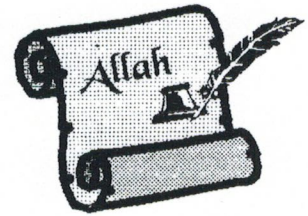


Somos...

revista panislamica de Alianza Islamica
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Somos: What's In The Name

We wish to welcome you to the premiere issue of *Somos...*, the literary voice of Alianza Islámica, a research and information center located at Lexington Avenue between 107th and 108th Street. The mere presence of an Islamic organization in a traditionally Latin neighborhood has surely raised both eyebrows and many questions. It was deemed necessary to publish a newsletter to provide answers to these questions or risk letting those both less informed and less sympathetic answer them for us.

This brings us to the newsletter's name. While brainstorming for a title, a close friend suggested *Somos*. No specific reason was given and it was hard for me at the time to envision its relevance, but it was short and sweet, a palindrome (spelled the same backwards), and looked great on the screen in 54-point bold and italicized Cranbrook. Work continued apace on the publication and as the work unfolded so, too, did the significance of the title.

The word *Somos* is really the beginning of a sentence, a long prolonged exposition of who we at Alianza Islámica are, what we represent, what we stand for, and what we cherish and hold dear.

Subsequent issues would extend this dialogue with our community over the course of, God willing, months and years, each issue revealing more and expanding understanding of the Islamic way of life.

Keeping with the new understanding of our title, I added a small graphic enhancement. An ellipsis (...) was added to indicate that every turn of the page will reveal more about us. It is very important that you understand who we are and what we are about. For we are not strangers or foreigners. We are, for the most part, from the neighborhood and have shared in its pleasures and its pains just like you have. You already know us much better than you think.

So let the dialogue begin. Turn the page and let's start to talk. As the months go by, if it be God's will, we will get better at this and produce more substantial issues. Now about those Latino Muslims, I was about to say...

Inside: Ojala by Ibrahim Gonzalez, Latino Muslims in El Barrio and more

Latino Muslims In El Barrio

There was once a time when the sights and sounds of El Barrio were fairly predictable. Longtime residents would be hard-pressed to remember a winter without seeing a group of men huddled for warmth around a blaze from a stuffed trash can. Or a summer without the piragüeros providing a refreshing street corner oasis from the sweltering city heat with their soothing beverage of syrup and ice.

When it came to religion, things were quite simple. Pentecostal storefront churches were springing up on every block but Catholics still maintained an easy majority. And underscoring it all of course were the espiritistas and their more garish kin, the santeros, their idolatry only thinly veiled in the robe of Catholicism.

So no small amount of wonder greets the fully clad Muslim latina on line at the supermarket when she asks the check-out girl, "¿Y el sofrito, no estaba en especial?" Eyebrows raise and heads whirl for they expected an Arab's thick accent but got instead the melodious tones of a caribeña. Slowly, but inexorably, the residents of El Barrio are being made aware of a new presence in their neighborhood, one that seems both different and familiar. With the opening of Alianza Islámica, a small storefront information center on Lexington Avenue between 107th and 108th Street, a new element to the varied tapestry of El Barrio has been added.

People have greeted this new development with a mixture of curiosity and caution. It is at once alien and strangely appealing and many have come into the center just to satisfy their curiosity and have some gnawing questions answered. With recent events both at home and abroad focusing on Muslims, this new presence has taken on greater significance.

Alianza Islámica is a private institution dedicated to the comprehensive research and dissemination of the history, tradition, and culture of the true and authentic prophets of God. Though it is located in a predominately Spanish-speaking neighborhood, its services are open to people of all ethnic backgrounds. Its director, Yahya Figueroa, is a native of El Barrio and a dedicated Muslim for over twenty years. His untiring efforts led to the opening of this center earlier this year, a long-held dream.

Though small and with, as yet, scant resources, this diminutive locale seeks to serve as a hub for accurate information on the religion of Islam and for a slate of community services which include drug counseling and tutorial instruction for children and adolescents. Its all-volunteer staff boasts an impressive and varied amount of skills in a number of fields: education, computer programming and repair, linguistics, drug and alcohol abuse counseling, accounting, health care, and journalism. The autonomous Muslim women's contingent is led by Maryam Figueroa and Faiza Ocasio, women with strong professional backgrounds in business and education.

Latin American culture has been deeply influenced by Islam. Muslims ruled Spain for seven centuries and left an indelible mark on Latin society and culture. Even the Spanish language has hundreds of Arabic words left as a legacy by the Muslim rulers of Spain, some which are quite common in everyday speech such as salsa, arroz, aceituna, camisa, and zapatos.

It may not be long before a Spanish-flavored Islamic reality becomes common in Latin neighborhoods all around the city. Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world with some 800 million to 1 billion adherents. Contrary to many popular media depictions, most are hard-working, civic-minded people who are devoted to family and strict moral values. Much work has to be done to dispel the myth that Islam is synonymous with terrorism. The word Islam means peace and submission, the very antithesis of terrorism.

Alianza Islámica has opened up its doors to help bring a small measure of that peace to its beloved neighborhood.

Ibrahim Gonzalez's Ojalá, Part One

"Alca, alca, alcapurria!" sang the cuchifrito vendor on the southeast corner of 111th Street and Lexington Avenue as I climbed out of the subway exit on that shivery winter day. My mind was set on the religion assignment which Brother Logan had given us in class. Comparative religion he called it. We were to select a religion other than Roman Catholicism and visit its place of worship, observe a service if permitted, ask questions whenever and wherever appropriate, and purchase any literature which elaborated on its tenants of belief. I was already used to checking out the various Protestant churches in El Barrio, and I knew that my other ethnic counterparts (the Irish, Italian, and Polish kids at Cardinal Spellman High School, etc.) would consider the encounter with other Christian denominations - or with a Jewish rabbi for that matter - an exotic adventure. Temple No. 7 on 116th and Lenox Avenue was where I was headed, the Black Muslim temple. So after wolfing down the platanos maduros, huevos fritos, y cafe con leche with which my Abuelita Doña Maria nourished me con cariño, I set out for the West Side along 115th Street in order to avoid the congestion of La Marqueta along 116th Street.

As I approached la botanica near the elevated railroad, I saw chalky blue dye spread all along the storefront's sidewalk. I didn't know whether to step right through it or walk around it out of religious respect. But always out of curiosity, I would peek in through the window to look at the ensemble of tropical plants, African figures and statues of saints and almost always there was a statue of an American Indian wearing his chieftan headdress of eagle feathers. El Indio always had the most stoic expression of all the statues in the window. I equated his firm stability with a wisdom unknown to the rest of us, and his presence within la botanica as our severed link to our Taíno past, which I didn't know enough about.

As I approached Lenox Avenue, I felt a certain mysterious anticipation. The image of a tall, red-haired, fiery-speaking black man, whom I remember addressing a crowd swelled in my mind. When I was about nine years old, one Sunday, my father, brothers, and I set out for Central Park from our grandfather's apartment in the Foster Projects. As we waited for the light to change to cross the street to the park, the man, megaphone in hand, passionately spoke out against white on black violence and police brutality perpetuated in the "so-called Negro community." He urged those listening to learn how to protect themselves against racial attacks "...by any means necessary!" I never saw that same man speak on that corner, but what he said stuck with me and although I didn't consider myself "Negro", I felt the same applied to me as a Puerto Rican.

As I rounded the corner on the broad boulevard, my daydream faded into admiration for the majestic structure of the Nation of Islam Temple with its arched windows gracing the façade capped by a silver onion dome. Atop the dome, was the symbolic star and crescent, slowly rotated by the gentle breeze, glistening in the sun as it revolved. The temple housed a variety of storefront businesses on the street level, one of them being its own bookstore. I entered as unobtrusively as I could, but was immediately noticed. I was greeted with a warm smile from the man in the shop. After I politely reciprocated his greeting, he asked, "What can I help you with today, Brother?" It was the first time ever in my life that anyone had referred to me that way. Not only did I feel the man was prepared to lend me his fullest attention, but I also felt an immediate connection to him, as if he was ready to let me glance at a whole world of knowledge and wisdom which intuitively I was being led to. I didn't even feel the need to explain my assignment to him, though I felt perfectly comfortable to do so. As he showed me through the shelves of books on Islam, I was increasingly pleased by the sweet and subtle scent given off by the incense which permeated the atmosphere. After looking over the brother's recommendations, I choose two books which seemed to be within my scope of comprehension. We talked for a while and he explained to me the Muslim concept of brotherhood and its innate nature to seek understanding concerning its purpose. I refrained from asking too many questions for one, because, as a Catholic youth, I held onto a certain amount of pride and didn't want to give the impression that I was not grounded in my religion and also I felt that I shouldn't take up too much of his time and distract him from keeping shop.

I skimmed both books that night when I got home and prepared some notes for class the next day. Sure enough, most of the guys in the class went to the predictable churches and, to my surprise, no one even thought of going to a synagogue. Coily I waited to be the last to volunteer to give an oral report in class. Although the guys in class thought I was pretty weird for venturing that far afield away from the safety of Christianity, Brother Logan was not at all surprised or taken aback from my experience - he had served as a missionary in Africa. As the school year progressed, and my contact with people of different ideologies increased and intensified, I felt even more alien to the brand of religion I was brought up in. I had literally gone from altar boy to Puerto Rican political activist, struggling for all oppressed people, rallying against the Vietnam War, and realizing the role that the church played in the colonization of native peoples around the world.

End of Part 1

An Editorial

The Magic Act

Most people are fascinated by a magician's sleight of hand and are dazzled by cinematic wonders wrought by modern day special effects wizardry. In many cases, the illusionary effects are merely diversionary, just pure entertainment. But when applied to the real world, the realm of illusion can reveal its sinister dark side, masking a life of evil and doom behind a cloak of pleasure and ease. This is predicated on the distortion of reality.

For a Muslim, his perception of reality is based on the guidance contained in the book of Allah, the Most High, the Qur'an, His book, and the traditions of His Messenger, Muhammad (peace be upon him). This guidance is the core of his faith. It is his criterion for judgment and sets the parameters for all his actions. With this guidance, a Muslim is firmly rooted, solidly grounded, and clearly defined. Without it, he is ethereal, evanescent, an amorphous mass of aimless fluff.

Aimlessness is the hallmark of a world based on illusory foundations, a world made prurient and hedonistic by malicious delusion. Transience is embellished and the temporal is bedecked with baubles of bewitchment. In such a rudderless existence, material possession and the pursuit of homes, fat bank accounts, expensive furnishings, and unrestricted access to intoxicants and sexual gratifications are symbols for hundreds of millions of having "made it". Yet human beings were not created by Allah for this purpose. As a result, every conceivable repercussion spawned by this life-style has afflicted humanity at great cost: broken marriages, wars, venereal and degenerative diseases, criminal anarchy in the streets, and a cultural disintegration caused by all manner of social pathologies and psychoses.

To any sane person who could clearly see the cause and effect relationship between this unrestrained lifestyle and its destructive consequences, this would have as much appeal as a lifetime of root canals. The social misery is so great. Yet hundreds of millions remain devotees and defenders of this way of life in spite of tremendous human pain and suffering. This is a triumph for the real master illusionists, a grand collusion of big business, the government, the media, and morally bankrupt pundits, many with the highest academic credentials, who soothe the masses into compliance with the ideals of hedonism and consumerism. This means, of course, untold wealth for those with a vested interest in profiting from a dissolute public's relentless urge for gratification.

The master deceivers and their henchmen, modern admen, have convinced people that hedonism, the doctrine that the pursuit of pleasure is the only good, is in fact an affirmation of life. It is actually the very negation of life! Newport uses the slogan "Alive With Pleasure" in its cigarette ads marketing disease and death. Sex is an important tool for the adman who uses it to sell everything from blue jeans to cars. With the complicity of Hollywood, the advertising industry has helped promote a climate of uninhibited sexuality divorced from traditional moral underpinnings.

Take the word promiscuous, which has all but disappeared from the airwaves and print media. It has been replaced in the language of modern doublespeak by the less specific and, therefore, less accurate term "sexually active", which carries none of the moral overtones of the former word. So now "it has become socially acceptable for liberated, uninhibited women to be cautiously sexually active and more assertive in establishing intimacy with men". Translation: *There is no shame in being a slut.*

Muslims should be ever on guard against this form of sophisticated deception and should always be eager to point it out to those unfortunately deluded. The objective of this deception is to turn one away from the remembrance of Allah, the Creator of all things, and from the doing of righteousness which leads to the eternal reward of Paradise. The road to hell has been cleverly concealed. Only strict adherence to the authentic sources of Divine guidance can lead us through the labyrinth of trickery relatively unscathed.