

Comment

Those satanic verses

The Christian churches have not much at the moment to contribute to the sorting-out of the Rushdie affair itself, other than to help keep the temperature down, for example by avoiding making more silly excuses for the current blasphemy law. Later on they might be able to do more. Post-Enlightenment Western culture and modern Islam are, as totalities, almost wholly unintelligible to each other, and Christians in the West, being able to hear both Western culture and Islam, are uniquely well placed to act as 'honest broker', in theory. I repeat, in theory. In about a year's time, when surely most of the dust raised by Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* will have settled, we will try in our pages to investigate how realistic that possibility actually is.

Something much less ambitious is attempted here. In print, it is increasingly difficult not to take sides, if only because of the way the debate is moving. To take a random example, in his column in the London *Independent* of 2 March Peter Jenkins tells us that denying God has been 'a central part of the story of the winning of freedom of thought and speech'. What can one say in reply to that? One could argue equally convincingly that freedom of thought and speech has its origins in Christianity. But, in any case, nowhere in his novel does Rushdie deny the existence of God, even if God is always kept strictly inside brackets. A Bombay radical, Buphen Ghandi, says in the novel: 'We can't deny the ubiquity of faith. If we write in such a way as to pre-judge such belief as in some way deluded or false, then are we not guilty of elitism, of imposing our world-view on the masses?' (p.537) Judging from what he said in his Channel 4 interview, this is not far from Rushdie's own position. But there is no point in our joining the cacophony of voices here.

Here, rather, let us play make-believe for a few minutes. Let us turn back from 'the Rushdie affair' to this complex novel of allegory and fantasy, half down-to-earth, half dream, which started it all. Let us push out of our minds the book-burning in Bradford and the Ayatollah's *fatwa* of 14 February, and the author's flight. Let us imagine that we, Western Christians, had read it before we heard a word about all that. We would, then, almost certainly have been surprised to be told that it was an onslaught on Islam. The long shadow of the Prophet spreads across the story, but only chapters II and VII—14% of the text—are explicitly about Mohammed.

How far would we have expected these two chapters to have offended Muslims—the kind of Muslims likely to read a long sophisticated novel like this? Let us begin with chapter VII, on the Prophet's return in triumph to Mecca.

It depicts Mohammed as a much-married businessman who had become 'obsessed by law' (p.363) and whom the now-captured dissenter 'Salman the Persian' had been able to mislead, by altering words of the sacred text (which it had been his job to transcribe) without the Prophet at first noticing. An offensive cutting-down-to-size? Possibly, but we are not to forget that this was all supposed to be happening in the dream-life of the very worldly Indian film-star Gibreel Farishta, who, although he seems to take on from time to time the identity of the Archangel Gabriel, never ceases to have the mind of a modern secular man.

We might wonder what this chapter contributes to the plot at all, were it not that the author, in his TV interview, had said: 'Basically, there's two questions that the book seeks to answer. When an idea comes into the world, it's faced with two big tests: when you're weak, do you compromise; when you're strong, are you tolerant?' Chapter VII is about the second of these tests.

Chapter II is about the first, the still-powerless Mohammed's inclination to compromise and give some acknowledgment to Mecca's three local goddesses as a way of winning support. It is this chapter which we would have much more easily imagined disturbing Moslems, for there are things in it which can disturb us too, make us angry too. That Mohammed was tempted would not seem shocking to us Christians—after all, so was Jesus. What is troubling is what Rushdie is saying, in this chapter particularly but in fact all over the whole book, about uncertainty. Arguably it is this that the book is really all about: uncertainty.

Mohammed, returning to the cave where he meets the angel Gabriel ('Gibreel'), learns that the prophecy favouring the goddesses had come from Satan impersonating the angel. But, when the Prophet has gone, Gibreel says to himself: '*... it was me both times, baba, me first and second also me.* From my mouth, both the statement and the repudiation ... and we all know how my mouth got worked' (p.123). Rushdie does not go so far as to say that the Prophet put all the prophecy into the angel's mouth himself, that it was nothing but self-projection and wish-fulfilment, but the prophecy certainly does not come to a purely passive prophet. Rushdie must have known that he was suggesting something that would shock many Muslims. After all, according to Mohammed himself, the Koran is made up of portions of a Heavenly Book mediated through a heavenly messenger.

Christianity, partly because of its incarnational stress, has no difficulty in believing that human beings contributed to the creation of the Bible—that the prophets and evangelists did not function like telex

printers. But this does not mean Rushdie has given only Moslems something to worry about. He believes 'we cannot any longer have a fixed certain view of anything', but in his novel the attack on certainty goes further than that would suggest. The story begins with the two Indian actors, Gibreel Farishta and Salman ('Salahuddin') Chamcha, who have tumbled from a blown-up Boeing 747 into the English Channel and miraculously survived, being equally miraculously cast to fight out the cosmic struggle between good and evil (or so it seems). It is, however, never certain which is the fighter for which—in fact, what 'good' and 'evil' actually are. And at the end Chamcha is thinking to himself 'It seemed Gibreel had not managed to escape from his inner demons ... He, Salahuddin, had believed ... love had shown that it could exert a humanizing power as great as that of hatred; that virtue could transform men as well as vice. But nothing was forever; no cure, it appeared, was complete.' (p.540). But if good and evil are as indefinable as Rushdie suggests and we cannot soundly hope in the transforming power of love, not only is Islam in trouble, and Christianity too, but so is the whole of the human race.

We believe Rushdie is wrong on this. But the question he raises is a serious one. And some of the things he has to say about the dangers of certainty are excellent. He hates clericalism—the mentality of the Imam exiled in Kensington with his curtains blocking out the Western world, of the charismatic girl Ayeshta, of the Sikh woman terrorist, of all who use religious certainty as a way of dominating human beings. And he writes comic but tough things about that other seller of certainty, 'Mrs Torture', and her materialistic racist Britain. Read the novel patiently, and it is clear that, if you see it primarily as an anti-religious attack, you are going to miss what are the really important things going on in it, the urgent moral questions which are being asked. Rightly deplore the insensitivity and arrogance both of many of its self-appointed defenders and (occasionally) of Rushdie himself. Nevertheless, take it from us, whose fellow-Dominicans four centuries ago were burning people like Mr Rushdie: it would be immoral to ban *The Satanic Verses*.

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