Impressum

Yusuf Mubarak: The Satanic Verse:
Do Muslims **have** to be fanatics?
Or: Learning to Live with Doubt

Length: 19,860 words = 115,390 characters = 53 pp A4

e: yusuf.mubarak@rochdalewriters.org.uk

© 2000 Yusuf Mubarak

Date: 2000-00-00, Mk1.4

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

This essay deals with the Salman Rushdie ("The Satanic Verses") affair from the point of view of a young British Muslim, who has a progressive and affectionate attitude to his own religion, is averse to fanaticism and sees good and bad in the attitudes and actions of all parties involved in the affair. He sees that there are lessons to be learnt not only by his own community, but by followers of all religions and by Western secularists. Rushdie's book has something important to say to all of them.

The author describes the incident which gave rise to the title "The Satanic Verses" and its social background. If this incident is true, it is apt to destroy blind faith in any scripture. The author explains to western readers the mechanisms of Muslim sensitivities and taboos. He asks Muslim readers whether they are not oversensitive, and have not cultivated over the years a form of excessive respect to aspects of their own religion, which may be bordering on covert idolatry, which is in itself anti-Islamic.

He gives examples of misreadings of the novel "The Satanic Verses", and discusses the need for sensitive, i.e. metaphorical interpretation, of secular as well as of sacred literature. He discusses the benefits of doubt, e.g. that it reduces fanaticism and violence. This however is no cause for western readers to gloat and feel superior.

The essay concludes with examples of Solomonic judgements (fatwas) delivered by Muslim sages in past centuries about offending poets. These show how wise and tolerant the Islamic tradition can be and asks that this tradition be revived and cultivated.

CONTENTS

Introduction

1. Satanic Seeds of Doubt
    1.1 What is Idolatry
    1.2 Doubt
    1.3 Social Background to the Incident
    1.4 The Incident (1)
    1.5 The Problem with Infallibility
2. The Satanic Curse: Idoliteralism
    2.1 What Causes Offence
    2.2 Are Christians Superior
    2.3 Idolatry
    2.4 Aberrations of Literalism
    2.5 Metaphorical Interpretation of Texts
    2.6 Can the Holy Qur'an be "idolised"?
    2.7 The Use of Arabic for Daily Prayers
    2.8 Literature and its Ambiguities
    2.9 The virtue of doubt
3. Salmanic Wisdom in Islam
    3.1 Poets in the Holy Qur'an
    3.2 Goethe's Poems

Yusuf Mubarak:
The Satanic Verse:
Do Muslims *have* to be fanatics?
Or: Learning to Live with Doubt

1 Satanic Seeds of Doubt
2 The Satanic Curse: Idoliteralism
3 Salmanic Wisdom in Islam

INTRODUCTION

One thousand four hundred years ago, on one occasion when the Holy Prophet dictated a passage of the Holy Qur'an to his scribes as it had been revealed to him, it is said, and we are not sure whether this is history, legend or slander, he uttered two verses which were not, as he firmly believed, the inspiration of Allah, but which had in fact been "put on his tongue" by the devil. Promptly Allah's true messenger, the Archangel Gabriel, appeared to the Prophet, exposed the deception which had taken place and told him the correct version of the text, which is as we have it today in the Holy Qur'an. The verses in question dealt with idolatry.

Twelve years ago, when Salman Rushdie in his novel "The Satanic Verses" reminded the world of this incident (1) and explored its implications, an almighty row broke out which resulted in Salman Rushdie being sentenced to death for blasphemy by a highly placed elder of the Muslim community, a sentence (fatwa) which in turn caused the non-Muslim world to be up in arms against the allegedly fanatical, backward and uncivilised Muslim community and their sensitivities. As a result much of the debate at the time was pro-Islamic versus anti-Islamic rather than about specific philosophical or literary issues.

Islam is not a dead monolith. It is a living tradition. It is what its followers make it. Devout Muslims come in all shapes and sizes. Not all are and were fanatics, yet they can be devout. There are conservatives and progressives among them. Young Muslims sometimes perceive things differently from their elders. Now that the dust has settled, it will therefore be useful to look at the issues again. Westerners (I use this term losely to refer to non-Muslims, especially Christians and Western secularists who share a similar way of thinking) have to understand more about Muslim (or often generally "Eastern") ways of thinking to see that the uproar was not quite as unreasonable as it then seemed. Those Muslims who were so grossly offended by "The Satanic Verses" have to consider whether they were carried away by emotions and whether it is not necessary to allow more

reason in the discussion of our religion. Many young Muslims in Britain, who live between two worlds, feel that way.

I shall illustrate the dangers of literalism by giving an example of how "The Satanic Verses" were misinterpreted, perhaps in good faith. I shall cite two famous fatwas to illustrate a dignified Muslim response to the liberties which poets take. Many of the lessons to be drawn apply to followers of **any** religion.

This is an exploratory essay. It does not try to lay down the law. The exploration will not be systematic but attached to issues arising from my examples.

The questions I intend to explore are the following:

1. Who guarantees that a Holy Scripture is true?
2. How do Muslim sensitivities differ from Western sensitivities?
3. The deeper meaning of idolatry
4. Can excessive respect lead to idolatry?
5. Is doubt dangerous? Can doubt be a blessing?
6. Do we **have** to be fanatics?
7. The dangers of literalism
8. The need for metaphorical interpretation.
9. Why literature has to be ambiguous?
10. Is the Holy Qur'an unambiguous?

1 Satanic Seeds of Doubt

Many non-Muslims and even some Muslims have wondered about the significance of the title of Salman Rushdie's book "The Satanic Verses". It is obviously a racy title, but pious people may immediately take exception to it and fear something evil in a book carrying the name of iblis, the evil one, the shaitan, on its cover.

Some people can be worried about the mere **naming** of something bad or unclean, just as in good English society, say at a dinner party, merely the ejaculation of some dirty word can cause the same offence as if the offending object itself had been brought into the room. Some people will therefore be upset in their religious sentiments if something unclean or unholy appears in the close vicinity of something holy, or if it is connected to it even if only by some allusion. Since every society decides for itself, quite arbitrarily, which words and objects are considered offensive, the mere title "The Satanic Verses" can for such sensitive people be enough to be offensive. I like such sensitivity, since I have grown up with it. I think our culture is "superior" to Western secularism in that it still recognises some boundaries of respect (for elders, for what is holy, etc.), retains some sensitivities, has not yet become a society in which "anything goes" and is not yet as brutalised as much modern English culture has become.

1.1 What is Idolatry

But there is also a danger in the cultivation of such sensitivity, or oversensitivity: it may lead to "idolatry".

Some people define idolatry as merely the worship of idols (e.g. statues). In this form, idolatry is strongly condemned by our religion; it may almost be the greatest sin.

Others say idolatry is the worship of anyone other than God as if he or it were God. I think this comes closer to the truth. I would like to generalise even further: **Idolatry is a form of excessive respect.** It is therefore possible to practise "immaterial idolatry". The only question on which one can disagree is where does excess begin. Up to what boundary is respect necessary or legitimate?

Therefore our **over**sensitivity, if any, **may** be a form of idolatry. Do we see a kind of **material** holiness in the thing, idea, word or person (**other than God**) to be protected from contagion? We will take up this point again in Section 2.

However, the title "The Satanic Verses" has a much deeper significance and gives the clue for the understanding of the whole book, a clue which I feel has been regularly overlooked in the uproar about it. Our elders have complained about the

vulgarity of the book, about its lack of respect towards the Holy Prophet and his family, about the use of a medieval abusive nickname, etc. These have been popular issues, to which both ordinary Muslims and the Western public could respond (however wrongly) and with which they could somehow sympathise. This perhaps is the reason why these irrelevant issues were put into the foreground of the protest.

1.2 Doubt

However, the point at issue is much more abstract, much more important, and therefore much less popular and much less suitable for public debate. Moreover, it strikes at the heart of the documents (holy scriptures) not only of Islam but of any revealed religion, i.e. any religion which derives, or says it derives, its authority from a scripture.

The issue of "The Satanic Verses" is the issue of doubt.

Is doubt permitted or even desirable? How can we dispel doubt? Which person or which scripture, if any, is infallible? How can we be sure they are infallible? If they are not infallible, why should we believe them in cases where they are in conflict with our own intuition? How do we interpret them? Can any text be treated as infallible when we have to concede that no text is unambiguous and none can be understood without interpretation by fallible human beings and without re-formulation into language which may itself contain other ambiguities? Is there any solution to these problems, or do we have to accept that, in matters of religion at least, we have to continue to live with some uncertainty?

It does, by the way, not follow from these questions that we cannot or should not continue to follow in a sensible way the morals, life-style and religious practices of our parents and of our community. All this is compatible with doubt. Good Muslims do not have to be **blind** believers.

But if we accept the legitimacy of doubt, we can practise, and transmit to our children, the life-style (including its religion) of our community **without becoming fanatics**. This is the issue of The Satanic Verses.

1.3 Social Background to the Incident

The incident of the Satanic Verses is alluded to, but not described, in Rushdie's book. It is alleged to have happened during the lifetime of the Holy Prophet and is mentioned in some of the earliest commentaries (written by devout Muslims) on surah 53:19 and related verses. Since the incident, if true, undermines (not faith as such but) blind faith in the reliability of the text of the Holy Qur'an, all Muslims would be happier if it had not occurred or could be proved to be untrue or legendary,

perhaps an invention of the enemies of Islam. As devout Muslims we have so-to-speak a vested interest in the falsity of this story, while it may be said that the enemies of Islam have a vested interest in its being true. Accordingly, there are some Muslim scholars who have dismissed the incident as legendary, untrue, or anti-Islamic propaganda (an anti-faith time bomb). Over the centuries, our elders have done their best to commit the embarrassing story to oblivion. But there are other Islamic scholars who, like most Western scholars of Islam, argue that the incident is probably historical, on the grounds that the devoted early Muslim commentators who included it in their commentaries on the Holy Book would not have done so if they had regarded it as untrue and hostile to Islam. They were closer to the original event or sources, had the same vested interest in the story being a fabrication, and only their scrupulous honesty, regardless of propagandistic considerations, forced them to record the story and thus preserve it for posterity. To them it is the one remotely embarrassing incident in the life of our otherwise perfect Holy Prophet (PBUH).

To understand the incident, it is important to know a little about the way in which the Holy Qur'an came into existence. It was revealed to the Holy Prophet over a period of twenty-three years in smaller or larger segments. The message was carried to the Holy Prophet by the Archangel Gabriel. The Holy Prophet had to repeat what he heard to ensure that he had understood correctly. Since he himself could not write, he dictated the verses to other people who wrote them down on any material that came to hand. Revelations usually came to him during nights of prayer in holy and lonely places and dealt not only with general questions of faith but also with quite topical matters affecting his small, but steadily growing, band of followers.

Hostility to his preaching was great. Mecca, the desert town in which he started his mission, was not only a big trading point where various caravan routes crossed each other but also a place of pilgrimage in which three goddesses, Al-Lat (meaning simply "Goddess", the feminine form of the Arabic word "Al-Lah"), Al-Uzzah and Al-Manat were worshiped. People who arrived from all over the Arabian Peninsula to worship their images also brought trade and prosperity, as modern pilgrims to the holy places of Islam (and pilgrims of any religion elsewhere) do today. The "new religion" which preached that there was only one true God, and invisible at that, would, if successful, have lead to the abolition of the cults of the three goddesses, the destruction of their shrines, which were so profitable to the merchants of Mecca, their families and their employees and the many other people who depended on them for their livelihood. They were therefore very reluctant to accept the religion which threatened to put them out of work.

Nobody knows what thoughts may have been in the mind of the Holy Prophet at that time. We believe that he simply followed the words or instructions he received through the Archangel. Apparently there were negotiations between him and the most

influential merchants of Mecca aimed at reconciling their interests in maintaining the existence of the three shrines and the message of the Archangel Gabriel that there was only one God and he alone should be worshipped.

One compromise which seems to have been discussed and which, as is alleged, the Holy Prophet may have put to God in prayer was that the three deities could be approached for "intercession" (as opposed to "be worshipped"), i.e. play the role of mediators between human beings and Allah. Their shrines could then have been preserved in some form or other and the trade with the pilgrims to these shrines could have continued.

1.4 The Incident

I now quote from W Montgomery Watt: "Muhammad at Mecca" (2) where more details can be found:

> "When Muhammad saw that the Meccans were turning from his message, he had a great desire to make it easier for them to accept it. At this juncture Surat an-Najm (3) was revealed; but when Muhammad came to the verses, 'Have ye considered al-Lat and al-'Uzza, And Manat, the third, the other?' (4) Then, the tradition continues, 'as he was saying it to himself, eager to bring it to his people, Satan threw upon his tongue (the verses), "These are the swans exalted, Whose intercession is to be hoped for"'. On hearing this the Meccans were delighted, and at the end when Muhammad prostrated himself, they all did likewise. And the news of this even reached the Muslims in Abyssinia. Then Gabriel came to Muhammad and showed him his error; for his comfort God revealed 22.51, and abrogated the satanic verses by revealing the true continuation of the Surah." (p 102)

> "The Muslim scholars, not possessing the modern Western concept of gradual development, considered Muhammad from the very first to have been explicitly aware of the full range of orthodox dogma. Consequently it was difficult for them to explain how he failed to notice the heterodoxy of the satanic verses. The truth rather is that his monotheism was originally, like that of his more enlightened contemporaries, somewhat vague, and in particular was not so strict that the recognition of inferior divine beings was felt to be incompatible with it. He probably regarded al-Lat, al-'Uzza and Manat as celestial beings of a lower grade than God, in much the same way as Judaism and Christianity have recognised the existence of angels." (p 104)

W Montgomery Watt (5) summarises the situation:

> "Some Muslims today reject this whole story, but it is difficult to see how any Muslim would have invented it, or how a non-Muslim could have persuaded distinguished Muslim scholars accept it."

After the "Satanic Verses" had been eliminated from the Holy Qur'an, Surah 53:19-26 read as follows, as it does today:

> "Have ye seen Lat and 'Uzza and another, the third goddess, Manat? What! For you the male sex and for Him, the female? Behold, such would be indeed a division most unfair! These are nothing but names which ye have devised, -- ye and your fathers, -- for which God has sent down no authority whatever... (19-23) ... How many-so-ever be the angels in the heavens, their intercession will avail nothing.(26)" (p 1445) (6)

1.5 The Problem with Infallibility

Why is this story so dangerous to the continuance of **blind** faith in a person's life? Why does it stir up the uncertainty which means that nobody can any longer complain of, or act against, blasphemy with total conviction and rigour? If this story is true (and, regrettably, even if it is not true but remembered as a wicked tale!), it prompts any intelligent child, or at least teenager, to ask: If even the Holy Prophet (PBUH) could be deceived by Satan assuming the form of the Archangel Gabriel and making him utter false verses, how can we be sure that some similar deception did not occur (without being corrected later) in some other part of the Holy Qur'an? True, Allah sent the Archangel to save the Holy Prophet from perpetuating his error and made him correct the verses. But how do we know that this second "apparition" was the Archangel himself and that there was not then some interference from Satan? And if we are to believe that the Archangel could come and correct the Satanic Verses and prevent Satan from interfering on this second occasion, why did he not intervene on the first?

But if we can not trust in the Holy Prophet and in the Holy Qur'an, not absolutely trust I mean, in whom and in what can we "absolutely" trust? Only in our common sense? In our tradition? In our varying levels of understanding, which lead us to judge what is plausible and what is implausible, what is desirable and what is undesirable?

This is how it seems to be in the modern stage of some other revealed religions, for example in Christianity (7). Christians also say that they are strictly following the bible, and its words are decisive, divine and absolute truth. Their practice, however, is different.

Examples:

1. The Anglican Church now has women priests even though Jesus had only male apostles and the Bible expressly forbids women to speak in church:

   > "Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be obedient, as also says the law. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church." (Bible, New Testament, l Corinthians 14:34-35).

2. Jesus told people, in effect, not to save money, not to hoard goods, not to take out insurance policies:

> "Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them... Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, that even Salman in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these... Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself." (Bible, New Testament, Matthew 6:26-34)

Nevertheless, this is what they all do.

If there is some verse in the Bible which, taken literally, seems impracticable or unreasonably harsh or unrealistic, Christian theologians are only too ready to say: "This is not how it was meant, it is to be interpreted with common sense, etc.". Common sense decides what was "meant" or "not meant".

The Jewish Bible says that anyone who tries to persuade the citizens to serve other Gods is to be strangled or stoned to death (Deuteronomy 13:6-12). Yet for reasons best known to the Jews themselves, no such sentence has been carried out for many a year or century. Are they disobeying God's word in the name of common sense? Or must we all, sometimes, disobey God's apparent word (if it is God's word) in the name of common sense?

Whatever the Holy Scripture, the Scripture itself cannot decide or tell us whether or not it is to be obeyed, whether or not it is to be obeyed literally, and to what extent it is to be re-interpreted. Attempting this would lead to a vicious circle. The validity of the Holy Scripture therefore is derived not from what the scripture says about itself (since each scripture will demand strict obedience for itself) (8), but from authorities outside the scripture, e.g. tradition, the opinion of our parents and elders, or even common sense (none of which, by the way, is infallible; none of which, especially, is as infallible as the Scripture claims to be or is claimed to be!)

Do similar considerations not also apply of necessity to the interpretation of the Holy Qur'an?

They do not if the Holy Qur'an is more holy, more true, "more absolute" than the Bible, as we have been brought up to believe. But the incident of the Satanic Verses or **the mere idea** that such an incident could have occurred, the mere idea casts us back into uncertainty, even about our Holy Qur'an and throws us back to the human resource of **common sense**, which we then bolster up by underpinning our traditions by reference to the Holy Qur'an, the sayings of the Holy Prophet and other religious precepts.

Each community has its social values and customs, all equally valid (whatever the community and religion), and then underpins them by establishing a link with divine revelation.

Problems of a similar nature arise for Hindus. The authority of the Vedas is officially recognised by all Hindu sects and establishes their unity. In many ways it has been overtaken by quite different philosophies, such as those contained in the Bhagavad Gita and in the many radically differing interpretations derived from it (at least six distinct schools of philosophy which are considered orthodox) (9). If interpretations can differ to such an extent, it makes little sense to speak, if anybody does, of the "absolute" authority of the Vedas. However, **having an unchanging text can make sure that, at least, the interpretations do not drift too far apart**. For each fresh translation or each fresh interpretation one goes back to the same text in the same original language. Thus at least the Chinese whispers syndrome is avoided. In practice even Hindus do not go back to the Vedas but base their philosophical teaching on the Gita and the Upanishads, which are much more advanced than the Vedas, much more spiritual and, especially, "monotheistic", which my teachers at Mosque tended to forget when they railed against Hinduism (thereby implicitly encouraging us to bait our Hindu fellow pupils, whereas we do not like others to bait "our" invisible God.)

Christians are faced with a similar problem of authority and interpretation. Max Müller has discussed this in his autobiography. (10) If I, or anyone, accept that a scripture is infallible because somebody (e.g. a commentator) tells me so, I must also accept that that person is infallible, which plainly he isn't since he isn't God, who alone is infallible. To assume anything else would be dangerously near to committing idolatry. It therefore depends on my reason (common sense) whether I accept a scripture as infallible or the incident of the Satanic Verses as true. It is my duty to exercise my judgement well (that's why God gave me reason), in case I accept a false scripture as true (Satanic Verse syndrome!). **The Holy Qur'an continuously appeals to my reason** to induce me to believe. But if I agree as a result of arguments, is my attitude that of belief or of knowledge?

Here is just one example, chosen at random from dozens of others, of the Holy Qur'an appealing to my reason. The question whether people of today would consider the arguments valid is not at issue here, but only the fact that the Holy Qur'an attempts to appeal to my reason in order to induce belief and to make me accept its authority. My acceptance of the Holy Qur'an is therefore based on reason (another word for common sense).

> "Say: 'Who is more worthy, Allah or the idols they serve besides Him? Surely worthier is He who made the heavens and the earth. He sends down water from the sky, bringing forth gardens of delight. Try as you may, you cannot cause such trees to grow. (59-60)... Surely worthier is He who answers the oppressed when they cry out to Him and relieves their affliction. It is He who has given you the earth to inherit. Another god besides Allah? How little you reflect!' (62) ... The unbelievers say: 'When we and our fathers are turned to dust, shall we be raised to life? We were promised this once before, and so were our fathers. It is but a fable of the ancients.' Say: 'Roam the world and see what was the end of the guilty...' (69-70). (Surah 27:59-70)(11)

Obviously there is a decision to be made!

Once and for all or repeated as insights and understanding change? If only once (the problem of the "apostate"), why? If arguments are a legitimate means to turn me from unbelief to belief, then arguments are a legitimate means to turn me from one belief to another.

The question which arises for Christians is why the Bible is infallible. Because the Pope says so? Is the pope infallible? Who says so? Your parents? How do you know they are right? Are your parents infallible? And so on, ad infinitum. Here too it boils down to a matter of common sense - on which different communities and human beings will not agree.

But even in Islam we have **at least one** outstanding example demonstrating, I regret to say, the relativity of our holiest text, where at least some of us quite deliberately no longer follow its original instructions. This is the institution of muta marriage (temporary marriage), still practised by Shi'i Muslims but no longer by Sunnis. It was instituted through the Holy Prophet in Surah 4:24, which reads:

> "You are permitted in addition to seek out wives with your wealth in modest conduct but not in fornication; give them their pay for the enjoyment you have had of them as a duty"

The words "for a specified period" used to be added. Umar ibn-al-Khattab (Omar) (12), the second caliph, tried to abolish the institution, and the Sunnis follow his ruling, whereas the Shi'is do not, arguing: "What the Holy Prophet has instituted no Caliph can abrogate" (13). In Sunni translations of the Holy Qur'an the passage is often almost incomprehensible. Its meaning comes out clearly in Shi'i translations and even more so in its commentaries, whereas Sunni commentaries seem to be designed to obscure the meaning of the passage.

Shi'i translation:

> "And it is allowed for you, besides in these that ye may seek them by means of your wealth taking them into marriage and not committing fornication; and as such of them ye had Muta with them, give them their dowries as a fixed reward; and it shall not be a sin on you, in whatever ye mutually agree to vary after the fixed reward". (Surah 4:24)(14)

2 The Satanic Curse: Idoliteralism

In 1989, in a northern English town, I attended a lecture by Ahmed Deedat (1918-2005), founder of the Islamic Propagation Centre in Birmingham, England, (15), in a packed townhall.

It was entitled: "How Rushdie Fooled the West: 'The Satanic Verses' Unexpurgated."

It had been advertised in the shop windows of the many local Muslim shops with posters stating: "Not suitable for bashful women and children". Nevertheless a handful of women attended. No non-Muslims were present.

Wikipedia says about Ahmed Deedat: He

> "was a South African and Indian [Gujarati] self-taught Muslim thinker, author, and orator on Comparative Religion. He was best known as a Muslim missionary, who held numerous inter-religious public debates with evangelical Christians, as well as video lectures on Islam, Christianity, and the Bible."
>
> He "wrote several widely distributed booklets on Islam and Christianity. He was awarded the King Faisal International Prize in 1986 for his fifty years of missionary work. He wrote and lectured in English."

Deedat (PBUH) was a dignified and kindly old scholar. I am fond of him and respect him, his scholarship and his age, and do not want to lay him open to ridicule, in spite of the serious criticism I have to make of his booklet: Like Salman Rushdie he has given us something to think about. I am capable of simultaneously respecting his age and learning with my mind, and laughing at his foibles with my belly. Perhaps he is laughing at me right now for having taken his spoof seriously. But was it a spoof?

Deedat presented what he punningly called "a novel approach" (page 3) to Salman Rushdie's work and the campaign to get "The Satanic Verses" banned in Britain. His campaign took the form of a lecture he gave on Sunday, 1 October 1989, in the Royal Albert Hall in London, and repeated in Bradford, Leicester, Birmingham and other English towns with large Muslim populations. I was

present at one of them. The poster advertising the lecture (reservations at the Royal Albert Hall: £2 per seat) contained a quaint "Warning: Definitely NOT for prudes, children and bashful men and women" and offered "Special FREE reservations for men of letters". (16)

The basic argument of the lecture and of the booklet, which documents it and was distributed to the many thousands who attended this lecture all over the country, was:

> The English refuse to ban the book (the general problem of whether we should have blasphemy laws, and to whom they should apply) because they neither understand how Rushdie has insulted us Muslims nor would they care about it if they did because they have not been hurt themselves. The only way to induce them to impose a ban is to make them feel the pain for themselves. We therefore have to show them that Rushdie insults and slanders not only Muslims but also the entire English nation.

Anyone who, like me, has grown up in this country would know that this strategy could not possibly work. The English have no sense of **izzat** (collective honour) and cannot be collectively insulted. Their upper lip, if nothing else, remains stiff. You can question the legitimacy of an individual and thereby provoke a rage, but you cannot evoke much of a response from the nation as a whole (perhaps because the illegitimacy of an ever increasing part of the younger population is beyond all reasonable doubt).

The book then sets out to prove that Salman Rushdie insults the English and their most respected figures, e.g. the then Prime Minister, Mrs Thatcher, and even the Queen. Every member of the audience received one copy of the booklet with the instruction to make himself a martyr in the good cause by duplicating and re-printing it in large quantities.(17)

> Go out and distribute this booklet in the street,

we were told,

> wait for the public to protest, get yourself arrested and taken to court for contempt of Her Majesty the Queen and for distributing slanderous and offensive literature. Then argue in court that these are not your own insults, but those of Salman Rushdie, that you love the Queen, and Mrs Thatcher, and the English nation, and the Conservative Party (Peace be upon them! Yes, my old friend still has not lost his sense of humour and you should have seen the twinkle in his eye), and the Labour Party (Peace be upon them too, just in case they win the next election) and your local council, and the Church of England, and your Bobbie on the Beat, and Allen Shearer, and your wife and children and your paternal-auntie, and if you deserve to be punished for these insults, then Mr Rushdie himself should be punished and his book be banned.

These are compelling arguments.

Western readers may regard this as surrealism, and perhaps it is: perhaps old Ahmed Deedat has taken us all for ride. I would not put it past him.

But we must also consider the important possibility that Ahmed Deedat spoke in earnest. The strange question then arises how kindness, age and learning (Islamic and biblical scholarship) and the respect which we rightly accord such a person in our culture can go hand in hand with extreme ignorance and incompetence in matters of interpretation of literature.

2.1 What Causes Offence

To justify **as far as possible** what Ahmed Deedat said during his lecture and the upset of those Muslims for whom he was speaking, I must discuss in some detail some peculiarly Muslim sensitivities before presenting some strange quotations from his booklet.

The extreme sensitivity of our elders can in a way be understood, and yet not be understood or no longer be approved of, by us younger Muslims when we consider the fact that in our culture both holiness and profanity (offence) may often reside in the word, object or situation itself, without regard to the way in which it is being used. The mere mention, the mere presence of it, causes the offence. (18)

An innocuous example, not from our culture: People like Ahmed Deedat would be offended equally by the statement "This book is shit" and by "I think the word 'shit' should not be used." With such sensitivities applied to "The Satanic Verses", the book had to run into trouble, even though not necessarily legitimate trouble. I only want to make the issue understood.

Unlike most Christians today, but like Jews and like Hindus (19), we feel strongly the link between physical cleanliness, spiritual purity and holiness. For us, cleanliness is not only a social, but also a religious duty. For example: We bathe before we pray. We have a number of objects which are considered unclean (polluting), e.g. dogs and pigs. We will not eat pig meat and we will not touch or be near to pigs or dogs. If we touch them accidentally, we will take ritual ablutions not only to wash any scientifically detectable traces of these animals off our bodies but also to regain spiritual purity before we eat or pray or touch the Holy Book.

But our deeply ingrained respect for what is sacred and fear of what may be profane or profane us goes further. It has now become an end in itself, no longer capable of being detected by a forensic scientist. We will not like to see pictures of dogs or pigs (even they become mentally polluting) and we will not like to take their names in our mouths or hear them in our ears. If English people visit us and talk about these things in their usual uninhibited way, we understand the reason, smile indulgently, cringe secretly, but say nothing which they would not understand anyway, and hope that the conversation will move on to a different subject. We can't teach old dogs (sit venia verbo!) new tricks.

We cannot easily understand the difference between a word and the object (for example) or the word and an action, or we do not want to understand it, because it is a feature of our culture that we are gentle and sensitive in these matters (unlike the fairly brutalised Western secular society), and we do not want to lose this sensitivity: It is a virtue, provided it is not taken too far.

The refusal to distinguish between word and object is not a sign of stupidity and does not make us incapable of reading and understanding Ferdinand de Saussure, it has nothing to do with our objective perception of the world but with our value system. And value systems are arbitrary. Every society or community is entitled to have its own: and all provide certain benefits to those supporting them and suffer from certain shortcomings which are unavoidably linked with them.

English people will understand this better when they consider that offence may be caused even among liberal-minded and generally outspoken people if, at the dinner-table, she word "shit" is used, or the bad toilet facilities in a southern European country or the workings of an abattoir are discussed while they eat the best of British veal. The offence is in the word or idea itself, at the time when people eat and therefore want to think only of edible things and not of objects or places which would pollute them. When dinner is over, the same people might be quite coarse in the language they use. Similarly people will be more careful with the language they use in a church as opposed to outside. If the pulpit collapses under the weight of the ancient priest, he will not, or should not, shout "Jesus Christ" or "Fuck it" - not in a church. (20) Similarly, it used to be common that people in the West (perhaps still in Ireland) avoided using the word "devil" and replaced it by various euphemisms accompanied by the sign of the cross, because they believed that the word itself was "evil", was polluting and had the power of calling the evil spirit denoted by it. In the same vein, Hindus make no distinction between the holy name of God and God himself, and by repeating such a name in a mantra they know that God himself will be present in them.

Therefore the sentence "You should not call the Holy Prophet such and such" can cause the same, or almost the same, offence (or pain) to the listener, as actually hearing him called such and such.(21)

Western readers may not believe this, and I will therefore illustrate it with an example from commentaries on the Holy Qur'an.

Arabic "ra'ina"	= "Listen to us"
Hebrew "rā`ina"	= "Our evil one"
Arabic "undhurna"	= "Look upon us"

Jewish Arabs exploited the ambiguity of "ra'ina" to scorn the Holy Prophet. Dawood (p 335) explains this in a note attached to his translation of Surah 2:104, which tells believers not to use the innocuous Arabic expression "ra'ina" because it provided an opportunity for this abuse: "Believers, do not say to Our apostle (Prophet) Ra'ina, but say Undhurna."(22)

Abdullah Yusuf Ali in his translation and commentary on the Holy Qur'an cannot bring himself to write the word "ra'ina" in the text itself, even though it is contained in the original of the Holy Qur'an itself. He is more sensitive than the Holy Prophet, therefore perhaps oversensitive (the general point I am trying to make in this essay). He translates the word "ra'ina" by "words of ambiguous import" because he does not want a potentially disrespectful word to disfigure the Holy Qur'an. "O ye of Faith! Say not to the Apostle words of ambiguous import, but words of respect." His commentary says: "The word disapproved is 'Rai'na', which as used by the Muslims meant 'Please look at us, attend to us'. But it was used by enemies by a little twist to suggest some insulting meaning. So an unambiguous word, 'unzurna', with the same meaning is suggested." (p 46) - The translation by Mir Ahmed Ali has no qualms over using the delicate word (p 79 and p 132).

Having something holy and something profane in close vicinity, in the same book, in the same sentence can be offensive for us. Such is our culture, and Christian culture, not too long ago, was not all that different in this respect.

In this respect our, sensitive and verbally restrictive, culture is no less valuable than a culture where everything goes. There are benefits for both approaches: neither is **intrinsically** superior. Therefore it may even be possible for us younger Muslims sometimes to support and practise the approaches of one culture and sometimes those of the other. Since we cannot swear in our own language (there is no such tradition), we swear heartily in English (when out of earshot of our parents). This is not schizophrenia but natural and beneficial and leads us to have a certain degree of tolerance which our elders or less educated people may not have.

This attributing sanctity or profanity to a word regardless of the sentence in which it is embedded is one of the manifestations of what I call "literalism". In a certain sense it is magic ("Hoc est enim") or, as I argue, covert idolatry, i.e. truly satanic.

Satan (like God?)(23) prefers to hide where he is least likely to be detected.(24)

I used to be, judiciously in private, a defender of Salman Rushdie, especially when I heard my favourite younger sister say when she saw his face on television: "May he rot in hell", even though she has never read his book and will be forever incapable of reading it, and she is the sweetest, most harmless soul imaginable. I have now learnt to keep my own counsel. There is no getting through, even though I think that it would be beneficial for the future our culture and our religion if I did manage to get through.

I tried to explain the difference between fiction and history. I explained that the book never mentions the Holy Prophet by name, that it did not set out to describe any incidents in his life, and therefore did not tell lies or slanders. To simplify things and not provoke further irrelevant misunderstandings, I denied certain things about the book which I should not have denied. But when, in this long and gentle conversation (with me winning all the points), my sister asked me whether Salman Rushdie had in his book perhaps in any way been "inspired" by events in the life of the Holy Prophet and used(!) them for the purpose of creating a work of fiction, I felt I could not possibly, and need not, deny that, because the parallels are important features for the, as I feel positive, religious message of the book. Then my sister said quietly and sadly: "In that case, he should not have done it. You must not make use of the Holy Prophet for anything other than listen to his message and follow his example."(25)

I have never argued about this matter with her again. It would have been impossible without hurting her and without undermining the faith which sustains her whom I love deeply. She has been brought up, in this country, with these sensitivities and she will die with them.

We Muslims are not alone in cultivating respect as a virtue in its own right. I once brought an English friend to a Hindu household. On entering we took off our shoes out of respect for the house of our hosts and in order to observe the rules of cleanliness which we have in common with Hindus. My friend had an attaché case with him. When we parted and put on our shoes again, my friend rested his foot on his attaché case in order to tie his laces. His Hindu hostess, who knew him well and wanted to do him a favour by teaching him something, pointed out that this is not done. The attaché case probably contains books. All books (not only sacred ones) are to be respected because they represent the spirit. One therefore does not step on them or even a box containing them, one does not use them as a support for one's feet or shoes, which are by definition (and because they are made of leather) "unclean" and polluting. This is a symbolic matter. It is irrelevant whether there is physical contact between the shoe and the book.

By contrast I once observed with utter amazement during a yoga class that was held in the gymnasium of an English school that the the mainly English students fetched bibles and hymn books which were kept there in order to use them as supports and sit on them. Any notion of respect for sacred things seems to have utterly disappeared in a country in which this can happen. We will not even put the Holy Qur'an temporarily on a chair or on a floor because these two areas have come in contact with two parts of the body which are considered "unclean". But actually to sit on a religious book! We think that, in this regard, our culture is more refined.

I see the value of these sensitivities, and deplore the reduction in "culture" in western society which has lost these, formerly existing, sensitivities. But I feel at the same time that a slightly more robust, slightly less "literalist" approach to religion is desirable, if only to ensure that religious leaders do not become overbearing and exploit the ignorance of their uneducated followers, and in fact prevent them from becoming more educated and thinking for themselves. Therefore I argue for a less "idolatrous" approach to our holy symbols. Such an approach is implicit in the spirit of Islam. But in all justice, and in order not to feed naive Christian and secularist feelings of superiority, a point made by Rana Kabbani, I had to justify first our traditional sensitivities and defend their value.

2.2 Are Christians Superior

As long as they themselves are protected by blasphemy laws, Christians have no right to rail against Muslims for objecting to blasphemy. All blasphemy laws in all countries, for all religions, should be abolished. As long as they exist, Christians have no reason to feel superior to Muslims on the grounds that they would not impose a death sentence on a blaspheming Christian. This only shows that they are quite ready to ignore the injunctions of their Holy Scripture: According to their New Testament Jesus was executed for blasphemy.(26) If the Muslim hierarchy and their uneducated followers made a mistake during the Rushdie affair, it was not by imposing or supporting a death sentence on Rushdie (however much many other Muslims disapproved of it), but by getting so upset about alleged blasphemy (if it had been blasphemy) on the one hand and by being so unable to understand and distinguish the subtleties of assertion, suggestion, question, etc., involved in poetic and literary expression.(27) Rana Kabbani (28) has explained some of the historical reasons which made this difficult, and I will pick up her arguments.

2.3 Idolatry

Sensitivity and reverence for the sacred is often a good thing: but practised in excess it can become a vice.

In this sense our very touchiness concerning anything "dirty" or "disrespectful" coming in any way near the Holy Book or our Holy Prophet (regardless of what is being asserted) is a form of idolatry and therefore against our own religion.

It is not good to give too much respect and too much protection to the messenger of God's word (a creature of flesh and blood) (29), to his Holy Book (a material object no less than the golden calf) (30) and to its **words**. All words are human, never divine, even if they come from God. God does not "speak" or "think" in human language. "His words", however holy and authentic, are still not (and can never be) identical with God's absolute and divine reality.

Therefore if we give too much respect to these, then we offend unwittingly against the spirit of religion, and especially of a religion which prides itself on being spiritual and on not confusing God, who is spirit, with his imperfect creatures, including His spirit imperfectly embodied in the imperfect language and historically conditioned mind of his imperfect creatures. Note: Even God's words are not God himself, they are his creation and therefore do not deserve equal protection, even if any protection were required.

However, Rana Kabbani has a point when she says that the Muslim fury has to be seen in the context of Muslim-Christian relations over the centuries, where Muslims have often (except when they managed to conquer North Africa and Spain and establish the Ottoman Empire) been at the receiving end of Christian military, economic and allegedly spiritual superiority. They are therefore touchy about being accorded adequate respect. (More touchy than God, who, unlike his Muslim devotees, is so sure of his position that he does not have to demand respect!)

Since Muslims are regularly denied this respect, they may sometimes demand it in a hysterical fashion. The issues are then confused. There is confusion between the alleged perpetrator, Rushdie, and his Western or Christian supporters, and the Rushdie affair is seen as a Western or Christian attack against Islam. (It would have been better if there had been more committed Muslim supporters of Salman Rushdie: that would have removed some of the partisan aspects from the affair.) In return, the liberal western party, in a vicious circle, becomes even more contemptuous of Muslims, such as Fay Weldon (as quoted by Rana Kabbani!):

> "The Koran is food for no-thought. It is not a poem on which a society can be safely or sensibly based. It gives weapons and strength to the thought police -- and the thought police are easily set marching, and they frighten ... I see it as a limited and limiting text when it comes to the comprehension of what I define as God. ... You can build a decent society around the Bible ... but the Koran? No." (31)

Was the Ottoman empire not a tolerant and orderly society? More tolerant than Spain that expelled, and Germany that murdered, its Jews, more orderly than the successors of that empire in the

former territory of Yugoslavia! Was the society, built around the bible, that murdered the Cathars or that which gave supreme power to Torquemada a decent society? And today's British society, if it is more decent than others (formerly or elsewhere), is not built around the bible but round the idea of human rights established through the French revolution and not through the Church.

Klaus Bung's poem "Burnt Offerings" makes the point for me:

Klaus Bung:
Burnt Offerings
(32)

DEUS, IN ADIUTORIUM MEUM INTENDE.
DOMINE, AD ADIUVANDUM ME FESTINA.
(33)

Miguel Serveto of Tudela
thought too deeply about
Baptism and the Holy Trinity.
He corresponded with Calvin.
Come, Mephasttophilis, let vs dispute againe!
(34)

Calvin issued a fatwa against him:
"You just dare to come and see me in Geneva,
and I promise you will not leave my bloody town alive."
Serveto did not believe his fellow searcher for truth.

But it befell that some of his letters to Calvin
fell into the hands of the
Come, Mephasttophilis, let vs dispute againe!
Inquisitor General at Lyon.

Sur le pont de Lyon
on y mente, on y mente,
sur le pont de Lyon
on y mente tous en rond.
(35)

cheerfully chanted the innocent children.

Miguel was arrested, his books
were confiscated, during his trial
he wisely escaped.
He was found guilty
in his absence and burnt in effigy

by the Catholics.

"A pen for Serveto, a penny for Miguel!",

cheerfully called the innocent children.

Thinking he would be safe in Geneva,
Come, Mephasttophilis, let vs dispute againe!
because effigies were allowed neither there nor in Mecca,
and therefore couldn't be burnt
(they insist on the Real Thing Coca Cola)
and considering himself
a pen-friend of Johnny Calvin,
he made his way to Geneva
looking forward, in vain,
for the Red Cross to protect him.
He was a visionary, far ahead of his time.

The Calvinists tried (and succeeded)
him for heresy
Come, Mephasttophilis, let vs dispute againe!
and found him guilty,
because he had
cleverly concocted a doctrine
about the Spirit of God
so good that it upset
all the parties, Papists
and Calvies alike.
Therefore it must
have been the truth,
or very close to it.

If he had gone
from Geneva to Constance,
he would have been burnt by the Pope there
together with Hus.
Come, Mephasttophilis, let vs dispute againe!
It never occurred to him
to go to Ulster and get himself shot
by the two parties at once.
Come, Mephasttophilis, let vs dispute againe!

They all did it and do it or would
do it if only they could:
Catholics and Protesters: I think
they deserve one another, they stink
each in his own peculiar way.

While most of Serveto's colleagues
were friends with one of these
parties and were burnt by the other, if only
in effigy,
Serveto managed
to needle them both.
The hunted heretic was
on the run for much of his life,
had only his pen for to prick with,
and he lacked the two chairs
that are commonly needed
for sitting between them.

Come, Mephasttophilis, let vs dispute againe!

In Geneva the ecological movement
had taken root. Oecolampadius,
or Johann Huszgen or Home as he is homely known,
Patron of Friends of the Earth,
and balding chauvinist Hansgen Calvin (36)
wanted his scalp, his head,
not his ashes,
to reduce global warming, they said,
which at the time was progressing
at an alarming pace, Joan of Arc
had lit the spark,
what with bitches
burnt as witches,
here Jan Hus
there Spanish Jews.
Illuminations turned Europe
into a Blackpool, flames flaring,
bin of ashes, black pool of blood,
buggers (37) burning like candles
to honour this threefool'd schizo-
phrenic man-
made God.

Would one had used the waters
of the Jordan,
of all baptismal fonts and all rivers
to put out these blasphemous fires!

On 27 October
in the fucking Year of the Lord 1553,
the hunted Serveto,
man of ancient Tudela, city of Benjamin,

of Juda Ha-Levi and wise Ibn Ezra,
servants of God all,
was burned alive. I detest

this cruel mode of punishment. It depletes
our forests
and the stench of burning flesh
Auschwitz-like
pollutes the atmosphere.
The crucifix was
a much more civilised mode
of execution - only two
pieces of timber, that's just one tree
per victim. The cross can even be
recycled. Just imagine
how many more thinkers
can be executed that way
at less cost
to the environment and
to the pious tax-payer!

But, after St Jesus, St Peter
and kilted St Andrew, of course,
nobody was worthy
of being killed in that manner.
Only sometimes
Yugoslavian women these days
are nailed to the cross of the bed.

If only we could rid ourselves of
our addiction to that mad phrenic construct
The Truth,
that Moloch (38), King of Shame.

Would that we could
like Herod the King kill all prophets
before they can train disciples!

And AIDS on both their houses!
(39)

DEUS, IN ADIUTORIUM MEUM INTENDE.
Come, Mephasttophilis, let vs dispute againe!
DOMINE, AD ADIUVANDUM ME FESTINA.

Therefore, what people say in these outbursts cannot always be taken literally. Often they say one thing but mean something that is subtly different. This may even apply to Fay Weldon. These ill-considered paragraphs may be **her** "Satanic Verses", out of character. Perhaps we all have our Satanic Verses. The more reason, perhaps, to forgive and forget them all?

Muslims must do their own blaspheming. Even Ahmed Deedat swears, albeit in English: "I dream in English and I also swear in English".(40) "Blaspheming" is necessary in order to purify a religion. Rushdie made a contribution to this process of purification. He needed Christian and western support but, regrettably and predictably, this support made things worse because it transformed an incident in which a Muslim or ex-Muslim took "liberties" with his religion into one were Muslims felt that they had been attacked by outsiders, and their ancient grievances and inferiority complexes were thereby triggered.

2.4 Aberrations of Literalism

I can now continue my exposition of the aberrations of literalism, for those of my friends who are capable of getting the point and help to renew our approach to religion, not for the amusement of non-Muslim readers, who have enough weaknesses of their own (past and present) to worry about.

EXAMPLE 1: BELOVED SISTERS

Since Ahmed Deedat quotes sentences out of context and his misinterpretations become apparent only if one knows it, I start with a quote from "The Satanic Verses" itself.

> "After the first nervous days on the ground, during which the three turbaned young hijackers went perilously close to the edges of insanity, screaming into the desert night 'you bastards, come and get us,' or, alternatively, 'o god o god they're going to send in the fucking commandos, the motherfucking Americans, yaar, the sisterfucking British', moments during which the remaining hostages closed their eyes and prayed, because they were always most afraid when the hijackers showed signs of weakness, -- everything settled down into what began to feel like a normality." (hardback edition, p. 80)

Ahmed Deedat sees the essence of this passage not in the question whether hijackers do or do not swear but whether the British fuck their sisters and neglect the complex duty they owe to their mothers, and whether the Americans err in the opposite direction. He writes:

> "Now see, how he repays his British god-fathers for all their kind and generous hospitality.
>
> He charges his British benefactors as an incestuous people. He calls them "THE SISTER FUCKING BRITISH." This is the unkindliest cut of them all. He marries Pamela Lovelace according to his story in The Satanic Verses. And according to his own philosophy she was destined " FOR FUCKING AND THROWING OVER", which he did by divorcing her. Where did he

> get the information from that the British fuck their own sisters? Perhaps his Pamela may have confided in him, and maybe he betrayed her trust" (p 13-14 of the booklet).

Ahmed Deedat's last sentence requires some elucidation for Western readers.

Rushdie was married to a British woman, named Pamela. Ahmed Deedat's train of thought runs like this:

> No Englishman will admit, even if true, that he has done such a disreputable thing to his sister. A fortiori, no English woman will admit that she suffered this shameful ordeal at the hands of her brother. Therefore it is quite impossible for Rushdie, who is not English and therefore never did it to his sister, to know about such matters. Then how can he assert it? Ah, there is only one explanation; this is what must have happened: Salman Rushdie was married to a British woman. On the wedding night he will have discovered to his dismay that she was no longer a virgin. He will have demanded an explanation. She will have hesitated. He will have insisted and threatened to divorce her immediately under the Trade Descriptions Act ('shop-soiled goods'). She will then have struck a bargain with him: "All right, I will tell you a shameful secret **provided** you promise never ever to reveal this to anybody else...". He promised, she told him the truth, and then he betrayed her trust, went and published her shame for all the world to read - since, if it is true that "the English are sister fuckers" then it follows syllogistically (41) that Pamela was fucked by her brother. (If her brother had not fucked her, one could not call the English sisterfuckers.) Rushdie betrayed her secret. Mathematical logic!

All that is encapsulated in the sentence "Perhaps his Pamela may have confided in him, and maybe he betrayed her trust".

EXAMPLE 2: GIVE A DOG A BAD NAME

"The Satanic Verses" describe a conversation of two angry disaffected characters as follows:

> "Chamcha was confused. 'I'm talking about you-know-who,' Valance explained helpfully. 'Torture. Maggie the bitch.' Oh. 'She's radical all right. What she wants -- what she actually thinks she can fucking achieve -- is literally to invent a whole goddamn new middle class in this country.' " ("The Satanic Verses", p 269 f)

For Ahmed Deedat the question arises whether it is true that Mrs Maggie Thatcher was a bitch (for lying, he knew, was a sin, a sin). Where is the evidence, he asked during the lecture but not in the booklet, that while Mrs Thatcher was a student in Cambridge, the young men were queuing up outside her room to receive her favours? If they weren't, she isn't a bitch.

Nor will a disclaimer, as is used at the beginning of films, save Rushdie out from the obvious accusation of having slandered Mrs Thatcher and having sullied her reputation. What will her son Mark make of this since Rushdie has, implicitly but inescapably, called **him** a son-of-a-bitch? Will he accept that epithet without evidence, or will he not rather go and shoot Salman Rushdie and do us a favour? If Rushdie cannot produce such evidence and is found guilty of attacking the reputation of a respectable lady,

he has to expect severe punishment in accordance with Islamic law. Here is how Ahmed Deedat puts the argument:

> Rushdie claims that his "The Satanic Verses" is only an novel, it is fiction, it is a dream within a dream. Don't you remember that every movie before its screening, at one time, displayed a notice to wit -- "All characters in this film are fictitious and the similarity of any name to persons living or dead are merely coincidental." Tell that to Mark Thatcher or Carol Thatcher, Mrs. Thatcher's son and daughter, and see what they do to you! Nobody will blame them for any grievous bodily harm. Try! Try!
>
> In the house of Islam, anyone traducing the fair name of any lady, living or dead, will be required to produce four "EYE WITNESSES" to the alleged indiscretion to qualify as a "bitch," and if under cross-examination one of them fails, all the four witnesses will receive 80 lashes each. Cruel! Barbaric! You say. You would not say that if your mother's integrity was involved. I bet! If Rushdie himself was an eye witness to his wife's adultery, he may divorce her on the ground but he would not be allowed to have her arrayed before an Islamic court without three other impeccable eye witnesses to corroborate his charge, failing which he too will receive eighty lashes.

This kind of "literalist" approach to the interpretation of literature and to questions of truth and falsity does not do us younger members of the Muslim community any good. It can, if anything, only undermine our trust in our elders.

Not every man of God today can be expected to be a new Averroës. (42) Nevertheless it may be fair to ask whether people who are capable of misinterpreting the passages from Rushdie's book which we have quoted in **such** a misguided manner are truly capable of giving any valid interpretation of the Holy Qur'an (and no scriptural truth or meaning exists without interpretation (43)). The misinterpretation of Rushdie's book results from methods and approaches which come from habits which also lead to the misinterpretation of the Holy Qur'an or any other "prophetic" scripture.(44)

The problem of blasphemy, and whether blasphemy can be objectively perpetrated by anyone or exists only in the misguided mind of a beholder, is also closely linked with this problem of perception of holy scriptures, God, holy persons and symbols.

But why does a pious old man, who normally preaches worthy sermons and admonishes his fellow-believers to lead good lives, and who has hardly ever in his life used a filthy word, write abusive passages such as the following? Does excess of piety lead to impiety?

> "All this shit of Rushdie will not satiate Peter Mayer, the Director of Penguin, and his fellow gluttons. They need something more sticky and stinky to satisfy their depraved tastes. And, Rushdie is their man of the hour. There will never be another to get away with the lampooning of Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Jews. Blacks as well as all whites! Not even sparing the "Iron Lady," nor the Queen of Great Britain." (page 6)

Could it be that piety leads to stupidity (which Allah forbid) and that therefore the same man has to be venerated for his piety but shunned or ridiculed for his stupidity?

The final paragraph of this booklet went even beyond **my**, modern and therefore high, threshold of toleration:

> **"Mired in misery,**
> **may all his filthy lucre**
> **choke in his throat,**
> **and may he die a coward's death,**
> **a hundred times a day,**
> **and eventually**
> **when death catches up with him,**
> **may he simmer in hell**
> **for all eternity!"**

Is this a prayer in which Allah takes pleasure? The prayer of a God-fearing man? Or the prayer of a person who is sucking up to the big boss?

I, a Muslim, could not bear to have these cruel sentences stand on my shelf without invalidating them by, sit venia verbo, crossing them out. May Ahmed Deedat (P.B.U.H.) be forgiven for his aberration!

I wrote a holy symbol beneath the curse to cancel out the evil that resided in it. **This was the truly SATANIC VERSE that everyone had missed.** It is in the nature of Satan that he turns up in guises in which you do not recognise him, as he did when he assumed the shape of the Archangel Gabriel or as he did when for thirty seconds he laid this sentence on the tongue of my old friend Ahmed Deedat.

He, like me **and all human beings** (even the greatest and most holy), has his moments of error, even if otherwise guided by Allah, and perhaps that is the deepest significance of, the lesson to be learnt from the story, or incident, of the Satanic Verses: it makes us aware of the difference between fallible human beings and God, between God and his messenger, who is so close to him and almost indistinguishable from him, and it is therefore a cautionary tale, to put us on guard against idolatry, especially well-intentioned covert idolatry.

For this is the true text of the Holy Qur'an:	
Wa-immā nuriyannaka b`aḍa-llaẕī na-`iduhum aw natawaffayannaka fa-'innamaa `alayka l-balāgu wa-`alayna l-ḥisāb. (Surah 13:40)	**Whether We (Allah) let you (the Holy Prophet) witness the punishment with which We threaten them, or cause you to die before it is fulfilled, your mission is only to give warning: it is for Us to do the reckoning. (Surah 13:40)**

Allah does not have to be helped or speeded up by our curses on alleged mockers or disbelievers. On the contrary, since truth will ultimately prevail, even in sinners, even in unbelievers, we must wish them peace and pray for them, for the Holy Qur'an says:	
Wa-qīlihi yā-Rabbi 'inna hā-'ulā-'i qawmu lā yu'minūn! Fa-ṣfaḥ `anhum wa-qul Salām! Fa-sawfa	**The apostle says: 'Lord, these men are unbelievers.' Bear with them and wish them peace. They shall before long know their error. (Surah 43:88-89)**

Surely this applies to Salman Rushdie (Peace be upon him!)!(45)

Or did Ahmed Deedat take us for a ride, even with his feigned fury against Salman Rushdie. In that case may the two clowns happily meet in paradise and rejoice in each other's company and find that in Allah all opposites coincide. (46)

2.5 Metaphorical Interpretation of Texts

Salman Rushdie is **not** an enemy of Islam and bent on destroying it. By the way in which he treated incidents analogous to those in the history of Islam Salman Rushdie was, as an insider, i.e. as a Muslim, trying to contribute to the reform of Islam and of literalist approaches to religion in general: these are concerns not only for Muslims but for all mankind, as I have pointed out repeatedly in this essay. Jews have wrestled with the problem through the midrash method of exploring their sacred texts. Christian scholars have applied similar methods to theirs (e.g. Bishop John Spong in "Born of a woman"(47) and other books), and often caused an outrage in their own communities, from which it does not follow that they are wrong. The Holy Prophet, when he started preaching, caused an outrage among the unbelievers (or

among the Christians some of whose beliefs he castigated (48): he was not therefore wrong. To the extent, however, that the Holy Prophet Muhammad was the successor of the Jewish and Christian prophets, the work of Jewish and Christian scholars is not necessarily a priori irrelevant to us: it deals with our antecedents. It is worthwhile to have at least a look at it to see if there are any analogies and lessons to be learnt. Centuries ago in Muslim Spain, our own Averroës wrestled with the problem of metaphorical interpretation.

Rushdie wrote a book which, like the Holy Qur'an (may I be forgiven the comparison which will appear odious to some people), can be understood properly only if the text is read with affection, subtlety and compassion, with the intention of discovering its truth (which, as in all poetry and literature, is encoded or hidden below the surface and can be seen only by well-intentioned readers searching for the truth rather than for faults), and not as if it were a mathematical equation, a computer manual, or an Act of Parliament.

2.6 Can the Holy Qur'an be "idolised"?

Like the bible, the Holy Qur'an is **not** the **foundation** of a tradition, but a **document** (albeit holy and of the greatest importance) of that tradition (with a complex history of dictation and compilation) and very much conditioned by the audience to which it was addressed, by the social circumstances of the time, and the purpose for which the holy words were received or uttered. It cannot be understood or properly applied if these are not taken into account. Contrary to **popular** Islamic tradition, it is not **literally** engraved in stone (that would be evident idolatry), it is not an eternal document as we were fondly taught to believe:

> "Every age has its scripture. Allah confirms or abrogates what He pleases. His is the Eternal Book." (Surah 13:39)

There is a difference between the "eternal book" in heaven and its manifestation through the holy words of his Messenger or through the holy words written on parchment or paper and visible to our eyes.

Similarly, in spite of their traditional name, the Hindu "sanathana dharma" (eternal laws of righteousness) are in fact not eternal but have changed and are slowly changing, so that a history of their development could be written, evidence enough that they are not eternal. Eternal things do not change.(49)

The incident to which the title of Rushdie's book refers is symptomatic for, or symbolic of, the fundamental question whether the Holy Qur'an (or any other Scripture) (or any human words,

even if transmitted by God) can have any absolute value and can be an absolutely reliable source of truth (and therefore be accorded ABSOLUTE respect), or whether as, for example, the Sufis (and the Quakers) believe, it is the spirit that matters and the holy words are only there to help us explore the spirit from which they come. Is there an inner meaning of a scripture (or custom) which is not readily apparent from its "external meaning", as the Spanish Muslim philosopher Averroës (50) argued?

By treating the Holy Qur'an as if it were absolute, not requiring sensitive interpretation, and, indeed, paying as much respect to it as Hindus, symbolically, give to their murtis (51), we commit the sin of idolatry, which is one of the greatest sins our religion warns us of.

2.7 The Use of Arabic for Daily Prayers

This has the consequence that the Arabic text is revered (idolised?) to such an extent that Muslims who do not speak Arabic recite the text in the original holy language (52), rather than in a translation in their native language, in which it would have a meaning, albeit only one of the several possible meanings and interpretations that the original text permits.(53) Because of this "idolatry" of the original text and the original but accidental language, many Muslims do not know for themselves the contents of their Holy Book (54) other than those passages which they have learnt as children to use for their regular prayers. To that extent the excessive emphasis on the importance of the original text disregarding the Arabic origins of the original teaching (idolatry) has been counterproductive. It has had an effect which the Holy Prophet cannot have envisaged when he said that the message was given in Arabic, i.e. in the native language of his audience, specifically in order that they may understand it in every detail (and not only in a summary transmitted by theologians or teachers).

Excessive respect therefore leads to less rather than more knowledge of the Holy Book - and therefore to less understanding of the Book which was proclaimed in order to increase understanding!

The question of the language in which the Holy Qur'an is written is so important in the question of covert idolatry and untouchability of texts, that I must quote here at length what the Holy Book says about it. The matter must have been of importance at the time; otherwise the point would not have been restated so often.

Seen in conjunction, these verses show why Arabic was chosen for the revelation, how important these reasons were for the Holy Prophet, and give a strong indication as to the role of these holy texts in other countries and other linguistic (and historical) environments.

1 "We have revealed the Koran in the Arabic tongue so that you may understand it."(Surah 12:2)

2 "Thus We have revealed it, a code of judgements in the Arabic tongue." (Surah 13:37)

3 "Each apostle We have sent has spoken in the language of his own people, so that he might make plain to them his message." (Surah 14:4)

4 "We have revealed to you the Koran in your own tongue..." (Surah 19:97)

5 "Thus We have revealed the Koran in the Arabic tongue..." (Surah 20:113)

6 "This Book is revealed by the Lord of the Creation. The faithful Spirit brought it down into your heart, that you might warn mankind in plain Arabic speech." (Surah 26:192-195)

7 "Had We revealed the Koran in a foreign tongue they would have said: 'If only its verses were expounded! Why in a foreign tongue, when the Prophet is Arabian?'" (Surah 41:44)

8 "Thus We have revealed to you an Arabic Koran, that you may warn the mother-city ..." (Surah 42:7)

9 "We have revealed the Koran in the Arabic tongue that you may grasp its meaning." (Surah 43:3)

10 "We have revealed this to you in your own tongue so that they may take heed." (Surah 44:58)

11 "It is revealed in the Arabic tongue to forewarn the wrongdoers ..." (Surah 46:12)

Arabic, then, was chosen for the revelation, not because it was a divine or superior or unambiguous language but because, unlike for example Hebrew, Greek and Latin, it was the mother tongue of the Holy Prophet and he was sent to address **Arab** people, who had not yet had a prophet of their own (55), who needed to be reminded of the forgotten or distorted divine message and had to be addressed in the vernacular.

The text in this language, arising out of local circumstances and for practical reasons, is all we have of the original revelation. Whenever we interpret and translate the text, we must go back to this original to avoid the Chinese whisper syndrome and to prevent interpretations and translations unstoppably drifting away from the original message. However, the original words are not so holy that it is better to learn and repeat them without understanding and therefore without meaning (a form of idolatry and magic) than to learn, pray and use them today in our own languages, be it Urdu, English, French or whatever. Beware of idolatry!

The holy words were lampooned at the time (e.g. by the unbelieving poets and intellectuals) and had to contend with that. Happily, the Holy Prophet gave as good as he got (and we today can do the same), with sarcasms and with threats and warnings of divine punishment **in the afterlife**. That was a fair contest, and I, as a young British Muslim, am not afraid of

continuing it. I feel that I do not need more protection today than the Holy Prophet needed in his time (and was he not hugely successful in the end!) and that Allah will indeed prevail with each offending individual (even though the world will never be perfect and without evil). I do not have to inflict any secular punishment or call Allah's wrath down on the sinner in the hope that Allah will love me more for being such an eager supporter. I feel that free competition with words (no punches pulled and no holds barred) is more dignified for us who have Allah on our side than to insult Him by giving Him support which He does not need. I diminish Allah in the sight of the unbelievers if I try to protect His dignity, which cannot be touched and tarnished even if a blasphemy had been committed. Only the unbelievers think so little of God. Should we arrogate His power to punish or pardon the offender?

Salman Rushdie, in his poetic, i.e. ambiguous, way (and this at present is the only possible way) makes us aware of this danger of idolatry, not only by what he says in the book, but also by the unexpected but "idolatrous" events which came in its train.

Salman Rushdie's book, by digging up, or ploughing the solidified ground again (an activity which has been considered blasphemous) has in fact given his open-minded Muslim readers the chance to re-vivify their religion by looking at it with new eyes and from fresh angles. Our religion is vibrant and viable enough to stand up to such inspection and discussion. Jesus said: "Unless a wheat grain falls into the earth and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies it yields a rich harvest."(56) This saying may also be applied to the cultivation of the soil for the rebirth of a religion.

We want the words and the teachings of the Holy Qur'an to flourish on a fertile field, not to stand dried up and shrivelled on barren hardened clay or planted like metal spikes in concrete or on tablets of stone. If they are to flourish, the field has to be made fertile, to be cultivated by digging and loosening it up. This is what Salman Rushdie has done. And others must do it after him at regular intervals. Of course, the language I am using here is only metaphorical. It is not to be taken literally. I know well that the Holy Qur'an itself (or popular tradition) states that the Holy Words are chiselled in tablets of stone:

> Surah 85:21-22: Surely this is a glorious Qur'an, inscribed on a preserved tablet.
>
> Surah 56:77-79: ... this is a glorious Qur'an, inscribed in a hidden book which none may touch except the purified.
>
> Surah 43:4: It is a transcript of Our eternal book, sublime, and full of wisdom.

But that language too is to be interpreted metaphorically. The Holy Book itself recognises that it contains such passages:

> Surah 3:7: "He it is Who has sent down to you the Book: In it are verses basic or fundamental (of established meaning); they are the foundation of the book: others are allegorical."

The Qur'an commentary by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, p 123, notes on this:

> "If we refer to 11:1 and 39:23, we shall find that in a sense the whole of the Qur'an has both 'established meaning' and allegorical meaning. The division is not between the verses, but between the meanings to be attached to them. Each verse is but a Sign or Symbol: what it represents is something immediately applicable, and something eternal and independent of time and space, - the "Forms of Ideas" in Plato's Philosophy. The wise man will understand that there is an 'essence' and an illustrative clothing given to the essence, throughout the Book. We must try to understand it as best we can, but not waste our energies in disputing about matters beyond our depth."

Like much else in the Holy Qur'an, the story of the tablets (of stone, or eternal, etc.) wants to put over the idea that the holy words are of extreme importance and are to be held in great respect, but not that they should be treated as if they were dead or straightjackets or metal spikes, or instruments of torture. Metaphorical language can exaggerate one aspect of the truth at the expense of another, in order to achieve a specific purpose in a specific situation. It has to be interpreted with common sense. The truth lies somewhere in between the two extremes.

Since we can interpret the Holy Qur'an sensitively, we are also capable of doing so, and should do so, with secular and less difficult literature and do justice to the intentions of their authors.

2.8 Literature and its Ambiguities

As true Muslims we recognise only one God, and that God is spirit. If we "idolise" any of his prophets, even the last, or even his Holy Book, we may be transgressing a divine boundary. That is a matter to be considered, and the publication of "The Satanic Verses" forces us to consider it seriously rather than rejecting it out of hand: It is one of the purposes of literature, as opposed to edicts, that it induces people to think about matters which are not yet ready for legislation or simple solutions, or for which simple solutions will never exist. That's why literary "assertions" are hidden in jokes, exaggerations, stories, fictions and ambiguities. Just as there are divine things which can never be adequately expressed in unambiguous human language, there are other things in life which can only be hinted at, somehow considered, and which are therefore formulated through the ambiguities of literary texts. In trying to puzzle them out, we are forced to think about, perhaps "unthinkable", matters which require thinking about, from time to time.

Rushdie's book forces us to come out into the open about this idolatry and provokes a discussion about the interpretation of

books, any book, including the interpretation of holy scriptures. He therefore kicks or drags us, screaming and shouting, closer to the truth, even though this may be, in fact, greater uncertainty. Perhaps a degree of uncertainty is all we can have, in spite of all revelations, in matters divine. One might therefore say, quite seriously, and without wanting to be blasphemous again, i.e. with due respect, that like the Holy Qur'an "The Satanic Verses" are a holy book, a theological book, which may in due course, perhaps after centuries (once it has been properly understood and the politically motivated rage has abated), turn out to have been an important work (perhaps a turning point) in the history and positive development of our religion.

2.9 The virtue of doubt

The real offence (if it was one) of Rushdie's book, even though this seems to have been hardly ever stated in public (in a discussion which was overshadowed by passion and communal politics) was that even mentioning the incident of the Satanic Verses sows a seed of doubt. The book reminded people of that incident, popularised it, could have made them think about it if they had read the book properly, and therefore sowed doubt. The question is whether we Muslims are strong enough in faith **to live with doubt**. I think we are, and we will become spiritually stronger, more fit for life in this world and in our time, if we **learn to cope with doubt**. Doubt does not mean rejection but it may mean openness.

The Hindus have a saying "Ahimsa (non-violence) is the greatest virtue". Even though we do not traditionally emphasise this virtue as much as they do, it might make good sense for us and for Western secularists if all of us did. Islam can support many radically different lifestyles (this is the message of the beautiful parable by Naguib Mahfouz: "The Journey of Ibn Fattouma" (57) and take many different forms in different countries and environments and ages, as it does in England.

Much pain and suffering could be avoided if we at least strove for this ideal. To such a code of virtue, even we unafraid young Muslims of today might, as a Hindu pandit recently did, add two other maxims: "The second highest virtue is to doubt, and the third highest virtue is the spreading of doubt." This sounds absurd, and in certain circumstances does not apply (e.g. nobody should undermine the faith of simple people), but in many situations it can be extremely important and beneficial. Let me explain.

The three virtues are linked. Idolising any virtue, even "God" or what we believe to be his Words, in their imperfect human form and their uncertain human interpretation (= meaning)(58) can lead to violence, cruelty, abuse and infinite suffering, as the history of the Christian church (e.g. inquisition), the persecution of the Jews in Nazi Germany (Hitler's henchmen were firm believers in his absurd ideology), the history of many

Islamic countries, even today, and last, but not least, the Salman Rushdie affair, have shown. It gives people who often do not deserve it a means to obtain, and hold on to, political power (as the Salman Rushdie affair has also shown).

Doubt is necessary in the quest for truth and for the preservation of mercy.

All religions are tools for the pursuit of truth, and all advocate mercy, most of all Islam who, in contrast with other religions, makes mercy the most prominent, most repeated "attribute" of Allah.

Bismillaahir	-	In the name of ALLAH
Rahmannir	-	the Compassionate
Rahiim	-	the Merciful

It is our duty to emulate the virtues of Allah, including his mercy and compassion. Paradoxically, an element of doubt is a helper in this pursuit.

Doubt tempers what we dare do in the name of, or under the pretext of, truth and God. Doubt therefore reduces violence. The dissemination of doubt therefore spreads peace. If the followers of the Nazis had had at least some doubt about the validity of their ideology, they would not have committed the atrocities they did and not so many Jews would have been ill-treated and not six million of them would have been murdered in the gas chambers.

These concisely formulated virtues should of course be understood in the sense in which they are intended and not be abused by literalist interpretation and not be turned against our religion or the religions of others.

3 Salmanic Wisdom in Islam

Salmanic judgements are not the prerogative of the bible (59) or the Caucasian Chalk Circle (Brecht). There have also been many of them (exemplifying wisdom and tolerance) in the 1400-year history of Islam. Regretfully they are not well enough known. They are not systematically promulgated and set up as examples. They are known

- neither to the Islamic extremists (who could learn to model their ideas of virtue on them) and their fundamentally peaceful but uneducated followers,
- nor to their Western critics (who are liable to condemn anything Islamic indiscriminately and would benefit if this tradition of wisdom were more easily accessible to them).

Are the English identical with their football hooligans and their imbeciles or with their greatest literary and artistic minds? Are Muslims identical with their rabble and their rabble-rousers or their great minds, sadly unknown in the west and even to uneducated Muslims themselves. But the uneducated of any community, be they Muslim or English, do not know the great minds of their own communities. of their own histories.

I think there is an urgent task for educated Muslims and for a progressive and history-conscious Islamic organisation to collect and publish examples of Islamic wisdom and tolerance, in popular format. I am thinking not so much of stories which are so idiosyncratic that only Muslims can be moved by them but of stories and histories of wisdom that can be understood and appreciated, that can benefit, today, **all of humanity**, even people who have no inclination to convert to Islam. Can Islamic **wisdom**, if well propagated, not become as peacefully popular in the West as Hindu wisdom is today?

This would be one step towards improving the image of Islam as a whole in the eyes of non-Muslims. It would reduce their contempt of, and attacks on, Islam. It would also (if books can have any influence at all) curb the excesses of politically motivated Islamic fanatics. It would reduce their emotional need for increasing their excesses in response to the contempt and neglect they experience from many non-Muslims. Someone reading this essay may perhaps feel prompted to take up this task.

Two examples of Islamic wisdom which would have served us well if it had been applied to Salman Rushdie has been made known to the West through Goethe, himself a poet, who entered into a poetic dialogue with Islamic culture in his collection of poems called "Westöstlicher Divan" (West Eastern Divan). The Islamic Solomonic judgements on which Goethe bases four poems in this collection should be made known to Muslims and non-Muslims alike, including those Christians and politicians in England who want to give equal rights in blasphemy affairs to Christians, Jews and

Muslims. The right approach to do this is not to extend the blasphemy laws, which at present protect only Christianity, to cover Islam and Judaism as well (or as badly) as Christianity, and thereby make our society ever more intolerant, but by abolishing them altogether. We and Allah do not need such petty-minded protection.

My source for what I am about to describe are the four poems by Goethe and the notes provided by the editor of Goethe's Works (60). I will confine myself to giving a prose translation of Goethe's poems and of some of the notes. This material deserves to be much better known to Muslims and non-Muslims outside Germany (to each group for its own reasons). Most of what we read here is definitely not Goethe's wisdom (Western wisdom) but Islamic wisdom, because, as the notes show, Goethe largely follows the original fatwa argument in all its brevity, only putting it into beautiful German verse, an example which, regrettably, I cannot emulate in English. Perhaps a reader will take up the challenge and produce verse translations into English and Urdu.

In his poems, Goethe refers to the Persian poet Hafez (61). He was a follower of Sufism (a gentle and inward-looking branch of Islam) and on many occasions in trouble with the authorities. He refined traditional poetic forms which had the convention of dealing by preference with love and wine, -- the praise of a wine, of course, being in conflict with the sober lifestyle of devout traditional Muslims. "His poetry is characterised by love of humanity, contempt for hypocrisy and mediocrity, and an ability to universalise everyday experience and relate it to the mystic's un-ending search for union with God." (62)

The first poem is called "Anklage" (Indictment).

In the setting of Goethe's poem, ordinary Muslims are confused by the verses of their celebrated national poet, whom they want to regard with pride as their own and of whom they have to be nevertheless suspicious because of his daring verses, which seem to transgress traditional boundaries and contradict accepted rules of behaviour. This reaction might apply to devout people of any religion when faced with the works of their famous but unconventional artists.

3.1 Poets in the Holy Qur'an

The Muslims in Goethe's poem, however, have even more reason to be wary and confused because poets and their bad ways (as Salman Rushdie vividly illustrates in "The Satanic Verses") go back even to the days of the Holy Prophet (PBUH), and their mischief is noted even in the Holy Qur'an itself, where a whole Surah (No 26) is devoted to them. (63) In the days of the Holy Prophet, they made a particular nuisance of themselves (often instigated and paid for by the Prophet's rich enemies) by writing scurrilous verses about him and his mission and undermining his work more

effectively than their rich but dim paymasters could have done. They were the journalists and spin doctors of the day. With their wit and skill they were dangerous enemies to have. The Holy Prophet therefore had reason to regard poets with suspicion. Salman Rushdie's novel alludes to this fact in various places. These poets were the comedians, cynics and blasphemers of the time. But they were not blaspheming against an established religion.

The Holy Prophet had to contend with poets in two ways:

1. He was ridiculed himself as being no better than a poet, an inventor of tales, or mad as a poet. (64)

2. Poets lampooned him and his message.

Various verses of the Holy Qur'an defend him in both respects

> Surah 37:36: "When it was said to them (the evil-doers), 'There is no god but Allah', they replied with scorn, 'Are we to renounce our gods for the sake of a mad poet?'"
>
> Surah 52:30: "... they say, 'He is a poet: we are waiting for some misfortune to befall him.'"
>
> Surah 36:69: "We (Allah) have taught Mohammed no poetry, nor does it become him to be a poet."

All this is evidence, if evidence were needed, that the Message was first preached in a country in which (oral) literature and literary play and interplay flourished and was socially very important. In this society a special effort had to be made to establish the distinction between "performance poetry" and what must have sounded like "revivalist preaching" (if both anachronisms may be forgiven). Salman Rushdie describes this literary bantering in his book.

The Message arose and flourished in a sophisticated literary culture, it showed that it was alive by being debated and tossed around with no holds barred.

Surely it did not arise in order to kill that culture!

Yet today there are followers who, in consequence of their love and excessive respect for the Message, have become needlessly rigid. If they expect the message to be simply and reverently accepted, they turn it into, and deliver it as, a dead message, a message not to be debated (even in the seemingly frivolous style that is sometimes the hallmark of literature), and our religion into a dead religion.

Excessive respect and **oversensitivity** makes these Believers, paradoxically, **insensitive** inasmuch as they are sensitive only to vague notions of holiness but not to the subtle shades of literary communication. Meaning has been replaced by emotion. Literature, in this context, is something that tries to communicate things which are (like all matters divine) too

complex, too subtle, to be communicated with the blunt words of a surveyor's report.

Having elucidated the role of the poet in the time of the Holy Prophet we can return to Goethe's fatwa poems, starting with the indictment of Hafez.

3.2 Goethe's Poems

The Holy Qur'an says:

> "Poets are followed by none except erring men. Behold how aimlessly they roam in every valley, preaching what they never practise. Not so the true believers who do good works and remember Allah and defend themselves when wronged." (Surah 26:224-227) (65)

Goethe's "Indictment" refers to this text.

The indictment mentions not only Hafez but also another poet, Mirza. Mirza is a name borne by various Persian poets and stands here simply for poets in general.

Goethe puts the indictment like this:

INDICTMENT

Do you know for whom
the devils lie in wait,

in the desert,
between rock and walls?

How they wait
for the right moment,

grab their victim,
carry him to hell?

It's the liars
and the evil-doers
they are waiting for.

Now, why is it
that the poet
likes the company
of such people?
(66)

Does the poet know
with whom he shares

his walks and ways,
he, who is always
acting from madness?

Without boundaries,
he is driven into solitude
by his obstinate loves.

The rhymes of his laments
are written into sand
and are blown
away by the winds
in an instant;
he does not
understand what he says,
and what he says
he will not keep.

Nevertheless, one allows
his song to be sung,
even though
it goes against
the Holy Qur'an.

Therefore now teach us,
you who know the Law,
you wise and pious
highly learned men, the firm duty
of devout Muslims.

Especially Hafiz
causes offence,
whereas Mizra
blasts the mind
into uncertain spaces.

Tell us what
we have to do
and from what
we have to refrain.

This indictment was brought (in terms of the poems) to the Sage **Ebusuud Efendi**, a historical person. He was a famous mufti in 16th century Constantinople and was actually asked for an opinion (fatwa) about Hafiz, by then an established classic and long dead. Ebusuud wrote (67) (and what follows is the actual text of his fatwa):

> "The poems of Hafiz contain many important and unchallengeable truths, but here and there are some small points which are indeed outside the boundaries of the law. The safest thing to do is to distinguish these two kinds of verse carefully from one another, not to swallow the poison of serpents as if it were treacle (theriac) (68), to indulge only in the pure pleasures of good actions and beware of those pleasures which lead to eternal pain (69). This was written by poor Ebusuud: may God forgive his sins."

How much happier the world would have been if the Ayatollah Khomeini (may Allah forgive his sins and peace be with him, for it is such as he who need God's mercy and our prayer!) had issued this sober and humble fatwa about Salman Rushdie!

The central point of Ebusuud's fatwa is that **books have to be read with care and with discrimination**.

Most of the uneducated Muslims (and the majority of all people is always uneducated) who were whipped up into high passions against Salman Rushdie's book by quotations and reports, distorted and out of context like those cited in Part 2 of this essay [The Satanic Curse: Idoliteralism], would, admittedly, not have been able to distinguish between what is good and what may be bad, between treacle and poison, in it. But they would also never have been exposed to the potential, or alleged, poison. They would have been unable to swallow the poison even if they had not recognised it. They were never in any danger. (And neither was Allah! Then who was in danger? Who had to be defended?)

Salman Rushdie carefully protected them from any poison in his book by writing in such a way that uneducated readers would never get past the first page. This page was his cattle grid. Unfortunately the political rabble-rousers flew in by helicopter. The morals of uneducated Muslims and their faith in the Holy Qur'an were therefore never put at risk.

Even those people who considered themselves educated, who went through the motions of reading the book (e.g. by counting and publishing all occurrences of the word "fucking" in it and checking whether every sentence had a subject and a predicate), came to the wrong conclusions. They carefully extracted the poison without the antidote which Salman Rushdie had provided to balance it (a bucket of water next to every bale of straw), spread the poison by mobilising the masses against the book, miserably failed in understanding it and it's profound message against covert idolatry in Islam (as the, admittedly extreme, example of Ahmed Deedat shows, whose booklet is a kind of "distilled poison"). Yet no harm came to them, as their continued faith in Islam and their continued enthusiasm for the anti-Rushdie campaign shows. Obviously Rushdie's "poison" was not virulent.

Goethe's first "Fetwa" poem ("Hafis' Dichterzüge...") is an exact versification of Ebusuud's original fatwa.

Goethe follows this with a Western response, given in the name of Western individualist poets.

DER DEUTSCHE DANKT
(The German Poet
Expresses his Thanks)

Holy Ebusuud,
how right you are!

You are the sort of saint
the poet wishes for;
for it is exactly
these little things
which are just outside
the boundary of the law
which are the inherited estate
on which the poet moves audaciously,
joking even while he suffers.

To him
serpent poison and treacle
must seem alike.

The former will not kill
and the latter not cure:
for true life
is the eternal
innocence of action
which manifests itself in such a way
that he harms no one but himself.

And therefore the old poet can hope,
that the Huris in paradise
will receive him well
as a transfigured youth.
(70)

Holy Ebusuud,
how right you are!

Goethe follows this with another fatwa, also based on a historical decision, and therefore subtle Islamic wisdom and tolerance. (71)

FETWA (FATWA)

The Mufti read
Misri's poems.

One after the other,
all together.

Thoughtfully he threw them into the flames,
the beautifully written book it was destroyed.
(72)

"Burnt be everybody", spoke the judge,
"who speaks and who believes as Misri -
Misri alone
be excepted
from the punishment of death.

For Allah gave his talent to the poet.

If he abuses it by sinful life,
then it is up to him
to make his peace with God."

Footnotes

1. For simplicity's sake, I will continue to call it "the Incident" without prejudice to the question whether it was historical or not.

2. W Montgomery Watt: "Muhammad at Mecca", Oxford, 1953, p 102ff

3. Surat an-Najm: Surah 53

4. Have ye considered ... the other: Surah 53:19

5. Encyclopaedia of Religions, p 139 (article about Muhammad)

6. Have ye seen Lat ...: Translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, 1946, published by Islamic Propagation Centre International, Durban, South Africa

7. We do not have to rely on extreme examples of "deviation" or "modernism" such as those in the writings of "radical reformists" (or rationalists) such as Bishops John Spong ("Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism", San Francisco, 1991), John A T Robinson ("Honest to God", London, 1963; "But that I can't believe", London 1967) and David Jenkins ("Guide to the Debate about God", Cambridge, 1966). Many more mainstream examples can be found where current Christian practice follows common sense rather than the bible.

8. obedience for itself: People interject in English, quite colloquially: "Believe you me!", "I swear it" to reassure their partners in conversation. Hindu scriptures almost routinely start or end with often exaggerated promises of the benefits that will accrue to the person who reads the scripture or recites it to others. The reader has to take these promises as a valid expression of reassurance but the precise wording as a literary convention which should not be taken literally. The intention is to induce people to read the book and thus to get the benefit of knowledge and spiritual improvement. This inducement is coached in a conventionalised language which even simple minds will understand and respond to. If I receive an advertising coupon which promises a million pounds to everybody posting it to the manufacturers of some product, I would be naïve if I did not suspect that there was a snag in the small print.

   The Holy Qur'an contains similar expressions. The majority of those listening to the original message must have been uneducated (the majority always is) and the formulation of the message therefore had to be kept simple. The Holy Prophet had to find a way to get through to the blockheads facing him. From time to time that required oversimplification or shouting. Therefore we find such

exhortations to believe also in the Holy Qur'an, but that does not solve the problem for a thinking or sceptical reader who is uncertain about the exhortation itself. There is no solution to the problem of credibility.

Surah 2:1 contains a telling example which also demonstrates the ambiguity of the original text and our dependence on believing one fallible human being (translator) or another when deciding what the text means.

Dawood (Penguin edition, p 326) translates: "This Book is not to be doubted. It is a guide to the righteous."

Abdullah Yusuf Ali, p 17, translates: "This is the Book; / In it is guidance sure, without doubt, / To those who fear God."

9. The traditional six Hindu schools of interpretation are:
   1. Samkhya
   2. Yoga
   3. Nyaya
   4. Vaisheshika
   5. Mimamsa
   6. Vedanta

   You can google them or read:
   Max Müller (1899): The six systems of Hindu Philosophy. Longmans Green, London, 521 pp

10. Max Müller (1901): "My Autobiography". Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, USA

11. Say, who is more worthy ...: Translation by Dawood, Penguin Books

12. Umar ibn-al-Khattab (Omar), 581-644 AD (reigned 634-644 AD)

13. What the Holy Prophet has instituted ...: Details of the institution can be found in Shahla Haeri: "Law of desire. Temporary marriage in Iran." London 1989

14. And it is allowed for you ... fixed reward: Translated by S V Mir Ahmed Ali, Publisher: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an Inc., P.O.Box 731115, Elmhurst, New York 11373-0115, USA., Second Edition, 1995 (Shia translation)

15. Islamic Propagation Centre, 481 Coventry Road, Small Heath, Birmingham B10-0JS, England. I checked in 2024, and the Centre still exists. This is their website: https://www.ipci-iv.co.uk/

16. You can hear and watch the Albert Hall lecture on YouTube (still accessible in 2024 when I last checked).

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ljh1jY4W74w

Rumour has it that Salman Rushdie, the great clown, applied for one of these seats and was refused entry on the grounds that his "abominable" book was not good enough for him to qualify as a man of letters, but I won't believe that for a minute. I have it on good authority that this was a ruse designed cunningly (like the rest of the campaign) for the sole purpose of luring Salman Rushdie into one of these halls by offering him free entry. The poster did not say whether his exit would be free.

A complete copy of the book can be downloaded from: https://www.rochdalewriters.org.uk/ahmed_deedat/1989_00_00_how_rushdie_fooled_the_west.pdf

17. in large quantities: "OPEN ORDER: We grant you an open licence the reproduce or translate into any language this booklet as well as every other publication of ours." (Inner Front Cover Page)

18. causes the offence ...: On deeper consideration, as I will show later, giving such properties of holiness or unholiness to a mere word or object, may be a form of idolatry, quite absurd if it were found to be practised in our religion at whose heart is the fight against idolatry, even in the very incident of the Satanic Verses.

19. like Jews and like Hindus ...: Patanjali, Yoga Sutras, on "shauca" (purity and cleanliness)

20. not in a church: David Jenkins, former Bishop of Durham became famous because he once used the words "bloody" and "damn" in a sermon. Source: "Bishop banned from pulpit for swearing", The Sunday Times, 2006-08-27 - https://web.archive.org/web/20110604110530/http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article620772.ece - Retrieved 2024-12-02

21. called such and such: Some offence would no doubt be caused even in liberal America if an organisation put up huge posters all over the country proclaiming "President Clinton is not a Y", where Y is an obscene word. This might be read by some people as saying the opposite, by linking his name with Y.

22. but say Undhurna ...: This substitution is similar to the current trend in English to replace the correct word "sex" (in contexts where the subject is not issues of grammar and grammatical gender) by the incorrect word "gender", which should be used only as a technical term of grammar, the reason for the substitution being that oversensitive people want to avoid the connotations of

sexual activity which the word "sex" has acquired.

23. Satan (like God?): Allah is omnipresent. Could he be hiding in the heart of a blasphemer?

24. least likely to be detected ...: See C S Lewis: The Screwtape Letters

25. follow his example ...: In the same way and for the same reason, extreme respect, it is considered offensive if not blasphemous to depict the Holy Prophet in a picture or a film (however tastefully and respectfully made), it is offensive to make him the subject of a work of fiction or of any light-hearted treatment, however gentle and kind the approach.

26. executed for blasphemy ...: Matthew 26:65-66, about Jesus: "He hath spoken blasphemy... He is guilty of death." Leviticus 24:16: "And he that blasphemeth the name of the Lord, he shall surely be put to death, and all the congregation shall certainly stone him: as well as the stranger, as he that is born in the land, when he blasphemeth the name of the Lord, shall be put to death."

27. poetic and literary expression ...: To clarify my line of thinking, which may be surprising to some people, here is an analogous example: The murder of six million Jews in Nazi Germany was a terrible crime for those who participated in it, but the even greater crime (with even more perpetrators) was the fact that so many Germans held their Jewish fellow-creatures in such contempt. Without that contempt (the root cause!), the murder and associated crimes could not have been committed. Nobody should commit crimes. But there is little virtue in not committing a crime because you are too weak, the state will punish you (which did not happen in Nazi Germany) or you are too weak or too scared. This is the position of many people elsewhere, say in England, concerning their racial minorities, who are only too ready to feel virtuous and cast the first stone. Of course, the murder of even one Jew is unforgivable, and for the victim that may be the worst aspect. But for the moral standing of the perpetrator, his feelings of contempt, his lack of respect (regarding another human as "subhuman") for the victim is the real sin. Without those feelings the "external sin" would not have been committed. That applies to the six million victims in Germany as well. By condemning contempt, I condemn murder.

    I do not wish to justify the "death sentence" on Salman Rushdie but to draw attention to the emotional soil on which it grew. If we want to avoid fanaticism and return to ancient Islamic wisdom we have to remedy the causes more than tinkering with the symptoms. By condemning

idoliteralism, I condemn death sentences on authors.

28. Rana Kabbani: A Letter to Christendom. Virago, London, 1989

29. a creature of flesh and blood ...: Paradoxically, the Wahhabis, though "scriptural literalists" themselves, would see this point while disagreeing with the others.

30. no less than the golden calf ...:
"Moses said to his people, "O my people, you have wronged yourselves by taking the calf, so repent to your Maker, and face yourselves. That is better for you with your Maker, so He would forgive you. He is the Forgiving, the Compassionate." (Surah 2:54). Translation: Yüksel, Edip (et al)(eds)(2007): "Quran: A Reformist Translation". Brainbow Press, London, 521 pp

31. Fay Weldon (as quoted by Rana Kabbani ...: Fay Weldon: "Sacred Cows", Chatto and Windus, London, 1989, pp. 6, 12, 29-30; as quoted by Rana Kabbani, "Letter to Christendom", Virago Books, London, 1989, p 3

32. Burnt Offerings: The footnotes attached to the poem are Klaus Bung's.

33. ad adiuvandum me festina ...: Make haste, o God, to deliver me: make haste to aid me, o Lord. (Psalm 70:1 [King James] = Psalm 69:1 Vulgata). To be prayed by Benedictine Monks at the beginning of services and at the beginning of any monastic enterprise.

34. Come, Mephasttophilis...: Marlowe: Dr Faustus, 641

35. On the bridge of Lyon people are lying all over the place.

36. Latin calvus, calvinus = bald; French chauve = bald. Calvin, Chauvin and Cauvin were Latin and French variants of the same name

37. bougre: name given to the Cathars, the southern French heretics

38. Leviticus 18:21: And you shall not let any of your children be sacrificed in the fire to Moloch.

39. Shakespeare: Romeo and Juliet, 3.1:102

40. Even Ahmed Deedat swears: p 16 of his booklet

41. it follows syllogistically: averroically?
(The question mark is intentional.)

42. Averroës: Muslim religious philosopher who lived in Spain from 1126 to 1198, much concerned with establishing valid rules for interpreting the scriptures.

43. Susan Sontag: "Against interpretation and other essays.". Deutsch, London, 1987

44. The misinterpretation of Rushdie's book results ...: Exactly what such errors are may be a topic for somebody's thesis.

45. Surely this applies: Admittedly the Holy Qur'an also says "As for those who break Allah's covenant after accepting it, who part with what He has bidden to be united and commit evil in the land, a curse shall be laid on them and they shall have an evil end." (Surah 13:35) This could be interpreted as contradicting Surah 13:40, which says implicitly that punishment is in Allah's hand.

    In the case of such contradictions (which occur in the scriptures of all religions) and in case of doubt, I would think it wise for human beings to take their cue rather from Allah the Merciful than from Allah the Just, and not be too eager to lay curses on evildoers or to speed them to their "evil end". Allah in Surah 13:35 does not make it the duty of any human being to utter such curses or to bring about his evil end. The curse of which the Holy Qur'an speaks does not have to be an imprecation like the one uttered by AA but simply exists in the fact that Allah has a determined an evil end for such a person. In that case it is Allah (and not a human being) who lays the curse and Allah who executes the sentence. It is safe for him to do so since he (unlike human beings) can determine with certainty whether a person (for example Salman Rushdie) is or is not an evildoer. Human beings, however pious and however high in rank, can never be sure (Errare humanum est), as the example of AA shows.

    Similarly, the words "They shall have an evil end" do not impose on any Muslim the duty to bring about this evil end, but are merely a prediction of what will happen to a person whom Allah (not a fallible human being) has judged to be an evildoer. In order to avoid injustice it is therefore advisable refrain from all cursing, however great the apparent provocation, and from harming alleged apostates.

46. in Allah all opposites coincide ...: Nicolaus Cusanus (Nicholas of Cusa; German medieval philosopher, 1401-1464): coincidentia oppositorum (the union of opposites)

47. John Spong: "Born of a woman: a bishop rethinks the birth of Jesus", San Francisco, 1992

48. beliefs he castigated: Jesus Son of God; Trinity etc.

49. Eternal things do not change: Pandurang Vaman Kane: "History of Dharmashastra (Ancient and mediaeval religious and civil law)". Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Poona, India, 1974. 8 volumes.

50. Spanish Muslim philosopher Averroës: 1126-1198

51. Murtis are statues representing deities.

    Hindus were wrongly accused by my Muslim teachers of polytheism, even though they also believe that there is only one god (whom they call Brahman but who might as well be called Allah), who resides in all murtis (statues of deities) and in all creation. Even when fencing with Hindus we sometimes bandy about words (e.g. the word "god" and "gods") rather than looking at meaning. Even for naming God, each prophet uses the language of the people he addresses, be it Arabic, Sanskrit, English or Latin, etc.

52. the original holy language ...: It has for them only a "summary" of a meaning and a vague notion of dutifulness and holiness.

53. original text permits: It is easy to be "orthodox" if all that is required is that one affirms the truth of words which one does not understand in detail.

    Goethe's Mephistopheles says sarcastically:

Denn eben wo Begriffe fehlen, Da stellt ein Wort zur rechten Zeit sich ein. Mit Worten läßt sich trefflich streiten, Mit Worten ein System bereiten, An Worte läßt sich trefflich glauben, Von einem Wort läßt sich kein Jota rauben. Goethe: Faust 1, Studierzimmer, Schüler, line 1995-2000	Just where concepts are missing, a word will conveniently take its place. It is easy to fence with words, construct a system of words, it is easy to believe in words, and you must not remove a dot from a word.

54. contents of their Holy Book: Roman Catholic lay-people before and even after the Reformation were discouraged from reading the bible for themselves. They depended, and were meant to depend, on the priesthood as intermediaries between them and God's revelation! But Islam does not encourage intermediaries.

55. a prophet of their own: Surah 2:151: "Thus We (Allah) have sent forth to you an apostle (prophet) of your own who will recite to you Our revelations and purify you of sin, who will instruct you in the Book and in wisdom and

teach you that of which you have no knowledge."

56. yields a rich harvest: John 12:24

57. Naguib Mahfouz: "The Journey of Ibn Fattouma". Doubleday Paperback, London, 1993

58. uncertain human interpretation ...: They never reach us, even as native speakers of Arabic, except fraught with uncertainty.

59. Salmanic judgements ...: 1 Kings 3:16-28

60. notes provided by the editor ...: Goethes Werke, Hamburger Ausgabe, Vol. 2, Christian Wegner Verlag, Hamburg, p 21-23 (poems) and p 563-565 (notes)

61. Also spelt Hafiz, 1325-1390 AD. His works are available in English translation.

62. His poetry is characterised: Encyclopaedia Britannica 1998

63. a whole Surah (No 26) is devoted to them: Significantly there is no chapter in the bible devoted to poets, and it seems that the word "poet" does not occur in the bible either, unless we take the Psalmist David as an example of a poet.

64. mad as a poet:
cf Shakespeare, Midsummer Night's Dream, 5.1:7-8:
"The lunatic, the lover and the poet
Are of imagination all compact."

65. (Surah 26:224-227): Translation by N J Dawood, Penguin Books, p 204)

66. of such people: Guilt by association. The enemies of Jesus said: "Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners." (Matthew 11:19)

67. Ebusuud wrote: Text taken from Goethe, Vol. 2, p 564

68. theriac: The word "treacle" is derived from "theriac", a sweet antidote to snake poison, and goes back to Greek "therion" (little wild beast) and "ther" ("th(f)erocious"[!] beast).

69. eternal pain: cf Bhagavad Gita 18:38: "That happiness which arises from the contact of the senses and their objects and which is like nectar at first but like poison at the end ..."

70. that the Huris: Or Houris: Beautiful maidens who will reward good people by being their companions in paradise.

71. Islamic wisdom and tolerance: For sources, see Goethe, Vol 2, p 564

72. the beautifully written book: Before the days of printing an invaluable hand-written illuminated copy.

^^^eof