For secularism

Tahar Ben Jelloun

‘For six months now a tragedy has been unfolding before us. It involves threats, fear and death. It’s new version of Chronicle of a Death Foretold. Except that this one is not fiction. A novel is being written every day, almost everywhere in the world. A man is risking his life. He is a writer. He is already marked for life. If the assassins succeed in finding him and kill him, it will be a great defeat for thought and freedom.

‘There are principles that we cannot compromise. Freedom to imagine, to create and to write is one of them. Every man has the right to write what he wants. If he offends the reader, if what he portrays injures and hurts personal beliefs or convictions, a writer is not only free not to read the work, it is also free to sue the author for libel. This is what happens in a country where there is the rule of law, in a democratic society where everyone has the right to dream, to sing, to paint, in short, to express himself as he sees fit.

‘Who can seriously believe that a religion as prestigious and alive as Islam, which has more than a billion believers throughout the world, could be threatened by a work of fiction? Can a novel, even if it is blasphemous, shake 1,500 years of history? It’s not one book or even several books which threaten Islam. What gives Islam a bad name now are political manipulation and its effects, expressed in fanaticism and intolerance...

(Le Monde, 3 March 1989)

Tahar Ben Jelloun is a Moroccan writer and winner of the 1987 Prix Goncourt.

Dr Zaki Badawi

‘What he [Salman Rushdie] has written is far worse to Muslims than if he’d raped one’s own daughter. It’s an assault on every Muslim’s inner being. Muslims seek Mohammed as the ideal on whom to fashion our lives and conduct, and the prophet is internalised into every Muslim heart. It’s like a knife being dug into you — or being raped yourself...

‘Yes, Khomeini reflects the entire Muslim religious view that Rushdie is on the face of it an apostate, a heretic. But neither he nor any Muslim authority has the power to sentence Rushdie to death. I must state with all the authority under my command that anyone who seeks or incites anyone to kill Rushdie is committing a crime against God and the Islamic shari’a.

‘Even if he were legitimately sentenced to death, Islamic punishment cannot be carried out by anyone other than the Islamic appointed authorities and you cannot in Islam pass any sentence, let alone the death penalty, without a proper trial. It is unacceptable in Islam to try someone in his absence. Teachings of both the minority Shi’a branch of Islam and the majority Sunnî, to which I belong, are identical on this.

‘And even were Rushdie to be tried, it is by no means certain he would be sentenced to death. The Prophet himself tolerated many people who left Islamic beliefs but were not considered dangerous to the fabric of the state. Those who were put to death were killed because of rebellion, not because of their beliefs.”


Dr Zaki Badawi is chairman of the Imams and Mosques Council, and of the Islamic Law Council.

Edward Said

‘In this world Salman Rushdie, from the community of Islam, has written for the West about Islam. The Satanic Verses thus is a self-representation. But everyone should be able to read the novel, interpret it, understand, accept, or finally reject it. And more to the point, it should be possible both to accept the brilliance of Rushdie’s work, and also to note its transgressive apostasy.

‘If this peculiar paradox is also an emblem of the fate of hybrids and immigrants, that fate too is part of this contemporary world. For the point is that there is no pure, unsullied, unmixed essence to which some of us can return, whether that essence is pure Islam, pure Christianity, pure Judaism, or Easternism, Americanism, Westernism. Rushdie’s work is not just about the mixture, it is that mixture itself.

‘To stir Islamic narratives into a stream of heterogeneous narratives about actors, tricksters, prophets, devils, whores, heroes, heroines is therefore inevitable. Most of us are still unprepared to deal with such complicated mixtures but, as Rushdie says in his essay (“Outside the Whale”, Granta, 1984): “In this world without quiet corners, there can be no easy escapes from history, from hubbub, from terrible, unquiet fuss”.

‘But what those of us from the Muslim part of this world need to add is that we cannot accept the notion that democratic freedoms should be abrogated to protect Islam. No world culture or religion is really about such violence, or such curtailments of fundamental rights. If we have accepted Rushdie’s help in the past, we should now be assuring his safety, and his right to say what he has to say. To dispute with him, to engage with his work does not, cannot, be the same thing either as banning it or threatening him with violence and physical punishment.”

(New York, 22 February 1989)

Edward Said is Professor of English and Comparative Studies at Columbia University, and a member of the Palestine National Council.

Roald Dahl

‘With all that has been written and spoken about the Rushdie affair, I have not yet heard any non-Muslim voices raised in criticism of the writer himself. On the contrary, he appears to be regarded as some sort of a hero, certainly among his fellow writers and the Society of Authors, of which I am a member. To my mind, he is a dangerous opportunist.

‘Clearly he has profound knowledge of the Muslim religion and its people, and he 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 he cannot plead otherwise.

‘This kind of sensationalism does indeed get an indifferent book on to the top of the best sellers list (Spycatcher is another example), but to my mind it is a cheap way of doing it. It also puts a severe strain on the very proper principle that the writer has an absolute right to say what he likes.

‘In a civilised world we all have a moral obligation to apply a modicum of censorship to our own work in order to reinforce this principle of free speech.’

(Letter to The Times, 28 February 1989)

Roald Dahl is a British writer.

Better dead than read

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religions, especially the monotheistic ones, have not been noted for their tolerance. Fortunately, there are now an increasing number of tolerant Christians, Jews, and Muslims; they have become tolerant because of the general mood of the times. We should rejoice in this as we do in the promotion of human rights. But tolerance has not till now been a religious virtue, either in Islam or in other religions.

Do I seek to excuse Muslim fundamentalists by comparing their conduct with that of other fundamentalists? Not at all, just the opposite. We must denounce without ambiguity the present excesses of devout Muslims, and especially their call to physical violence. At the same time I believe that a certain mental attitude, and the exclusive and dogmatic philosophy it generates, will always tend toward the use of terror. And we know in our heart of hearts that this could apply to us, had we the means and the opportunity. If certain Muslims, a certain conception of Islam, frighten us it is because they hold a mirror up to us, showing us what we once were and what we still partially are.

When the ashes from the bookburning have cooled down, and the calls to murder have ceased, we will, I hope, see that the Rushdie affair has posed once more the problem of the place of religion in our societies and in the life of each of us, whether we are ourselves religious, agnostic or otherwise.

Amidst the hullabaloo created by the fundamentalists, what can moderates say if they dare speak out at all? They condemn the death sentence, but claim at the same time to have been deeply shaken; they still consider themselves insulted. This sense of insult is deeply felt and deserves analysis. Why feel insulted? It is this quasi-unanimity in the Muslim world which seems to me significant and which would worry me if I were a Muslim. Several years ago, in my book *La Dépendance* ('Dependancy'), I suggested that cultural identity depended on both adherence to the group and adherence to a system of values. Often this double dependence is so powerful that individuals find it impossible to conceive of themselves without it, whatever the merits or otherwise of their community of the objective truth of its traditional postulates. For a Christian, debates on the politics of the Church hold no interest; nor does knowledge of the real life of Christ. The essential point is that the Christian is constituted as a person by the ecclesiastical structure and by faith in Christ the King.

For a strict Muslim, it would be useless to look for tangible evidence that Mohammad rose on his favourite mare to heaven; pointless for a practising Jew to ask himself if Moses were not perhaps an ambitious Egyptian who led the Hebrews in order to found a state of his own. For what matters is precisely their identification with these figures. To attack these points of identity is to shake the foundations of a believer's collective and individual personality.

For reasons that I have gone into elsewhere, religion has occupied a crucial place in both the Jewish and Arab value systems, but no longer has the same importance for the majority of people in the West, for whom religion is no longer the backbone of their existence. Religion has retained its importance among Muslim immigrants and, to a lesser extent, among the sephardic Jews from North Africa who have not yet found an alternative to faith as a form of shelter, to its *valeur refuge*. This spontaneous legitimation of religion has prevented them, and will undoubtedly prevent them for some time to come, from finding other outlets.

But historical and semiological analysis cannot hide or alleviate the dangers for a democracy of such attachments. All the more so since monotheism, philosophically and pragmatically speaking, is totalitarian. Jean Guitton, the Catholic philosopher and theologian, has recognised that all the religions are exclusive; monotheism, in particular, is totalitarian in its vision of the uniqueness of God. This is freely admitted

\[\text{Nawal el Saadawi}\]

'I have read other stories before that are more daring than *The Satanic Verses* in their concern with goodness, evil, angels, Satan, God, and other people. But I have never heard of a writer having to sacrifice his life because of a fictional story — not since the Middle Ages. 'Now I wonder why Salman Rushdie should have to die at the end of the 20th century? Is it just because he is a Muslim, born in India? Is it the case that Muslims throughout the world are ideologically and artistically obedient to the Ayatollah Khomeini from Iran? Is Khomeini the messenger of God? Is Khomeini's opinion of Islam the only real and valid one? Are all other opinions blasphemous and pagan? 'Khomeini has tried to get all Islamic countries and organisations to support his death sentence on this Indian writer. But the clever and wise in these organisations have not listened to this statement — a statement which twists the image of Islam and could give the impression that Islam is a religion whose grounds could be shattered by a fictional story. Yet there is no one book that could influence religion in this way ... 'Creative men and women are not afraid of death, of prison, or of exile. The greatest creators in the world, in the East and the West, have paid a very high price for breaking down the barriers of fear, of clichés, the barriers created by the need to please one's rulers or escape their vengeance. The real creators in our Islamic countries are no different from creators in other countries. If one Islamic leader like Khomeini has the idea of sentencing a writer to death, this does not mean that that Islamic world is a world of ideological terrorism and bloody violence, bent on persecuting all free-thinking people. On the other hand, there may be people, writers, who feel threatened — and this fear could spread to our countries, too.

'The great, wise men of Islam, the sages of India, have issued different statements describing the generosity and the respect of Islam towards creative and free-thinking people in all sectors of science and the arts. They have confirmed that Khomeini's statement is harming Islam, showing that Khomeini's version of Islam is a picture of terrorism — of Islam as a religion of bloodshed.

'Writers and artists' associations in England and all over the world have begun to express their protest against this bloody terrorism aimed at one of the greatest writers of our time. In my opinion, it is time to have been deeply shaken; they still consider themselves insulted. This sense of insult is deeply felt and deserves analysis. Why feel insulted? It is this quasi-unanimity in the Muslim world which seems to me significant and which would worry me if I were a Muslim...'

(Extracts from an interview with a Swedish journalist)

Nawal el Saadawi is an Egyptian novelist.

\[\text{Moscow News}\]

On 8 March 1989 *Moscow News* published a petition signed by a group of Soviet intellectuals, including Andrei Sakharov, appealing to Ayatollah Khomeini to show 'clemency' towards Salman Rushdie. It was signed by more than a dozen Soviet intellectuals, including Roald Sagdeev, an adviser to Gorbachev, who said that such clemency 'would be in accordance with the precepts of Jesus and Mohammed'.

(*Le Monde*, 10 March 1989)