

Editorial

'The evil that men do lives after them; The good is oft entered with their bones'. If Brutus' epitaph on Julius Caesar were to be applied to modern dictators, one might be inclined to think that the late Ayatollah Khomeini went naked to his grave, whilst leaving behind a rather larger legacy than usual. Certainly it seems that the furore over Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* is a long way from dying down, and sadly, most of those involved probably have little or no idea what the controversy is all about.

There is an ancient Islamic tradition which says that Mohammed was deceived by Satan and wrote certain verses into the Koran. Later on, he realized what had happened, and had those verses expunged. Rushdie suggests, in suitably veiled terms, that Mohammed may have been deceived from the beginning, so that what he wrote was not the word of God, but the word of Satan through and through.

The Satanic Verses is a tortuous and difficult book; by no stretch of the imagination can it be considered interesting, or great literature. Its fame and success are due almost entirely to the publicity which has surrounded its publication. How anyone ever read far enough into it to notice what it was all about, and why they informed the Ayatollah, remain something of a mystery. Probably someone in the Muslim community had it in for Rushdie, and with the publication of this latest outrage realized that he had found the weapon he was looking for.

What is not a mystery is that hundreds of British Muslims (not to mention thousands of their co-religionists in the Indian sub-continent) have rioted and burned the book, demanding that the author be taken to court on a charge of blasphemy. This is where Christians come in, since the blasphemy laws in this country relate exclusively to the Christian Faith. Should these laws be changed to include Muslims – and presumably others – as well? A lot of leading churchmen think so, and there is at least a possibility that the laws will be revised, if not abolished altogether.

What can we say about all this? First of all, it should be remembered that 'British Muslims' is a rather misleading term. Most of these people are fairly recent immigrants, as is Salman Rushdie, and their claim to be 'British' is based on the possession of a passport, not on shared values and ideals. Britain is paying the price of Empire, and it will be a long time before these people are integrated, if indeed they ever are. Furthermore, not many outsiders would be very sympathetic to their demands, if it were not for the fact that behind them lie the Arab oil kingdoms, with their ability to put a stranglehold on Western economies. And that, of course, is blasphemy indeed!

On a more religious level, it may be asked whether Rushdie has really blasphemed even the god of Islam. Is it blasphemy to suggest that Mohammed may have been wrong? If it is, then the prophet has an infallibility which belongs to God alone, and *that* surely is at least as blasphemous as anything Rushdie wrote. For a Christian, of course, even that must be called into question. Can we believe that God inspired the Koran? If we do not believe this, what are we going to say about it? Was it just the product of Mohammed's imagination, or did Satan truly inspire him? We must remember, after all, that Islam is the only great religion which has actually *rejected* Christianity; the others are different, but they grew up independently and therefore say nothing directly about Christ. The Koran, however, contains statements about Jesus, including one that he did not die on the cross, which make it impossible to attribute Mohammed's rejection of Christ to ignorance. His was a deliberate refusal to accept the truth revealed in Jesus of Nazareth, and no amount of interfaith dialogue can alter that basic fact. Rushdie may have expressed himself somewhat crudely, but can we disagree with his basic thesis?

This brings us back to the problem of the blasphemy laws. Christians and Muslims may cohabit, somewhat uneasily, in many parts of the world, but there is no avoiding the fact that on a strict interpretation, the two religions are blasphemous in each other's eyes. A law which protected Muslims in this way might easily be construed as anti-Christian, just as the present law might conceivably be used to ban the Koran. Christians would presumably not want to use the law in that way, but what can we say about those who take their orders from the late Ayatollah Khomeini? The Anglican Bishop of Iran escaped with his life; others were less fortunate. Is this the future we want for this country?

Clearly the liberal establishment must accept that religions can only cohabit successfully when one dominant creed is prepared to tolerate others. That allows for a majority consensus on social behaviour, but protects minorities who live in a different way, so long as they do not obstruct the freedom of others. Christianity could live without a blasphemy law – it does so in many countries without any trouble. No true believer would imagine for one minute that his faith depended on the local magistrate for its validity, and most of us would prefer to stay out of the courts altogether. Only in the most extreme case has the law been applied, but even the Faith's greatest detractors would not seriously suggest that Jesus was a homosexual (as was done in the famous *Gay News* case brought by Mrs. Mary Whitehouse). Such things are the aberrations of a sick mind, and usually recognized as such.

If the law is to change then, let it simply be abolished. Churchmen have no business seeking to protect the principles of Islam by

extending a dubious law to cover them as well. We ought to believe that in a free society our beliefs will stand and flourish; it is those who do not know the truth, like Muslims, who need the state to protect them in this way.

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