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An Assassination Attempt Revives an Old Discussion

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The assassination attempt on novelist Salman Rushdie as he lectured at the Chautauqua Institution on Friday, August 12, 2022 in Chautauqua, New York, has resonated worldwide, as one might have anticipated. Some portray the ensuing furore as a manifestation of the dissonance between two poles: the “West” and the “Islamic world”. In so doing, they ignore not only the tremendous diversity of these two realms and the polarizations and conflicts within them, but also the overlap between the two and the broad and complex network of cultural, economic and political relations that join them.

As expected, the assassination attempt provided rich fodder for television interviews, press commentaries and social media threads. Condemnations and denunciations were issued, and some public figures hinted at a sense of schadenfreude toward the writer. As was also expected, commentators and journalists viewed it as additional evidence in support of what has now become axiomatic for them, namely, that fanaticism and violence are unchanging features of Muslim peoples and Islamic civilization. Indeed, many a piece has been written expounding on these polaristic, divisive fantasies, attempting to delineate the borders between Western and Islamic civilizations and define an immutable essence for each. Their notions are inevitably informed by the author’s mood, whim and worldly interests and extrapolated from cherry-picked details and individual cases, at best.

Social media witnessed an endless stream of ill-considered statements and sweeping generalisations by people who view every misfortune as an opportunity to spout prejudices, baseless opinions, and neurotic-sounding absolutes, and to vent frustrations, bitterness, and long-buried resentments. With its exhibitionist attention-seeking chaos, the hubbub on social media appears to be an ongoing obstruction to any meaningful pluralism or rational dialogue among people with differing views.

This is neither the place to discuss these topics or to consider the meaning of the sacred and the difference between the sacred, the worshipped, and the divine (a topic on which I have elaborated elsewhere).¹ Nor will I be examining the content or literary style of *The Satanic Verses*. Rather, what prompted me to write this piece was the desire to clear up a confusion surrounding a fundamental issue related to freedom of expression, the right to disagree, and ways of dealing with disagreement.

The Fatwa and the State

In February 1989, Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa calling for the killing of writer Salman Rushdie. The fatwa reads as follows:

I hereby announce to zealous Muslims around the world that the author of the book The Satanic Verses, which was written, printed and distributed with the motive of waging war on Islam, the Prophet and the Qur’an, as well as the publishers who are familiar with the contents of the book, have been sentenced to death. I call upon zealous Muslims to take prompt action to execute these people wherever they find them, so that henceforth, no one will dare to offend against the sanctities of Muslims. Moreover, anyone who is killed in the

¹ See my book, *al-Dīn wa-l-`almanīya fī siyāq tarākhīh* [Religion and secularism in a historical context], Part I, Volume 1, *al-Dīn wa-l-tadayyun* [Religion and religiosity] (Doha/Beirut: Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, 2013).



course of taking this action shall be considered a martyr, God willing. If someone is able to locate the author of the book but lacks the ability to execute him, he shall inform others of his whereabouts so that he can be punished for his deeds. May the peace, mercy and blessings of God Be upon you.²

The text of the fatwa assumes that its author knows not only what the novel says, but what the novel's author's intentions and aims were, although the latter had not stated them. Furthermore, it authorises anyone to kill the book's author, publisher and distributor, because they have been sentenced to death, while promising paradise to the executioner because he will be considered a martyr before God. The passive voice is used to speak of the acts of execution and martyrdom as if the commands had not been uttered by the author of the fatwa, but rather, by a divine power speaking through him. It also denies the novelist, in advance, any opportunity to be forgiven or pardoned, should he repent, apologise and retract the book. It is hard to imagine such a degree of absolutism and determination to block all exits condensed to a mere four lines of text!

In fact, on 12 July 1991, an unknown assailant murdered Hitoshi Igarashi, Professor of Comparative Islamic Civilization at the University of Tsukuba, who had translated *The Satanic Verses* into Japanese, as well as works by Avicenna. He had also authored two books, entitled *The Islamic Renaissance* and *Medicine and Wisdom in the East*. The murder of this weighty Japanese scholar received little attention at the time, although there have been a few mentions of his assassination since the conversation about the fatwa was revived following the recent attempt on Rushdie's life. The current Iranian Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, confirmed the ongoing validity of this fatwa in 2017, although former President Muhammad Khatami (in office 1997-2005) had declared it expired. No Iranian official has called for its implementation since that time.

The fatwa was issued during what has been termed the Islamist tide that came on the heels of the Iranian revolution of 1979. This coincided with the rise of the right in the West (Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher), the dissolution of the socialist camp, and the emergence of so-called identity politics in Eastern and Western Europe. Some associate the promulgation of this fatwa with the emergence of the contemporary form of Islamophobia in Europe, as the controversy over the hijab in France erupted that same year.³ The result was a recurrent crisis. If an author wrote a word critical of the Noble Prophet, if a cartoonist drew a cartoon deemed to insult him, or if some idiot announced his intention to burn the Qur'an to provoke reactions and draw media attention, these acts would drive angry crowds into the streets to protest, burn pictures and flags and threaten to kill the perpetrators. Sometimes the threats were actualised, as with the attack on the headquarters of the satirical *Charlie Hebdo* magazine in Paris on 7 January 2015, and the assassination of a French

² "Even if Salman Rushdie repents, every Muslim must send him to the lowest depths of hell." Imam Khomeini: Ruhollah Al-Mousavi Khomeini, February 13, 2022. Seen on September 4, 2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3D0Aogy>.

³ There were numerous reports of a disapproving Western reaction which demanded that Muslims residing in the West take a clear position. This in turn provoked an identity-based response that rose to the level of extremism in some cases, the result being a vicious cycle of Islamophobia and extremism. This phenomenon is illustrated in a particular story published by the BBC website. See: Mubin Azhar, "Writer Salman Rushdie is the one who drove my generation to extremism," BBC Arabic, 14/2/2019. Seen on 9/4/2022, at: <https://bbc.in/3Rxd9ij>.



school teacher on 16 October 2020.⁴ In the meanwhile Western media and film industry's went on in the stereotyping of Arabs and Muslims as terrorist extremists, unidimensional traditionalists and unscrupulous financiers or, if depicted as good and likeable, that is because they collaborate with the Western protagonist (much like Muslims who are depicted as "moderate" in real life). Such films have been broadcast on Arab television networks so frequently that they are seen as normal and no longer elicit popular outrage.

A friend of mine who was a member of an Islamist current and who was living in London when the fatwa was issued told me that the fatwa had sparked his curiosity. Since he did not want to buy the book, of course, he went to the library to borrow a copy, only to find dozens of people already waiting for it. He was told he would have to wait about a month before it was available. He pointed out that neither the conservative British newspapers that sympathised with Muslims' religious sentiments nor the liberal ones that sided with Rushdie against the fatwa had cited the passages in the novel that were deemed offensive. Rather, they only appeared in certain Islamist periodicals which had quoted them in full as evidence of Rushdie's crime to mobilize the faithful against him. Thus, they were the first to circulate the insults. It should also be borne in mind that the novel was addressed to readers of literature in English, many of whom would not understand the book's metaphors and similes, and thus would not recognize Islamic religious symbols unless they were explained to them.

Extensive analyses have been conducted on the purpose and timing of Khomeini's fatwa⁵ and to prove that it was politically motivated. It was issued after Iran's cease-fire with Iraq at a time when Imam Khomeini's morale was low. His popularity suffered as a result of the war and he had been obliged to accept a ceasefire after nearly a decade of gruelling hostilities, an experience he likened to drinking poison.⁶ Prior to this, Pakistan and India had witnessed demonstrations against the novel. Since the last decades of British colonialism, the two countries have had a history of demonstrations by both Muslims and Hindus in response to alleged attacks on each others' holy symbols and sites. However, sectarian motives were at work. Religious sanctities were being used as a tool to spur, mobilise and marshal the energies of the masses.⁷ In a pattern that continues to this day, people and

4 An eighteen-year-old Russian-born extremist of Chechen origin behead a 47-year-old French school teacher, Samuel Baty, who taught history and geography, for showing his middle school students caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad. The attack took place on the street in front of the school where he worked in the northwestern Paris suburb of Conflans-Sainte-Honorine.

5 See, for example: Robin Wright, "Ayatollah Khomeini Never Read Salman Rushdie's Book," *The New Yorker*, 14/8/2022, accessed on 4/9/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3AQFUQa>.

6 Khomeini's Speech on the Anniversary of the Great Mosque of Mecca Massacre, and the Acceptance of Resolution 598" Imam Khomeini Newspaper, Volume 21, 20/7/1988 (29 Tir 1347 AH - Sh/5 Dhu al-Hijjah 1208 AH - s), pp. 73-92, seen on 9/4/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3Rzuk2D>. The text of the speech reads: "I have accepted the resolution to enter into a ceasefire, as I consider this, in the current situation, to be in the interest of the revolution and the regime. God knows that if we were not all prepared to sacrifice ourselves, our pride, and our credibility for the sake of Islam and Muslims, I would never have accepted this, and death and martyrdom would have been sweeter to me by far. But what can be done, as we must all submit to the will of the Most High? The Iranian people were, and will always be, brave and heroic. O God! Let this written statement, this record of the testimony remain open to those who long [for You], and do not deprive us of the blessing of joining them. O God! Our country and people are still at the beginning of the path of struggle, and they need the torch of guidance. So protect and guard this shining lamp. Blessings to you, people. Blessings to you, women and men. Blessings to the disabled, the prisoners, the missing, and the ennobled families of the martyrs. But woe to me, who have remained to this moment, and who have drunk the cup of poison by accepting this resolution. I feel ashamed before the greatness and sacrifices of these valiant people."

7 "In 1873, 1885 and 1894, riots took place in Malabar, which are known in history as the Moplah outbreaks. These riots were connected with the conversion of Hindus to Islam [...]. During the same period, riots took place in Azamgarh, Bihar and Bombay on the question of cow slaughter and nine such communal riots were recorded in Punjab between 1881 and 1893. Communal riots continued and indeed increased during the twentieth century. Major riots took place in 1925 in Calcutta, and in 1928 in Bombay and in 1930s in Kanpur. [...] Chermernhorn, on the basis of the Indian Statutory Commission, listed 112 communal



places were imbued with a sanctity they had not enjoyed to begin with. Recently, however, Muslims in India have been subjected to racism at the hands of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, a part of a general process of de-secularizing policies. The same party, by the way, was silent about the recent attempt on Rushdie's life, and did not condemn it.⁸

It did not matter in the least whether the demonstrators had read the novel, or whether it contained an actual insult, intentional or otherwise. Similarly, it made no difference whether its author truly aimed to harm Islam, or whether he had some other purpose in writing the novel. The demonstrations appeared to be against a novelist and what he had written (both of which were catapulted to fame as a result). Whereas, in fact, the acts of protest were an affirmation of collective identity, and of the sanctities whose social function was being transformed into a central component of sectarian identity. Violation of such sanctities thus became an offence against the collective dignity into which the individual's dignity had been assimilated, or conversely, the collective dignity as internalised by the individual. In any case, demonstrations took place in India and Pakistan, and India, ruled then by the secular congress party, banned the publication and distribution of this Indian Muslim writer's novel even before Khomeini pronounced his fatwa. *The Satanic Verses* provided the leaders of both India and Pakistan with an occasion to take revenge on Rushdie for his scathing critiques of their ruling elites of both countries in two other important novels of his: *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*.

These demonstrations can only be understood properly within the socio-political contexts of the countries in which they took place, given how they may have been informed by political causes that had nothing to do with religion. For example, the Syrian regime, isolated since the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri (2005), staged demonstrations on 4 February 2006. In response to the publication of 12 offensive cartoon drawings of the Prophet of Islam in a Danish newspaper, protesters marched on the Danish embassy in Damascus, which also housed the consulates of Sweden and Chile, stormed it and tried to burn it down. These events were not just a means for the regime to protest its isolation by the West after Hariri's killing. They were also an attempt to demonstrate the regime's ability to either unleash or rein in "Islamic extremism" depending on the state of its relations with Western countries. It goes without saying, of course, that the Syrian regime was not concerned about protecting the image of the Holy Prophet. It probably cared little about a set of caricatures drawn by some nameless artist from Denmark.

Political aims and motives merged with politicians' desire to present themselves as the protectors and defenders of religion. In general, the idea of hundreds of thousands of angry demonstrators taking to the streets to protest against some French magazine or an unknown artist on the other

riots from 1923 to 1927, and pointed out that the number increased in the 1930s. In the 1940s, in Uttar Pradesh alone, over 1,809 riots took place in 1945; and 3,176 riots took place in 354 Zeenath Kausar a single year in 1946. In the late 1940s, in the wake of independence, nearly half a million people were killed. In September 1948, after independence, the state of Hyderabad was invaded by the Indian army. [...] According to Mushirul Hassan, the whole process of consistent riots continued until partition and a million Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims perished and 14 million people lost their homes". See: Zeenath Kausar, "Communal Riots in India: Hindu-Muslim Conflict and Resolution," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 26, no. 3 (December 2006), pp. 354 - 355.

⁸ Interestingly, Sadiq Jalal Al-Azm tells us that Islamic fundamentalist currents who supported the Bharatiya Janata Party against Gandhi's secular Indian Congress party demanded that then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi ban the book, which he did, as did the racist South African government of the day. See: Sadiq Jalal Al-Azm, *Dhahniyat al-ta'aruf* [The Mentality of Prohibition], 3rd Edition (Damascus: Dar Al-Mada, 1997), p. 187.



side of the globe, in countries whose Muslim populations suffer daily violations of their most basic rights, from arbitrary imprisonment and suppression of the freedom of expression to demeaning poverty and unemployment, not to mention the daily desecrations of al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem and the ongoing Judaization of the city, is truly perplexing. The demonstrators are rising to the bait of the blatant provocation some individual conceived for this very purpose. They are elevating foreign individuals who do not deserve such attention. The disproportionate mobilization of the masses against things being done by foreigners in faraway lands implicitly marginalises the Muslim individual while affirming the individuality and distinctiveness of the cartoonist or novelist against whom the masses are taking to the streets.

Angry demonstrations are an affirmation of identity and pride in that identity; however, they are a negative affirmation (in the sense of being defensive). In this case, they are an affirmation of the rejection of contempt shown for sacred realities. However, from the perspective of a self-confident civilization, such demonstrations should be viewed as superfluous since sacred realities are too sublime to be diminished by some expression of contempt or disrespect. A civilization with true, positive self-regard will not be harmed by others' disrespect; it will not be shaken by a drawing or provoked by insults or a few lines in a novel. To a well-established civilization, such insults — if this is how they are understood — harm the party who initiates them, not the party against whom they are directed. But the politically religious, the fanatics and those who need the cry to defend a collective identity against domestic and foreign opponents do not share this understanding of sacred symbols, because in their version of religiosity, the function of such symbols is entirely different.

Given the atmosphere of political frustration that prevailed in a country still nursing the wounds of war, Imam Khomeini issued this fatwa in which he appeared, or hoped to appear, as the principle protector of the abode of Islam, thereby outdoing the demonstrators and their leaders in India and Pakistan and demonstrating the vigour of the Islamic revolution and its ability to defend its sanctities in the face of anyone who sought to violate them, even in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war.

In fact, the significance of the fatwa lies not only in the issuance of death sentences, which at that stage were being applied liberally in Iran against all who went against the new regime, including many who had taken part in the revolution but lacked Rushdie's fame, but also in the fact that it transgressed even the limits of the authoritarian theocratic state with its laws forbidding criticism and legitimizing capital punishment, and with its inconsistency with the concept of the modern state and an international order based on this concept.

The fatwa bypassed all processes of investigation, prosecution, and trial, even a sham trial. It transgressed the boundaries of the state and citizenship, since it was issued against a person who was not an Iranian citizen and who had committed his "offence" outside Iran's borders, and it authorised any person, even if he was not a citizen of Iran, to "execute" someone of another nationality in any country in the world. The modern state relegates to itself the sole authority to legislate and carry out violence within a specific territory and in relation to that territory's inhabitants. Yet, the author



of the fatwa arrogated to himself both legislative and judicial powers, while assigning the exercise of armed violence to unknown persons from outside the state. He handed down a death sentence against a citizen of another country, disregarding the concept of the modern state — the very modern state that underlies the international system of which the Iranian regime at that time so desperately wanted to be a part, and whose recognition it sought. It should be remembered here that Iran is a member of the United Nations and a signatory to charters and covenants respect for which is required by all schools of Islamic jurisprudence.

It might be said that, to a certain extent, the effects of this mentality can still be seen in Iranian policy toward other countries with regard to matters that have nothing to do with the violation of Islamic sanctities or the Holy Prophet, but relate to sheer political conflict. This includes situations in which Iran relies on the pretext of protecting holy shrines. Iran is currently the only country in the world that engages in politics in other countries through armed militias made up of citizens of these other countries. As for my use of the caveat phrase, “to a certain extent,” it is due to the fact that Iran has begun limiting this type of transnational policy to situations that directly impact the interests of the state and its regional influence, and it no longer issues fatwas of the type pronounced by Imam Khomeini, who called for people to kill in defence of the symbols of Islam. Consequently, apart from such exceptions as the conservative *Kayhan* newspaper, which openly expressed its glee at the violent assault against Rushdie, Iranian leaders have distanced themselves from this assassination attempt.

On Offences against the Sacred in Literature.

All major religions, including Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, have witnessed literary, artistic, and cinematic attempts to bring the sacred down to earth, as it were, and to reveal the mundane, human side of their prophets, often in relation to the human body and its needs. In some cases, this is done in order to bring the lives of the prophets closer to people and their humanity, as the scriptures themselves do when they describe ways in which God has tested His prophets in their points of human weakness. At other times, literary texts mock widespread beliefs that elevate the prophets to superhuman status, ridicule religion in general as a kind of superstition, or denigrate a particular religion. Novels and films about Jesus have even gone so far as to suggest that Jesus had a romantic, sexual relationship with Mary Magdalene. In Christianity, this is a graver offense than attributing sexual desire to the Prophet of Islam, since Jesus is viewed by devout Christians as the incarnation of the divine, whereas all Islamic schools of jurisprudence affirm that the Prophet was only a human being. The author of such a work might have been burned at the stake if he had written it in the mediaeval Christian era. However, despite the indignation such works have aroused among believers and the few Catholic demonstrations they triggered, such creative endeavours are now protected by rights such as freedom of belief and expression.

The impact of literary and artistic works on religious people’s beliefs is nothing compared to that of changing lifestyles, the tools of science and modern technology, education, state laws and the like on



religiosity generally, or at least on the form of one's religiosity. In fact, often the effect of such literary and artistic interventions is to push religious people to greater adherence to their beliefs. Regardless of the disparate literary and artistic value of works containing criticism which some consider to be enlightening, this approach to secularisation and enlightenment has never succeeded in opening up genuine dialogue anywhere but in elite circles that were secular to begin with. Meanwhile, it elicited angry counter-reactions from the devout and from others keen to preserve the sacred as a facet of identity. Perhaps this mode of attempting to dispel the sacred auras around prophets and apostles is a form of self-congratulation, a way of boasting how bold and audacious some secular subcultures can be or of celebrating precedents in transcending and expanding the bounds of freedom of expression. One also senses the delight in the shock value, ostensibly as an instrument to jolt awake those deluded by mythology and to free them from their superstitions. Alternatively, it may be a way to vaunt a form of nihilism among circles in a world of their own who rejoice at any breach of the familiar regardless of the literary or artistic value of the breach.

A number of fine Arabic literary works have appeared down the ages that have been viewed by some as insulting to religion because they depict patterns of religiosity as manifestations of backwardness and ignorance, and many religious people might agree. One is reminded here of the assault against the novelist Naguib Mahfouz. Similarly, many literary and artistic works boldly attack secular or mundane sanctities that are deemed sacred by patriots (the leader, the homeland, the people, nationalism, the party, the flag, the national anthem, the symbols and heroes of patriotism, etc.). They may be informed by a liberatory intent by exposing genuine suffering and injustices. Others may proceed from jaded and nihilistic perspectives. Common sense can easily distinguish between the two. Regardless of the case, such works still provoke anger and possibly even retaliation by the state and its organs under an authoritarian government, and legal penalties should there exist laws banning them. In liberal democracies, such works are generally tolerated despite popular disapproval and the conflict between grassroots circles, who cling to the aura surrounding national figures whom they view as central to the identity of the people and the state, and liberal elites. Albeit, the latter are often torn between defending freedom of expression, and the risk of losing ground to the extreme right in future elections, given that a common tactic of populists is to incite the masses against anyone who would dare desecralize the country's national symbols.

Discussion of the matter ranges from historical rational analysis and literary criticism to vitriolic outbursts and demagogy, albeit short of physical violence and murder. Authoritarian regimes penalize speech with corporal punishment because they view freedom of expression as a dangerous dare which may lead in turn to the transgression of other prohibitions. In other words, they view freedom of speech as a prelude to freedom of action. Fear of freedom of speech is also typical of groups to whom dissenting opinions or verbal criticism of shared traditions and symbols is a kind of secession from the group whose boundaries are preserved and safeguarded by these very traditions and symbols, as opposed to their members' participation in public affairs through rational



deliberation and the exchange of opinions. Freedom of expression in such a situation comes at the price of perpetual conflict over the demarcation of these boundaries.

There is no clear cause-and-effect link between a literary work and its outcomes. These inevitably vary according to historical circumstances and the manner in which social and political forces respond to the work in question. The response can range from silence and marginalisation to praising it as a critical and enlightening work in the context of a heated conflict between the state and the religious establishment or, conversely, to sharing in the outcry of the state and conservative and popular social forces opposed to it. The latter is how Rushdie's novel was greeted in the East and West alike. He was condemned by Christian and Jewish religious establishments in Europe, and even in Israel, as well as by political leaders in Europe and the United States (from Thatcher and Reagan to Jimmy Carter). However, this reaction was not simply an example of pandering to religion, religious people and Muslim states. It reflected genuine conservative biases, since Rushdie's writings were opposed to racism and Western policies relating to immigrants and third world issues. As for the United Kingdom, it protected him from the death threat because it constituted an attack on its sovereignty that no country would have accepted.⁹ Even the Arab Left, including some of its well-known thinkers and journalists, was divided over the novel, especially given the fact that at that time, many in leftist circles were still in awe of the Iranian revolution and had adopted a form of identity politics. In both the East and West, some writers' attitudes toward Rushdie were undoubtedly coloured by personal envy. This common human tendency is widespread among writers and intellectuals, particularly those preoccupied with fame, though it is rarely given its due when diagnosing people's motives.

Since those days, much blood has been shed as a result of terrorism and the war on terrorism. Along the way, Western governments' shed their reservations against, and even rejection of, incitement against Islam and provoking Muslim sensitivities, and began to show a tolerance for Islamophobia and even a willingness to fan its flames by placing all blame on terrorism and "Islamic extremism." Some countries, moreover, have seen the rise of politicians who make no attempt to conceal their prejudices against Islam and Muslims before being elected to public office.

It is useful to distinguish between racist expressions against Islam or some other religion from a government official, a state educational curriculum or its official media, and the individual statements of a writer or artist, assuming that they are, in fact, racist. The former, in my opinion, do merit mass political protest such as demonstrations, since in this case, we are talking about an institution that is expected to reject racism and represent everyone, or at least be neutral. The latter do not merit demonstrations, sit-ins and marches. The best one can do, if unable to ignore such statements, is to respond verbally or in writing and/or boycott the book or the work of art. Protests and demonstrations against an individual's affront to something held sacred create a distinct impression of self-doubt and a needless fear of words or drawings that could simply be shrugged off with disdain, derision, and indifference. Nevertheless, there is something which must not be

⁹ Ibid., pp. 183-191, 252 - 254.



dismissed with indifference, and that is the disregard being shown for Muslims' anger by Western governments and public opinion makers, and their defence of the act of provoking Muslims as part of the freedom of expression guaranteed in these countries. The fact that such provocations are protected by the right to free expression does not mean that one should defend them rather than condemn them. There is a difference between freedom of expression and the position one takes on the content of what is being said.

The guarantee for freedom of expression enshrined in the laws and constitutions of liberal democratic countries means that words and art works are not punishable by law. It does not mean that the state, as embodied in its various organs such as parliaments and government administrations, has no obligation to condemn the "fashion" of maligning what is sacred to others in order to trigger a reaction, get attention, or simply for the fun of being provocative. The state has an obligation to raise public awareness that insulting what others hold sacred is not a desirable model for the exercise of free expression, especially given the legacy of acts of incitement against Islam and that and that distorting the image of its Prophet is a tradition that has roots in the Renaissance and Enlightenment. The portrayal of the Prophet in *The Divine Comedy* was hardly an innocent literary image. It manifested a prejudice that was prevalent in the period in which the Europe Renaissance began to paint a negative portrait of "the orient". In addition, there is the tension stemming from the colonial relationship between "the East" and "the West" that has prevailed since the late nineteenth century. Of course, just as officials and public opinion makers in the West have a responsibility to deal firmly with incitement against Islam, so also do public opinion makers in the Islamic world have a duty to undertake a critical review of Muslim religious sermons that demean other religions and their followers.¹⁰

Literature and the Freedom of Expression

The silence of millions in the Islamic world about the criminal attempt on Salman Rushdie's life should not be interpreted as support for it. Undoubtedly, some have paid little attention to the matter, since they have problems of their own, not to mention the fact that not a day goes by without reports of murder in their countries, including the murder of innocents. There are countries where someone might be imprisoned and tortured for insulting the president, not the Apostle or God Almighty. Still others disapprove of the assault on Rushdie, but do not believe that Salman Rushdie is worth taking to the streets in his defence. I have read numerous articles by Arab writers who issued sincere, full-throated condemnations of the recent attack, and without following it with "but..." There is also undoubtedly a group of unknown size that approved of this act. Speaking of which, there are countless Arab writers who defended Rushdie's freedom against the threat of extremists, but who do not defend prisoners of conscience in their own countries or even the freedom of an elected president who died behind bars.

¹⁰ Azmi Bishara, "Discussing freedom of expression, tolerance and secularism in a demagogic atmosphere," *Maqalat* [Articles], Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, 10/29/2020, viewed on 4/9/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3q6u2Vr>.



What interests me in this is the discussion that unfolded among aware people who followed what happened and have stated positions on it. Of particular concern to me is the discussion about the content of the novel and the people's reactions towards it.

The writer Sadiq Jalal Al-Azm describes Khomeini's fatwa as an example of a backward prohibition mentality that represents everything regressive and all that obstructs progress, enlightenment and rationality. This mentality is quick to call for violence without even cracking the novel open. It lacks any understanding of the role of imagination in literature, and treats literature as though it were a form of factual historical report, whereas literature is not literature if it is a mere depiction of reality, and if its relationship with reality is infused with ambiguity, if not outright tension. It ignores the very Islamic heritage which it claims to champion with such zeal, and which itself includes salacious poetry and critical literature that crossed the boundaries of the taboo. Those with this mentality cannot bear to read details that are to be found even in the biographies (*Siras*) of the Prophet and other Islamic writings.

Al-Azm, who has written an extensive literary criticism of the novel, not only condemns the fatwa and the incitement of violence against Rushdie, but registers his objection against those who have written about it without reading it.¹¹ Khomeini clearly had not read the novel; rather, his attention had been drawn to some lines in it, most notably the ones related to a certain imam in exile in the West that possibly alluded to him. Many writers have pointed out that those who condemn the novel and call for its author to be killed have not even gone to the trouble of reading the book. They are right to point this out, since numerous Arab writers and intellectuals have exhibited this trait: the tendency to attack a text without having read it, content to rely on what they have heard about it from others. Some are bold enough to admit as much, opening their tirade with: "The truth is that I haven't read the book, but I think that..."

However, this observation, important though it is, has nothing to do with the issue of freedom of expression, but rather with the rationality, decency, ethics and feasibility of dialogue. No one has the right to discuss a book he has not read. This is true. But what concerns us in the context of the recent assassination attempt is that no one has the right to issue a death sentence against a writer or call for him to be physically assaulted because of a book he wrote, whether the person issuing the sentence has read the book or not. *Or not*. This is an important distinction.

Many writers who support freedom of expression have noted repeatedly that the person who carried out the assassination attempt (American of Lebanese origin Hadi Matar) had not read the novel. And they are right. But why is it important to mention this fact? Should his having read, or not read, the novel make a difference in our attitude towards his attempt to kill its author? Let us suppose that after reading the novel and the comments on it, someone compared it with what was written by al-Tabari and by Ibn Saad in his *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kabīr* (Book of Major Classes) about the incident

¹¹ Al-Azm, pp. 166 - 169.



of the *gharānīq* and others, and the details from the Prophet's biography narrated by Ibn Ishaq and recorded by Ibn Hisham. Let us suppose, further, that this person then arrived at the conviction that the writer had marred the image of the Prophet and offended the sacred. Would he, then, have the right to kill the writer in question based on knowledge rather than ignorance? Of course not. He would not have the right to commit murder whether he has read the novel or not, and whether or not his conviction that the novel is an insult to what Muslims hold sacred is based on valid evidence.

What does it matter whether he had not read the novel? There is little point in having a zealous young man mired in an identity crisis and in search of existential meaning in his religion or in a specific understanding of faith read a novel before judging its writer. His issue with the book is not rational, intellectual, artistic or literary. His issue is with the reality that has so angered him, and with the person who has angered his religious leader. In short, it is a matter of defending his identity. Furthermore, he does not espouse values that forbid the use of violence in response to something someone has said or written. His values sanction the murder of someone who offends his religion. It is such values that count here, not knowledge of the object for which he was incited to violence. And now that this person had suppressed the religious and secular morals that would deter him from committing murder and replaced them with fanaticism, the only thing to prevent him from carrying out the violence in question is the law of the state (if exhortation and educational guidance has failed).

In modern society, words are to be met with words, if they merit a response at all. Some speech, such as defamation, is punishable by law. However, even verbal incitement to murder does not justify killing the inciter. Rather it should activate legal processes, such as prosecution under the laws of the country in which the accused is located, not a fatwa from a religious leader living in another country. Herein resides the difference between the laws of modern states and terrorism and the law of the jungle. I mean 'terrorism' here literally: intimidation to deter others from engaging in similar acts. As we have seen, intimidation became an incentive. After the fatwa was issued, writers or artists have begun to insert vulgar insults to Islam and Muslims in things they publish, including offensive cartoonists. The fatwa threw down a gauntlet that was picked up in the name of defending the Western "way of life," which includes freedom of expression. In other words, there is another identity also whose sanctities are being defended. The result has been ever more insults and uglier generalisations against the Arab-Islamic civilization, although neither Imam Khomeini's fatwa nor Hadi Matar's action in a public lecture hall represents this rich and diverse civilization.

Do novelists and other writers of literature enjoy special privileges in the area of freedom of expression?

There is no intellectual, moral, or legal basis for making such a distinction in applying the principle of freedom of expression, which is a core freedom in liberal thought. In liberal democratic constitutions, it is guaranteed under the law to every opinion holder. But even in democratic countries, public opinion in the past was more tolerant of artistic and literary expressions that were deemed to offend the sacred and so-called public taste, because the world of imagination and images was not held to the standards of daily life or of science.



However, I doubt this still applies. In liberal countries, there is no longer a difference between the rule and the exception with regard to what was once taboo, especially in the areas of religion and sexuality. As for the laws, they have never recognized a distinction between creative persons and others with respect to the freedom of expression. In the context of the polarisation in the West and the spread of Islamophobia, we find that ironically, the extreme right has also come to defend things that until recently were considered taboo. For example, the political right was once united in its opposition to homosexuality, on either religious or traditionalist grounds – but this has now become the preserve of evangelical conservatives in the US and a minority of the Christian right in Europe. Conversely, many of those same right-wingers have sought to portray themselves as defenders of LGBTQ+ rights and other liberal practices as individual freedoms in the name of preserving liberties considered central to the Western lifestyle and identity “threatened” by the spread of Islam through Muslim immigrants. While in the recent past, right wingers in Western democratic countries had reservations about insulting any religion, including Islam, and opposed open homosexuality and other more recent social phenomena, their defence of individual freedoms is now used to justify Islamophobic and anti-immigrant sentiment.

Privileges granted to writers in terms of freedom of expression is generally a feature of authoritarian regimes. Famous writers may enjoy greater immunity than others in dictatorial countries, especially if their works circulate only among the elite, or if they employ literary strategies such as symbolism or magical realism, which allow a dictator to pretend that he is not the person being portrayed or alluded to. This is all the more the case if the writer is a recluse, does not take stances on public affairs, or engages in a kind of self-censorship whereby he discerns from experience how to avoid ideas that roil the ruler and the security apparatus. Yet, even in these cases, there have always been ways to “discipline” writers by placing restrictions on them or turning public opinion against their writings on the grounds they are offensive to “public taste.” Then the authorities might take measures to teach the writers their place, such as guarding them from public opinion or extremists bent on harming them for what they wrote and then suddenly giving the public freedom of speech against the writer who becomes an alternative target for their anger. The writer becomes a prisoner of the dictator who protects him from the “violence of the mob.”

In democratic and liberal countries, by contrast, where writers and artists are honoured, and where the wheat and tares are thrown together in the culture of parties, awards and the celebrity industry, literature and art do not enjoy special privileges when it comes to freedom of expression. In fact, the opposite may be true, in the sense that writers and artists may be expected to shoulder a greater responsibility than others. I say this in defence of people’s freedom. This is the responsibility of the writer if he is a public intellectual. It is not so much his freedom that is the question, but freedoms in general, which include the writer’s freedom of expression within society at large as opposed to within his own bubble.

To further expand on this subject, we might draw a distinction between totalitarian and authoritarian regimes. The former are less tolerant of writers, as they expect them to adopt the official line. Some



readers may be familiar with Zhdanov's definitions of literature under Stalin and socialist realism, literature promoting the Aryan race and the spirit of the *Volks* under Nazism, and so on. However, the central point remains that in dictatorships the privilege some writers may enjoy with regard to freedom of expression emanates from above. It is the product of the mentality of the dictatorial elites. It follows that, in democratic societies, condemning the attempt against Rushdie's life should not be justified on the grounds that *Satanic Verses* falls in the scope of the art of fiction. It is to be condemned because freedom of expression is a value in itself...

As important as the distinctions literary criticism draws regarding the "architecture of the novel" and the narrator's strategy are, they have nothing to do with freedom of expression and the prohibition of physical violence against speech. Take, for example, the interesting comment by the Syrian novelist Mamdouh Azzam¹² regarding the distinction between a novelist's positions and those expressed by the characters in his novels. This is undoubtedly an important distinction, although others may have a different opinion in this regard. However, whether Salman Rushdie's characters express his views or not, that has no bearing on the fatwa calling for his death or carrying it out.

What matters, then, is not the particular nature of literature in this case, but freedom of expression in general. In a democratic system, there are three specific cases in which someone might be prosecuted for statements he or she has made (bearing in mind that authoritarian regimes exploit these situations against political opponents). The first is defamation. Different countries have different definitions of defamation, and they vary in how severely they penalise it. But we define the term here as an offence against a particular person by publishing false allegations that cause this person demonstrable harm. The second is incitement to deadly violence against a particular person. The third is racist, negative stereotypes against groups of people, though unfortunately these tend to be tolerated by most countries in the world. Many countries, including democratic ones, do not prohibit racism for fear of not being able to accurately delineate its boundaries, and the possibility of stretching its definition to a point where it can be used as a means of suppressing freedom of expression. Of relevance here is the prohibition against questioning the Nazi Holocaust against the Jews and the expansion of the definition of anti-Semitism to the point where anti-Zionism is viewed as a form of anti-Semitism.¹³ Politicians in liberal democratic countries exhibit an astonishing degree of hypocrisy in this connection.

There is also another area in which the defence of writers' freedom of expression becomes hypocrisy. It is when the repression of freedoms and rights of the general public marginalizes. It should come as no surprise that defending literary freedom, on its own, in countries where rights and liberties are being repressed on a wide scale under dictatorial regimes does not resonate with the oppressed.

¹² Mamdouh Azzam, "The Court or the Knife", *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 26/8/2022, last seen on 4/9/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3CXA2aG>

¹³ See: Azmi Bishara, "Is it true that anti-Zionism is one a modern form of anti-Semitism? Anti-Zionism as a Jewish Phenomenon," a case assessment, the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 28/2/2019, accessed on 4/9/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3Qe05gv>.



Concluding Thoughts

We should note an important phenomenon that accompanies violent responses to verbal expression, be it literary or otherwise, and that often goes unnoticed when the topic is discussed. It is a complex, two-pronged phenomenon. The first part is the transformation of the party who considers himself offended or harmed, into a perpetrator, and the second is that of depriving people of the opportunity to discuss actions rationally and condemn them morally when necessary. One effect of the act of violence is to turn those who condemn the publication of material that could be deemed offensive to people's religious sensitivities into the condemned from the perspective of public opinion and the law in the very countries where this discussion most needs to take place.

At the same time, threats of murder and violent protest demonstrations against a writer may turn him into a victim who wins people's sympathy. As noted earlier, there is a difference between demonstrating against a state or government and demonstrating against an individual. This individual might be an opportunistic narcissist who knows that such texts will bring him notoriety because of the reaction he expects then to provoke. I am not speaking of Salman Rushdie personally, as I do not know him. Some believe that narcissism (mostly conscious, though sometimes not) is a malady that afflicts some people who work in literature and art, whether or not they succeed in weaving their own legend, and that only exceptionally few people are spared this malaise. This is not the place to discuss the nature of the relationship between narcissism, acting, poetry, and other literary genres. However, the presence of a pattern of media and popular reactions to certain literary or artistic statements may motivate many would-be celebrities to come out with comparable statements of their own, or to outdo them if they can.

The second component of this phenomenon is the thwarting of rational and moral discussion. This is the second victim of these acts. After an act of violence or mass demonstrations against a writer or artist, it becomes difficult to discuss the issue publicly in a rational manner, or to refute the negative image of Arab civilization or the character of the Prophet in "the West". Does this person's work fall within the scope of refined art or literature, or is it simply a continuation of a history of preconceived misconceptions about Islam and its Prophet that began with the Renaissance, and an attempt to promote such ideas once again? It is difficult to make this distinction in an atmosphere of incitement, attempts at assassination and the like. Yet, this is the duty of intellectuals who, by necessity, has to shift from discussing the words and actions of a French school teacher or cartoonist, or the artistic level of a novel and the image it portrays of Muslims, to defending the writer's or artist's right to free expression and condemning the crime of physically assaulting him. It is a necessary discomfiture.. Unfortunately, it forfeits a great opportunity for civilised interchange and mutually beneficial dialogue that could score points against prejudice and racism.