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Nasruddin and his donkey: Tales of the holy fool

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Eco Catholic

The holy fool, or the fool as wise soul, is a figure in many wisdom traditions, including the Russian Orthodox spirituality tradition, the Sufis of Islam, Zen Buddhism, Christianity and the inheritors of the Hasidic movement of Judaism. Such fools amuse, confuse, sometimes speak in simile or circuitous riddles, are often ridiculed. They are trickster figures. They are, after all, intentionally ridiculous but can succeed by that very character in breaking through a crust of resistance or disbelief. Holy fools turn our spiritual traditions upside down and inside out -- just as Jesus' parables do -- so that we can more readily see the truth within them.

?There is an enigmatic quality to the fool's cloak of madness or nonsense that provokes attention, response, reflection, as well as laughter. The fool's inherent humility, too, may loosen the defensive, ego-inflated character of those who make too much of themselves and thus lose touch with a deeper reality,? writes John Boettinger.

The great holy fool from the Sufis is Mullah Nasruddin. Here are some of the tales told about him:

-- A neighbor who Nasruddin didn't like very much came over to his compound one day. The neighbor asked Nasruddin if he could borrow his donkey. Nasruddin not wanting to lend his donkey to the neighbor he didn't like told him, "I would love to loan you my donkey but only yesterday my brother came from the next town to use it to carry his wheat to the mill to be grounded. The donkey sadly is not here." The neighbor was disappointed. But he thanked Nasruddin and began to walk away. Just as he got a few steps away, Mullah Nasruddin's donkey, which was in the back of his compound all the time, let out a big bray. The neighbor turned to Nasruddin and said, "Mullah Sahib, I thought you told me that your donkey was not here. Mullah Nasruddin turned to the neighbor and said, "My friend, who are you going to believe? Me or the donkey?"

-- One day there was news in every corner of the town about the Mullah's donkey which he had lost. When his neighbors heard the news they got sad and decided to go to mullah's house and help him to find his donkey. So they came to his house and saw that he was happy and thankful to God. They asked him: "Mullah, aren't you sad about losing your donkey?" Mullah laughed and said "I am happier because God helped me that I was not riding it otherwise I would be lost as well."

-- The mullah went to see a rich man to earn some money from him. He asked the man to give him some money. The man said why you need money?
Mullah said I want to buy an elephant so that is why I need money!
The man said if you don't have enough money how are you going to look after the elephant? Mullah said, "I came here to get money not advice!"

-- Mulla Nasruddin had been calling on his girlfriend for over a year. One evening the girl's father stopped him as he was leaving and asked, "Look here, young man, you have been seeing my daughter for a year now, and I would like to know whether your intentions are honorable or dishonorable?" Nasruddin's face lit up: "Do you mean to say, sir, that I have a choice?"

-- It was a cold winter day, and a heavily dressed man noticed Nasrudin outside wearing very little clothing. "Mullah," the man said, "tell me, how is it that I am wearing all these clothes and still feel a little cold, whereas you are barely wearing anything yet seem unaffected by the weather?"
"Well," replied Nasrudin, "I don't have any more clothes, so I can't afford to feel cold, whereas you have plenty of clothes, and thus have the liberty to feel cold."

-- As Nasruddin rested under a tall walnut tree one day, he looked a few yards to his side and noticed a big watermelon growing on a thin vine near the ground. Nasruddin looked up and said, "Great God, please permit me to ask you this: Why is it that walnuts grow on big strong trees, while watermelons grow on thin weak vines. Shouldn't it be the other way around?"
But at that very moment, a walnut fell from high on up in the tree and hit Nasrudin square on the head. "Ah!" remarked Nasrudin. "I suppose Nature's ways might not be as backward as I thought. After all, if a big watermelon fell out of the tree and onto my head, it might have killed me!"

-- One day, the town's new conqueror asked Nasruddin, "If I were a slave, how much would I cost?"
"Five hundred dollars," Nasruddin responded. "What!" the conqueror shouted in great anger. "Just the clothes I'm wearing right now are worth five hundred dollars!" "Yes," replied Nasruddin, "I factored the clothes into my price."

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