



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

**America's Capital
The Islamic Center and the National Cathedral**

The Islamic Center and the Washington National Cathedral

Report One: The Islamic Center

May 10, 2006

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter, reporting once again from Massachusetts Avenue in Washington, DC.

Today, we call on two places located on this street. First, we visit the Islamic Center; second, the Washington National Cathedral. I devote more space to the National Cathedral than the Islamic Center. This approach reflects two facts: (1) The National Cathedral is larger and displays more wares than the Islamic Center; (2) The National Cathedral's gift shop has more stuff than the Islamic Center's gift shop.

The Islamic Center

The Islamic Center has been a feature attraction in Washington, DC for many years. When I first saw the Center campus, I thought its principal building (seen in Figure 1¹), housed an Embassy of a Middle East country. Later, I discovered it was (and is) a learning center and a place of worship. The Center also serves as a monument to Islamic culture. As you can see from the day-time and night-time photos in Figure 1, the building is a beautiful landmark in our nation's capital.

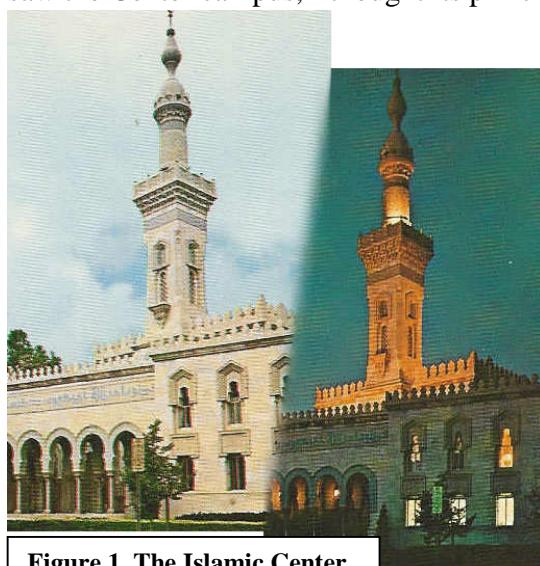


Figure 1. The Islamic Center.

The Washington Islamic Center was founded during President Truman's term in 1947 to accommodate the large influx of Arab Muslims into the Washington, DC area. Before this mosque was built, religious services were held in make-shift places, such as homes and rented rooms.

The Center is not a large building. Most of its space is reserved for the mosque. Our visit occurred in between the times of prayer. Consequently, few people were milling about. Your Reporter and Reporterette were the only tourists in sight. We spent a few moments inside the central chamber of the mosque. Parts of its interior design are shown in Figure 2. It is an ornate theme, in keeping with the mosques in the Middle East and the Orient. Unlike Christian places of worship, a mosque has no altar or pews. Worshippers knell on the rugs in the room for their prayers.

¹ Courtesy of The Islamic Center, 2551 Massachusetts Avenue N.W., Washington, D.C.



Figure 2. Inside the mosque at the Islamic Center.

The Islamic Center Gift Shop

We now continue your Reporter's determination to get to the bottom of the mystery: Why are T-shirts sold in curio stores but not in gift shops? To that end, I checked-out The Islamic Center's bric-a-brac room. This investigation preceded the visit to the mosque in order for Reporterette to buy a scarf.

As I expected, the shop sold the usual gear, such as postcards, scarves, and books. But compared to other monument stores, this shop was Spartan. For example, I could not find a commemorative whisky jigger. No matter, the focal point of my search was T-shirts, so I approached a store clerk:

- Reporter, "Hello, I'm looking for T-Shirts."
- The clerk stared at me for a moment, but said nothing. He glanced to his cash register, looked up....paused, then asked, "What's a T-shirt?"
- This couldn't happen in our great country! A T-shirt impaired person living in America!
...And a joke. What he said was, "No T-shirts."
- Reporter, "You're missing out on a big market."

The clerk responded with a quiet shrug of his shoulders. A gesture that spoke many words. Nonetheless, taking a cue from the famous author of the book *Blink*, I searched for additional clues to his countenance by looking at his forehead to read his thoughts. No luck.

- I began to feel like The Ugly American, "OK, I'll take some post cards and a scarf....
Do you sell any scarves that my wife should *not* wear into the mosque? Any headgear that's forbidden?"
- Clerk, " Just so her head is covered. That's why we sell them."

Later, I also purchased several books and pamphlets about Islam. A few years ago, after I decided to stop reading about "Electrons on the Internet," I had time on my hands, so I retrieved a copy of the Quran² that I had bought in the 1970s, but had never opened. I attempted to read it but was stumped. After a couple hours of confusion, I put the book away, and later read *The Koran for Dummies*.³ I was now ready for Koran 101.

The shop displayed shelf upon shelf of books on Islam and the Quran. Not certain which selection to chose, but determined not to chose another indecipherable text, I noticed a man browsing through the books. He could have been a naïve tourist, such as I, but he did not resemble a tourist. He looked Middle Eastern. *Blink* had taught me to read people's forehead to determine their ethnic predispositions. Thus armed, I approached the man and....

Oh all-right, before we proceed, yes, I was profiling. I realize this practice assumes certain behavioral characteristics of individuals based on their external appearance. I recognize it is not supposed to be done in America. But we all do it. We "profile" every single person we encounter, even before he or she has uttered a word to us.

Anyway, I profiled this man. He looked like Omar Sharif. Thus, he resembled an Islamic-knowledgeable, Middle Easterner; as well as an enlightened Dr. Zhivago. Hey, cut me some slack. If he had resembled Howdy Doody, I wouldn't have approached him.

The upshot is: Thanks to this man, I purchased several tutorials on the subject at The Islamic Center gift shop. Yes, Gift Shop. It does not sell T-shirts, so it cannot be classified as a curio store.

Your on the Street Reporter

² I use the spelling Quran. In English, it is also spelled Koran and Qur'an.

³ Sohaib Nazeer Sultan, *The Koran for Dummies* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Publishing, 2004).

The Washington National Cathedral and The Islamic Center

Report Two: The Washington National Cathedral

May 10, 2006

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter, reporting from Massachusetts Avenue in Washington, DC, where we visit the Washington National Cathedral. Words to describe this place: Massive, Grand, Imposing, Remarkable. I'll save awesome for something that really impresses me. I was taken by this awesome cathedral.

It is said a picture says a thousand words, so let's begin this report with a photo of the building, as seen in Figure 3.⁴ The building is located on top of Mount St. Alban, which affords a view of downtown DC and the National Mall area. It can be seen from miles around, even from Virginia as you approach the nation's capital.



Figure 3. The Washington National Cathedral.

The Cathedral is the sixth largest structure of its kind in the world.⁵ Its architecture is a Gothic style, which was used for many cathedrals in Europe beginning in the 12th and 13th centuries. A common feature of this type of building is flying buttresses outside the building to reinforce the walls and distribute their weight. Another characteristic is the strange-looking gargoyles populating the roofs.

This church contains many individual worship rooms. The largest is the central chamber where famous people attend the funerals of famous former-people. In addition, weddings and multifaith services are a common part of the Cathedral's ongoing operations. The building also functions as temporary quarters for other churches. Fourteen religious organizations have used the Cathedral's rooms while those orders built their own houses of worship.

⁴ Courtesy of The Washington National Cathedral.

⁵ The largest cathedral in the world is St. John the Devine, located in New York.

Good idea. I wish multiservice operations were more in vogue. I'm skeptical of the tax-exempt status accorded to churches---especially in view of recent events in which churches and church leaders have ventured into politics. *Mr. or Ms. Deacon/Pastor/Shaman/Priest/Rabbi, etc., once you start campaigning for a Red or a Blue, a Pink or a Purple, please mail-in your 1041s, accompanied by a check.* This approach may sound harsh, but just consider how many church-owned properties in America are not taxed.

Why is this fact of importance to you and me? If different faiths conducted their services in the same building, Uncle Sam could lower our taxes, thereby freeing Uncle Sam to seize the now vacant churches through Imminent Domain for the development of Taco Bells and condos.

Just consider the possibilities, the front part of a multifaith church could be designed like a theater stage: The various artifacts, icons, crosses, stars, and flowers associated with a specific service could be placed on a large mobile table and wheeled in-and-out as needed.

I'm not being disrespectful. After all, I'm a certified and saved Southern Baptist. Just food for thought to gain some income from those religious folks who are as political as they come, but do not come forth with paying taxes. ...Say, the 700 Club.

Very Fancy Crypts

Over 300 people are buried inside the Washington National Cathedral. A very impressive resting place. And with each passing year, I think a bit more about this final stop. It is going to be a big adjustment on my part because I like to move around. Similar to my proposed multifaith altar, I'm ambulatory by nature. A grave will definitely put a crimp in my life style. I considered several places for depositing my carcass and settled on the cemetery in my hometown. I have many pals and relatives buried there, so it's a user-friendly graveyard.

Nonetheless, my potential plot is located in a part of America noted for its scarcity of trees and other greenery. I am fond of foliage. So, no offence to my prospective neighbors in the Lovington Cemetery, but I'm keeping my options open. To that end, I asked a Cathedral guide:

- "What qualifications, other than being dead, does it take to be buried here?"
- Guide, "Funny. Being famous helps. So does being a benefactor to the Cathedral.
Long-time members of the Cathedral and its associated schools⁶ also have a chance.
...Do you fit the criteria?"
- Reporter, "I fail all of them. I'm not famous. I've never given a red cent to the
Cathedral. I'm not a member, and have never attended any of the schools."
- Guide, "And you fail the most important requirement. You're not dead."
- Reporter, "Very good. Do you accept tips?"

I snapped a few photos while visiting the Cathedral. Figure 4 shows three views of the Rose Window, which reminded me of a similar glass creation I saw in Paris at the Notre Dame Cathedral. I mentioned my observation to Reporterette, who informed me rose-like windows are

⁶ On the grounds are some prep schools. St. Albans is the best-known.

found in a variety of churches. Still, the two windows look a lot alike. Maybe the designers bootlegged the design for piety's sake.

The left picture in Figure 4 is an outside shot, taken in front of the Cathedral. The middle picture is an inside shot taken from the central chamber; as is the right photo, which provides a closer look at the colored glass.

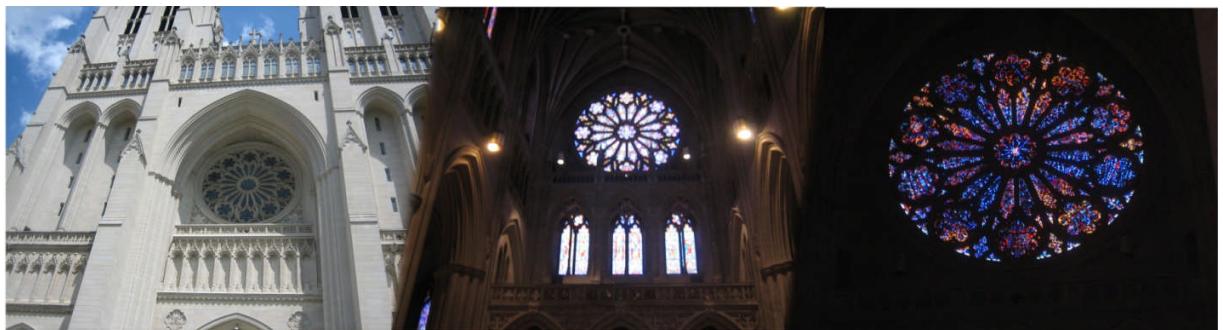


Figure 4. The Rose Window.

Regal glass windows are impressive, but these stately structures have nothing on my hometown in New Mexico. Prior to the construction of a new Lovington First Baptist Church in the late 1940s, its predecessor featured a glass window. Unlike Notre Dame and the National Cathedral, the First Baptist Church's window was made of discarded bottles.

The creation was of clear and opaque glass. In the spirit of the building's spirit, all bottles were label-free. No Pepsi or Coke names could be found on any of the bottles. Granted, I had not been exposed to Medieval Gothic architecture, but I judged the glass window to be splendid handiwork. Too bad it was torn down. Along with the recently constructed prison and cheese factory... and a future nuclear waste site, I suspect it would now be a major tourist attraction...accompanied by a curio store.

Johns Worthy of St. John the Devine

The benefactors and builders of the Washington National Cathedral did not skimp on money. Nor did they hold back on making the many parts of the edifice an integrated whole. Yet this place of worship is not lavish. It is not understated nor overstated. It is elegantly simple.

Furthermore, no detail escaped the architects' eyes. For example, Figure 5 shows a men's room door. Pretty impressive for a door to a john, but elegant understatements can sometimes present logistical problems. Look at Figure 5 again. Notice the absence of the conventional large sign advertising the function of the room behind the door. Notice the presence of a very small sign advertising the same. As you can see---well *maybe* you can see---the sign is barely visible.

I asked a guide for directions to a men's room. She replied, "Down this hall. Turn right at the dead end. It's on your left."



Figure 5. A regal entrance to a john.

I followed her directions and passed by this door three times before I realized this gothic-like entrance was the door to my (increasingly) important destination. Interestingly, as I grow older, I find I develop preconceived images about a subject, which clouds my otherwise mediocre judgment about the subject. *Where in the hell (opps, sorry; I'm in a church) is the john? Don't see a sign. Doors along this corridor are not restroom doors; most likely doors to places of worship or religious thrones.*

I was searching for a different throne. I found it and then made my way to the most important part of the tour: The Washington National Cathedral gift shop. Yes, it had to be a gift shop. A dignified place such as this could not possibly sell T-shirts. It could not possibly be a curio store.

The Bric-a-Brac Room

The official title of this room is, "The Washington National Cathedral Museum Shop and Book Store." This title is misleading because the Cathedral contains no museum pieces, unless you count as historical artifacts the 300 bodies lying in the crypts.

Books for certain. Hundreds of them. Scores of Bibles; some costing a few dollars, and some going for eleven thousand dollars. Even a book on the *Guide to Gargoyles*. I was tempted to buy this book because scary-looking gargoyles have fascinated me since my childhood days when I first encountered them on roof of the First Baptist Church in my hometown. Just joking, our church's architecture was post-Gothic and thus did not include gargoyles (but it did have a window made of glass bottles). Besides, Reverend Watts' fire and brimstone sermons were

sufficient to scare the wits out of an eight-year-old kid. No gargoyles were needed to frighten me to the bosom of Jesus.

What a knick-knack place! Handbags, umbrellas, hundreds of crosses (on earrings, key rings, necklaces, and bracelets), scarves, fridge magnets, bookmarks, paper weights, coasters, puzzles, shirt pins, dishes, cups, spoons, chess sets, saucers, ties and pillows ("Cathedral Inspired"), decals, clay pots, watch fobs, and Cathedral condoms. (Just checking if you were reading the list.)

But no T-shirts. I looked around but could not spot any of those sinful lures. Good thing, because I had broken into a cold sweat just being near other temptations. A T-shirt would have put me over the edge.

Nonetheless, a reporter's job is to report, especially when it is possible to report on a nonevent, and thus extend the news report by 15 seconds in order to fit-in two minutes of advertisements. Thankfully, I'm into hard copy reporting where a person can skip over the advertisements. Anyway, just to confirm my initial findings, I sauntered over to the cashier, "Hello. I noticed you have no T-shirts."

Clerk, "Oh yes, we do. They're to your right at the end of the room."

T-shirts! No way! Not in a Church-oriented gift shop. Not in the somber, elegant surroundings of the Washington National Cathedral. But there they were. A couple shelves of T-shirts with the picture of the Rose Window on their fronts. Wow. The Rose Window. Dignified, no lettering, just the window.

Still, the Islamic Center did not traffic in T-shirts. Nor did the Supreme Court. Truth is, my working theory had just become a non-working theory. I had discovered a bric-a-brac establishment---ostensibly, a gift shop---housed inside the building of a dignified institution, selling T-shirts. In fact, it was a curio store.

In closing out this nonreport on nothing of significance, I would like to suggest a change to the Washington National Cathedral's sign for its store. It should read, "The Washington National Cathedral Book, Bric-a-Brac, Knick-Knack, and Curio Store."

I would also like to suggest the city fathers and mothers of Lovington, New Mexico, that they construct a replica of the glass window (of discarded bottles) of the old First Baptist Church. This window would be a model for a photograph. This photo would then be placed on a T-shirt and sold in the Curio Store next to the glass window. Why not? Tourists flock to all kinds of hackneyed exhibitions: Religious sandwiches; a painting of Mary who weeps---playing havoc with the water colors.

And the biggest scam of all: Abstract modern art (*I'll take that black canvas. Only two million dollars? Fine, wrap it up. I'll also like to buy the painting of a soup can.*) Talk about addictions.

Cast Aside that Sinful Habit

And speaking of addictions, the road to recovery from an addiction rests on resisting temptation. T-Shirts Anonymous (TA) emphasizes a life style that keeps an addict away from the source of the addiction. Not me. Jump into the lion's den and wrestle with the lions.

I bought a T-shirt at the Washington National Cathedral Book, Bric-a-Brac, Knick-Knack, and Curio Store. I took the article off the shelf, paid the clerk with an admittedly shaky hand, and made my way out of the store. ...Once more, on the road to ruin.

But raise be! Hallelujah! I was saved from T-shirtism because I paused before consuming it...eh, before putting it on...and thought of the 4th point of TA's 12-step program: *Make a searching and fearless moral inventory of yourself.* I did not like what I saw, and I realized I needed more than words; I needed a role model for abstinence. But who would it be? Of course! The paragon of self-denial, self-restraint, and moderation: President Clinton.

Thus, I embraced TA's Step 4 as well as Bill for my role model: He smoked, but he didn't inhale. He had sex, but he didn't have sex. I bought, but I didn't wear **it**. I pulled **it** out ~~of~~ the wrapper, but I didn't put it on.

Like an alcoholic's whisky bottle in the cupboard, I have the Rose Window T-shirt in my closet. I look at it occasionally, even a bit wistfully, thinking of those past days of T-shirt indulgence. Nonetheless, it remains on its hanger in my closet, a powerful testament to those champions of abstinence, T-Shirts Anonymous and Bill Clinton.

Your on the Street Reporter