BE CAREFUL WITH MUHAMMAD!

The Salman Rushdie Affair

Shabbir Akhtar

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To those on the other side—
in the hope that they may understand
our pain.

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Preface

An illiterate woman in Bradford went to see her teenage daughter's schoolteacher, who said to her: '*The Satanic Verses* is brilliant! In Britain we like to read great literature.' She remained silent and returned home. This book is an attempt to explain that inarticulate believer's anguish. If it achieves anything more, it will be a bonus.

I have written this book in difficult conditions. We were in the midst of the campaign against *The Satanic Verses*; and success was not in sight. But many people have, in widely different ways, helped me to survive:

Ishtiaq Ahmed, Naila Ahmed, Zamir Akhtar, Arfana Amin, Shahida Bano, Ib Bellew, David Caute, Kenneth Cragg, Courtney Gibson, Balbir Kaur, Fazlun Khalid, Rashid Mufti, Bhikhu Parekh, Andrew Robinson, Mohammed Saddique, Ziauddin Sardar, Ahmed Versi, and Riffat Yusuf, to mention but a few.

I also wish to thank Rehana Ahmed for cheerfully and accurately typing the manuscript with such dispatch; and, finally, someone very close to me who always reminds me that every human being has the right to fail.

SHABBIR AKHTAR
Bradford, August 1989

'Believers! Be resolute in the doing of justice, as witnesses to God, even though it be against your own souls, your parents or your relatives, and whether it concerns the rich or the poor. For in the eyes of God neither wealth nor poverty carry any weight. Do not follow your own desires and thereby pervert the truth. Yet if you decide to act in bias and prejudice, God is well aware of the things you do.'

Koran, *The Women*, v. 135

NOTE It is customary for Muslim writers to place the pious expression 'Peace be upon him' after every mention of the name Muhammad, especially in devotional contexts. The author hopes that it does not seem unduly irreverent to omit this expression in a primarily argumentative work.

1 Be Careful with Muhammad!

1

'Say what you like about God—but be careful with Muhammad!' is an old slogan of Western caution about Islam, but one which we might well take seriously in the wake of the controversy surrounding the publication of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. The missionaries and other Christians who preached the Gospel in Islamic lands often found Muslims to be obstinate in their religious convictions and protective about their Prophet. While Muslims tended to accept some forms of satire or parody of the divine ways, they rarely tolerated insults to Muhammad and his family. Belief in God was common to Jews, Christians and Muslims. But endorsement of Muhammad's prophethood was the distinguishing feature of the Muslim outlook. It was the responsibility of Muslims, therefore, to guard the honour of *their* Prophet, the Arabian messenger who had brought them guidance from God.

Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* is seen by Muslims as a calculated attempt to vilify and slander the Prophet of Islam. Not only has Rushdie said what he pleased about God, he has also taken liberties with Muhammad. The reaction of the Muslim communities world-wide has been loud and clear. The only recent event to have triggered off Muslim emotion on a scale even remotely comparable to the Rushdie affair was the attempt to destroy the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem two decades ago. It will not be our task here to recall all the many dimensions of the Rushdie saga that have crowded the world's headlines for many months. But it will be our task to see why so many Muslims have been willing to spill much more than merely ink over *The Satanic Verses*.

Muhammad ibn Abdullah is, on every score of influence and achievement, a decisive figure in the history of theistic

religion. His contribution to the human quest for the holy cannot be reasonably denied. Even so, someone might wonder, why the caution? Why should one be careful with Muhammad? Is he any different from any other historical figure? After all, Moses and Jesus also have vast ideological legacies but the same demand for caution, especially these days, seems unnecessary.

Moses, Jesus and Muhammad are all seminal figures in the history of Western theism. But Muslims jealously guard the reputation of their Prophet in a manner that looks odd even to Jews and Christians, let alone to secularists and rejectors. In the Jewish case, disrespect towards Moses and other Hebrew prophets is tolerated. In fact, blasphemy is restricted to cursing the Lord; insulting Moses is, strictly speaking, not blasphemous: 'Say what you like about Moses—but be careful with God.' As for Jesus, wanton attacks on his personality and the associated Christian convictions have been commonplace in recent decades in secular Western societies. In general, Christians have tolerated these affronts; the character assassination of Jesus has been carried out with impunity.

Muhammad is unique in the respect and honour afforded him by his followers. Though not regarded as divine, Muhammad is held in the highest possible esteem. No pictorial representations are allowed; mention of his name warrants, among the pious, the invocation of divine blessing on him, his family and companions. His wives are seen as the mothers of the faithful. Every detail of his biography has been preserved and countless millions seek to imitate him daily in every aspect of their lives.

The reason for the caution, then, is what may be called 'the posthumous authority of Muhammad'. The influence of the Arabian Prophet on the lives of millions, through the patterns of his biography daily imitated, is without parallel in the whole of history, religious or secular. The imitation of Muhammad is, unlike the imitation of Christ, an accepted obligation, a routine occurrence. It is the ideal not only for the saints—but for all Muslims, from the beggars in the slums of India to the spectacularly wealthy sheikhs of Saudi Arabia, from the illiterate peasants of Pakistan to the erudite scholars

of al-Azhar, from the village women of the Third World to the sophisticates of Western female society.

Muhammad is dead. But he is dead only in the least significant sense. For he is ideologically alive—and well. The Rushdie affair has demonstrated the extent of Muslim enthusiasm about their messenger and, in doing so, the quality of their allegiance to the ideals he preached. The fact is that the Prophet of Islam is resurrected daily in what must be the greatest triumph over the limitations of physical extinction. It is therefore unsurprising that any attempt to prostitute his reputation should have met with such resolute and uncompromising opposition.

2

In chapter 33 (verse 21), the Koran describes the life of Muhammad as 'a beautiful exemplar' (*uswatan hasanah*). Elsewhere in the sacred volume, the Prophet is also extolled as the model of righteousness, the perfect individual. His actions and ambitions are held to be worthy of our close scrutiny and imitation. Naturally, for the Muslim conscience the imitation of the Prophet becomes a morally excellent action. Conversely, any attack on this holy pattern is already an attack on a Muslim's own professed ideals.

It is in this context that we need to give a brief summary of the contents of *The Satanic Verses* and offer concisely a Muslim rejoinder. The brevity of these introductory remarks is not intended to imply any undue dogmatism or foreclosing of issues. All of the worries set out here will be carried forward into several subsequent chapters; this account should be read as foreshadowing the fuller ones that follow.

The plot of *The Satanic Verses*, in so far as it is intelligible, is centred around the lives of two ageing Indian actors, Gibreel Farishta (Gabriel the Angel) and Saladin Chamcha (Saladin 'the Yes man'). Miraculously, they survive the fall when a plane is blown up in a terrorist attack. Upon descent, they turn into fantastic embodiments of good and evil, with Chamcha, an Anglophile, representing evil. True to their names, Chamcha grows horns and begins to resemble the

Devil while his angelic companion acquires a halo. Though Chamcha is humiliated as a beast and betrayed by his companions, he is eventually redeemed by re-adopting his Eastern identity. Gibreel, by contrast, loses his mind, fails as a human being, and eventually commits suicide.

The story of their lives is inextricably linked to and redefined in terms of a background narrative about the Prophet Mahound who lives in the hedonistic metropolis of Jahilia (literally, ignorance)—the pre-Islamic name for Mecca. Now Mahound was, as Rushdie explains in the book, a derogatory name for the Prophet Muhammad, used in medieval Christendom. More precisely, Mahound was, in Christian mythology, an evil personality who joined forces with the Devil and King Herod. Mahound believes that he is the recipient of divine revelations which authorise him to preach and propagate a new monotheistic religion. According to Rushdie, Mahound, a 'businessman-turned-prophet' is, in an attempt to attract more followers, ready to entertain the pagan proposal that three Meccan goddesses share divine status with the supreme being, Allah. At first, Mahound believes that the proposal is divinely inspired; afterwards he realises that the Devil interfered in his reception of the divine message. Though Mahound decides to eradicate from his holy book these 'satanic verses'—from which Rushdie's novel takes its title—Mahound's book is in general a value-blind collection in which good is routinely confused with evil, divine with diabolic.

The two chapters 'Mahound' and 'Return to Jahilia', containing Gibreel's coherent dreams, are in effect Rushdie's attempt to rewrite chronologically the history of early Islam. Taken together, along with some subsidiary material in other chapters, these sections of the book proffer an alternative biography of Muhammad, his wives and companions.

Someone might immediately query the assumption that dream sequences in a novel can reasonably be interpreted to be an alternative historical account. But, as the Hindu writer Bhikhu Parekh has so ably shown (*New Statesman & Society*, 23 March 1989), the events and characters in *The Satanic Verses* bear so striking a resemblance to actual events and characters in Islamic history that one has grounds to doubt

its status as merely fictional. Muhammad was called Mahound by Western polemicists; the episode of the satanic verses is, according to many learned authorities in Islam, an authentic one in the history of the revelation of the Arabic Koran; Rushdie's Mahound has wives and companions who bear names identical to the names of Muhammad's wives and companions. Rushdie does not explore, in a fictional context, the religious mind or religious attitudes in general. He explores the Muslim mind—the 'Muhammadan' mind. The characters in *The Satanic Verses* are real historical personalities of the Islamic tradition—redefined, re-assessed, their motives and actions radically if imaginatively reinterpreted. That is why it is fair to note, as Gerald Priestland does (*Sunday Times*, 6 November 1988), that Rushdie's book is indeed 'a parody of the prophet Muhammad', and, therefore, one should add, of Islam and the derivative Islamic tradition.

The details of the parody must await the next chapter. Only a few comments are in order here. The title itself does not reflect the dominant theme or content; the name Mahound is chosen without adequate literary reason. The character assassination of the Arabian Prophet is here carried out with a precision and ferocity that would shock any decent human being, let alone a Muslim. There are serious allegations: Muhammad is an unscrupulous politician—'a smart bastard' in Rushdie's phrase—whose enemies, particularly ideological ones, are the victims of a ruthless anger discrepant with his official professions of mercy; the book he claims to bring from God is really just a confused catalogue of trivial rules about sexual activity and excretion. Muhammad, according to *The Satanic Verses*, was a debauched sensualist with 'God's permission to fuck as many women as he pleased'; his household is portrayed in pornographic scenes in a brothel incongruously called 'The Veil'—the symbol of female modesty and chastity in the Islamic ethical outlook.

A man who brought a book that directly inspired a major world civilisation is here portrayed as an insincere impostor with purely political ambitions. The revered Prophet of an established and ancient faith re-emerges as a man motivated

by purely and irredeemably evil impulses. Muslim anger and resentment are easy to understand.

Had the voice of mockery in *The Satanic Verses* been even slightly more subdued, there would have been grounds for restraint and forbearance. But an authentic Muslim is bound to feel intolerably outraged by the book's claims, for Rushdie writes with all the knowledge of an insider. This is not to deny his right to explore, in fiction, the great parameters of life, sexuality, mortality and the existence (or non-existence) of deity. But Muslims must and do take issue with his choice of idiom and the temper it serves. His treatment is uniformly supercilious and dismissive; his reservations are shallow, playful, predictable, unoriginal. One looks in vain in his unprincipled prose for the reverent yet iconoclastic doubt which might set the agenda for the Islamic Enlightenment. There is nothing in *The Satanic Verses* which helps to bring Islam into a fruitful confrontation with modernity, nothing that brings it into thoughtful contact with contemporary secularity and ideological pluralism. Rushdie's scepticism fails to teach the ignorant, disturb the orthodox, agitate and educate the indifferent. Sceptics there have been and always will be. What matters is the quality and integrity of their reservations.

Let me introduce an autobiographical note here. Ever since the publication of *The Satanic Verses* in September 1988, my name has been associated with the campaign for its withdrawal. Though there are pressures of professional diplomacy in public contexts, I wish to make my position perfectly clear. I believe that *The Satanic Verses* is a calculated attempt to vilify and slander Muhammad. It is my conviction that while freedoms of belief, expression, conscience, and dissent are rightly valued in a liberal democratic society, it is immoral to defend, in the name of these freedoms, wanton attacks on established religious (and indeed humanist) traditions. There is all the difference in the world between sound historical criticism that is legitimate and ought to be taken seriously, on the one hand, and scurrilous imaginative writing which should be resolutely rejected and withdrawn from public circulation.

What matters here is not simply that Rushdie has falsified

established historical records or even that he has written a satire about things sacred. There are wider issues too which hinge on the fact that we live in a society that is often described as multi-racial (or rather, multi-cultural, for there is only one race, the human race). It is unwise for us, in such a context, casually to allow our idolatry of art to obscure issues of great social and political concern. One would think that, in a plural democracy, we should all generate respect rather than hatred for opposed yet conscientiously held convictions. To be sure, there will be conflicts; and writers have the right to identify and condemn evil and injustice wherever they find them without being unduly shackled by fear of giving offence. But these frictions and differences are containable in a mature democracy so long as we do not tolerate, let alone encourage, a form of ridicule that breeds resentment to the point of frustration and hence personal and social dislocation. It can never be right to defend, in the name of liberalism, works that demean and humiliate human nature and tradition in any of their established forms. Militant evil has enough sponsors already without liberal society lending another helping hand.

3

The question of Rushdie is inseparable from the question of Muhammad and his faith. The Prophet has been the target of Western animus periodically for one-and-a-half millennia. The current debate has, at this late hour, virtually nothing to do with Rushdie or his book, let alone with freedom of speech. For these latter debates are containable and indeed resolvable given the modesty of the Muslim demand and the capacity of Western governments to fulfil it. The Rushdie affair retains its momentum largely because of the incidence of deep psychic tensions within a Western conscience confronting an authentically Islamic temper. Part of the concern here is fuelled by the contemporary fear, in itself absurdly unrealistic, that Muslim immigrant populations want to build a theocracy in the heart of a European country. But, more plausibly, for complex historical reasons, Islam has always

been a threatening presence on and around Western frontiers—and not merely on account of its geographical proximity. Indeed the threat has been to the whole of 'the West' in the ideological (rather than geographical) sense of the civilisation created, through world-wide colonial exploitation, by the peoples of Europe. It is not surprising that the faith of the Arabian Prophet is increasingly a major variable in the ideological calculations of Christian missionaries and Western apologists.

The parody of Muhammad and the Muslim tradition in *The Satanic Verses* has clear echoes of the worst brand of orientalist sentiment for which the term 'prejudice' is decidedly lenient. Even if we leave aside the evil and unjust polemic of a Dante in the Middle Ages, there is plenty of animus in works published in the heyday of Western Christian imperialism. Washington Irving's *Mahomet and His Successors* has, on its title page, an imaginary painting of the Prophet with a sword in one hand and a Koran in the other. His nineteenth-century contemporary Sir William Muir is more explicit: 'The sword of Mahomet, and the Coran are the most fatal enemies of civilization, liberty and truth which the world has yet known.'

Little has changed over the centuries. Though some recent academic scholarship has moved in the direction of objectivity and imaginative sympathy, there has been no substantial shift in opinion. As for the popular mind, the old prejudices certainly prevail. Barbaric, fanatical, out-dated, exotic, oppressive, sensual—all are contemporary Western descriptions of Islam. Predictably the monotheism of Muhammad emerges as the natural habitat of all the base passions—extravagant sensuality, bloodthirstiness and fanaticism. Islam is the lower unbridled nature of man, motivated by impulses which Christianity and civilisation together tame and control. Even the sacred personalities of the Islamic tradition, including Muhammad, are seen as fanatical and irredeemably evil, their humanity overwhelmed by their lust for power.

There is a great deal of popular fiction and journalism to perpetuate these and related assessments. Novels such as Leon Uris's *Haj*, social critiques such as John Laffin's *The Dagger of Islam*, travelogues such as V. S. Naipaul's *Among*

the Believers, films such as *Harem* and *Strike Force*—all convey the same picture of an intolerant and cruel faith whose votaries cling to bygone certainties. Nor are these portraits of Islam in serious conflict with Western academic scholarship. On the contrary, there is a whole host of disciplines, engaging countless 'experts', all united in their biased opinion of Islam. This negative image of Muslims and their faith is perpetuated with a consistency and vigour that makes at least one conspiracy theory appear close to the mark.

There are, of course, many grounds for the sustained Western animus against Islam. For one thing Islam was originally and has remained, for the Western Christian conscience, a religious puzzle. Why Muhammad and the Koran after Christ had walked among men as God incarnate and proffered ultimate salvation? Muslims, with much reason, regard Islam as the culmination of the Hebrew style of religiosity with Christianity as essentially an aberration. At any rate, the very existence of Islam in the world implies that the Judaeo-Christian faith complex does not exhaust the Western monotheistic tradition.

The problem of Islam has always been much more than merely 'religious'—if only because Muslims have always seen Islam as a unified enterprise of faith and power. Christians could hardly ignore the political potential of a religious ideology that has to its credit the fastest permanent conquest of recorded military history. To the medieval mind, nothing could explain the phenomenal success of the new faith other than as the work of the Devil. In later centuries the ambitions of Islamic imperialism continued to exercise Western apologists, who were themselves no strangers to that impulse.

Western apologists have always wanted to believe that Islam is an inferior and unoriginal faith and have always had difficulty in believing it. That Muhammad was an insincere impostor—'a smart bastard' as Rushdie would say—has always been hard to reconcile with his manifest achievements as a religious reformer. Islamic civilisation, based on a religiously sanctioned respect for literacy and scholarship, has since its inception remained a serious intellectual rival to the Christian outlook. Indeed Islam itself has been a great

temptation to Christian believers; the rate of conversion from Christianity to Islam is the highest of any inter-faith movements, often attracting highly distinguished individuals.

4

Under the impact of increased tensions in the Muslim world in the last two decades there has been an attempt, quite deliberate and perhaps even co-ordinated, to construct an influential stereotype of contemporary 'fundamentalist' Islam. It is a stereotype that feeds on indelible images of apparently motiveless malice and terror. Hardly a day passes without some report of political violence in Iran, Lebanon, and Israel's Occupied Territories. And it is almost always fundamentalist Islam, according to the newscasters, that is agitating the Muslim masses.

Contemporary Western attitudes towards militant Islam are well reflected in the titles of recent books, *The Dagger of Islam*, *Sacred Rage*, *The Holy Killers of Islam*, and television documentaries, 'The Sword of Islam', 'The Fire of Islam', to mention but a few. It is rare that one comes across a widely available work whose author resists the temptation to sensationalism and opts for modest titles or sub-titles. Everywhere violent language like 'terror', 'rage', 'dagger', spices the title and triggers off reactions, variously, of withdrawal, anger, fear and contempt by readers located firmly within the Western constituency, in virtue of geography as well as of ideology and prejudice. It is revealing that many libraries innocently stock books on fundamentalist Islam under 'War and Terrorism'.

Where partisan political passion, whether for Islam or against it, is so firmly linked to scholarship, objectivity is hard to come by. Yet objectivity is something we desperately need. In their discussions of Islamic fundamentalism, both Muslims and their opponents need to re-assess emotive terminology and the negative images it conveys. For the choice of vocabulary is politically consequential. Part of the task here is to rescue terms such as 'militant Islam' and 'religious fundamentalism' from the disrepute into which they have fallen. It is

all too easy and tempting to misuse these words. To call a movement 'fundamentalist' is, with many writers, already to discredit it. It is high time that we questioned the assumption prevalent in both academic and popular contexts, that fundamentalist options in religion necessarily lack intellectual credentials.

The insistence on a proper terminology is part of the larger concern to question stereotypical assessments. The dominant view of Islam among unsympathetic Christian and Marxist thinkers is that Islam is essentially a false religion with dangerous political potential. It is not surprising that their accounts employ a loaded terminology which betrays not only misunderstandings but often deliberate misrepresentations of the themes under discussion.

Take, for example, the old myth of Islam as an anti-intellectualist creed. Rushdie revives the view that the Koran radically vetoes scholarship, for it already contains all of it. 'Burn the books and trust the Book!' Rushdie's Imam, who has set his face against progress and knowledge, becomes the perfect Muslim. Yet the view is clearly laughable. For the scripture of Islam can claim the unique privilege of having directly inspired a major world civilisation based on a religiously sanctioned respect for literacy and learning. The early Muslims developed a great rational philosophical tradition which was itself part of the inspiration for both the Renaissance and the European Enlightenment. That Rushdie should choose to be a *literary* terrorist is itself a fitting tribute to the intelligent earnestness of Islam as a faith of the pen.

Islam is an influential and suggestive view of the world and of our place in it. Whether coherent or not, whether true or false, it has guided, and continues to guide, the lives of millions in a universal political constituency. Like any major ideology, it is a powerful vision with ambiguous potentialities—producing both moral greatness and enlightenment as well as appalling obscurantism and restriction of human sympathies. On every score, it deserves to be understood and properly assessed.

5

Muhammad is easily the most maligned religious personality in the whole of history. But he is also, I would argue, the most influential. Indeed the Rushdie affair is a conclusive confirmation of the extent of his posthumous authority for Muslims.

'Be careful with Muhammad', runs the cautionary maxim. It is as well to heed it. In 1924 a Hindu religionist in Lahore ignored the advice and published his iconoclastic *Rangila Rasul* ('The Merry Messenger' or 'The Playboy Prophet'). He insisted that Muhammad was a libertine whose religion was fit only for villains and impostors. The author was murdered by a Muslim; and the Muslim was hanged by the British authorities in India. One certainly had to be careful with Muhammad.

The life of the Arabian Prophet is of great interest to many thinkers and historians, whether Muslim, Jewish, Hindu or secular. It is also valid territory for imaginative reconstruction; after all even historical events are the subject of speculation and controversial interpretation. But neither historical nor fictional exploration of his biography can, with impunity, lapse into abuse and slander. Rushdie relishes scandalous suggestion and pejorative language. His account is uniformly self-indulgent, calculated to shock and humiliate Muslim sensibilities. It is unwise to ignore the role of provocation and polemic in exciting hatred and anger to the point of physical confrontation. In *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie is handling the ultimate love and passion of millions. If one handles precious things, one does well to handle them with care.

2 Art or Literary Terrorism?

1

'The way in which art changes society', said Salman Rushdie in an interview in the autumn of 1988, 'is never in a broad sweep . . . —you write a book and governments fall—that never happens.' Doesn't it?

There are works of the pen—admittedly not novels—which topple dynasties. The Bible, the Koran, and *Das Kapital* are all books which have, in their different ways, undermined entire power structures that have resisted their revolutionary proposals. And in Rushdie's novel Mahound wrote a book and many governments—in fact two whole empires—fell. The pen can be mightier than the sword not least when its ink is used to praise it.

Let us turn now directly to Rushdie's novel. *The Satanic Verses* is, on every score of influence and publicity, a work which assures Rushdie a place in literary history and, according to Michael Foot, an honourable place in general history. In this chapter I shall review the book, examine its salient themes, and set down, rather starkly, the central objections that a Muslim conscience must necessarily raise.

I should say to begin with that Muslim critics of the work have been accused of taking the allegedly offending material out of context and throwing it about as, in Bhikhu Parekh's apt phrase, 'polemical hand grenades'. (*New Statesman and Society*, 23 March 1989). That many Muslim leaders have not read the whole book is true enough. But those who classify themselves as critics certainly have. To discuss some selected pieces out of a lengthy work is not in itself tantamount to ignoring the total context. A fair critic needs to be aware of the overall context and make clear its connection or significantly its lack of connection with the selected passages. That will be my procedure in the coming pages.