’s welfare or even social development. From this perspective, salvation and deliverance can only be understood through conversion and compliance with Islam, which is considered the sole salvific religion for humanity. Therefore, what matters most is to be Muslim and to follow Islamic teachings. Other dimensions of life, such as welfare, are considered secondary from this point of view. It can then be argued that the idea of welfare is understood in this perspective only in the context of religious conversion.

Officially, the group’s representatives do not present themselves as Salafi, but simply as “Sunni,” seeking only to convey “authentic Islam” to Muslims regardless of their doctrinal affiliations. However, several members of other Muslim organizations perceive them as Salafi due to their religious interpretations (strong criticism against Sufism, rejection of the mainstream traditional theological

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<sup>30</sup> These are *mezquita* As-Salam in Medellín, *mezquita* An-Nur in Cali, *mezquita* Abu Baker en Valledupar, and the Centro Islamico de Pasto in Pasto.

<sup>31</sup> It was not possible to identify the source and nature of these financial resources. Moreover, due its opaque nature and the discretion of its members, the “organization” appears to be more of an informal network than a hierarchical structure, although some elements tend to support the hypothesis of the latter.

schools—i.e., Asharism and Maturidism), and identifying markers<sup>32</sup> (e.g., specific clothing for men such as *qamees* and ankle-length trousers, long beards, use of the jilbab and niqab for women, clear gender segregation). Furthermore, their social circles include many self-identified Salafis. Given these factors, we can surmise this network is Salafi on the basis of its discourses, religious teaching, and stance toward other Islamic traditions and local communities.<sup>33</sup> Analyzing its networks, we can also observe that *mezquita* As-Salam has relations with local Salafi figures like Muhammad Isa Garcia in Barranquilla as well as with organizations affiliated with transnational movements like the Akedemi Bunyan untuk Studi Islam in Indonesia.<sup>34</sup> For some reason, *mezquita* As-Salam and its network officially deny that they are doctrinally affiliated with Salafism, as they refuse any labeling excepting “Sunni.” Nevertheless, it could be identified as what Sadek Hamid (2016, p. 141) proposed as “methodological Salafism,” whose adherents claim to follow the Quran and Sunnah directly, without the mediation of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), any schools of law (*madhab*), and dogma (*‘aqeedah*). Furthermore, the group’s relationships and contacts are restricted to organizations promoting Salafism, such as Huda TV Channel and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY). Moreover, as I observed, it tends to comprehend Islam as a collection of principles and norms at its core, which have to be observed regardless of context, paying little attention to local sociocultural specificities. For such organizations, *dawah* is not only aimed at spreading Islam to non-Muslims, but also implies the promotion of a so-called “authentic” interpretation of Islam among professing Muslims who are considered misguided. This understanding of *dawah* aimed not only to non-Muslims but also to Muslims recalls the practice of various transnational Islamic organizations such as the iERA, an Islamic missionary group founded in the United Kingdom by Anthony (“Abdur Raheem”) Green in 2009 (Baz, 2016), but also other Salafi actors in non-Muslim countries like the United Kingdom (Farquhar, 2017) and France (Arslan & Marlière, 2014).

Finally, the prioritization of *dawah* explains the relegation of other aspects of community engagement like social work to simply serving as a means designed to serve a higher purpose. This approach considers that Islam has to be applied “as it is” without contextualization related to Latin American societies. Beyond the Salafis’ scope, we have observed a similar tendency in Chiapas with the

<sup>32</sup> Similar trends in style and dresses have also been observed in other contemporary contexts of Salafism’s expansion, such as in Indonesia (Hasan, 2018, p. 246).

<sup>33</sup> Salafism and Wahhabism are controversial notions still used by both researchers and religious actors with very different meanings. In this paper, the term Salafism is used to refer to an ongoing religious phenomenon characterized by recurrent and interconnected features despite its divisions in several tendencies (Haykel, 2014, pp. 38–39). Some commentators use the term Wahhabism as synonymous, in reference to religious doctrine formulated by Ibn ‘Abd-ul-Wahhab (Farquhar, 2017, pp. 6–8).

<sup>34</sup> The leader of the *mezquita* As-Salam in Medellín sent Colombian young Muslims to the Akedemi Bunyan untuk Studi Islam in Indonesia, an Islamic Institution linked to Salafism. This institution has links with various organizations, including the World Assembly of Muslim Youth, or WAMY, which is considered an influential component of the Salafi movement (Schulze, 2022).

Turkish organization Suleymanciler,<sup>35</sup> where the interpretation of Islam conveyed in this Mexican region is such that it is taught in Turkey without explicit intent to contextualize religious practices and discourses (Brodard, 2023b, p. 21). Therefore, the ideological and theological profile of some imams and community leaders helps explain the orientation of their activities and speeches, in particular the direction of nonprofit philanthropy or, on the contrary, calculated proselytism.

## Conclusion

Through the above cases, I have shown that some Islamic centers promote charity and aid for all, while others instrumentalize social services for the ultimate purpose of *dawah*. Not surprisingly, orientations given to charitable practices undertaken by Muslim congregations, in Colombia as elsewhere, depend on multiple factors. Among these, the cases above illustrate the need to distinguish between ideological and religious considerations and more pragmatic and strategic ones. In the background, sociocultural and political contexts will often exert a significant influence on the orientation of Muslim actors' choices. Although research on the nexus between Islam and philanthropy in Colombia is still in its nascent stages, mainly due to the very recent and highly evolving nature of Islamic charity work in these contexts, the case studies above already point to a few conclusions.

First, I suggest that "autochthonous Muslim communities" (Brodard, 2023b), as compared to Muslim congregations led by foreign figures, seem to have distinctive attitudes, discourses, and views at the level of both religion and activism. Although they usually stay affiliated with specific Islamic movements and ideologies from abroad, Islamic centers led by Colombian Muslims tend to shape their own religious practices and discourses through the prioritization of certain standards and principles over others and more flexible interpretations of other aspects (e.g., the salience of social engagement benefiting the local community including a majority of non-Muslims, versus the relativization of the importance of "ritual" religious elements considered a priority in other religious circles, such as the consumption of "halâl" meat, the wearing of the veil, or gender separation norms).<sup>36</sup> Beyond the influence of an "Islam imported from abroad," local "autochthonous" Muslim communities contextualize Islam in the light of their local social, cultural, and political contexts.

Second, although the limited number of cases prevents any broad generalizations, it is arguable that "autochthonous" Muslims often show a stronger concern for their local environment, tending to consider that Islam must contribute to tackling social problems like poverty and injustice in their country. The leaders

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<sup>35</sup> The Süleymanî, founded in the 20th century by Shaykh Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan, is one of the Turkish Muslim organizations that has transnational networks for preaching and teaching Islam abroad (Akgönül, 2005).

<sup>36</sup> Concrete examples of this trend can be seen, for example, in the Muslim community of Buenaventura, in the tolerance of the consumption of meat from non-ritually sacrificed animals, with the exception of pork. It can also be seen in the flexibility of injunctions concerning women's dress, in particular the wearing of the veil in the Muslim congregations of Buenaventura, Guapi, and Cartagena, just to name a few.

and main actors of the Islamic centers of Buenaventura, Cali, and La Boquilla in the suburbs of Cartagena have all developed substantial charitable initiatives, while insisting on the crucial duty for Muslims to contribute to the development of society and to help the needy regardless of religious adherence.

Third, interviews showed that ideological and religious beliefs often underpin decisions and orientations in terms of charity practices: some understand *dawah* as the higher purpose of any investment justifying to use of charity work as a means, whereas others argue that welfare activity is an end in itself, as Islam teaches its followers to spread compassion and kindness to others, therefore opting to help those in need “unconditionally,” including when they are not Muslim. This link between certain interpretations of Islam and social and political commitment has already been addressed in previous research (Solano Urrutia, 2020), but deserves further investigation. Although positions and approaches of Muslim organizations involved in social work or charitable activities depend largely on their understanding of Islam, strategic and pragmatic concerns also remain highly influential.

In this regard, funding opportunities and organizational strategies can in some cases lead to the instrumentalization of social welfare for proselytizing, as appears to be the case in the context of *mezquita* As-Salam in Medellín. In that context, the prioritization of *dawah* justifies the means of charity to attract new people to the faith. In parallel, *dawah* is encouraged by foreign donors who require evidence that their money has been used to spread of Islam.<sup>37</sup> This double relation, which helps explain the potential orientation of some faith-based organizations toward an instrumentalization of social welfare services to attract new converts, is nevertheless hindered by both altruistic and religious values promoting philanthropy unconditionally that influence the practices of some Muslim actors.<sup>38</sup> In any case, the factors predisposing one to a preference for religious preaching or altruistic benevolence remain complex and multifaceted, preventing any clear-cut generalization. Continued observation, quantifiable studies, as well as some comparative research would be helpful to improve our understanding of the complex relation between charity and proselytism, particularly in the context of Muslim communities in Latin American countries.

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<sup>37</sup> This tendency was explained by several Muslim leaders in Colombia and Mexico. Some activists carefully count the number of conversion testimonies (or *shahâda*) and record them on video in order to show evidence of the impact of their presence in the field when they communicate with (potential) donors.

<sup>38</sup> Indeed, it cannot be argued that all the motivations behind the engagement in charity work stand for strategic interests. No serious elements allow us to doubt the sincerity of activists acting in the name of their faith and mercy for their fellow humans, except when they themselves indicate the opposite.

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