

# A Muslim View of the Rushdie Affair

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## 1 Preliminaries

All praise is due to Allah alone, the Creator, Sustainer and Nourisher of the Worlds. I seek the protection of God from the mischief that is in my soul and the evil consequences of my deeds. Those whom God leads to guidance, none can lead astray; those whom God leads astray, none can guide. I bear witness that there is no God except Allah; He is One and has no partners. I bear witness that Muhammad is his slave and his messenger.

As a Muslim, my sole concern is to please my Creator. If my actions and beliefs please God, it matters not at all if the entire world condemns me. If I am disobedient to God, the praise and approval of the entire world gains me nothing. Why then should I seek to explain the behavior of myself and my fellow Muslims to a non-Muslim audience? My efforts are directed to removing obstacles to understanding Islam created by slanders and lies. After the last prophet Muhammed, this duty of conveying the message of our Creator to mankind has been assigned to all his followers .

Unfortunately, the task is enormous. Starting with the Crusades, and continuing through the era of Colonialism, a tremendous amount of grossly distorted or completely false information about Islam and Muslims has been taken as axiomatic in the West<sup>1</sup>. The misunderstandings regarding Rushdie are but a trivial manifestation of the widespread ignorance (combined with fear and hate, in many cases) about Islam. For a good introduction to Islam written from a Western perspective, see *Islam and the Destiny of Man* by Charles Le Gai Eaton.

## 2 Freedom of Speech?

I and my fellow Muslims are perplexed at Western defence of Rushdie in terms of freedom speech. Muslim see the Westerners as acting in bad faith in this issue; freedom of speech is invoked where it suits them, and ignored when it does not. For example,

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<sup>1</sup>See the excellent book *Orientalism* by Edward Said for documentation of some aspects.

- The American press was, in general, mildly amused at the discomfiture of the British Government when they banned the book 'Spycatcher' by Peter Wright recently. There was no impassioned outrage at the restriction of free speech by Mrs. Thatcher (as opposed to the Ayatollah)
- When Jimmy (the Greek) Snyder uttered remarks offensive to blacks, he was dropped from all major TV networks, and has not been seen since. Presumably, he has suffered serious loss of income. No one has defended his right of free speech.
- A research center in Southern California responsible for propagating the idea that the Holocaust never happened, or else that the numbers involved have been exaggerated, was bombed and burned down. Death threat were made to the personnel. No national outrage at this denial of free speech was visible.
- Very recently, a Chicago art exhibit required people to step on the flag, apparently to properly view the exhibit. The Daughters of the American Revolution promptly came in with the requisite bomb threats. A reconciliation was reached by restricting the viewing of the exhibit. Again, the incident (and its relation to free speech and the Rushdie case) went unnoticed in national press.
- During the Nixon administration, General Brown uttered remarks about the excessive influence exercised by Jews in America. This influence can easily be substantiated by reading the memoirs of Kissinger, Nixon, and the more controversial 'They Dare to Speak Out', by Senator Paul Findlay. Ironic proof of his own statement was provided by the subsequent demotion of General Brown.

The list goes on and on, but the above should be sufficient as a sampler. The point is that Muslims regard invocations of freedom of speech as merely a pretext by Westerners to freely heap insults on Muslims and Islam.

We take the view that just as my freedom to move my arm is restricted by your nose, freedom of speech is restricted by the need to avoid damage to society. Libel laws protect individuals from verbal attacks which hold them up to 'ridicule, hatred, or contempt'. The concept of banning the book (or removing its offensive portions) to prevent this libel is not as 'alien' to Western principles as Westerners claim. Indeed, a previous book by Rushdie, which made false allegations about Mrs. Gandhi, was successfully sued and subsequently edited to remove the offensive portions. Again no complaints were registered regarding Rushdie's right to freely insult Mrs. Gandhi. How then does Rushdie have the right to freely insult deeply the approximately one billion Muslims of the world? In my view, an appropriate resolution to this problem would be for Rushdie to revise and eliminate the sections offensive to the Muslims, showing us the same courtesy shown to Mrs. Gandhi.

### 3 Who is the Terrorist?

From the strong horrified reactions to Khomeini's death sentence, one would think that such behavior is unknown in the West. Nobody was horrified about Ronald Reagan's attempted assassination of Muammar Khaddafi, which succeeded only in killing his adopted child. The murder of a PLO official in his bedroom in Tunis by Israeli commandos did not inspire horrified comments. In both cases, Westerners feel that the murdered men were terrorists and deserved to die, and legal niceties are not relevant. They take upon themselves the 'White man's burden' of trying, judging, and executing these men, but don't feel anybody of a different race can take similar liberties.

Westerners see Khomeini as a terrorist, while they regard Rushdie as an innocent. In fact, the terrorist in this affair is really Rushdie, and not Khomeini. Whereas nobody has been killed (yet) as a consequence of Khomeini's edict, well over fifty people have been killed in riots in India and Pakistan directly caused by publication of 'Satanic Verses'.

Should Rushdie be held responsible for the rioting and deaths that have occurred in response to the publication of his book? There is ample evidence (supported by Rushdie's own comments from his interview on Nightline) to suggest that the book is deliberately provocative. Exactly like the producers of 'The Last Temptation', he and Penguin Press counted on such adverse reaction to boost sales.

Let us however, give Rushdie the benefit of the doubt. Suppose that he was indeed surprised by the rioting and deaths that occurred in India and Pakistan, in the violent reaction over his book. How then can we explain his appeal to Rajiv Gandhi to lift the ban on his book, and move towards making India a 'less repressive society?' Even a casual observer should realize that if the publication of the book in America caused over 50 deaths in riots, there would be considerably greater violence if it was actually published in India. My own estimate is the number of deaths would range in thousands if we are lucky, and could easily reach the hundred thousand level.

What kind of man is willing to let so many die, for personal motives? Rushdie has a tremendous hatred for Muslims<sup>2</sup>. Those who are unyielding in their support of Rushdie are also unmoved by the numerous deaths of Muslims. We should remember that the Holocaust was caused by the great hatred of one man for Jews *combined with the indifference of many to deaths of Jews*.

Many Americans incorrectly categorize Rushdie along with Scopes as being persecuted for expressing his beliefs, which are contrary to religious dogma. Thus they feel the Muslims 'should read the book before condemning it', or else, simply 'not read it if they find it offensive' etc. It must be emphasized that Rushdie is *not* expressing a point of view, or a belief. Fantasizing about

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<sup>2</sup>Desperate for acceptance into English society in his youth, he was denied it because of his race and culture. A common response to this childhood trauma is intense hatred for one's own race/culture/religion.

our Prophet and his companions in demeaning situations (completely out of the boundaries of historical probability), and using derogatory and pornographic language, is insulting to us, regardless of the context (i.e. within a dream) in which this occurs. We do not feel it is appropriate for Westerners to dictate to us what we should or should not find offensive. The correct analogy regarding Rushdie is not Scopes, but for example, trashy pornography regarding the Virgin Mary and Jesus.

## 4 Should Rushdie be Killed?

Because of deep insults to our religion contained in Rushdie's book, many Muslims are so outraged that they wish to kill him. The teaching of Islam is that in this and all matters, we must surrender our wills to the will of Allah. Thus the question of whether or not Rushdie should be killed becomes, for the Muslim, strictly a question of Islamic Law. When we look for precedents, we find examples of all kinds. When during the reign of Omar (the second Caliph in Islamic History), a Christian was slapped by a Muslim for uttering insults about Mohammed, the Christian took the case to court! The ruling went against him, in that the Qazi (Judge) found that civil liberties did not include the right to insult Mohammed, but no penalties were imposed. In Muslim Spain, there was a period during which Christians would come in, publicly abuse the Prophet, be executed, and thereby achieve martyrdom. Eventually Muslims negotiated with the Church to prevent this nuisance. The Church then revoked the status of 'martyrdom' for those executed for the abuse of Muhammed, and this stopped.

Why should abuse of the Prophet be punishable by death? Exactly as the Rosenbergs (who may have been innocent) were executed for the crime of treason to the state, so treason to Islam is punishable by death. Rushdie's case vis-a-vis Islamic law is complicated by the fact that he is a citizen of Britain, a non-Muslim country which has diplomatic relations with Muslim countries. In complex situations, scholars of Islamic law issue rulings (called *fatwa's*) which give their opinion regarding the matter. The completely misunderstood 'death sentence' of Khomeini, is no more or less than a scholarly finding that 'Islamic Law sanctions death penalty for Rushdie'; scholars at Al Azhar University in Cairo have issued an opposite ruling. Khomeini did not, contrary to popular impression, put a price on Rushdie's head (this was done by private citizens in Iran). He did not, unlike Reagan or the Israelis, send out a commando team to execute Rushdie. Surely Khomeini's freedom of speech, which may result in the death of one man, is as valuable as Rushdie's, which has already resulted in deaths of over 50. Finally, it must be clarified that his sentence is not binding on Muslims. If by strange happenstance, Rushdie were to enter Iran, he would *not* be killed on the spot. Rather, he would be tried in an Islamic court. The judge would (probably) take into consideration Khomeini's fatwa, but may well call for other fatwas from other experts. Incidentally, Khomeini is not, as some

have suggested, the worlds greatest authority on Islam. There are many scholars of greater eminence. Khomeini is merely the one best known to the West for obvious reasons.

## 5 Love of the Prophet

The key to understanding Muslim reactions to Rushdie is the love that all Muslims have for the prophet Mohammed. This and similar statements are routinely misinterpreted by Westerners to be expressions of piety or theological dogma. While the commandments to ‘love God’ and to ‘love our neighbors’ are more remote, love of our Prophet is a concrete reality in the lives of Muslims. One aspect of this love is demonstrated in the following of *Sunnah*, or the way of the Prophet. The Sunnah includes all aspects, even seemingly trivial ones, of the Prophet’s behavior.

I despair of conveying the nature of our love for the Prophet to a non-Muslim audience. Both in terms of its intensity and its universality among Muslims, it is a phenomenon outside the range of Western experience. It is this love which binds Muslims of different races, cultures, and social status. Odes to the Prophet constitute a special genre of poetry in Muslim languages, and good ones are capable of moving large audiences to tears.

Perhaps it would be more effective to illustrate the kind of effect that the Rushdie book has had on lives of ordinary Muslims. On the eve of the demonstration in Manhattan against ‘Satanic Verses’, we received a call from an elderly Muslim lady, urging us to go. When she heard of our distaste for demonstrations, she began weeping. Her sentiments were ‘that our Prophet should be so insulted in public, and that no one should speak on his behalf, or come to his defence, this is unbearable’. Out of deference to the lady’s tears, I went to the demonstration, which was attended by about ten thousand Muslims. In another incident, I attended a meeting of Muslims to discuss responses to the Rushdie affair. One hotheaded youth was infuriated by our ‘lukewarm’ discussion regarding pamphlets, talks, demonstrations, etc. He challenged us, “ Are you cowards or men? That our mothers be called prostitutes, and we should sit on our hands and look the other way?”. It took great effort by the rest of us to persuade him Islam teaches us restraint, and we must obey Allah and not act on our baser impulses. Yet another index of Muslim feelings about this matter is in the (private) responses of the large immigrant Muslim population. Many have had deep regrets, and second thoughts about their decision to settle here, given the obvious hostility to Islam, Islamic values, and Muslims displayed by the Western response on this issue. I have no doubt that among the many Muslims I know who have been toying with the idea of going back, some will be spurred into action as a consequence of this event.

Who was Mohammed, and why does he inspire such affection? We have a wealth of detailed information about his life. Over the short span of thirteen

years, he changed the course of history. His achievement was the transformation of a semi-barbaric culture to sublime heights of civilization<sup>3</sup> Our Prophet (and all prophets, including Abraham, Moses, and Jesus) personified the most excellent character achievable, and taught us by word and deed how to achieve this ideal. He was compassionate, gentle, soft-spoken, and humble. Until his death he lived a life of great austerity, even though Muslims became quite affluent following political successes. He *never* turned down a request for assistance, to the extent of giving up the shirt on his back, or his only meal for the day.

## 6 Closing Prayer

When the prophet Abraham (may Allah shower his blessings upon him) refused to renounce his faith in one God and his opposition to idol worship, King Nimrod had him thrown in a huge fire. God ordered the fire to be cool, and it did not burn Abraham. This story, like all others reported in the Quran, are taken literally as historical events by *all* Muslims<sup>4</sup>.

A Sufi parable (not to be taken literally) relates the story of a bird attempting to put the fire out using drops of water carried in its beak. The bird explains that its efforts are directed towards God; it does not wish to be accused of standing by idly, while a beloved prophet of God was burning.

I feel much like the bird. I pray that God will accept my efforts, and forgive my errors. I pray that he may heal the rifts between us. I pray that he may lead us all to the love of God, from which springs the love of all creation. All praise is for Allah, the Merciful and the Compassionate.

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<sup>3</sup>Here again is a stumbling block for Western understanding. The measure of civilization from the Muslim point of view is neither wealth (GNP), nor scientific, intellectual, or artistic accomplishment. A civilization is judged *solely* by the character of the people. From the Islamic point of view, a civilization is developed if the people are truthful and trustworthy, generous, loving, and take good care of their own disadvantaged, elderly, and poor.

<sup>4</sup>It is not well-known that, unlike the Bible, events as reported in the Quran (such as Noah's flood, creation, etc.) are *not* in conflict with current scientific findings. See, *The Bible, Quran, and Science* by Maurice Bucaille for documentation of the striking accord between Quran and later scientific discoveries.