

Interreligious Insight

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MUSINGS...

¡Ojalá!

By Gilbert Friend-Jones

Ojalá is one of the most beautiful words in any language. It is Spanish, and pronounced Oh-ha-LAH. It expresses a strong desire for something to come to pass. *Ojalá* I will get the job! *Ojalá* she will sell the house to us! *Ojalá* he will win the tournament! Modern Spaniards say it means “May it be so” or “I hope that” or “I wish that” something will happen.

But like many of other words (“Goodbye” for example) its meaning is much richer than this. It expresses a nearly universal sentiment which is religious to its core.

For historical reasons, many Spanish words are rooted in Arabic. *Ojalá* is one. Its predecessor in Arabic is *Insha’Allah!* - “if God wills.” To this day when pious Arabic speakers plan for the future, or make promises, resolutions or pledges, they begin or end with “*Insha’Allah*” - if God wills. A friend recently announced her wedding plans by saying, “*Insha’Allah*, Hud and I will be married this summer.”

Ojalá and *Insha’Allah* both introduce a note of deep uncertainty about life. We will marry - if God wills. In the face of circumstances beyond our control, *Ojalá* expresses an attitude of profound humility and acceptance. We declare our strong desire or intention, but the “success” of our endeavor does not depend upon a particular outcome. In West Virginia we said it this way: “*Lord willin’ and the creek don’t rise.*”

Unless I am a saint, however, God’s will and my wishes often clash. If I haven’t given my life into God’s hands, then “*Ojalá*” takes its thinner, more modern meaning: “I wish” or “I hope.” “I hope the Braves win.” Or perhaps God becomes the servant of my self-indulgence: “I want God to make it possible for me to have this house!”

But the recognition of uncertainty concerning everything I cherish also may reveal a greater certainty - the certainty of a *fundamental commitment*. If I have committed my life to God, then *Ojalá* (“if God wills”) is what I most truly want. I may yearn to own this house, to marry or to get that job, but I crave even more to fulfill God’s purpose for my life. Jesus ended his famous prayer with its Aramaic equivalent: “I want to avoid this suffering,” he said, “but -- *ojalá* -- your will be done.”

Medieval Spaniards, contemporary Arabs and traditional West Virginians share this basic piety. In the proper ordering of a life lies the intrinsic beauty of this word.

