

The 2013 Political Book Awards
Polemical of the Year



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book

Nick Cohen

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You Can't Read This Book

Censorship in an Age of Freedom

FOURTH ESTATE • London

For Christopher Hitchens
(1949–2011)

There is an all-out confrontation between the ironic and the literal mind: between every kind of commissar and inquisitor and bureaucrat and those who know that, whatever the role of social and political forces, ideas and books have to be formulated and written by individuals.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS

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INTRODUCTION

Do you believe in freedom of speech?

Really, are you sure?

You may say you do. It's the sort of thing that everyone says. Just as everyone says they have a sense of humour, especially when they don't. You will certainly have had serious men and women assure you that freedom of speech is inevitable whether you believe in it or not. In the late twentieth century states, courts, private companies and public bureaucracies confined information, the argument runs. If it spread beyond those with 'a need to know', the authorities of the nation state, whether a dictatorship or a democracy, could imprison or fine the leaker. The threat of punishment was enough to deter newspapers from publishing or television stations from broadcasting.

That manageable world has gone for good. If one person living in a court's jurisdiction breaks a court injunction, a judge can punish him. But how can a judge punish a thousand, ten thousand, a hundred thousand on Twitter or Facebook? If a court in New Delhi, Copenhagen or London bans the publication of embarrassing information, sites outside the jurisdiction of the Indian, Danish or British courts can publish it on the Web, and everyone with access to a computer in India, Denmark or Britain can read it, along with billions of others.

If the Web has a soul, then a loathing for censorship stirs it. The Streisand effect – first named in 2005 after the star tried to sue a photographer for publishing pictures of her Malibu mansion, and succeeded only in directing hundreds of thousands of viewers to his website – is a real phenomenon. Label a report 'confidential' and it becomes as desirable as forbidden fruit. Once a whistleblower leaks it, you can guarantee that the Web will broadcast its contents, regardless of whether they are interesting or not.

Optimists about the liberating potential of technology can find many reasons to be euphoric. The Net has no borders. National laws cannot contain it. Attempts to press down on the free circulation of information in one country just push it into other countries. The ability of users to copy, link and draw others into their campaigns had stripped censors of their power.

On this cheerful reading, we live in a new world where information is liquid. Wall it in, and it will seep through the brickwork. 'An old way of doing things is dying; a new one is being born,' announced a US cyber activist. 'The Age of Transparency is here.'

So it appeared. WikiLeaks became the new age's journalistic phenomenon, as it dumped masses of confidential information onto the Web about the American war in Afghanistan and the American war in Iraq and the American prison at Guantánamo Bay and the American State Department. America, the most powerful country in the world, could not stop it. WikiLeaks was based in Sweden, beyond America's control, although everyone in America with access to the Net could read what it published.

The new technologies justified their revolutionary possibilities by playing a part in the Arab Spring of 2010–11. In Syria and Libya, they allowed the victims of closed societies to talk to the rest of the world. In Egypt, Facebook became a means of organising revolutionary protest. The Arab dictators knew the arts of torture and repression well. They could break the bodies and the will of the traditional opponents. They could not cope with the mobilisations of the young the Web allowed because they had never experienced anything like them before.

The promise of the Net inspired politicians as well as activists. After the fall of the Berlin Wall

optimistic leaders and intellectuals believed that history was over and that any society that wanted to be wealthy had to embrace liberal capitalism. In the early 2010s, optimists switched from political technological determinism. They predicted that genocides would become impossible when all it would take to stop an atrocity would be for witnesses to alert the conscience of humanity by uploading videos from their iPhones to YouTube. They warned dictators who censored that they were imperilling economic growth by stopping their businesses accessing the sources of knowledge they needed to compete in a global market. Any society that wanted to be wealthy had to embrace freedom of speech.

With tyrannies tumbling and computing power guaranteeing the triumph of liberal values, why write a book on censorship?

I am all for liberal optimism, and hope a new world is being born. Before euphoria carries us away, however, consider the following scenarios.

- A young novelist from a Muslim family writes a fictional account of his struggles with his religious identity. He describes religion as a fairy tale and mocks the prohibitions of the Koran he was taught as a child as bigoted and preposterous. His writing shows that he does not regard the life of Muhammad as exemplary. Quite the reverse, in fact. If word of his work seeped out in Pakistan, the courts would charge him with blasphemy, a 'crime' that carries the death sentence. In Iran or Saudi Arabia, the authorities would arrest him, and maybe kill him too. In India, they would confine themselves to charging him with 'outraging religious feelings'. In most Western states, prosecutors would not charge him, but he would receive the worst punishment the world can inflict on a writer other than depriving him of his life or liberty: no one would publish his work. He would find that although American and European countries do not have blasphemy laws that protect Islam, or in most cases Christianity, the threat of violent reprisals against Western publishers and authors is enough to enforce extra-legal censorship that no parliament or court has authorised.
- An African feminist comes to Holland and denounces its tolerance of the abuse of women in ethnic and religious minorities. Newspaper editors and television producers cannot get enough of her fresh and controversial voice. After religious fanatics murder one of her supporters and threaten to murder her, their mood changes. Intellectuals say she is an 'Enlightenment fundamentalist' who is as intolerant and extreme as the religious fanatics she opposes. Politicians and newspaper columnists complain about the cost to the taxpayer of her police protection and accuse her of bringing rancour to their previously harmonious multi-cultural society. No one bans her books, but her work inspires no imitators. She becomes a leader without followers. Women, who were prepared to support her arguments, look at the treatment she received, and put down their pens.
- The editor of a Danish newspaper wonders why comedians, who boast of their willingness to 'transgress boundaries' and 'speak truth to power', will mock Jesus but not Muhammad. He invites Danish cartoonists to satirise the Prophet. Most respond by satirising the editor. It makes no difference. They still have to spend the rest of their lives under police protection.
- Two bankers, one from New York and one from London, meet for lunch and discuss an issue that has troubled them both. Not one of the great newspapers that cover high finance saw the crash of 2008 coming. Nor did bloggers make it their business to find out about the risks their banks were running. The Net was as clueless as the 'dead tree' press. Insiders knew that the lust for bonuses and the pressure to accede to management demands for quick profits could have catastrophic consequences. But the information had never leaked. The two bankers discuss writing a joint article for the *Financial Times* or the *Wall Street Journal* exposing the continuing failure to

address the structural problems in Western banking. They think that their intervention could improve public debate, but dismiss the idea as too dangerous. They know that if they speak out, their banks will fire them and they will never work in banking again. No other bank will want people marked as troublemakers on its 'team'.

- A British newspaper reporter moves from the politics to the business desk. She resolves to start digging into the backgrounds of the Russian oligarchs who have set up home in London. She has criticised British politicians without fear of the consequences for years, but her editor turns pale when she talks about using the same tactics against plutocrats. The smallest factual mistake or unsupportable innuendo could lead to a libel action that could cost the paper a million pounds, 'and we don't have a million pounds'. She ploughs on, and produces an article that is so heavily cut and rewritten by the in-house lawyers no one can understand it. 'I want a thousand words on trends in fashion retailing by lunchtime,' the editor says when she starts work the next day.
- A member of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party reads a speech by Hillary Clinton. 'When countries curtail Internet freedom, they place limits on their economic future. Their young people don't have full access to the conversations and debates happening in the world or exposure to the kind of free enquiry that spurs people to question old ways and invent new ones. Barring criticism of officials makes governments more susceptible to corruption, which creates economic distortions with long-term effects. Freedom of thought and the level playing field made possible by the rule of law are part of what fuels innovation economies.' The old communist is a man who has trained himself never to show his emotions in case they reveal weaknesses to his rivals in the party. But he thinks of China's booming economy and America's fiscal and trade deficits, and for the first time in years he throws back his head and roars with laughter.

What follows is an examination of how censorship in its clerical, economic and political forms works in practice. It is a history of the controversies of our times, and an argument that free speech is better than suppression in almost all circumstances. I hope that I will have convinced you by the end that the limits on free speech – for there are always limits – should be few, and that the law must refuse to implement them if there is a hint of a public interest in allowing debate to continue unimpeded.

My subject is censorship that hurts, not spin or the unstoppable desire of partisan newspaper broadcasters and bloggers to preach to the converted and dismiss or ignore news their audiences do not wish to hear. I accept that press officers' manipulation of information is an attempt to limit and control. But manipulation becomes censorship only on those occasions when the law punishes those who expose the spin. I agree too that editorial suppression is a type of censorship, because it ensures that readers rarely find a good word about trade unions in a right-wing newspaper, or a sympathetic article about Israel in a left-wing journal. The effects are trivial, because those readers who do not wish to be spoon-fed opinions can find contrary views elsewhere, and a journalist who does not like the party line of one media organisation can choose to move to another.

True censorship removes choice. It menaces and issues commands that few can ignore. Write a freethinking novel, and religious terrorists will come to assassinate you. Tell the world about your employers' incompetence, and they will deprive you of your livelihood. Criticise a pharmaceutical corporation or an association of 'alternative health' quacks and they will seek to bankrupt you in the English courts. Speak out in a dictatorship, and the secret police will escort you to jail.

The invention of the Net, like all communications revolutions before it, is having and will have profound effects – which I do not seek to belittle. Its effect on the ability of the strong and the violent to impose their views is less marked than optimists imagine, because they fail to understand the

difference between *total* control and *effective* control. Everyone who wants to suppress information would like to remove all trace of it. But when total power eludes them, they seek to impose limits. It may irk a Russian oligarch that readers can find accounts of his mafia past somewhere on the Web, or infuriate the Chinese, Iranian and Belarusian regimes that dissident sites escape their controls. But they are not threatened unless people can act on the information. Action requires something more than an anonymous post somewhere in cyberspace. It requires the right to campaign and argue in public. As we have seen in the Middle East, in dictatorships it can require the courage to risk your life in a revolution.

Censorship's main role is to restrict the scope for action. If religious terror ensures that even a mainstream broadcaster is frightened of lampooning Islam's founding myths, or if the citizens of a dictatorship know that they will be arrested if they challenge their leaders' abuses of power, then the censors are exercising effective control by punishing those who challenge them and bullying their contemporaries into silence.

'You can be a famous poisoner or a successful poisoner,' runs the old joke, 'but you can't be both.' The same applies to censors. Ninety-nine per cent of successful censorship is hidden from view. Even when brave men and women speak out, the chilling effect of the punishments their opponents inflict on them silences others. Those who might have added weight to their arguments and built a campaign for change look at the political or religious violence, or at the threat of dismissal from work, or at the penalties overbearing judges impose, and walk away.

Technology can change the rules, but it cannot change the game. Freedom always has to be fought for, because it is rooted in cultures, laws and constitutions, not in microchips and search engines, and is protected by institutions that are obliged to defend it. The struggle for freedom of speech is at root a political struggle, not least because the powerful can use new technologies as effectively as the weak, and often more effectively. Today's techno-utopianism is at best irritating and at worst a dangerous distraction, because it offers the comforting illusion that we can escape the need to fight against reactionary and unjust governments, enterprises and movements with the click of a mouse. When the first edition of this book came out, an otherwise kind critic bemoaned my failure to understand that the Web brought the dissident enemies of the Putin regime in from the fringe and allowed them to challenge the kleptocracy. 'The great boon of the Web is that distinctions between the mainstream and the esoteric crumble,' he said. 'How can Cohen not see that?'

One year on, and the protests against the Russian state's rigging of elections are over, and Putin is still in power. I wish it were otherwise, but contrary to the shallow views of Net utopians, technology cannot ensure progress. When it comes, progress in human affairs does not advance in a straight line. It bends and swerves; and sometimes it retreats. Today's debates assume that we are living in a better and more open world than our repressed ancestors. The most striking counter-argument against modern complacency is to begin by looking at that most contentious and dangerous of forces, and to observe that we were freer to challenge religions that claimed dominion over men's minds and women's bodies thirty years ago than we are now.

In 1988, Salman Rushdie for one thought that a writer could criticise religious bigotry without running the risk that fanatics would murder him and everyone who worked with him, just for telling the story.

PART ONE

God

I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised & unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race, where that immortal garland is to be run for.

JOHN MILTON, 1644

'Kill the Blasphemer'

It would be absurd to think a book could cause riots. That would be a strange view of the world.

SALMAN RUSHDIE, 1988

Of course it was blasphemous. A book that challenges theocracy is blasphemous by definition. Not just because it questions the divine provenance of a sacred text – Did God speak to Moses? Inspire the gospels? Send the archangel Gabriel to instruct Muhammad on how to live and what to worship? – but because it criticises the bigotries the sacred text instructs the faithful to hold. By this measure, any book worth reading is blasphemous to some degree, and *The Satanic Verses* was well worth reading.

To say that Salman Rushdie did not know his novel would cause 'offence' is not true in the narrow sense of the word. He and his publishers never imagined the viciousness of the reaction, but just before the book was published in 1988, he sent a draft to the Palestinian intellectual Edward Said. Rushdie wanted Said's opinion because he thought his new novel 'may upset some of the faithful'. Indeed it did, but in the late twentieth century, no honest writer abandoned his or her book because it might upset a powerful lobby. Lackeys working for a plutocrat's newspaper or propagandists serving a state or corporate bureaucracy guarded their tongues and self-censored, but not artists and intellectuals in free countries.

Rushdie was writing in one of the most optimistic times in history. The advances in political, sexual and intellectual freedoms were unparalleled. It seemed that decent men and women needed only raise their angry voices for tyrants to totter and fall. First in the fascistic dictatorships of Spain, Portugal and Greece in the 1970s, then in the military dictatorships of South America in the 1980s and from 1989 to 1991 in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and apartheid South Africa, hundreds of millions of people saw their oppressors admit defeat and embrace liberal democracy.

Those who fought on the side of liberty did not worry about offending the religious or challenging cultures. Forty years ago a campaigner against state-enforced racism knew that supporters of apartheid came from a white supremacist culture with deep roots in the 'communities' of Dutch and English Africans. Their clerics provided a religious justification for racism by instructing them that blacks were the heirs of Ham, whom God had condemned to be 'the servants of servants' because of a curse vindictive even by the standards of the Abrahamic religions – that Noah placed on Ham's son Canaan (Ham had had the temerity to gaze on a sleeping Noah when he was naked and drunk, and laugh at him. God therefore damned his line in perpetuity.) The opponents of oppression did not say that they must 'respect Afrikaans culture', however. They did not say that it was Afrikaanophobic to be judgemental about religion, or explain that it was imperialist to criticise the beliefs of 'the other'. If a religion was oppressive or a culture repugnant, one had a duty to offend it.

The liberal resurgence, which brought down so many tyrannies, was also an attack on the beliefs and values of the old democracies. The 1960s generation brought an end to the deference shown

democratic leaders and established institutions. Many found its irreverence shocking, but no matter. The job of artists, intellectuals and journalists became to satirise and expose; to be the transgressive and edgy critics of authority. They did not confine themselves to politics. Cultural constraints, backed by religious authority, collapsed under the pressure of the second wave of feminism, the sexual revolution and the movements for racial and homosexual emancipation. The revolution in private life was greater than the revolution in politics. Old fences that had seemed fixed by God or custom for eternity fell as surely as the Berlin Wall.

Struggling to encapsulate in a paragraph how the cultural revolution of the second half of the twentieth century had torn up family structures and prejudices, the British Marxist historian E. P. Hobsbawm settled on an account from a baffled film critic of the plot of Pedro Almodóvar's 1987 *Law of Desire*.

In the film Carmen Maura plays a man who's had a transsexual operation and, due to an unhappy love affair with his/her father, has given up on men to have a lesbian, I guess, relationship with a woman, who is played by a famous Madrid transvestite.

It was easy to mock. But laughter ought to have been stifled by the knowledge that within living memory transsexuals, transvestites, gays and lesbians had not been subjects that writers and directors could cover sympathetically, or on occasion at all. Their release from traditional morality reflected the release of wider society from sexual prejudice.

That release offended religious and social conservatives who thought a woman's place was in the home, sexual licence a sin and homosexuality a crime against nature. Although the fashion for relativism was growing in Western universities in the 1980s, leftist academics did not say we had no right to offend the cultures of racists, misogynists and homophobes, and demand that we 'respect their 'equally valid' contributions to a diverse society. Even they knew that reform is impossible without challenging established cultures. Challenge involves offence. Stop offending, and the world stands still.

Salman Rushdie was a man of his time, who would never have understood the notion that you should think twice before offending the powerful. *Midnight's Children*, the 1981 novel that made him famous, was an account of how the ideals of independent India, which Nehru announced as the chimera of midnight struck on 14–15 August 1947, degenerated into the tyranny of Indira Gandhi's state of emergency. Its successor, *Shame*, dissected the brutalities of military and religious tyranny in Pakistan. By the time he began *The Satanic Verses* Rushdie was the literary conscience of the subcontinent. He deplored the cruelties of post-colonialism, while never forgetting the cruelties of the colonists. It was not a surprise that after looking at post-partition India and Pakistan, he turned his attention to Islam. He had been born into a secular Muslim family in Bombay. He had studied the Koran at Cambridge University, as a literary text written by men rather than God's creation. The Islamic Revolution in Iran, which brought the Ayatollah Khomeini to power in 1979, had pushed religious conservatism to the centre of politics. Rushdie would no more treat religious authority uncritically than he would treat secular authority uncritically. If he had, he would have committed real offence against the intellectual standards of his day.

A God of Bullies

Rushdie's title declared his intention. According to a contested religious tradition, the satanic verses were the lines the devil tricked Muhammad into believing were the words of God as he struggled

convert the pagan people of Mecca to Islam. Satan suggested that Muhammad tell the Meccans that he would compromise his harsh new religion and allow Mecca's pagan goddesses Al-Lat, Al-'Uzzá and Maná to intercede with God on their behalf. The biographers of the Prophet claimed that the angel Gabriel chastised Muhammad for allowing Satan to deceive him. Mortified, the Prophet took back the satanic words and returned to uncompromising monotheism.

To modern and not so modern eyes, the episode raises pertinent questions about how believers can consider a sacred text to be the inerrant word of a god or gods when the devil or anyone else can insert their thoughts into it. The cases of the Koran, Old Testament and New Testament gave them excellent grounds for scepticism, because the texts were not prepared until decades after the supposed revelations. Rushdie endorsed scepticism by showing how well the Koran suited the prejudices of early medieval Arabia, and threw in the oppression of women for good measure.

Al-Lat, Al-'Uzzá and Maná were goddesses, and Islam, like Judaism and Christianity, was determined to wipe out the goddess cults of the ancient world and replace them with the rule of a stern and unbending patriarch. It is worth mentioning Christianity and Judaism at this point, because although everyone who raises the subject of sexism and religion in the post-Rushdie world concentrates on Islam's attitude to women, liberalism's task of knocking misogyny out of the other mainstream religions is not over. As late as 2010, a modest proposal to allow women to become bishops with the same powers as their male counterparts pushed the Church of England close to schism. In any other area of public life, the suggestion that male employees could refuse to serve a woman boss would be greeted with derision. To a large faction within the supposedly modern and moderate Church of England, sexism remained God's will, and equality of opportunity an offence against the divine order. At about the same time as Anglicans were displaying their prejudices, gangs of Orthodox Jews were forming themselves into 'chastity squads'. They beat divorced women in Jerusalem for breaking religious law by walking out in the company of married men, and asked the courts to uphold men's 'right' to force Orthodox women to sit at the back of buses – an unconscious homage to the segregation of blacks and whites in the old American South.

Rushdie was touching therefore on a theme that was close to being universal. While there always have been and always will be men who wish to dominate women, the peculiar iniquity of religion is to turn misogyny into a part of the divine order: to make sexism a virtue and equality a sin.

The authors of a recent study of religious oppression dispensed with the circumlocutions of moderate commentators, and put the case for an unembarrassed critique of religion plainly. They considered how Sharia adultery laws state that a raped woman must face the next-to-impossible task of providing four male witnesses to substantiate her allegation or be convicted of adultery; how when rapists leave Pakistani women pregnant courts take the bulge in their bellies as evidence against them; how in Nigeria, Sharia courts not only punish raped women for adultery but order an extra punishment of whipping for making false accusations against 'innocent' men; how in the United States, the fundamentalist Church of Latter Day Saints gives teenagers to old men in arranged marriages and tells them they must submit to their wishes; and how the theocratic Saudi Arabian state stops women walking unaccompanied in the street, driving a car and speaking to men outside the family. Then, after drawing a deep breath – they asked, 'Does God hate women?'

Well, what can one say? Religious authorities and conservative clerics worship a wretchedly cruel unjust vindictive executioner of a God. They worship a God of ten-year-old boys, a God of playground bullies, a God of rapists, of gangs, of pimps. They worship – despite rhetoric about justice and compassion – a God who sides with the strong against the weak, a God who cheers for privilege and punishes egalitarianism. They worship a God who is a male and who gangs up with other males against women. They worship a thug. They worship a God who thinks little girls should be married to grown men. They worship a God who looks on in approval when a grown man rapes a child because he is 'married' to her. They worship

a God who thinks a woman should receive eighty lashes with a whip because her hair wasn't completely covered. They worship a God who is pleased when three brothers hack their sisters to death with axes because one of them married without their father's permission.

Although the authors looked at the abuse of children by the Catholic Church, and prejudice in Jewish American Baptist and Mormon sects, most of their examples came from Islam and Hinduism. That is not a sign of prejudice on their part. Any writer tackling religious oppression has to accept that liberalism tempered the misogyny of mainstream Christianity and Judaism in the rich world after centuries of struggle, but left the poor world largely untouched. Christianity and Judaism are not 'better' than Islam and Hinduism. Free-thinkers have just made a better job of containing the prejudices and cruelties.

Rushdie's Muhammad does not always pretend that religious ordinances come from heaven. As he considers the Meccans' demand that their goddesses should be allowed to argue with his male god, he is no longer a prophet seeking to understand divine commands, but a politician weighing the options. The pagans of Mecca will accept his new religion in return for him allowing them to keep their own goddesses. That's the bargain. That's the offer on the table. God's will has nothing to do with it. No, do the tricks of Satan. If Paris is worth a mass, is Mecca worth a goddess, or two, or three?

'I've been offered a deal,' he shouts, but his followers will have none of it. Like so many leaders, Rushdie's Muhammad is trapped by the fanaticism of disciples who deny him space for compromise. They had believed that every word he said came from God via Gabriel. If they changed their story to suit political pressures, they would become a laughing stock. Why should anyone trust them if they diluted their absolute faith and accepted that God's commands were open to interpretation and negotiation? Why should they trust themselves?

'How long have we been reciting the creed you brought us?' asks one. 'There is no god but God. What are we if we abandon it now? This weakens us, renders us absurd. We cease to be dangerous. Nobody will ever take us seriously again.' In any case, a second disciple tells Muhammad, 'La Mamnat, Uzza – they're all females! For pity's sake! Are we to have goddesses now? Those old cranes, herons and hags?'

Muhammad realises that if he compromises, he will lose his followers and with them his power base. The Meccans will have no reason to deal with him. He falls into a crisis of self-doubt, a scene Rushdie carries off with great pathos, although neither his religious detractors nor many of his secular admirers could admit it.

As the book went on, Rushdie provided his enemies with more ammunition by continuing in the feminist vein. Can a man who has so many wives under his control be the leader of a new faith, he asks. Or as Aisha, Muhammad's youngest wife, says in the novel, 'Your God certainly jumps to when you need him to fix things up for you.' When Rushdie's Muhammad confronts free-thinking women, 'bang, out comes the rule book, the angel starts pouring out rules about what women must do, he starts forcing them back into the docile attitudes the Prophet prefers, docile or maternal, walking three steps behind or sitting at home being wise and waxing their chins'.

To illustrate how you cannot have blasphemy until there is a religion to blaspheme against, Rushdie had the men of Mecca go to a brothel where the courtesans were named after the Prophet's wives. He tested the belief that the Koran was the sacred word of God by having a sceptic rewrite the Prophet's divine revelations. As I said, to those with the mentalities of heretic-hunters and witch-burners, *The Satanic Verses* was a blasphemous book, and no one could deny it. The single point that his supporters should have needed to make in his defence was that Salman Rushdie was born in democratic India and moved to democratic Britain. He was a free man in a free country, and could write what he damn well

wanted.

Events were to prove that his supporters needed additional arguments.

The first was to emphasise that the best novelists do not produce agitprop.

The Satanic Verses is not just 'about' religion and the rights of women. It is a circus of magic realism, with sub-plots, dream sequences, fantasies, pastiches, sudden interruptions by the author, bewildering number of characters, and a confusion of references to myths and to the news stories of the day. If you insist on nailing down its political message – and trust me, you will whack your thumb with the hammer many times before you do – you will discover that the novel is 'about' migration from India to the West who, like Rushdie, are contending with their changing identities and the dissolving religious and cultural certainties.

The protagonists – Gibreel Farishta, a Bollywood movie star who plays Hindu gods in religious epics, and whose fans worship him as a god, and Saladin Chamcha, an actor who has left India and makes a living doing voiceovers for London advertising agencies – confront the pressures on the psyche migration brings. Somewhat prophetically given what was to happen next, the Anglicised Saladin tells his Indian mistress, who is trying to find what remains of India inside him:

'Well this is what is inside ... An Indian translated into English-medium. When I attempt Hindustani these days, people look polite. This is me.' Caught in the aspic of his adopted language he had begun to hear in India's Babel an ominous warning: don't come back again. When you have stepped through the looking glass you step back at your peril. The mirror may cut you to shreds.

If people wanted reasons to find offence – and as we will see, there are people who are offended if you *don't* give them reasons to find offence – then the British police and immigration services might have issued death threats, because Rushdie showed them as racists and sadists. When the controversy broke and he needed police protection, supporters of law and order complained about the lack of 'respect' for the British state Rushdie had displayed in his writings. The cops, however, took his satire on the chin and went on to guard him from assassins. If you wanted to be fussy, you could also notice passages which showed that Asian shopkeepers in London were not always comradely soldiers joined with their Afro-Caribbean brothers in the struggle against white prejudice, as the anti-racist orthodox of the 1980s said they must be. Rushdie's Asian Londoners are contemptuous of the black youths they assume must be criminals. Britain's black community once again lived with the offence.

But, and here is the second large point, to go through *The Satanic Verses* with the squinting eye of a censor searching for thought crimes, or even to seek to see it in the round, as I have tried to do, is to blind yourself to the real reason why the fatwa against Salman Rushdie became the Dreyfus Affair of our age. That reason is as brutal now as it was then.

Globalising Censorship (1)

Terror is why *The Satanic Verses* is still the novel that all modern arguments about the silencing of sceptical and liberal voices must deal with first. The terror unleashed by its opponents and the response of the inheritors of the liberal tradition to their enemies' demands for censorship and self-censorship. No terror, and *The Satanic Verses* would be one of several great works by a great novelist rather than shorthand for a battle whose outcome defined what writers can and can't say.

Rushdie did not understand what he was fighting. 'The thing that is most disturbing is they are talking about a book which does not exist,' he said as the protests grew. 'The book which is worth killing people for and burning flags is not the book I wrote. The people who demonstrated in Pakistan and who were killed haven't actually read the book that I wrote because it isn't on sale there.' He had not grasped that reactionary mobs and those who seek to exploit them have a know-nothing pride

their ignorance. It was sufficient that clerical authorities said that the book was blasphemous, and could quote a passage or two to prove their case. The vast majority of religious fanatics who murdered or threatened to murder publishers, translators, booksellers and innocent bystanders did not want to read the book in the round, or to read it at all. Most would not have understood it if they had tried.

Their violence rolled around the world. The brutality of the reaction was beyond anything that Rushdie or his publishers anticipated or could have anticipated. Penguin released *The Satanic Verses* in 1988. Without pausing to consider its contents, President Rajiv Gandhi put it on India's proscribed list. The opposition MP who demanded that Gandhi ban the book had not read it either, but decided, 'I do not have to wade through a filthy drain to know what filth is.' Gandhi was frightened of communal riots and of losing the Muslim vote, and perhaps remembered how Rushdie had excoriated his mother, Indira, in *Midnight's Children*.

In India and Pakistan and later in Britain, Jamaat-e-Islami organised the protests. Its enmity was a compliment to Rushdie, for Jamaat's supporters were enemies any liberal should be proud to have. Jamaat's founder, Maulana Abu'l Ala Maududi, began agitating in British-occupied India in 1941, and had a good claim to be the first of the Islamists. He combined his version of a 'purified' Islam with European totalitarianism. From the communists he took the notion of the vanguard party, which would tell the masses what they wanted, regardless of whether the masses wanted it or not, and vague notions of a just future where all would be equal. From the Nazis, Jamaat, and its partners in the Arab Muslim Brotherhood, took the Jewish conspiracy theory. They explained that Muslims were weak because they were victims of the plots of sinister Jews, or 'Zionists', as they came to call them, who were everywhere seeking to undermine their faith and morals. Muslims would free themselves by building a caliphate, where the supreme ruler of a global empire would not be a Nazi führer or communist general secretary but a theocrat ruling with total power in accordance with Koran and Sharia.

After the British withdrew from India in 1947, leaving millions to die in the slaughters of partition, Jamaat supported the new Muslim state of Pakistan, which was split between its Bengali east wing and the Punjabi-dominated west. When the Bengalis of East Pakistan revolted against a system that made them second-class citizens, the Pakistani army's retaliation stunned a twentieth century that thought it had become inured to genocide. Jamaat aided the army's campaigns of mass murder and mass rape because it believed in the caliphate, and hence could not tolerate the secession of Bangladesh from Pakistan, because it broke Islamic unity. At the time this book went to press, Bangladeshi prosecutors were beginning war crime proceedings against Jamaat leaders they claimed were members of the paramilitary squads Pakistan recruited to help with killing.

Rushdie had already noticed that the Pakistani military dictatorship of the 1980s needed the Jamaatists to provide a religious cover for tyranny. 'This is how religions shore up dictators; by encircling them with words of power, words which the people are reluctant to see discredited, disenchanted, disenfranchised, mocked,' he said, as he gave Jamaat reasons to hate him as well.

The next countries to ban *The Satanic Verses* were Sudan, Bangladesh and apartheid South Africa. If you find the alliance of militant Islamists and white supremacists strange, then you have yet to learn that all the enemies of liberalism are the same. In its dying days, the regime tried to uphold the apartheid state by co-opting mixed-race and Asian South Africans into the system, the better to deny South Africa's black majority the vote. Most coloured and Asian South Africans refused to cooperate. But Islamists saw the chance to use apartheid's censorship laws against Rushdie. The left-wing *Weekly Mail* and the Congress of South African Writers had invited him to visit Johannesburg in 1988 to discuss the censorship of the opponents of white rule. Rushdie had to pull out because of death threats from Islamists. The white-skinned rulers learned they could now rely on brown-skinned

religious extremists to intimidate a writer who was proposing to come to their country and denounce their regime.

Even before the Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa, Rushdie had many enemies, but they were not dangerous enemies. The Indian government regularly banned books it thought might provoke communal violence. Jamaatists in Pakistan and white supremacists in South Africa had always threatened authors. An Anglo-Indian writer based in London had little to fear from them. Intellectuals who had made it to the West were beyond the reach of oppressive forces. They had a place of sanctuary.

The fatwa changed all that. It redrew the boundaries of the free world, shrinking its borders and erasing zones of disputation from the map of the liberal mind. It ensured that London, New York, Paris, Copenhagen and Amsterdam could no longer be places of safety for writers tackling religious themes.

Journalists throw around the word 'unprecedented' so carelessly and ceaselessly that we miss the new when it stares us in the face. Khomeini's incitement to murder was without precedent. Here was a head of state ordering the execution of the private citizens of foreign countries for writing and publishing a work of fiction. A grotesque regard for the forms of legality had accompanied previous outbreaks of state terrorism. Even Stalin forced his victims to confess at show trials so that when he murdered them, he did so with a kangaroo court's approval. No such concern with keeping up appearances inhibited Khomeini. On 14 February 1989, he said that the faithful must kill Rushdie and his publishers and 'execute them quickly, wherever they may find them, so that no one will dare insult Islam again. Whoever is killed in this path will be regarded as a martyr.' Just in case zealous assassins doubted that they would receive eternal life in paradise along with the services of seventy-two virgins, an Iranian foundation offered the earthly reward of \$3 million.

There was not even a show trial. Khomeini did not listen to the religious scholars who said that since Rushdie was not a citizen of an Islamic state, he could not punish him for blasphemy or apostasy. And he took even less notice of the more substantial objections from secularists that no one had the right to order the murder of a writer for subjecting religion to imaginative scrutiny.

Far from making himself the object of repulsion, the Ayatollah's endorsement of state-sponsored murder won him many followers. After the death sentence, preachers whipped up mobs against Pakistani Christians in Islamabad. In Bombay, twelve died in battles with the police. A bomber murdered a security guard at the British Council offices in Karachi. In Dhaka, fifteen thousand people tried to break through police lines and ransack the British Council's library. In the United States, Islamists threatened bookstores and firebombers hit the offices of the *Riverdale Press*, a weekly paper in the Bronx, after it published an unexceptional editorial saying that the public had the right to read whatever novels it pleased.

In Britain, demonstrators in Bradford burned copies of *The Satanic Verses*. I doubt they had heard Heinrich Heine's line that 'Where they burn books, so too will they in the end burn human beings' – a condemnation from the German Enlightenment of the burning of the Koran by the Spanish Inquisition, ironically enough. Onlookers were entitled to wonder whether Heine was right, and Rushdie's British enemies would burn the human being in question if they could get hold of him. As in America and Europe, British bookshops withdrew the novel in the face of threats – two independent bookshops on the Charing Cross Road were bombed, as were Penguin bookshops and a department store. Police surrounded Penguin's head office with concrete barricades to stop suicide bombers crashing cars into the building. They X-rayed all packages for explosives and patrolled the perimeter with guard dogs. Meanwhile Special Branch officers moved their charge from safe house to safe house. Rushdie was

the beginning of a rolling programme of house arrest that was to deprive him of his liberty for years.

He had nowhere to run. If he had left Britain, no other country could have promised him safety. The global scale of the malice directed against him made him a refugee without the hope of asylum. Iranian or Pakistani writers who saw the violence in the West realised that if clerics issued fatwas against them in Tehran or Lahore, they could no longer expect to flee to a safe haven. If the controversy was raucous, if the media amplified the death threats, there would be nowhere on the planet to hide.

To justify their death threats and make the shocking seem reasonable, Rushdie's enemies aped the European fascists and communists of the twentieth century. Just as the Nazis said that the Germans were the victims of supernatural Jewish plots or the communists said that the proletariat was the target of the machinations of the treacherous bourgeoisie, so the Islamists told the faithful that they were being persecuted by a conspiracy of global reach and occult power. Ali Akbar Rafsanjani, the speaker of the Iranian parliament, declared that the West had been engaged in a cultural war from colonialism on to 'undermine the people's genuine Islamic morals'. Rushdie was at its forefront. He was the ideal undercover agent for Western intelligence, Rafsanjani announced – 'a person who seemingly comes from India and who apparently is separate from the Western world and who has a misleading name'. Rushdie was a white colonialist, hiding beneath a brown skin; a traitor hiding behind a Muslim name. The British secret service had paid him to betray the faithful, the Iranian theocracy explained as added corruption to the list of charges against him. It gave him bribes, disguised as book advances, and it organised the assault on Islam by the cunning if curious means of a magical realist novel.

As with Nazism, the conspiracy theory needed Jews. The Iranian interior minister said that Zionism had 'direct involvement' in publishing the book. The Iranian president said that 'Zionist-controlled news agencies' had made Rushdie famous. In Syria, the Ba'athist dictatorship said that the novel was part of a plot to distract the world's attention from Israel's treatment of the Palestinians. In Pakistan, religious leaders talked of an 'American Jewish conspiracy'. Across the planet, the drums shuddered to the same beat: 'It's the Jews, it's the Jews, it's the Jews.'

The demonstrations against Rushdie were not confined to the poor world. The faithful marched in Bradford and London as well as Tehran and Lahore. They inspired a fear in the West that went almost unnoticed during the elation the 1989 revolutions in Eastern Europe produced.

Fear was a novel emotion for Western liberals, and I understand why they wanted to push it to the back of their minds. However much they talked about the bravery of the stands they were making, those in the West who campaigned against apartheid in southern Africa, and those, much fewer in number, who wanted to help the opponents of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union had not had to put their lives on the line. They had not had to come to terms with the knowledge that the publication of a book or a cartoon, or the vigorous condemnation of an oppressive ideology, would place families, colleagues and themselves in danger. They had never felt the need to glance twice at dark doorways or listen for quickening footsteps coming up behind them in the street.

By the early 1990s, events seemed to have taught liberals that they could win without pain, through bloodless revolutions. After the fall of white South Africa and the break-up of the Soviet Union, fear appeared to be an unnecessary emotion. History's lesson was that dictatorships would collapse of their own accord without the usual wars and revolutionary terrors. Party hacks and secret policemen, who had never uttered a dissenting word in their lives, had of their own accord given up serving worthless ideologies and embraced the ideals of Western liberalism. 'The heroes of retreat', the German poet Hans Magnus Enzensberger, called them – Kadar, Suarez, Jaruzelski, Botha and above all Gorbachev – apparent 'yes men' who decided to say 'no' to the regimes they had promised to protect. Just like the

without anyone invading their countries or storming their palaces and holding guns to their heads. One day apartheid was there, the next Nelson Mandela was president of South Africa, and the world was granting him a status dangerously close to sainthood. For forty years the Iron Curtain had divided Europe, and then as if a magician had waved his wand, it vanished and tourists could gawp at what was left of the Berlin Wall, before going on to holiday in what had once been the forbidden territory of Eastern Europe.

Humanity had seen nothing on the scale of the bloodless revolutions of 1989 to 1991 before. Former enemies acknowledged their mistakes. They came to agree with our way of thinking without us having to risk our personal safety. The world lived through an age of miracles; but the trouble with witnessing miracles is that you come to expect more of them.

The tactless Rushdie spoilt the ecstatic mood. The reaction to his novel showed that history was not over. One enemy of liberalism was not coming round to our way of thinking, holding up its hands and admitting that we had been right all along. It asked questions of liberals that were close to home. Would they be able to defend their values, when their opponents were not Russian communists sending dissidents to Siberia, or right-wing dictators in faraway lands ordering the torture and murder of Latin American leftists, but fellow citizens who were threatening to kill novelists and bombing bookshops in the cities of the West? Would they defend free speech in murderous times? Or would they hold their tongues and accept that they must 'respect' views they knew to be false?

Demand a Respect You Don't Deserve

Once again I ask, do you believe in freedom of speech?

And once more, are you sure?

Far be it from me to accuse you of living with illusions, but unless you are a tyrant or a lunatic and the line between the two is thin – you will rarely speak your mind without a thought for the consequences. You would be friendless within a day if you put a belief in absolute freedom of speech into practice. If you propositioned complete strangers, or told them that they were fools, if you stood down at a meeting and announced that the woman next to you was ugly and the man next to her stupid, you would run out of people willing to spend time in your company.

Humans are social primates, and socialising with the rest of our species requires a fair amount of routine self-censorship and outright lying, which we dignify with names such as ‘tact’, ‘courtesy’ and ‘politeness’.

The appeal of censorship becomes evident when you consider whether you would be happy for others to say what they thought about you. Even if what they said was true – particularly if what they said was true – you would want to stop them saying that you were ugly, boring or smelly. You would expect them to lie to you, just as they would expect you to lie to them. Humans have a bias in favour of information that bolsters their prejudices and validates their choices. Above all, our species has a confirmation bias in favour of information that upholds our good opinion of ourselves. We want our status confirmed. We want others to lie to us so that we can lie to ourselves. We want to be respected.

As well as a provision for freedom of speech, most guarantees of basic liberties have a right to privacy sitting uneasily alongside them. It recognises that the full truth about an individual's life cannot be made public without crushing his or her autonomy. Under the pressure of exposure, his sense of who he was would change. He would become suspicious, fretful, harassed; he would be left exposed to gales of mockery and condemnation. In the interests of preventing a surveillance society, it is better that the state allows the citizen to live a lie. ‘If you've nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear,’ say authoritarians. But everyone has something to hide, and if there isn't a dirty secret, there is always something that your enemies can twist to make you look dirty.

Privacy was meant to offer the citizen protection against the over-mighty state. The emphasis on the right to a private life was an understandable and necessary reaction against the informers and spies that communist and fascist totalitarian regimes recruited to monitor daily life. But in the late twentieth century, at the same time as the *Satanic Verses* controversy began, judges began to adapt the law. Instead of stopping the secret service from tapping the phones or opening the mail of citizens, judges decided to stop the media revealing details of the private lives of wealthy celebrities and other public figures.

The privacy law they developed could not have been more different from traditional libel law. Libel is meant to protect the individual from the pain inflicted by malicious gossips who spread lies about

him or her. Privacy protects against the pain that comes from hearing the truth broadcast. In libel truth is an absolute defence. If writers and publishers can justify what they say, they may leave the court without punishment. In privacy cases, truth is not a defence but an irrelevance. The law intervenes not because the reports are false, but because they tell too much truth for the subject to cope with, and open him up to mockery, to pain ... to disrespect. Privacy rights allowed the wealthy to suppress criticisms, even though the criticisms were true. They could demand respect, even though they were not respectable.

The persecution of Rushdie appeared to follow the old precedents. Contemporaries looking for a parallel to Khomeini's gangsterish order for assassins to 'hit' him recalled the Vatican's order to take out Elizabeth I in the 1570s. They talked about the re-emergence of the Inquisition, or quoted Voltaire's pointed question, 'What to say to a man who tells you he prefers to obey God than to obey men, and who is consequently sure of entering the gates of Heaven by slitting your throat?'

The comparison with the past fails, because there is an unbridgeable gulf between today's religion and the religious ideas which persisted for most of history. Until the Enlightenment, maybe until the publication of *On the Origin of Species*, believers could reassure themselves that the wisest thinkers of their time believed that a divine order structured the universe. As late as the 1690s, a belief in science and magic could co-exist even in the great mind of Isaac Newton, who divided his days between trying to understand the laws of motion and trying to work out when the Book of Revelation foretold the 'great tribulation and the end of the world'. (He thought that God would wind us up in 2060, readers expecting to make it through the mid-twenty-first century should note.)

Charges of blasphemy and heresy were once like accusations of libel. The wretched sinner had sought to spread falsehoods against the true religion, which the faithful exposed. The Protestant divines of Elizabethan England and the papacy that confronted them fought over what kind of supernatural power ordered the world. But they agreed on the fundamental question that a supernatural power must order the world. The Catholic believed that if the Protestant converted to Catholicism he would find the truth. The Protestant believed the opposite. Now you have to be a very isolated believer to imagine that your religion, or any religion, can provide a comprehensive explanation of the world. When they study beyond a certain level, all believers learn that the most reliable theories of the origins of life have no need for the God of the Torah, the New Testament or the Koran. The most brilliant modern scientists have little in common with Newton. They are atheists, or believers in a remote God who is nothing like the capricious, interventionist deity of the holy books. The best thought has moved beyond religion. It is for this reason that religion, which once inspired man's most sublime creations, can no longer produce art, literature or philosophy of any worth; why it is impossible to imagine a new religious high culture.

If you go to the chapel at King's College, Cambridge – which was Salman Rushdie's college, as often happens – you will see one response to the loss of religious authority. The inheritors of the priests and stonemasons who sent arches soaring heavenwards to show their confidence in a divinely ordained universe are now modest people. Their information for visitors makes no pretence that the gospels are accurate accounts of Christ's life and teaching. Cambridge Anglicans stress that unknown hands wrote them long after Christ's death. They offer worshippers a celebration of tradition, symbolic truths and parables, not literal truths. Everywhere liberal Christians, Jews and Muslims follow the same example. They worship in a narrow religious sphere, which is cautious and a touch vapid, and do not try to force the rest of society to accept their views. For them there is a secular world informed by science, and there is their world of faith.

Religious fanatics appear to be opposed to the liberal modernists. They would never accept the

their holy books could be anything other than the word of God. The philosopher Ernest Gellner wrote just after the fatwa that ~~Westerners ought to rethink the assumption that industrialisation undermines religious belief.~~ The post-Khomeini world was showing that the forward march of secularism was not inevitable. Islam 'demonstrates that it is possible to run a modern, or at any rate a modernising economy, reasonably permeated by the appropriate technological, educational and organisational principles *and* combine it with a strong, pervasive, powerfully internalised Muslim conviction and identification'.

The differences between religious fundamentalists and religious modernists are not as great as either imagine. Both want to keep religion in a separate sphere; it is just that the religious sphere of the fundamentalist is wider and the means used to protect it from scrutiny more neurotic and brutal. Trying to maintain a 'strong, pervasive, powerfully internalised' religious conviction in a world that cannot manage without religious explanations creates perpetual tensions, however. The effort required to resolve them is harder than Gellner believed. At some level, even murderous fanatics know that their ideologies are redundant. They are not the vanguard for a new age of piety, but reactionaries, who hope that if they indoctrinate and intimidate they can block out modernity. Their desires mock their hopes. The rifles they fire, the nuclear weapons they crave come from a technology that has no connection to their sacred texts.

To prevent defeat, religious extremists stop the sceptical, evidence-based approach of science from moving into the religious sphere and asking hard questions about the validity of their holy books. Rushdie crossed the boundary, and asked modern questions about the evidence behind the story of the founding of Islam. His persecution was just as modern. Rather than representing a continuation of the persecutions of medieval inquisitors, who thought they were protecting the truth from its enemies, his tormentors were closer to celebrities' lawyers, who claim that their client's feelings would be hurt and their image tarnished by the discussion of unwelcome facts. Rushdie's critics were more concerned about the effect of his writings on the psyche of believers than whether what he had said was true. The charge they threw at him was that he had 'offended' the faithful by 'insulting' their religion. It was as if he had invaded their privacy.

I accept that the individual needs protection from the surveillance of an over-mighty state. I accept too that the judges will have to tackle the explosion of character assassination on the Net directed at private citizens. I find the use of privacy law to restrict the media's reporting of public figures far harder to justify. But if judges could be trusted with the power to prohibit, then I would accept too that people in the public eye need not be exposed to the scrutiny they receive in the United States. All of these acts of censorship, however, are protections for *individuals*. No honest jurisdiction can defer to using censorship to protect ideological systems from the harm or offence of criticism. You must treat ideologies which mandate wars, and govern the sexual behaviour of men and women and, in the extreme forms, every aspect of life for hundreds of millions of people, with the utmost candour. For they are ideas that seek to dominate.

Politics is as much a part of the identity of the committed leftist, green or conservative as religion is a part of the identity of the committed Christian, Jew, Muslim or Hindu. When the political partisan's beliefs are insulted or ridiculed, he feels the 'offence' as deeply as any believer who has heard his god or prophet questioned. We do not, however, prohibit or restrict arguments about politics out of 'respect' for political ideologies, because we are a free society. We call societies that prohibit political arguments 'dictatorships', and know without needing to be told that the prohibiting is done to protect the ruling elite. If political or religious believers are offended to the core of their being by criticism, free countries must reply, 'Tough. Learn to live with it. We know that we tell white lies

about many things. We accept that the truth can be suppressed on some occasions. But religion and politics are too important and too dangerous to risk handling with kid gloves.’

Respect for religion is the opposite of religious tolerance, because it allows the intolerant to impose their will on others. The Virginia Statute for Religious Tolerance, written by Thomas Jefferson in 1776, highlighted the distinction in flowing prose:

Be it enacted by General Assembly that no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burthened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief, but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of Religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge or affect their civil capacities.

Salman Rushdie was not free to abandon and criticise the religion of his childhood. The Islamists said that if he – and by extension all other Muslims – changed his religion or decided that he was an atheist, he would face assassination for the ‘crime’ of apostasy. They wanted to make Rushdie ‘suffer on account of his religious opinions’; to restrain, molest and burthen his body for his blasphemy, and to do the same to anyone, Muslim or not, who echoed his ideas. In his most compelling line, Jefferson concluded that ‘all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of Religion’.

‘Argument’ was his key word. Religious toleration did not limit argument, but removed the sanctions of the state and the established Church that had stood in argument’s way. It did not rule out appeals to logic, reason, imagination and sympathy – but gave them the space to breathe without the threat of punishment. Argument involves the true respect that comes from treating others as adults who can cope with challenging ideas and expecting them to treat you with a similar courtesy. The ‘respect’ demanded by Rushdie’s enemies infantilised both the giver and the receiver, and suited religious reactionaries well. They had every interest in keeping their subject populations in a state of infantile ignorance, and in spreading the fear that all who thought about arguing with them would know that they risked becoming the next target.

A Clash of Civilisations?

I see no way to secure liberalism by trying to put its core values beyond any but internal or consensual reasoning. The resulting slide into relativism leaves a disastrous parallel between 'liberalism for the liberals' and 'cannibalism for the cannibals'.

MARTIN HOLLIS

Islamism is a movement of the radical religious right. Its borrowings from fascism include the anti-Semitic Jewish conspiracy theory and the anti-Freemason conspiracy theory. It places men above women. It worships martyrdom and the concomitant cult of death. You do not have to stare too long or too hard at its adherents to realise that they are liberalism's enemies. Yet the most jarring aspect of Khomeini's denunciations was that he and his supporters implied that Western liberals should regard them as brothers in the struggles to defend the wretched of the earth. They used the anti-imperialist language the political left employed when it castigated the machinations of the White House and the CIA, and the anti-racist language it employed when castigating white oppression.

With a devious inversion, they turned the freedom to speak and to criticise into instruments of coercion the strong inflicted on the weak. If you wanted to be a genuine liberal, if you wanted to be on the side of the weak in their battle with the strong, you must be against Rushdie. Of all the lies that surrounded the fatwa, this was not only the most noxious but also the most farcical.

Rushdie was a typical leftist of the 1980s. He supported all the old causes. He was a candid friend of the Nicaraguan revolution, and wrote in defence of the Palestinians. At first, he welcomed the overthrow of the Shah of Iran and the arrival of the Islamic revolution, although he changed his mind long before its admirers tried to kill him. In Britain, he was the first great novelist English literature had produced to confront the disorientation felt by migrants. By necessity, his subject and his own experience made him a tough and on occasion vituperative enemy of racism. In the early 1980s, he broadcast a blood-chilling description of Britain as an island saturated with chauvinism. Unlike the Germans, who had come through painful self-examination to 'purify German thought and the German language of the pollution of Nazism', the British had never come to terms with the evils of Empire, he told the liberal viewers of Channel 4, who were doubtless suitably guilt-ridden. 'British thought and British society has never been cleansed of the filth of imperialism. It's still there, breeding lice and vermin, waiting for unscrupulous people to exploit it for their own ends. British racism, of course, is not our problem. It's yours. We simply suffer from the effects of your problem. And until you, the whites, see that the issue is not integration, or harmony, or multi-culturalism, but simply facing up to and eradicating the prejudices within almost all of you, the citizens of your new and last Empire will be obliged to struggle against you.'

If Rushdie was an agent of the imperialists, he was operating under deep cover.

Assessing the response of liberals to the assault on liberalism and the attempts to murder one of their own is blighted by the old problem that we remember the best writers' work, because it survives.

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