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# The Satanic Verses

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## Merle Inniger

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Salman Rushdie's novel, which has demonstrated the power to arouse the wrath of millions of Muslims, is a book alternately obscene and attractive, ridiculous and serious, and above all offensive to those who hold cherished beliefs. I wish here to outline the book's contents before commenting on its implications for the Law of Blasphemy in Britain.

Two men from Bombay, Gibreel Farishta<sup>1</sup> the movie idol and Saladin Chamcha, the wealthy play-boy, fall out of a bombed jumbo jet approaching London, and as they come to earth they are metamorphosed into the angel and the devil. Their involvements in London, "Ellowen Deewen", the "city visible but unseen" revolve around the love affairs, rejections, and all the love/hate syndrome of the immigrant psyche. It is the experience of the Indian Muslim immigrant finding it impossible ever to remove India or a rejected religion completely from his life. In the end, it is the angel who proves to be evil, and vice-versa.

From the depths of his subconscious and the culture of which he is a part, Rushdie, via the dreams of Gibreel, concocts some weird and wonderful stories. In some of these there is just enough truth or factual basis to provide the 'sting' which has fevered so many minds in 1989. One of these stories concerns Ayesha, a girl in an Indian village who has seen a vision of the angel, Gabriel! The butterflies which surround her, cover her and provide food for her, seem to confirm her prophecies. She leads a number of the villagers on a pilgrimage to the Arabian Sea, which they expect will part and make way for them to get to Mecca. Rushdie must have taken a cue from an incident in Pakistan in the early 80s.

But it is the chapters, "Mahound" and "Return to Jahilia", which have given the book its notoriety. Here Gibreel dreams of Jahilia,<sup>2</sup> the city of sand, and its prophet Mahound.<sup>3</sup> In the earlier chapter, the prophet, plagued by his failure to win converts, seeks the angel's advice about retaining three goddesses, part of the ancient pantheon, sought after by Jahilia's residents for their intercession. He receives the 'revelation' from Gibreel, and recites the verses to the congregation, "Have you thought upon Lat and Uzza, and Manat, the third, the other?... They are the exalted birds, and their intercession is desired indeed."<sup>4</sup>

But subsequent events and conversations with Hind, the wife of the Grandee of Jahilia, drive Mahound back to the mountain, back to Gibreel for a fresh revelation. They strive, they wrestle. Mahound returns. "He stands in front of the statues of the Three and announces the abrogation of the verses which Shaitan whispered in his ear. These verses are banished from the true recitation, *al-qur'an*. New verses are thundered in their place."

" 'Shall He have daughters and you sons?' Mahound recites. 'That would be a fine division! These are but names you have dreamed of, you and your fathers. Allah vests no authority in them.' "

So the first verses are abrogated. In exchange, Mahound receives new ones.

Surely Rushdie is here using his prolific imagination to search out the meaning of verses which now appear in the Qur-an. Three relevant passages are,

Sura 53 (The Star), verses 19-23, "Have ye thought upon Al-Lat and Al-Uzza and Manat the third the other? Are yours the males and His the females? That indeed were an unfair division! They are but names which ye have named, ye and your fathers, for which Allah hath revealed no warrani. They follow but a guess and that which (they) themselves desire. And now the guidance from their Lord hath come unto them."

Sura 16 (The Bee), verse 101, "And when we put a *revelation (verse) in place of another revelation (verse)* — and Allah knoweth best what He revealeth — they say, Lo! Thou art but inventing. Most of them know not."

Sura 22 (The Pilgrimage), verse 52, "Never sent we a messenger or a Prophet before thee but when he recited (the message) Satan proposed (opposition) in respect of that which he recited thereof. But Allah establisheth that which Satan proposeth. Then Allah establisheth His revelations. Allah is Knower, Wise."

Hence the book's title, **The Satanic Verses!** In the later chapter, "Return to Jahilia", Rushdie's imagination runs riot, and he sees a city overwhelmed by "laws" and yet plenty of opportunity to indulge in forbidden practices, for "no imperium is absolute, no victory complete".

Gibreel dreams of a brothel in Jahilia, named *Hijab* (The Curtain, or The Veil). The brothel-keeper and the poet, Baal, devise a scheme with the twelve prostitutes that each of them will assume the name and identity of one of Mahound's wives, from Ayesha on up. "It is dangerous, but it could be good for business." This mixing up, this mirroring, of Islam's first family with a popular brothel in "Jahilia", and giving the name *Hijab* (Veil, *Purdah*) to the brothel, is surely the "unforgivable sin" to Muslims and earned Rushdie — Muslim turned writer, slanderer and apostate — the sentence of death.

Anyone who reads Rushdie's novel can quite easily understand why the religious sensibilities of Muslims in the United Kingdom, and in fact world-wide, have been grievously wounded by its publication.

What is not so clear is what relevance this has to the United Kingdom **Law of Blasphemy**, and whether Muslims are right in demanding that the Law should be changed to become all-inclusive, or whether there should be a new crime to deal with deliberate insults to religious beliefs.

If our Muslim friends look around, they will find in modern society abundant material offensive to their beliefs and to their veneration (which in some cases borders on deification) of the Prophet. It so happens that they fixed their attention on *The Satanic Verses*, giving the book the notoriety it scarcely deserves.

In the profane climate of today, it is questionable whether any legislation can adequately deal with offences to religious beliefs. It is hard for Muslims to accept this, for in the founding principle and practice of Islam the State has always been the Protector and Promoter of Religion; it is unthinkable that insults to the "true and final Religion"

should not be summarily punished by the State. We can only urge our Muslim friends to be patient, to hold their faith in their hearts, and to seek to present their faith in a positive manner to a doubting, pluralistic society.

As for Christians, the case has been well stated by Professor Donald MacLeod:

To invoke the principle that blasphemy is an insult to God is to raise at once the question, "Which God?" and, by implication, the question of toleration. Jehovah, our God, is the only Lord. But to invoke penal sanctions against all that insults Him would mean proceeding against all idolatry and every major theological distortion. We should be acting against our own principles of toleration, liberty of conscience and the right of private judgement and assuming the role of persecutors, protecting our faith by the sword.<sup>5</sup>

He notes that it is highly doubtful if the state is competent to define blasphemy. "We should be expecting of judges a degree of theological competence they do not possess; or, alternatively, exposing ourselves to the subjective judgments of juries as to what is scurrilous, indecent, or contemptuous."

I believe that the British Evangelical Council's response to the Law Commission's 1981 Questionnaire is on the right track when it suggests that the most important reason for any possible change in the *Law of Blasphemy* would be simply "harm to our society".

As an evangelical Christian, I often hear and read things which offend my beliefs. How do I deal with this? Was this not precisely the problem the Apostle was dealing with as he wrote to Christians living among those who heaped abuse on them? (1 Peter 4:4). The Christians were exhorted to "set apart Christ as Lord". They were to be prepared to answer, but "with gentleness and respect" and to keep a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously...may be ashamed of their slander.

Can we do any more — or less — than those early believers?

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## References

1. *Gibreel Farisha* is Urdu/Persian for "Angel Gabriel", and *Chamcha* is a Hindustani word meaning "spoon" and is a term used for one who is servile or a puppet. Saladin was a great Anglophile.
2. *Jahilia* means "place of ignorance". The word is used by Muslims to refer to Arabia as it was before the Prophet's era.
3. The name Mahound was used in medieval mystery plays, in which the author of the Qur'an was given satanic proportions.
4. This verse, quoted by Rushdie, is thought by some (eg the biographer Waqidi) to have been recited by Mohammed to his fellow-tribesmen, and were originally part of Sura 53 of the Qur'an. They were later replaced by the present verses, 19-23, of that Sura. (cf Stanton, *THE TEACHING OF THE QUR'AN*, London, SPCK, 1969, p 21.
5. *Blasphemy and the Law*, FOUNDATIONS, No 8, May 1982, pp 1-6.