

GROWING Together

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A MUSLIM FRIEND I WOULD LIKE TO HAVE KNOWN

Whenever I hear of Basra, Iraq, I think of a Muslim I would like to have had as a close friend.

Her name was Rabia al-'Adawiyya. She was born in Basra around 714 CE, a time of great political turmoil. The fourth daughter in a very poor family, she was sold into slavery at an early age. In the evenings when her daily labour was done, Rabia took up the habit of prayer. One night as he passed by her room, her owner saw a halo of light around her and freed her the next day. She withdrew to the desert.

In time she made the pilgrimage to Mecca and her journey there was filled with miraculous tales. The Kaaba is a large structure located in Mecca, said to have been built by Abraham. All Muslims turn towards the Kaaba for their prayers five times a day. It is the most holy site for Muslims. Yet Rabia said she experienced the Kaaba as "only ... stone¹", meaning that she sought 'only' God.

When she returned to Basra, friends and seekers gathered around her, sensing in her a unique spiritual depth. With a faith grown confident from her unique intimate acquaintance with God, she remained there for the rest of her life. She died peacefully at the age of ninety and was buried in Basra.



For Rabia, only one thing mattered, her love for God - a love exclusive of all else, even thoughts of God's eternal rewards:

One day Rabia was running with fire in one hand and water in the other. People asked her the meaning of her action. She replied: "I am going to light fire in paradise and to pour water on hell so that both veils may completely disappear ...and the servants of God may see Him without any object of hope or motive of fear."²

¹ Margaret Smith, *Rabia the Mystic and Her Fellow-saints in Islam*, Cambridge, 1928, page 3.

² Smith, 9.

Rabia taught that love is the only authentic motive for serving and worshipping God. Such love must be truly disinterested: we do not love *in order to*; we do not love *because of*; we simply love and are loved. Period. Rabia says: "O God! if I worship Thee in fear of Hell, burn me in Hell; and if I worship Thee in hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise; but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake, withhold not Thine Everlasting Beauty" [from me].³

With such a love, Rabia holds up for us a much broader idea of sin than most people have: personal sin is everything that is not union with God. For her, even the act of confession is "hurtful in the highest degree to the soul"⁴ because it separates the soul and the Beloved. To repent, she says, we focus on ourselves, not on God.

Similarly Rabia has a surprising attitude towards nature. Many people find nature a source of inspiration and a pathway to God. For Rabia nature is yet one more distraction. One story tells that she is urged by another to go outdoors to admire God's works. She replies from within her home, "Come rather inside to behold their Maker. Contemplation of the Maker has turned me aside from contemplating what He has made."

In our world of terrorism and fear, in our world of simplistic understandings of others' religions, close friends like Rabia could save us from easy conclusions, perhaps from hastily legislated security measures. God will always be far bigger than our understanding. All our conclusions about the religion of others must include that vastness. Otherwise we fashion God after our own image.

If only we all could have met Rabia!

³ A.J. Arberry, *Sufism: an account of the mystics of Islam*, London, 1956, 42. Smith, 57.

⁴ Smith, 57

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