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Monsieur Ibrahim

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Monsieur Ibrahim

Abstract

This is a review of *Monsieur Ibrahim* (2003).

Monseur Ibrahim might best be viewed from the point of view of Sufism, for the Ibrahim of the title is a Sufi, and an inspirational one, at that. He is an old grocer in Paris of the 1960s when both popular music and his adolescent neighbor, Moses, are coming to life. But it is that "coming to life" that is perhaps the most powerful subject of the film, a fact that makes it valuable outside of its explicit Sufi references, which are many, and justifies, in addition, an "implicit" religious viewing.

Moses is the son of a mother who abandoned him and a father who is about to. The film opens with the teenager looking out of his window onto a small Paris street that is as lively as he would like to be. Autos honk, prostitutes loiter, and pedestrians crowd past while the music of early 60s rhythm and blues is just beginning to move the young to dance. Both Moses and Paris, it seems, are about to enter full-blown adolescence, a fact the film seems particularly joyous about. Across the way is "the Arab," a Turk, in fact, and one with a generosity of spirit and openness to life that contrast with Moses's father who is more concerned with turning music off, closing curtains, and reading old books. Ibrahim, of course, becomes the new father, both figuratively and literally, since he adopts Moses, after the father's suicide, renaming him Momo.

Two aspects make this film especially worthy of note for those with an interest in religion. The first is the aptness of the store as the central space of the

film. One is reminded of William James who urged that our relations with reality be a "lively commerce." It is in the grocery that Moses acquires goods he would never otherwise have: a means of fighting his father (buying cat food to serve him as pate), a *Qur'an*, and a relationship based on opening (Ibrahim fills his arms with foods as well as small wisdoms) instead of closing. Many worlds cross in the grocery; the prostitutes, neighborhood wives, children; even a film star squeeze through its full shelves. It is a place of trade, a place where Moses is able to move from stealing cans to the simple act of talking with Ibrahim. It is apt that in the final segment of the film, boy and man drive a sporty red car across Europe to Turkey. It is a film of encounters, and Ibrahim is a kind of commercial agent of many of them.

The film is also one of relationships, in particular that between fathers and sons, and here, too, commerce figures, though in the sense of accounting not trade. An early scene shows Moses's father asking his son for change from the grocery money, change the boy cannot give him. Moses's accounts are not squared and they cannot be. He is an adolescent and it is a time of extravagant spending, both literally and figuratively. Moses needs to spend for sex and for music, and he can't yet be called to account. Later there is a parallel scene in the grocery after he has stolen yet another tin, hidden (it must be pointed out) in his pants. Ibrahim mentions the theft and insists Moses keep what he has stolen. "You owe me nothing," he says, repeating it, "You owe me nothing." As Moses leaves both

childhood and home, he has to leave without the debts that would keep him bound to what is unpayable: his father's disapproval, his mother's abandonment, an absence of love. His relationship with Ibrahim provides him with a vigor to move forward.

Sufism enters at this point, though I would have to claim that in the open commerce that is not only the "Arab" grocery but Paris and, perhaps, France, and, in the eyes of the film, the 60s themselves, Sufism is yet another freely traded good. When Ibrahim gives Moses a *Qur'an*, he opens not another scripture for the boy but a sensibility. He opens his senses. Moses feels himself smile, encouraged by the old man. He dances with a neighbor girl. He risks courting and kissing her. And on the drive to Turkey, it is what is smelled and heard that are crucial. Istanbul itself is met through its sounds and smells and tastes. Ibrahim blindfolds Moses when he enters places of worship in that city - Greek Orthodox, Catholic, and Muslim - so he smells them first, through the incense, the candles, and the shoes.

Religions tell us who we are and where we are. Films, of course, do so, too. Though *Monsieur Ibrahim* is a provisioner who provides perhaps too easily, neglecting real pain and real harm, we may be glad of it in a month that also saw *The Passion of the Christ*.