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Rushdie's Critics

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The Fall and Rise

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& TOM HERRENBERG

of

Blasphemy

Law

with a foreword by
Flemming Rose

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The Fall and Rise of Blasphemy Law

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Paul Cliteur & Tom Herrenberg

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6 Rushdie's Critics

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INTRODUCTION

On 14 February 1989, the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini (1902–1989), issued a declaration that called for the death of British novelist Salman Rushdie (b. 1947). It reads as follows:

I inform all zealous Muslims of the world that the author of the book entitled *The Satanic Verses*—which has been compiled, printed, and published in opposition to Islam, the Prophet, and the Koran—and all those involved in the publication who were aware of its contents are sentenced to death.

I call upon all zealous Muslims to execute them quickly, wherever they may be found, so that no one else will dare to insult the Muslim sanctities. God willing, whoever is killed on this path is a martyr.

In addition, anyone who has access to the author of this book but does not possess the power to execute him should report him to the people so that he may be punished for his actions.¹

The aim of this chapter is to analyse some of the criticism that has been levelled against Salman Rushdie for having published his novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988). Since Khomeini's "fatwa," clashes between free speech and religious extremism have not dwindled, but have instead grown in significance. It is not only novels that have proved to give rise to controversy, but also cartoons and video clips. The latest of these controversies, the massacre of the *Charlie*

¹ Quoted in Daniel Pipes, "Two Decades of the Rushdie Rules: How an edict that once outraged the world became the new normal," in *Commentary Magazine*, October 2010, 31.

Hebdo cartoonists in Paris on 7 January 2015 underscores a deep division between a culture of civil liberties and theocratic extremism. Although Rushdie received considerable support from many sides,² he also faced strong criticism for writing his novel. Indeed, Rushdie was targeted not only by terrorists who wanted to punish him for his blasphemous novel, but also by public intellectuals who considered his stance too provocative, if not downright insulting, to the religious views of many people. In this chapter we will discuss positions taken by some of Rushdie's critics and look at their significance in the light of the killings of the *Charlie Hebdo* journalists and cartoonists.

WAYLAY HIM IN A DARK STREET

An early reaction to the Rushdie affair came from the famous historian Hugh Trevor-Roper (1914–2003), who stated:

I wonder how Salman Rushdie is faring these days under the benevolent protection of British law and British police, about whom he has been so rude. Not too comfortably I hope... I would not shed a tear if some British Muslims, deploring his manners, should waylay him in a dark street and seek to improve them. If that should cause him thereafter to control his pen, society would benefit and literature would not suffer.³

Perhaps this is—apart from Khomeini's fatwa itself—one of the most extreme reactions to the publication of the novel. What makes this reaction interesting is that Trevor-Roper so openly shows understanding for the threat of physical violence—if not advocating it—against the writer of the controversial novel. The reaction was also stunning since it came from an academic who, due to the nature of his own profession, can only work under conditions of academic freedom—conditions that are more or less naturally opposed to “controlling the pen.”

2 See, e.g., “Writers rally to Rushdie as publishers rethink,” in *The Guardian*, 16 February 1989; “Writers Defend Rushdie,” in the *New York Times*, 21 February 1989.

3 Quoted in: Salman Rushdie, *Joseph Anton: A Memoir* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2012), 260; Paul Weller, *A Mirror for our Times: “The Rushdie Affair” and the Future of Multiculturalism* (London/New York: Continuum, 2009), 21.

Furthermore, Trevor-Roper is a *historian*. He is the author of an extensive oeuvre, including books such as *The Last Days of Hitler* (1947),⁴ *The Invention of Scotland* (1994),⁵ *History and the Enlightenment* (2010),⁶ and many other works. He certainly must have been aware of the history of censorship, intimidation and violence against writers and scholars in the past.⁷

The vehemence of Trevor-Roper's reaction was perhaps partly because he felt Rushdie *had to have known in advance* what type of reaction his novel would unleash. Trevor-Roper argued that Rushdie was "well versed in Islamic ideas" and that he "knew what he was doing and could foresee the consequences."⁸ This point was also made by former United States President Jimmy Carter (b. 1924). Carter referred to something that came up time and again in the discussion on Rushdie's book, namely that as a Muslim, former Muslim, or at least someone cognizant of the mores in the Muslim world, Rushdie should have known better. Carter wrote: "The author, a well-versed analyst of Moslem beliefs, must have anticipated a horrified reaction throughout the Islamic world."⁹

Just like Trevor-Roper, Carter also took Rushdie to task for knowing what he, Rushdie, was doing. This was also explicitly voiced by Rushdie's fellow writer Roald Dahl (1916–1990). "[Rushdie] must have been totally aware of the deep and violent feelings his book would stir up among devout Muslims. In other words, he knew exactly what he was doing and cannot plead otherwise," Dahl argued.¹⁰ To this accusation Rushdie once humorously responded by saying that "It would be really strange ... to spend five years writing a novel and not know what you are doing."¹¹

4 Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Last Days of Hitler* (London: Pan, 2012 (1947)).

5 Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Invention of Scotland: Myth and History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994).

6 Hugh Trevor-Roper, *History and the Enlightenment* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

7 See, e.g., Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century: Religion, the Reformation & Social Change* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Fund, 1967).

8 Paul Weller, *A Mirror for our Times: "The Rushdie Affair" and the Future of Multiculturalism* (London/ New York: Continuum, 2009), 21.

9 Jimmy Carter, "Rushdie's book is an insult," in the *New York Times*, 5 March 1989, also in Lisa Appignanesi and Sara Maitland (eds), *The Rushdie File* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 236–237.

10 Quoted in: Ibn Warraq, *Why the West is Best: A Muslim Apostate's Defense of Liberal Democracy* (London: Encounter Books, 2010), 32.

11 During an interview with Christopher Hitchens at The Fifth Annual Arthur Miller Freedom to Write Lecture (2010).

What clearly appeared from Carter's reaction was that criticising religion was not very welcome. This opinion was shared by many, but not always for explicitly religious reasons. Sometimes there was also an element of resignation in the commentary of some participants. Religious criticism is not wise, because we cannot control the turmoil that follows it. In an interview on the Rushdie affair in May 1989, Novelist John le Carré (b. 1931) commented in the same vein when—while stating that it was “outrageous that ... Salman Rushdie had been condemned to death by the Iranian Government”—he said: “I don't think it is given to any of us to be impertinent to great religions with impunity.”¹²

This reference to “impunity” seems to be an allusion to what was made much more explicit by Trevor-Roper: you cannot complain when violence is exerted against you as a result of your criticism of religion. So the word “impunity” has a sinister undertone.

Another point was made by another famous detractor of Rushdie, the art critic John Berger (b. 1926). Berger's point was that it would simply not be possible to control the violence. In *The Guardian* he wrote in February 1989:

I suspect Salman Rushdie, if he is not caught in a chain of events of which he has completely lost control, might by now be ready to consider asking his world publishers to stop producing more or new editions of *The Satanic Verses*. Not because of the threat to his own life, but because of the threat to the lives of those who are innocent of either writing or reading the book. This achieved, Islamic leaders and statesmen across the world might well be ready to condemn the practice of the Ayatollah issuing terrorist death warrants. Otherwise a unique twentieth century Holy War, with its terrifying righteousness on both sides, may be on the point of breaking out sporadically but repeatedly—in airports, shopping streets, suburbs, city centers, wherever the unprotected live.¹³

Berger introduces the notion of “innocence” with regard to not only writing, but also *reading* a book. It seems he is suggesting that when you read a book

¹² “Russians Warm to le Carré,” in the *New York Times*, 22 May 1989.

¹³ Quoted in William J. Weatherby, *Salman Rushdie: Sentenced to Death* (New York: Carrol & Graf, 1990), 168.

that theoterrorists object to¹⁴ you run the risk of forfeiting your “innocence.” Berger sought the solution to the turmoil over the novel in halting the production and distribution of *The Satanic Verses*. Roald Dahl, too, was of the opinion that, given the outrage over the book, the best thing to do was to halt its distribution: “If the lives of the author and the senior editor in New York are at stake, then it is better to give in on a moral question when you are dealing with fanatics. If I were Rushdie, then for the sake of everybody threatened I would agree to throw the bloody thing away. It would save lives.”¹⁵ Here, Dahl and Berger shared common ground with Iran’s parliament speaker at the time, Hashemi Rafsanjani (b. 1934), who “said the solution to the strangest and rarest crisis in history is to issue a strict order to seize all copies in the entire world and burn them.”¹⁶

BRITISH POLITICIANS RESPOND

On 15 February 1989, Britain’s foreign secretary, Sir Geoffrey Howe (1926–2015), gave a rather tame reaction to the death sentence, telling the BBC that Khomeini’s declaration was something of “very grave concern” and that the British government was “looking into the background of it very carefully.”¹⁷ He also argued that Iran’s actions illustrated “the extreme difficulty of establishing the right kind of relationship with a manifestly revolutionary regime with ideas that are very much its own.”¹⁸ A day later Howe’s attitude was more forthright, and he declared that “Nobody has the right to incite people to violence on British soil or against British citizens. Ayatollah Khomeini’s statement is totally unacceptable.”¹⁹ On the same day the British government put out a statement that read: “The British Government’s view is that it would not be possible to establish a normal relationship with Iran while the Iranian Government failed to respect fully international standards

14 The word “theoterrorists” is used here for those who exert violence on the basis of a conception of God’s wishes. Needless to say, whether they give the right interpretation to God’s wishes is irrelevant from a social science perspective.

15 “Pulp book to save lives, says Dahl,” in *The Times*, 17 February 1989.

16 “Iranian Says All Copies Must Be Burned,” in *The Associated Press*, 10 March 1989.

17 “Iranians Protest over Banned Book,” in the *New York Times*, 16 February 1989.

18 Ibid.

19 “Britain Protests Khomeini’s ‘Death Sentence’ Against Author Rushdie,” in *Schenectady Gazette*, 17 February 1989.

of behaviour.”²⁰ In late February Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (1925–2013) stated that freedom of speech “is subject only to the laws of this land ... and will remain subject to the rule of law. It is absolutely fundamental to everything in which we believe and cannot be interfered with by any outside force.”²¹

Both Howe’s second statement and Thatcher’s comment seem to address the central issue, namely the fact that Khomeini has appropriated the right to exercise control over an individual not belonging to his jurisdiction. This point was aptly made by novelist Anthony Burgess (1917–1993). Burgess, commenting on the fatwa, argued:

The Ayatollah Khomeini is probably within his self-elected rights in calling for the assassination of Salman Rushdie, or anyone else for that matter, on his own holy ground. To order outraged sons of the prophet to kill him and the directors of Penguin Books on British soil is tantamount to a *jihad*. It is a declaration of war on citizens of a free country and as such it is a political act. It has to be countered by an equally forthright, if less murderous, declaration of defiance.²²

Burgess’ reaction proved prescient because, amid all the confusion, he highlights the really relevant issues here: assassination, national sovereignty, jihad and the need to resist. Burgess also rightly stresses that there is a conflict of visions. Khomeini is indeed right *within* his own religious paradigm. It is also remarkable that Burgess does not shy away from calling this “jihad,” meaning a “declaration of war” on citizens of another country. Burgess further stresses the element of territoriality (“British soil”).

While the British government unequivocally condemned Khomeini’s threat in the first days and weeks after 14 February 1989, attention shifted to the content of *The Satanic Verses* when Sir Geoffrey Howe gave an interview to the BBC in early March. In this interview—which was “relayed by the Persian service ... in Iran”²³—Howe was quite critical of the book, saying that:

20 “Britain puts ties with Iran on hold,” in the *New York Times*, 17 February 1989.

21 “Iran Tells Britain to Condemn Book,” in *Washington Post*, 1 March 1989.

22 “The sins of a holy terror. Once it would do intellectual battle but Islam now prefers to draw blood,” in *The Globe and Mail*, 17 February 1989.

23 “Terrorists add Hurd, Howe to book death list,” in *The Times*, 3 March 1989.

[There is] a huge distance between ourselves and the book. The British government, the British people, do not have any affection for the book. The book is extremely critical, rude about us. It compares Britain with Hitler's Germany. We do not like that any more than the people of the Muslim faith like the attacks on their faith contained in the book. So we are not sponsoring the book. What we are sponsoring is the right of people to speak freely, to publish freely.²⁴

The Times noted that Howe's remark about the "huge distance between ourselves and the book" was "apparently aimed at appeasing Muslim outrage and making the first tentative move towards a settlement with Iran."²⁵ The paper opined that the comments of Howe—who was also put on the death list of a pro-Iranian terrorist group—went "some way towards fulfilling an Iranian demand earlier this week for Britain not to adopt improper gestures towards the Islamic world."²⁶ At the same time, Margaret Thatcher had seemingly also developed an understanding of the offence the book had caused. Relating to her own religious beliefs, she said that "We've known in our own religion people doing things which are deeply offensive to some of us, deeply offensive, and we felt it very much. And that is what has happened in Islam. I think that these great religions are strong enough and deep enough to withstand these kind of events."²⁷

These comments were much to Rushdie's dismay. As reported by the *Washington Post*, Rushdie felt that "the government is beginning to play both sides in the middle in its efforts to defend the rights of free expression and avoid a threatened break in formal diplomatic relations with Iran."²⁸ Rushdie "feared the Government was weakening in its support for him as part of an attempt to resolve the UK-Iran crisis."²⁹

Howe was also criticised in the newspapers. *The Guardian* wrote in a commentary on Howe's interview:

It was presumably someone else at the Foreign Office who went through *The Satanic Verses*, picking out the naughty bits which led Sir Geoffrey

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 "Rushdie fears backdown by Government," in *The Times*, 4 March 1989.

28 "Statement Worries Rushdie," in *Washington Post*, 4 March 1989.

29 "Rushdie fears backdown by Government," in *The Times*, 4 March 1989.

Howe to conclude on Thursday that the book was "extremely rude" about Britain. The result was not a great success, either as an exercise in literary criticism or as a covert signal to the moderates in Iran.

...

Aren't we supposed to be against governments saying that they disapprove of books—let alone making up other people's minds for them? It was also a somewhat philistine judgment. Not only was the book "rude" but, said Sir Geoffrey, it "compares Britain with Hitler's Germany." It does nothing of the kind. It does portray, as our reviewer Angela Carter wrote before the great row began, "the mean streets of a marvellously evoked eighties London."³⁰

The newspaper concluded by stating that Rushdie "seems to have broken his silence ... to express concern about Sir Geoffrey's statement; and, regrettably, one can see why."³¹

In the *Financial Times*, Ian Davidson wrote a commentary on Howe's interview. Davidson touched on a number of interesting points:

Mealy-mouthed expressions of distaste for *The Satanic Verses* merely served to make the Government look obsequious and cringing. When Sir Geoffrey Howe said on the radio: "We understand that the book itself has been found deeply offensive by people of the Moslem faith," he was making an observation which was entirely otiose. He made matters much worse when he went on to say: "The British Government, the British people, don't have any affection for the book, which is extremely critical, rude about us. It compares Britain with Hitler's Germany. We don't like that any more than people of the Moslem faith like the attacks on their faith contained in the book."

The implications of these words are unmistakable and alarming: in the hope of avoiding a break in diplomatic relations, the British Government was fully prepared to adopt the posture of an equally injured party, even if it meant endorsing (in modified terms) the Ayatollah's attack on *The Satanic Verses*. If Mr Rushdie felt he was in

³⁰ "Rude, as in rudimentary," in *The Guardian*, 4 March 1989.

³¹ *Ibid.*

danger of being dumped by the British Government, he may have had good reason.³²

Davidson also made some interesting points about the expertise and competence of the government to comment on matters of literary interpretation.

Whether Sir Geoffrey or Mrs. Thatcher thinks *The Satanic Verses* is a nice book or a nasty book, whether they believe it is offensive to Moslems, or whether they consider it unfair to the British people, are entirely irrelevant questions. In any case, they are wholly unqualified, in their capacity as elected politicians, to have a useful opinion on any of these subordinate issues.³³

Davidson also spelled out what were to him the relevant questions in this case: "Under the Iranian gun, the only questions which are immediately relevant are whether Mr. Rushdie was legally entitled under British law to write and publish his book, and whether Ayatollah Khomeini is entitled to incite the murder of Mr. Rushdie."³⁴

Davidson did something only few people commenting on the Rushdie affair did. He first asked us: what are the *relevant* questions in this controversy?

You can, of course, comment on *everything*: on whether you liked the book, on whether Rushdie could have foreseen the consequences, on whether you like religious criticism in general, or on whether you have an understanding for offended feelings of religious believers. But what Davidson drew our attention to was the *relevance* of those questions. What should, for instance, a politician or "the state" ask when judging the situation? And Davidson claims only two questions are relevant: was Rushdie legally entitled to write the book, and was Khomeini entitled to incite murder?

These two questions are, indeed, the relevant questions for a politician to ask. But, as we saw, not all politicians focused on those questions—some took on the role of literary critic and commented on the matter as if they were ordinary citizens. Not to their credit, because what the state has to do is protect its citizens against the internal and external enemies of the

32 "Why British Diplomacy Cuts A Poor Figure In Iran's Holy War: It is Britain which should have severed diplomatic relations rather than attempt conciliation," in *Financial Times*, 9 March 1989.

33 *Ibid.*

34 *Ibid.*

peace. And in the light of *that* question, Davidson's two perspectives should be guiding.

OTHER EUROPEAN POLITICAL LEADERS

Other European government representatives backed the British in the struggle with religious terrorism. One of the first diplomatic responses came from the Netherlands. Shortly after Khomeini threatened Rushdie, the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hans van den Broek (b. 1936), cancelled a trip to Teheran. He gave the reason for his decision by saying about the death threat that "This is totally unacceptable, a call for international terrorism."³⁵ German Chancellor Helmut Kohl (b. 1930) "called on the 'entire civilised world' to take action against Iran's threat to kill Rushdie."³⁶ President Mitterrand (1916–1996) of France said: "All dogmatism which through violence undermines freedom of thought and the right to free expression is, in my view, absolute evil. The moral and spiritual progress of humanity is linked to the recoil of all fanaticisms."³⁷ Mitterrand was certainly right on this. The freedom to criticise freely is a fundamental institution of liberal democracies. That freedom is not absolute though, and there are good reasons to accept limits to the freedom of speech, for example in case of incitement to violence. Khomeini's fatwa itself, for instance, can never find protection under a liberal principle of freedom of speech.³⁸ The problem is, though, that accepting limits to freedom of speech does not imply that we can leave this task of establishing the nature of these limits to world religions, clerical leaders and religious zealots.

French Prime Minister Michel Rocard (b. 1930) stated that "any demonstrations urging violence against Rushdie would result in criminal

35 "Britain puts ties with Iran on hold," in the *New York Times*, 16 February 1989.

36 "Bonn and Paris back stand against Iran," in the *Guardian*, 23 February 1989.

37 *Ibid.*

38 That incitement to physical violence should be accepted as a limit to free speech was also proclaimed—although not literally—by John Stuart Mill in his important essay *On Liberty* (1859). See also David M. Rabban, "Clear and Present Danger Test," in Kermit L. Hall (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to The Supreme Court of the United States* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 183–184. And in general see Mick Hume, *Trigger Warning: Is the Fear of Being Offensive Killing Free Speech?* (London: Willam Collins, 2015).

charges.”³⁹ The mayor of Paris, Jacques Chirac (b. 1932), commented along the same lines:

I am not confusing Muslims with fanatics, but I cannot imagine that in Paris we will accept desperadoes who call for murder. If they are French they need to be pursued; if they are foreigners, they should be expelled. Foreigners, once they are on our soil, must respect our laws, and we cannot tolerate calls for murder in the capital of human rights.⁴⁰

A week after Khomeini's edict, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the 12 member states of the European Community issued a statement that condemned “this incitement to murder as an unacceptable violation of the most elementary principles and obligations that govern relations among sovereign states.” The ministers also expressed “their continuing interest in developing normal constructive relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran” but added that “if Iran shares this desire, it has to declare its respect for international obligations and renounce the use or threatened use of violence.”⁴¹

OTHER RELIGIOUS LEADERS

As might be expected, Iran was also seeking allies both in the West and among Muslim nations for its stance in the Rushdie affair. One of its allies in the struggle against the blaspheming Rushdie, it hoped, was the Pope. The Iranian embassy in Vatican City demanded that the Pope join actions against Rushdie. A senior Vatican official commented on this request, saying that he doubted whether the Holy Father would take any action. As the spokesman said: “After all, he is not a defender of the Moslem faith. In fact this move by the Iranian diplomats is rather out of place.”⁴² The Vatican spokesman further explained: “It's their problem, not ours, we have enough of our own,

39 “Bomb Kills One, Wounds Seven in Kashmir Protest,” in *The Associated Press*, 27 February 1989.

40 Quoted in Lisa Appignanesi and Sara Maitland (eds), *The Rushdie File* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 133.

41 “Text of European Statement,” in the *New York Times*, 21 February 1989.

42 Quoted in Lisa Appignanesi and Sara Maitland (eds), *The Rushdie File* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 81.

especially with all the books and films which cast doubts on Jesus Christ himself. We have never asked for Moslem help in curbing their sale."⁴³

Apparently, the Vatican spokesman did not consider this an opportunity to make clear where the Vatican stood in matters of freedom of conscience and freedom of speech. He was only concerned with the fact that the Iranians had sought the wrong partner for their protest. Should we conclude from this that if Muslims had been more helpful in protesting against criticism of Jesus Christ, the Church would have joined the actions of the Iranians against Rushdie?

More understanding for the Iranian point of view came from Anglican Church. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Robert Runcie (1921–2000), called for a strengthening of the law against blasphemy to cover religions other than Christianity. About the offended Muslims Runcie said: "I understand their feelings and I firmly believe that offence to the religious belief of the followers of Islam or any other faith is quite as wrong as offence to the religious beliefs of Christians."⁴⁴

Rabbi Avraham Ravitz (1934–2009), the leader of the Orthodox Degel Hatorah Party, said that Salman Rushdie needed to be condemned.⁴⁵ The Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, Immanuel Jakobovits (1921–1999), was critical as well and called for legislation that would prohibit "the publication of anything likely to inflame, through obscene defamation, the feelings or beliefs of any section of society."⁴⁶

Now we have to be careful, of course, not to equate the reactions of religious leaders with the reactions of the religion they represent as such or, even less so, with individual believers' opinions. Nonetheless, it seems fair to say that an unequivocal defence of Rushdie and his right to freedom of expression was rare for religious leaders. A case in point was what Cardinal Albert Decourtray (1923–1994), Archbishop of Lyons, said on the matter. He was the president of the French bishops' conference. Decourtray issued a declaration that contained two important points. First, that he had not read Rushdie's novel. Second, that he was offended by the book. "Once again the faith of believers is insulted," the bishop declared.⁴⁷ He continued: "Yesterday

43 Ibid.

44 Quoted in *ibid.*, 101.

45 *Ibid.*, 109.

46 "British Now Lie Low With Rushdie," in the *New York Times*, 9 March 1989.

47 "Priest: 'Satanic Verses' not like 'Last Temptation,'" in *The Bulletin*, 26 February 1989.

it was the Christians who were offended by a film which disfigured the face of Christ. Today it is the Muslims by this book about the Prophet.”⁴⁸

TRYING TO UNDERSTAND RUSHDIE'S CRITICS

Those religious leaders who condemned Rushdie and proposed legislation that would outlaw blasphemous material seemed to declare that strong criticism or satire of religious symbols should be off limits. They espoused more or less the same idea as the aforementioned author John le Carré, who stated “I don't think it is given to any of us to be impertinent to great religions with impunity.” But, we can ask ourselves, what does “impertinent” mean in this context? Is all criticism of a great religion by definition impertinent? Or does Le Carré want to distinguish between modest and legitimate criticism on the one hand and impertinent criticism on the other? And where should one draw the demarcation line? Was Nietzsche (1844–1900) “impertinent” when he declared God dead?⁴⁹ And what about Freud (1856–1939) when he wrote about religious belief as an illusion?⁵⁰ Was Spinoza (1632–1677) impertinent in equating God with nature?⁵¹ In short: would John le Carré extend his criticism to the whole literature of criticism of religion as it has been developed by Voltaire, Holbach, Kant, Freud, Hegel, Spinoza, Meslier, Paine and countless others? But why not give critics of religion some more credit? It seems reasonable to argue that contemporary public atheists such as Richard Dawkins⁵² (b. 1941) and Christopher Hitchens⁵³ (1949–2011), but also those who complained about Rushdie's satire, such as Hugh Trevor-Roper

48 Ibid.

49 In Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, in: *Sämtliche Werke*, 1882, Band 3, Kritische Studienausgabe herausgegeben von Giorgio Colli und Mazzino Montinari, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag (Munich: De Gruyter, 1999), 343–653.

50 Sigmund Freud, *Die Zukunft einer Illusion*, 1927, in Sigmund Freud, *Studienausgabe*, Band IX, Fragen der Gesellschaft, Ursprünge der Religion (S. Fischer Verlag), 135–191.

51 Thereby giving a decisive impetus to the Enlightenment, according to the British historian Jonathan Israel in, inter alia, Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) and Jonathan Israel, “Enlightenment! Which Enlightenment?”, in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67/3 (July 2006) 523.

52 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Paperback edn, London: Black Swan, Transworld Publishers, 2006).

53 Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York/Boston, Mass.: Twelve, 2007).

and John Berger, can write what they write because religious critics helped pave the way. And would it not be unwise to let this cultural heritage erode? To let it slip through our fingers because we mistakenly assume that freedoms once won are our birthright forever? The paradox seems to be that there is a tendency to be hurt and offended over the writings of a contemporary critic, for instance Richard Dawkins, who regards religious belief as delusional,⁵⁴ while Freud's (1856–1939) characterisation of religious belief as an “illusion” does not elicit any comments.⁵⁵ At least not any more. This is somewhat strange. The diatribes against Christianity or religious belief in general by Nietzsche (1844–1900) or Holbach (1723–1789) are considered to be part of the European tradition of liberty, our cultural heritage, while the less confronting criticisms of Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins and Michel Onfray (b. 1959)⁵⁶ are regarded as “outrageous,” “unnecessarily provocative,” “deliberately offensive,” or in words of that kind. Historical iconoclasts are lauded, their contemporary equivalents are despised. As Jeremy Treglown (b. 1946), literary historian and editor of *The Times Literary Supplement* in the 1980s, wrote shortly after the Rushdie controversy erupted: “Milton’s pamphlets and Dryden’s and Pope’s satires, which caused deep and violent feeling in those they attacked, should obviously have been toned down. Many readers have been made uncomfortable by the moral insights of Jane Austen and Dickens—clear cases for sensitive editing. Wouldn’t we be easier in our minds if there were no books at all?”⁵⁷ We see that same phenomenon with religious satire. Voltaire and Jonathan Swift are not criticised for their “tone,” so why do this with Rushdie?⁵⁸

Rushdie’s critics also leave us with many questions about the interpretation of their views. Le Carré, for instance: what does he mean by “great religions”? Should we take his words to mean that he is not opposed to criticising *smaller*

54 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Paperback edn, London: Black Swan, Transworld Publishers, 2006).

55 Sigmund Freud, *Die Zukunft einer Illusion*, 1927, in Sigmund Freud, *Studienausgabe*, Band IX, *Fragen der Gesellschaft, Ursprünge der Religion* (S. Fischer Verlag), 135–191.

56 Michel Onfray, *Traité d’athéologie: Physique de la métaphysique* (Paris: Grasset, 2005).

57 “Second Thoughts and Gritted Teeth on ‘The Satanic Verses,’” in *The Associated Press*, 5 March 1989.

58 Although this, we admit, is not entirely true, because Voltaire’s *Le Fanatisme ou Mahomet Le Prophète*, *Tragédie* (Postface by Jérôme Vérain, Paris: Éditions Mille et une Nuits, 2006 (1753)) also proved to be controversial. See on this Philippe Val, *Malaise dans l’inculture* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 2015); Philippe Val, *Reviens Voltaire, Ils sont devenus fous* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 2008).

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religions or sects, but that he is against criticising the *larger* religions?⁵⁹ If so, what is the reason for the “big is beautiful” approach? And where should one draw the line? Should we also consider it impertinent to comment unfavourably on Joseph Smith (1805–1844), the founder of Mormonism,⁶⁰ and Ron L. Hubbard (1911–1986), the founder of the Church of Scientology? Or are Mormonism and Scientology not “big enough” to attain the status of exemption from criticism which Le Carré demands for the “great religions”? And is the size of a religion, the number of its adherents, a *good criterion* for placing a religion beyond criticism?

One may have serious doubts about that. It would imply that Christianity could be the object of serious criticism in its infancy, but once it had gained the status it later acquired it was exempt from criticism. Why not the reverse? Why not say that a religion *in its infancy* should be handled gently but once it acquires a certain official status, the status of a state religion for instance, it should be criticised rigorously, because “power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely,” as Lord Acton (1834–1902) wrote?⁶¹ Or was Le Carré talking about a religion’s quality? But if so, how do we distinguish between the religions of great quality and those of lesser quality?

These are important questions, and by posing them we did not even comment on the exact meaning of Le Carré’s words “with impunity.” Le Carré said that we could not (or should not?) be “impertinent to great religions with impunity.” What does that word “impunity” mean? “Impunity” is often used in a criminal context and associated with unjustifiably getting away with something serious. Is Le Carré also alluding to punitive measures against the novelist, as Trevor-Roper did more openly when he said he would not shed a tear if aggressors were to waylay Rushdie in a dark street? Unfortunately, we

59 See on sects and alternative religions Stephen J. Hunt, *Alternative Religions: A Sociological Introduction* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 33–61; Stephen J. Stein, *Alternative American Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

60 See on this Amos N. Guiora, “Protecting the Unprotected: Religious Extremism and Child Endangerment,” in *Journal of Law & Family Studies* 12 (2010) 391–407.

61 “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority, still more when you superadd the tendency or the certainty of corruption by authority. There is no worse heresy than that the office sanctifies the holder of it.” Quoted in Lord Acton (John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton), “Letter to Bishop Creighton” (5 April 1887), in J.N. Figgis and R.V. Laurence (eds), *Historical Essays and Studies* (London: Macmillan 1907), 504.

do not know for sure,⁶² and the matter is important, because what happened in the Rushdie affair was that a cleric called for vigilante justice. That is a serious affair. The merits and demerits of blasphemy laws can of course be debated,⁶³ and to condemn Rushdie is one thing, but what Trevor-Roper, and perhaps Le Carré, advocated went further. Trevor-Roper at least implicitly approved of physical violence against Rushdie in order to “improve him.”

JOHN LE CARRÉ REVISITED AND BOOK BURNING

In William J. Weatherby's (1930–1992) *Salman Rushdie: Sentenced to Death* (1990) Le Carré is quoted elaborating on his earlier comments on the Rushdie affair, saying, just as Berger had done, that Rushdie should have withdrawn his book “until a calmer time has come.”⁶⁴ Apparently, Le Carré saw the Rushdie controversy as something that was exceptional, and that if things were not stirred up something of a normal situation (“a calmer time”) would return. Now, writing twenty-five years later, we know that a calmer time has not come. And the central question is, of course, what can bring this about? Is the “calmer time” likely to return as a result of giving in to the theoterrorist demands, or will this, in fact, only draw us further into the quagmire?

Perhaps one may formulate it thus: do the Islamist ideas Khomeini conveyed not demand the removal of *all material* with a similar content to Rushdie's book from the world? Legend has it that this was the position of the third Caliph, Uthman (c. 580–656), who ordered the destruction of the Library at Alexandria on the grounds that either the books agreed with the Quran, in which case they were redundant, or they disagreed with it, in which case they were worthless or evil. As John Grant writes: “In an act that has rightly been vilified throughout the centuries since, the Library's

62 Although Le Carré wrote a personal letter to Rushdie's biographer Weatherby explaining his stance towards *The Satanic Verses*. This is, however, not a retraction of his former dismissal of Rushdie's book, nor does it make Le Carré's views any clearer: see William J. Weatherby, *Salman Rushdie: Sentenced to Death* (New York: Carrol & Graf, 1990), in particular 170–171.

63 See, e.g., Richard Webster, *A Brief History of Blasphemy: Liberalism, Censorship and The Satanic Verses* (Oxford: The Orwell Press, 1990). Webster criticises Rushdie and tries to foster understanding for blasphemy laws.

64 William J. Weatherby, *Salman Rushdie: Sentenced to Death* (New York: Carrol & Graf, 1990), 171.

books were used as fuel to heat Alexandria's public baths. There were so many books that the burning took six months."⁶⁵

Grant may be right that this act has been vilified throughout the centuries, but it is not completely inconsistent with the worldview it aims to support. If you *really* believe that all that there is to say about morals, science, life and human destiny is included in *one single book*, why read all the others?

When St. Paul entered Ephesus "a number of those who practised magic collected their books and burned them publicly" (Acts 19:19). The French painter Eustache Le Sueur (1616–1655) made a magnificent painting about this early book burning: *La Prédication de saint Paul à Ephèse* (1649). We see the majestic figure of St. Paul presiding over a meeting, engaged in the noble art of burning blasphemous, heterodox, dissident or, from a certain perspective, "unnecessary" books.⁶⁶

If we relate this to Rushdie's book, we may ask ourselves whether it is not somewhat naïve to presume that condoning the censorship of *one* book will not lead to the censorship of *other* books—that Western intellectuals condemning Rushdie, or showing an understanding for physical violence after offence was taken, are complicit in the radical narrative that seeks to censor all types of material deemed "blasphemous"? John le Carré and John Berger perhaps thought that the fundamentalist mindset affected only Rushdie's book and *not theirs*. But is that not too sanguine? And would Berger, Trevor-Roper, Dahl and Le Carré also be prepared to compromise if *their own books* were at stake?⁶⁷ Would they be prepared to remove their own writings from the list of books to be published in the Western world if "horrified reactions" were to be the result of their products in other parts of the world?⁶⁸ And should we give in only when books displease Iranian piety

65 John Grant, *Corrupted Science: Fraud, Ideology and Science* (AAPPL Artists' and Photographers' Press, 2007), 177.

66 See on this Frederick H. Cramer, "Bookburning and Censorship in Ancient Rome: A Chapter from the History of Ideas of Speech", in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 6/2 (April, 1945) 157; Matthew Fishburn, *Burning Books* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2008).

67 Orhan Pamuk wrote that the attack on the freedom of one writer concerns all writers: see Orhan Pamuk, "Pour Rushdie," in Anouar Abdallah et al., *Pour Rushdie: Cent intellectuels arabes et musulmans pour la liberté d'expression* (Paris: La Découverte, Carréfour des littératures, Colibri, 1993), 244–245.

68 Roald Dahl conceded that he would, when he said that "If I were Rushdie, then for the sake of everybody threatened I would agree to throw the bloody thing away. It would save lives." See "Pulp book to save lives, says Dahl," in *The Times*, 17 February 1989. Le Carré stated: "I am mystified that

or should we also give in to possible demands of other Islamists and dictators of a more secular type? If we show understanding for the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution in Iran vowing to retaliate over a book he does not like, should we not show the same understanding for objections by the Supreme Leader of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or the House of Saud, over publications they despise?

Perhaps one would reject these musings as “speculative” and “not to the point.” But are they? If secular dictators or non-Islamist religious leaders see that threats of violence are a good device to stop the publication of critical books, then why should they not copycat Khomeini's strategy?⁶⁹

WITHDRAW THE BOOK UNTIL A CALMER TIME HAS COME

What many of Rushdie's early commentators have in common is that they presumed the controversy over *The Satanic Verses* was exceptional and probably unique—not a precedent but an incident. This is even the case in Weller's book (2009), which speaks about the Rushdie affair as something that has to do with the author Salman Rushdie. It was *his* personal liberty that was at stake, Weller tells us in the introduction to his monograph. Today we know that after the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks (2015), the riots over the *Innocence of Muslims* video⁷⁰ (2012) and the Danish cartoons (2005/2006), the “calmer time” Le Carré hoped for has not come. And that requires us to assess how we want to counter the violence that terrorists have in store for us if we wish to continue exercising our civil liberties.

he hasn't said: 'It's all a mess. My book has been wildly misunderstood, but as long as human lives are being wasted on account of it, I propose to withdraw it.' I have to say that would be my position.” See Rachel Donadio, “Fighting Words on Sir Salman,” in the *New York Times* (online), July 15, 2007; William J. Weatherby, *Salman Rushdie: Sentenced to Death* (New York: Carrol & Graf, 1990), 170.

- 69 Which actually was the case with the satire comedy *The Interview*, which was about North Korea's leader Kim Jong-un. In December 2014, North Korea promised 9/11-type attacks in American cinemas if *The Interview* were scheduled. In this conflict President Obama was unyielding: “We cannot have a society in which some dictator someplace can start imposing censorship here in the United States” (Remarks by the President in Year-End Press Conference, 19 December 2014). See also Bastiaan Rijpkema, *Weerbare democratie: de grenzen van democratische tolerantie* (Leiden: Dissertatie Leiden, 2015), 251.
- 70 See Tom Herrenberg, “Denouncing Divinity: Blasphemy, Human Rights, and the Struggle of Political Leaders to defend Freedom of Speech in the Case of *Innocence of Muslims*,” in *Ancilla Iuris* (2015) 1-19.

In an interview broadcast on 14 February 1989, the same day the fatwa was issued, Rushdie was asked: "What you've written has been called insulting to Islam and a provocation to all Muslims. Did you take delight in provocation?" Rushdie did not comment on the word "delight," but he picked up the word "provocation" and answered:

It depends what you mean by provocation. Any writer wishes to provoke the imagination. You want to make people think about what you're writing. One of the reasons for writing, I believe, is to increase the sum of what it's possible to think, to say "Let's look at it a different way." If it works, then people are provoked, and maybe they don't like it.⁷¹

But this idea (and ideal) of "provocation" was not shared among all prominent novelists of his generation. Few commentators seemed to understand or even suspect that this might not be about one specific author of one specific book, but about a whole way of living. Since Khomeini's edict calling for Rushdie's death was a symptom of a phenomenon—religious extremism targeting free speech in the West—quite unfamiliar to post-Second World War Europe, we should make note of the fact that we have something those commentators did not, namely the luxury of hindsight. And in hindsight we can argue that the Rushdie controversy proved to be at least as much about national sovereignty and a culture of freedom as it has developed in some parts of the world⁷² (and not others), as it was about one particular and controversial book.

CONCLUSION: CENSORSHIP BY TERRORISM PROVED HERE TO STAY

An early response to the controversy over *The Satanic Verses* from Rushdie's publisher Viking Penguin addressed the core of the problem Khomeini's declaration created. This response by a spokesman of Viking Penguin was as follows:

71 See Lisa Appignanesi and Sara Maitland (eds), *The Rushdie File* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 23.

72 In Europe, according to Henri Mendras, *L'Europe des Européens: Sociologie de l'Europe occidentale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 52.

It is inconceivable to most of us in the West that a writer, and a distinguished writer at that, should not be able to express his ideas, and that publishers should not be permitted to publish them, booksellers not permitted to sell them, and that readers should be excluded from the marketplace of ideas. If the present tendency continues, the Ayatollah will have prevailed. This is not censorship with respect to the First Amendment, this is censorship by terrorism and intimidation.⁷³

Indeed, the Rushdie affair can be regarded as the *locus classicus* of a social phenomenon new to modern Western societies: severe *extrajudicial* punishment for utterances deemed “unacceptable” to the most radical elements of a religion, as interpreted by the most radical leaders of that religion. As such, the controversy over *The Satanic Verses* was, in a way, compared to what happened at the *Charlie Hebdo* office, a haunting preview of things to come.

We started this chapter with Hugh Trevor-Roper’s remark that he would not shed a tear if some British Muslims waylaid Salman Rushdie in a dark street to seek to improve his manners. The famous British historian hoped that after this, Rushdie would “control his pen” and he thought that “society would benefit” from this and literature “would not suffer.” Fast-forward to today’s state of affairs; it is impossible to say whether Trevor-Roper, had he still been alive, would have justified the murder of the French cartoonists in 2015 in the same fashion. This is clearly something of much greater impact than having a writer beaten up in a dark street. One may argue that Rushdie “controlled his pen” in the sense that he never again wrote a book like *The Satanic Verses*. But others took over the torch of liberty—and some paid a heavy price for it. When four million people demonstrated in the streets of Paris after the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, and more than forty heads of state joined the procession in favour of free speech and the necessity of defying the religious militants, this was a sign of hope. Yet, notwithstanding this sign of support for the liberty to write and speak, the last twenty-five years have also proven that “censorship by terrorism and intimidation” has become more familiar to Western societies than one might have thought in the 1980s—and remains a problem that is as hard to solve now as it was then.

73 “Rushdie’s Publisher Assails ‘Censorship by Terrorism,’” in the *New York Times*, 19 February 1989.