

NOTE

Half Muslims and non-Muslims

Farzana Versey writes :

Born in the Ismaili faith, this correspondent has quite accustomed to the 'aadha Mussalman' (half Muslim) tag. However, it is difficult to understand the attitude towards Ahmadis in Pakistan. Ismailis have a living Imam, yet they are not considered a minority.

Why is this so? Is it because the Aga Khan Foundations help many people in developing countries? So does the Red Cross. Is it because the Ismailis are more interested in trade than the Taliban? This could be said of most people in any society.

If anything, the believers of the Aga Khan can be deemed more esoteric and are considerably distinct in the many countries they have chosen to make their homes in, mainly because allegiance to the nation is emphasised as part of the religious doctrine.

Politics uses religion as much as religion is being politicised. What happened in Lahore when extremist attacks took place. Don't blame the Taliban. They do not discriminate. They get no special points for killing Ahmadis; discrimination against them is built in the Constitution. How many people have made the government answerable for this? How difficult is it to change laws?

Ahmadis have been declared heretics. If they wish to perform the *Haj* they have to provide a written declaration stating that Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the founder of their sect, is a "cunning person and an imposter". How will this make Islam better? It is true that the leader declared himself to be the promised messiah and this would be seen as blasphemy in a monotheistic belief system that will not accept such a major departure even if no one disputes the oneness of god.

Ismailis often have to traverse two completely contradictory viewpoints—that of being the 'nicer Muslim' and of being 'half Muslim'. The first honorific is given by people from other faiths who have a stereotyped image and are surprised to find the unveiled, clean-shaven ones; the other comes from true-blue Muslims who find it difficult to not only accept that Ismailis believe in a continual line of Imams but that they have their own secular rules.

When there was some semantic jugglery regarding how the media cannot refer to the Ahmadi place of worship as a mosque, it struck this writer that the Ismailis call their place of worship a *jamaat khana*. They have a separate set of duas and namaaz is not offered on a regular basis. Men cannot have more than one wife at a time or they will be ex-communicated. There have been people who have left the fold to join the 'pure' Muslims and written books about the 'half ones', and they ought to be thankful for the education they received as Ismailis which taught them about the possibility of dissent.

It is ironical, then, for them to brand some offshoots of Islam as cults. What about dargahs where one pays obeisance to dead saints? Muslims do not consider it heresy to

place flowers on tombstones, light incense sticks and let the caretaker run a peacock feather over their heads as blessing; no one baulks at the fact that donation boxes rake in money to keep these places rich. Is this Islam?

The Ahmadis were promised a return to the pristine form of Islam. Who can have a problem with that? Not the religious fundamentalists if they think about the 'essence'. Acts of violence should be condemned for their own sake. Let people remember that the Taliban is not making rules. Pull up those who are. Minorities are supposed to be protected. If nothing else, such tragedies should at least lead to introspection and proactive action from concerned citizens instead of ruing it as one more bad haywire day. □□□