

My Muslim Friend

During my years in India I made many friends. Most of these friends were either Hindu or Buddhist, but I also had Christian and Jewish friends, as well as friends who were Zoroastrians or followers of the Baha'i faith. It was only in 1964, towards the end of my stay, that I acquired a Muslim friend. I was paying a farewell visit to Bombay and giving lectures in various parts of the city. Bombay was a cosmopolitan place, and as usual people of all faiths and none came to hear me. After one of these lectures I was approached by a tall, handsome young man in western dress. His name was Ramzam Ali, he told me, and in the course of the next few weeks he became my first Muslim friend. Besides coming to other lectures he visited me at the flat in Malabar Hill where I was staying and as he was rather communicative I soon knew quite a lot about him. He lived with his widowed mother who wanted him to take over the running of the family business, marry, and beget children, but he wanted to do none of these things. He was an innocent child of God, he declared, and he wanted to lead a spiritual life. He had no desire for worldly prosperity or for sex, and had his mother not insisted on stuffing him with mutton he would have been a vegetarian long ago.

In the course of our friendship he often spoke of himself as being an innocent child of God, and I came to associate the phrase with him. What he meant by it was not always clear and its connotation seemed more negative than positive. By birth he belonged to the Ismaili branch of Shiite Islam and he had a great devotion to its leader, the Aga Khan. The present holder of the office was a young man like himself, he once told me, and a few years earlier he had written to him about some doubts he was experiencing and had received a sympathetic reply signed by the Aga Khan himself. Though devoted to the Aga Khan, Ramzam Ali was hardly an orthodox follower of his branch of the Shiite tradition. He believed that the Aga Khan was identical with the Kalki avatar of Hinduism. It would seem that in some quarters there was a partial overlap between popular Hinduism and popular Islam. According to Hindu tradition Kalki was the tenth and last avatar of the god Vishnu and riding a white horse he would purge the earth of unbelievers and establish the reign of righteousness.

One day Ramzam Ali brought his mother to see me. She did not wear a veil and her corpulent person was swathed in layer upon layer of white chikan work. She was not in the least shy and at once came straight to the point. Her husband had died some years ago, she told me, leaving her to run the family business and to bring up their only son. That son was now of age and it was time he took the running of the family business off her hands and married, yet whenever she spoke to him about his responsibilities he would only laugh and say that he wanted to lead a spiritual life. Could he not run a business, and raise a family, and lead a spiritual life, she wanted to know. All this she said at great length and with many repetitions and since she spoke in Gujarati, Ramzam Ali was obliged to translate. This he did rather ungraciously, laughing whenever his mother spoke of his responsibilities in a way that showed no respect for her feelings. I was left wondering why she had been willing to see me. Perhaps she had hoped that, as an older man, I would agree with her and try to persuade her son to change his mind and accept his responsibilities.

A few days later I paid a farewell visit to Poona where as usual I stayed with friends and gave talks on Buddhism. Ramzam Ali went with me, and in Poona, as in Bombay, he attended my talks. By this time he knew something about Buddhism, due partly to his attending my talks and partly to our spending much of our time together discussing the Dharma. He particularly liked hearing about my experiences as a freelance wandering ascetic. One day a local guru of whom I had not heard before invited me to visit his ashram. He was a very modern guru and his ashram was situated in the most fashionable part of Poona. It consisted of a large bungalow furnished and decorated mainly in modern western style. The guru was a youngish man clad in the traditional gerua and except for his long black hair he could have passed for a monk of the Ramakrishna Mission. He was not a follower of

Ramakrishna, however, but of Sri Aurobindo and of Ananda Mayi whose silver-framed portraits decorated his comfortable sitting room. Ramzam Ali was fascinated by the guru and the fascination must have been mutual, for a few days later the guru invited Ramzam Ali to stay with him and I had to return to Bombay without my young Muslim friend.

Sangharakshita

Adhithana

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