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Friday
February 17
1989

Review Gu

Mason opens at the Playhouse

Can the freedom of literature be abrogated without other freedoms being jeopardised?

...nan Rushdie has taken on an Imam bent on rolling back history itself . . ."

ILLUSTRATION: GRAHAM RAWLE

The Imam and the scribe

J. P. Stern

IF THE history of the T... Reich's burning of boo... has any lesson to teach... it is that the freedom o... literature may not be abrog... without other freedoms bei... jeopardised, too.

Whatever the Ayatollah's ... tives — whether they are "p... uinely religious", or part of ... political tactics, designed to ... create a rallying point of hat... for his popular support after ... disastrous war — he and his ...

... Webb

TO DENOUNCE some... one else's imperfect polity as "an evil em... pire" is one thing; to keep agencies to per... rty tricks in the dark for ... excluding attempts at ...ation, is another: we ...bout these regrettable

these two tracks of Islamic fundamentalism, and existential, post-Christian modernism would continue on their parallel paths for ever. The wonder is, of course, that the collision didn't occur before now, with communities the size of whole towns springing up in the old English industrial heartlands, in which Moslem families have established a precarious citi-

home, to be defined by others, to become invisible, or, even worse, a target; it is to experience deep changes and wrenches in the soul. But the migrant is not simply transformed by his act; he also transforms the new world. Migrants may well become mutants, but it is out of such hybridisation that newness can emerge."

"This isn't love", cries the horrified Gibreel, "it's hate".

Certainly the voice that came across the agency wires on Tuesday didn't sound much like the voice of love.

But we must be careful not to reduce the Rushdie affair to a grudge fight of a bizarre and terrifying sort, or to a simple neo-Victorian opposition be-

wrote in the Times Literary Supplement that he was banned in the Islamic world. He assures me this is not so, and I apologise for the error. But I can't easily find a common language for argument when he says "You call blasphemy and profanity 'modernism'", and asks if I consider "a book which

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NAMING THE UNNAMEABLE

Malise Ruthven reconsiders the international storm of protest that greeted Rushdie's novel – from the politics of the fatwa to the fallout

On 26 September 1988, Salman Rushdie published his long awaited fourth novel, *The Satanic Verses*. Five years in the making, it was widely expected to top the bestseller lists. Rushdie's title was provocative: 'the Satanic Verses' refers to an episode in the life of the prophet Mohammed, recorded by some of his chroniclers, but not those considered most reliable, when Satan is said to have interpolated some verses into the Quran, a book that most believing Muslims consider to be the unmediated word of God. The verses extolled three female deities worshipped by the pagans of Mecca and were subsequently removed, but the episode could be used to cast doubt on the divine authenticity of the Quran (although not by some early commentators, who had no problem with the story).

The Satanic Verses episode is only a small part of an extremely complex novel that explores the psychological impact of migration and the conflicting cultural forces to which migrants find themselves exposed. A playful, transgressive work in the magical realism genre pioneered by Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel García Márquez, it contains a bewildering cast of characters, who satirise, sometimes brilliantly, the cosmopolitan milieus of London and Bombay, with their mixtures of argot and street language and, in

The Guardian, 1989
Credit: Abbas/Magnum Photos

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London's case, seedy immigrant ghettos. The alienations and humiliations of the migrants' world, with its disintegrating and reconstituted identities, are treated with the flat burlesque of cartoon. The characters seem two-dimensional, and critics have faulted Rushdie for being condescending or even offensive in his attitude towards Indians and West Indians. The novel's strength lies in its exuberant, surface qualities – its intense visuality, its way with syntax and astonishing lexical range. The shifting of names and characters who dissolve and re-emerge in different guises is matched by a stylistic ingenuity that is sometimes breathtaking, and occasionally wearing, as when sentences lasting a page or more teeter on the brink of collapse.

The novel parodies the ingredients of Indo-British Muslim identity, mixing fact with fiction, history with myth. It ridicules some of the brittle shibboleths surrounding Muslim beliefs and identities: not just the integrity of the Quran, but, more dangerously, the sexuality of Mohammed and the honour of his wives. In the dreams of Gibreel, one of the novel's two protagonists, Islam's most central rite, the Meccan pilgrimage, and the prophet Mohammed are subject to merciless lampoon. In a brothel called The Curtain (the primary meaning of *hijab*, or veil) prostitutes play the part of the prophet's wives, the most popular being the 15-year-old Ayesha (the name of Mohammed's youngest wife). Their clients circulate around a Fountain of Love 'much as the pilgrims rotated for other reasons around the ancient Black Stone' in Mecca. The anti-mosque satirises attitudes to women legitimised by Mohammed's numerous marriages. The poet Baal presides in the brothel as a kind of anti-prophet. Whether or not Baal symbolises his creator, his role in the novel is uncannily prescient. 'A poet's work is to name the unnameable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world and stop it from going to sleep. And if rivers of blood flow from the cuts his verse inflict, then they will nourish him.'

At least 60 people may have been killed in the agitation that followed the book's publication – 19 in India and Pakistan, two in Belgium, and 37 in Sivas, Turkey, in an arson attack by Islamists on a hotel where the book's Turkish translator, the novelist Aziz Nesin, and other writers were meeting.

Rushdie's own fate seems to have been prefigured in the novel: after Baal is discovered in the brothel, the prophet Mahound (the name Rushdie borrowed from crusading demonologists) issues a fatwa sentencing him to beheading. On 16 February 1989, nearly five months after the book's publication, Rushdie and his then wife Marianne Higgins were obliged to 'go

underground' for their own protection after Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa declaring Salman Rushdie an apostate from Islam:

> I would like to inform all the intrepid Muslims in 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 Quran, as well as those publishers who were aware of its contents, have been declared *madhur al dam* (those whose blood must be shed). I call on all zealous Muslims to execute them quickly, whenever they find them, so that no one will dare to insult what Muslims hold sacred. Whoever is killed in this path will be regarded as a martyr . . .

A fatwa is a *responsa* or legal opinion in answer to a question put to a legal authority. In his capacity as a *mujtahid* – an interpreter of the law – Khomeini had the authority to issue such a ruling, but it should only have concerned Shiites who recognised the Ayatollah's spiritual authority, and it would have been open to them and others to consult a different authority who could have come up with a different verdict. The fatwa was a naked political act: by enjoining 'all intrepid Muslims' to execute Rushdie, Khomeini was proclaiming his leadership over the whole *umma* (Islamic community), Sunnis as well as Shiites. Moreover this fatwa, directed at a British citizen living outside any Islamic jurisdiction, was supplied with teeth. Immediately after Khomeini's pronouncement, the Fifth of June Foundation, one of the many Islamic charitable trusts set up after the revolution in 1979, offered a reward of 20 million tumans to any Iranian who would 'punish the mercenary for his arrogance'. Non-Iranians would get the equivalent of US$3m.

The fatwa had not come out of the blue. In the months since the book's publication there had been a mounting campaign originating in the Indian subcontinent. Even before the novel's publication, its title and Rushdie's pre-publication interviews began stirring controversy in Muslim circles in India, where the author of *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* was an established celebrity. The Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, in an effort to woo the Muslim vote in forthcoming elections, decided to ban the book, a decision repeated in most Muslim majority countries, as well as South Africa. Rushdie's response, in a scathing open letter, prompted a number of Muslim politicians to defend their 'offended' electorate, even before anyone had read the book.

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The close family and communal ties between the subcontinent and Britain made it inevitable that British Muslims would respond to the book as soon as it appeared in print.

The protest came from a variety of different quarters. One was the Islamic Foundation in Leicester, an organisation with close ties to the Jamaat-i Islami, the Islamist party founded by Sayyid Abu Ala Maududi (1906-79), one of the leading ideologues of the Islamist movement. Maududi, who was strongly influenced by the totalitarian movements of the 1930s and 1940s, argued that the purpose of Islam is to set up a state on the basis of its own ideology and programme. He believed that the whole world should convert to Islam, that women should remain in purdah and that debate in his 'theodemocracy' should be restricted to the interpretation of laws deemed to have been revealed by God for all people and times. The Maududists have affinities with the Saudi Wahhabis, from whom they receive considerable support.

After the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, the Islamic Foundation sent a circular to all Muslim organisations, mosques and Islamic figures in Britain, a carefully crafted document whose exact wording would be repeated in several other formal protests:

> This work, thinly disguised as a piece of literature, not only grossly distorts the Islamic history in general, but also betrays in the worst possible colours the very characters of the prophet Ibrahim and the prophet Mohammed (peace be upon them) . . . The work also disfigures the characters of the prophet's companions . . . and the prophet's holy wives: and describes the Islamic creed and rituals in the most foul language.

The circular was accompanied by extracts from the book that Muslims would find most offensive.

A very different campaign was spearheaded by the Bradford Council of Mosques, an umbrella organisation representing several popular strands of Indo-Pakistani Islam in a city that has one of Britain's larger Muslim populations. As was the case with the Maududists, the first intimations of the book had come from India: a circular printed in Urdu and English contained extracts from two articles from journals published in New Delhi and Surat. The tone, however, was very different from the Islamic Foundation circular. It treated Rushdie's novel as if it were dangerous to handle, a defective product to be recalled by its manufacturer. It briefly

summarised the supposed blasphemies contained in the novel, without repeating them – for to do so would, logically speaking, repeat Rushdie's offence. The letter from the council's chairman, Sher Azam, to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, written in imperfect English, conveyed a tone of outrage, of genuine hurt:

> Honourable Madam
>
> The Muslims of Bradford and all over the world are shocked to hear about the Novel called 'SATANIC VERSES' in which the writer Salman Rushdi (sic) has attacked our beloved prophet Mohammed PBUH and his wives using such dirty language which no any Muslim can tolerate . . . As citizens of this great country, we have expressed our very ill feelings about such harmful novel and its publishers and state the novel should be banned immediately . . .

Unaware that the British government had no legal powers to ban the novel, on 14 January 1989 the Council of Mosques organised the spectacular *auto da fe* that brought their city – and their protests – to the world's attention, by publicly burning the book. Although no reporters from the national press attended, the amateur video they shot and circulated to television stations made bulletins all over the world. The image – which westerners viewed through spectacles darkened by memories of book-burning by the Inquisition and the Third Reich – fuelled further anti-Rushdie protests. It was a demonstration organised by the Maududist party, the Jamaati-i-Islami, in Islamabad early in February, in which five people were killed and more than 100 injured, that brought the anti-Rushdie movement to Khomeini's attention. The pretext for the demonstration was somewhat thin: since Pakistan had already banned the book, the demonstrators attacked the US Embassy, the ostensible reason being the forthcoming publication of the novel's US edition on 15 February.

Prior to the fatwa, Tehran's literary press had been hostile, but not in any way menacing. The novel had not been formally banned: there was no law to prevent readers from bringing in copies through customs. However, with the Maududists making the running in Pakistan, the radicals in Tehran (who were competing with the pragmatists for the dying Khomeini's attention) could not be seen to be lagging in the defence of Islam. By seeming to challenge the prophet's honour, Rushdie's novel had set off an auction in militancy.

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In retrospect, the affair of *The Satanic Verses* marks a watershed in the globalisation of Islam and the contradictory currents that flow from it. In Britain, the anti-Rushdie protest proved a catalyst in the process of creating a British-Muslim identity. It brought together a number of disparate Muslim traditions – Shias and Sunnis, Maududists, Momens, Deobandis, Barelvis, Tablighis and other groups that had previously had few connections with each other – to create a common platform.

A vital ingredient in the mix was the mystically inclined Barelvi tendency, who belong at the opposite end of the political-religious spectrum from the Maududists and their Saudi supporters. Unlike the Wahhabis, who believe that devotional reverence towards Mohammed or any other human risks the sin of idolatry, Barelvis almost worship Mohammed, who is seen as a semi-divine being blessed with powers of intercession. Like other South-Asian Muslims, Barelvis are fairly recent converts from Hinduism, and share some Hindu devotional attitudes.

The strength of feeling against Rushdie was dramatised by demonstrations in London in which thousands of Muslims were bussed in from northern and midland cities. The slogans – 'Rushdie is a devil!', 'Rushdie is a son of Satan!', 'Kill the bastard!', 'Jihad on agnostics!' – were more menacing than any previously seen on Britain's streets. The demonstrators – the vast majority of them male – included elderly men with curly grey beards, wearing turbans and baggy trousers, and clean-shaven youths sporting western jeans and bandanas: the protest bridged the cultural gap between generations.

The horrified response of the host community – expressed in government statements, newspaper editorials, and discussions in television studios, served to consolidate Muslim feeling. As Gilles Kepel, a leading commentator on modern Islam, observed: 'The more the outside world heaped opprobrium on Muslims, the more the Muslim community closed ranks. It was a vicious circle.'

Yet there may have been a more positive outcome of the protests that moved, paradoxically, in the direction of the domestication of Islam in Britain. The UK Action Committee on Islamic Affairs, set up to 'guide the Muslim community in their efforts to express their anger and hurt through democratic means, and to ensure that their protest stayed within the framework of the law' has evolved – through its founder and leading activist, Iqbal (now *Sir* Iqbal) Sacranie – into the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), an umbrella body covering more than 400 affiliated Muslim organisations. While the MCB has been criticised for its Maududist leanings and its claims to

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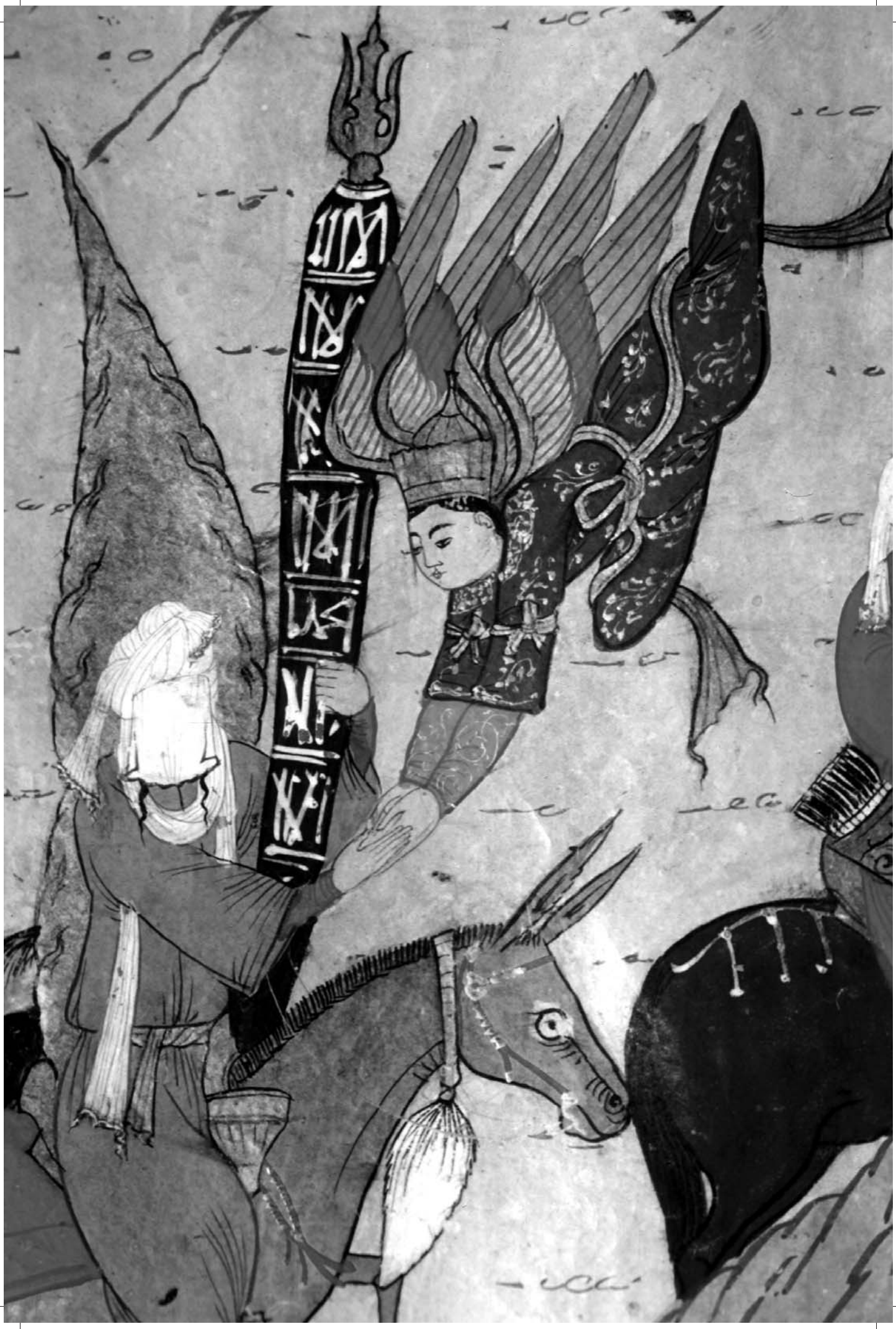
{TANDF_REV}RIOC/RIOC_I_37_04/RIOC_A_354450.3d (RIOC) [Revised Proof]

represent all British Muslims are hotly disputed, its role as an interlocutor for a substantial body of Muslim opinion vis-à-vis the British government has pushed it in a pragmatic direction that may conflict with its original instincts. In 1989, Sacranie was saying of Rushdie: 'Death, perhaps, is a bit too easy for him . . .' Two decades later, the MCB's official spokesman Inayat Bunglawala told the *Financial Times*: 'Looking back, it seems we were foolish trying to get the book banned. We were demanding that others be prevented from reading it, which I now think is preposterous. When you go down that road it is dangerous.'

Internationally, common sense also broke through the clouds. In September 1998, after months of torturous negotiations, Britain and Iran restored full diplomatic relations that had been ruptured over the Rushdie affair. Kamal Kharazi, the Iranian Foreign Minister, declared that his government 'has no intention, nor is it going to take any action whatsoever, to threaten the life of the author of *The Satanic Verses* or anybody associated with his work; nor will it encourage or assist anybody to do so'. After a decade of living in safe houses protected by Special Branch police, Rushdie emerged out of hiding. Sensibly he chose to live in New York. In 2007 – two years after Sacranie – he was offered, and accepted, a knighthood for his services to literature.

'Looking back, it seems we were foolish trying to get the book banned'

The final outcome of the Rushdie affair in Britain may seem encouraging, but the broader picture is sombre. In the age of the Internet, the relationship between a European host society and an embattled, underprivileged Muslim minority – the original context of the protest – has been overtaken by the vaster context where similar issues arise and instantly become global. Even before the attacks on New York and Washington in September 2001, and the West's ill-judged interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan raised political temperatures, the Ayatollah's warning against insulting 'what Muslims hold sacred' was being heeded. After the trauma and expense suffered by Rushdie's publishers, Viking Penguin in London, whose offices in



Kensington were in a virtual state of siege for several months, publishers have been chary of taking on titles considered risky, regardless of their literary merits. In 1998, David Caute's *Fatima's Scarf*, a brilliant and witty political novel that satirises the Rushdie affair, was turned down by more than 20 publishers. The author bravely decided to publish it himself. An entirely insult-free and non-satirical effort of my own, *Islam: A Very Short Introduction*, had to be modified after the publishers (Oxford University Press) were flooded with emails objecting to a picture of Mohammed receiving revelation from the Angel Gabriel. The picture – from a 12th century manuscript in the Edinburgh University Library – had been reproduced many times before, but on this occasion health and safety issues were invoked, as warehouse staff expressed anxieties about handling the book. The objectors included a medical doctor working in the National Health Service.

In November 2004, the Dutch film maker Theo van Gogh was murdered in Amsterdam by Mohammed Bouyeri, a 'born-again' Muslim of Moroccan origin. Van Gogh had made a controversial film with the Somali-born MP and feminist Ayaan Hirsi Ali, which showed verses from the Quran playing over a woman's body. A note attached to van Gogh's body informed Ali that she would be next. In court, where he was sentenced to life imprisonment without parole, Bouyeri addressed van Gogh's mother: 'I don't feel your pain. I don't have any sympathy for you. I can't feel for you because I think you're a non-believer.'

Perhaps the most striking example of Khomeini's legacy in the wake of the Rushdie affair is the case of the 'Mohammed cartoons' published by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in September 2005. As in the Rushdie case, a controversy concerning cultural relations between Muslim immigrants and the host community in a north European country sparked a global movement of protest, ranging from peaceful demonstrations to diplomatic sanctions and consumer boycotts, and in some cases open violence against targets symbolising 'western' power. Furious Muslim citizens of countries as far apart as Lebanon, Sudan and Indonesia attacked Danish embassies, with threats extended to all citizens of countries belonging to the European Union. Editors in France and Jordan who published the cartoons – to inform their readers or out of journalistic solidarity with *Jyllands-Posten* – were fired. None of the British newspapers published the cartoons – though they were instantly accessible on the Internet. The most egregious of them depicted Mohammed – with bushy eyebrows and an aggressive expression – wearing a black turban that takes the shape of a bomb with a lighted fuse. The front of

Mohammed and the Archangel Gabriel
Credit: akg-images/Bildarchiv Steffens

the bomb-turbans has a cartouche inscribed with the Arabic letters of the Islamic confession of faith – *there is no god but God, Mohammed is the Messenger of God*. By comparison, the other cartoons seemed rather puerile. In one of them, four suicide bombers with exaggerated big noses stand on clouds – symbolising heaven. They are greeted by Mohammed who appears to be barring the gates of paradise with the phrase 'Stop, stop! We ran out of virgins.'

It is not difficult to see how ordinary Muslims – and not just radicals – would find these images offensive. In particular, the bomb cartoon cleverly encapsulates western anxieties about 'Islam' in the aftermath of 9/11 and the Madrid and London bombings. By directly associating the figure of Mohammed with terrorism, it implies that all Muslims are potentially dangerous. The point is driven home by the cartouche on the bomb-turban: the *kalima* – or confession of faith – is a formula to which all believing Muslims subscribe. More conservative Muslims, both on the Maududist-Wahhabi and mystical-Barelvi ends of the religious spectrum, would find additional offence in the very idea of drawing the prophet Mohammed.

In the larger scheme of Islamic cultural history, however, the taboo against depicting the prophet (or indeed, other human beings and animals) has tended to be honoured in the breach. Although images of living creatures from the prophet down to animals never appear in places of worship or public buildings, there is a rich repertoire of medieval pictures in books and manuscripts depicting him, sometimes unveiled, but often veiled because of his special holiness. Traditionally, Shias have been less iconophobic than Sunnis in allowing pictures of the prophet and his family for devotional purposes. Recently, two French scholars, Pierre and Micheline Centilivres, were fascinated to discover that an image of Mohammed circulating in present-day Tehran, depicting him as a young man with a bare shoulder, had been plagiarised from a photograph of a young Tunisian taken by the German orientalist photographer Rudolf Franz Lehnert (1878–1948) in 1905 or 1906. The idea that depicting the prophet is offensive to all Muslims is of recent provenance, and reflects the influence of the Wahhabi-Saudi petrodollars and the fundamentalist tendencies they help sustain.

Khomeini's fatwa against Rushdie was a warning, but also a challenge. In the aftermath of the *fatwa* – and especially after 9/11 – publishers (with a few exceptions) have been chary about offending the religious sensitivities of all Muslims, not just fundamentalists. Muslim minorities in Europe, many of whom face difficult social circumstances, with high unemployment and poor education, may respond to religious satire as an attack on themselves

as people. A sense of collective victimhood has been exacerbated by the 'war on terror' and the shocking evidence of abuse emerging from Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. In the febrile atmosphere generated by the 'war on terror', attacks on prominent figures deemed to have 'insulted' the prophet of Islam may appear carthartic, as acts of revenge. However, there is a paradox here, because there is no way that transgressive ideas can be silenced. The authors, translators, film makers and publishers who offend Muslim sensitivities make easier targets than the anonymous websites and blogs where transgressive ideas and images may appear with impunity. In the virtual world, where everything goes, from pornography to advocacy for the 'gay jihad', self-censorship by other media must prove unsustainable. ❐

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Malise Ruthven is an historian and widely published commentator on Islam. His many books include *A Satanic Affair: Salman Rushdie and the Rage of Islam* (Chatto), *Fury for God: the Islamist Attack on America* (Granta) and *Fundamentalism: the Search for Meaning* (Oxford)