

Chapter 8: Multiculturalism

Case Study: The Rushdie Affair

In September 1988, the critically-acclaimed British-Indian author Salman Rushdie published his fourth novel, *The Satanic Verses*, under Viking/Penguin. The book included scenes, presented as the dreams and hallucinations of the central protagonist Gibreel, in which Islam was satirized and the Prophet Muhammed caricatured as a charlatan and hedonist. Rushdie had carved out a name for himself as a controversial and highly political writer, and was used to weathering criticism (he had, for instance, been successfully sued by Indira Ghandi for his portrayal of her in his second work, *Midnight's Children*). Undoubtedly he was aware that his new book would elicit a hostile reaction from many Muslims, and his publishers were apparently warned likewise (Horton, 1993, p. 107). However, the sheer scale of the international outcry that greeted the publication of the book was clearly beyond their reckoning.

It is not possible to recount here all the various newsworthy events that followed the release of *The Satanic Verses*. Some British Muslim leaders called for the book to be banned immediately, and for Rushdie to be prosecuted for religious libel: however, for neither action, the Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher told them, was there a valid legal basis (Horton, 1993, p. 109). India, meanwhile, banned the novel within days of its appearance on British shelves, and within a few weeks several other countries, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Pakistan, and South Africa, had followed suit. Protests were staged in Bolton and Bradford in December 1988 and January 1989 respectively, and copies of the book were burned (to resounding media condemnation). At Hyde Park, also in January, demonstrators petitioned, without success, for the book to be withdrawn by the publishers. There were further protests by Muslims across the world.

It was in February 1989, however, that the most dramatic developments were to occur. On the 12th and 13th, further demonstrations led to several deaths in Islamabad and Kashmir (ibid.). And on the 14th, the Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran issued his now notorious fatwa (religious judgement), which exhorted loyal Muslims to kill Rushdie, along with anyone else involved in the book's publication who was aware of its contents. Rushdie was forced into hiding, where he would remain for nearly a decade. Over the next few years, several publishers and translators of his book would be attacked, and one killed.

As Will Kymlicka puts it (1995b, p. 19), the events that together became known as the *Rushdie Affair* 'led people in the West to think carefully about the nature of "multiculturalism" and the extent to which the claims of minority cultures can or should be accommodated within a liberal-democratic regime.' In large part, this debate focused on whether cultural and religious accommodation might require an abridgement of liberal rights guaranteeing freedom of speech, and it is to arguments on that subject put forward by theorists of multiculturalism that we shall turn in the following sections. Media and

political debates about the legitimacy of imposing limits on free speech were rekindled in 2006, when the Danish *Jyllands-Posten* newspaper published 12 editorial cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammed (which is prohibited within Islam), sparking a fresh bout of global protests, and arson attacks on the Danish and Norwegian embassies in Syria. The Rushdie controversy itself resurfaced, meanwhile, in June 2007, when the author was awarded a knighthood by the British government, drawing criticism from many Muslims, and provoking a threat of reprisals from the terrorist organization Al-Qaeda.

<A>Muslim objections to *The Satanic Verses*

Let us first consider the reactions of Muslims in Britain to the publication of *The Satanic Verses*. There was, of course, no unitary Muslim position on the book (nor is there, indeed, on any other issue). While many British Muslims expressed anger, others welcomed the novel as challenging and stimulating, and as providing an opportunity to reflect afresh on the significance and value of religion in their lives.¹ Among those who did express grievances, meanwhile, at least three arguments can be distinguished: (1) that Rushdie deserved punishment as an apostate; (2) that *The Satanic Verses* blasphemed Islam; (3) that the novel was a form of libel directed at Muslims as a community. Of these, it appears that the first was something of a minority concern: British Muslims overwhelmingly rejected Khomeini's *fatwa* in particular, and the idea of taking violent revenge on Rushdie in general.² Instead, they sought to have the book withdrawn and/or to see Rushdie held legally accountable for hateful or offensive speech.

In pursuing these ends, some called for the extension to Islam of Britain's blasphemy laws, which, prior to their repeal in 2008, offered protection only to the Church of England. Since the blasphemy laws were clearly discriminatory, it was early on suggested that this solution was the most likely to bear political fruit (although, in fact, in February 1989 the Home Secretary, Douglas Hurd, moved to quash hopes that the government was planning to revisit the law of blasphemy [Horton, 1993, p. 109]). Apparently only some of those who pressed for revisions to Britain's blasphemy offences were primarily concerned that Islam itself had been defamed by Rushdie; others, while conceiving of the author's work as primarily an affront to their own personal dignity (insofar as it seemed to cast them as barbarous, and the dupes of a fraudulent and morally bankrupt religion), advocated the blasphemy strategy as the most likely route to a prosecution.

Liberal political theorists are extremely unlikely to sympathize with the claim that acts of blasphemy ought to be prohibited, insofar as they are standardly of the view that the state ought to be neutral in matters of religious doctrine, and does not have a remit to make judgements about what acts or words are or are not sacrilegious or profane. Liberals do, however, of course accept that if some act is harmful or demeaning to persons, this constitutes a good (albeit not necessarily¹ ²decisive) reason to prohibit or

¹ ¹ For a collection of essays written by Muslim academics and writers in support of Rushdie, see Abdallah (ed.) (1994).

curtail it. And for that reason, the academic debate over the Rushdie Affair has tended to concentrate in particular on the examination of proposals for the implementation of communal libel laws, which would (according to their defenders) serve to protect the social standing and dignity of individuals who are members of cultural minorities. Let us examine that issue in more detail.

<A>The idea of communal libel

The best-known philosophical proponent of communal libel laws is probably Bhikhu Parekh (1990, 2000). In Parekh's view, free speech is only one among the important values that we as a society ought to promote, and hence it is an open question how we should resolve conflicts between that value and, say, the value of mutual respect, or the prevention of avoidable hurt (Parekh, 2000, 320). Moreover, according to Parekh, in deciding on the relative importance of free speech as against these other commitments, we must pay attention to the cultural composition of our political community, and to the particular vulnerabilities and sensitivities of the various groups within it, given the history of relations between them. Parekh notes that, because persons strongly identify with their communities and cultures, verbal and written assaults on the integrity and reputation of the group as a whole are damaging to them personally as individuals, and detrimental in particular to their ability to maintain self-respect. He writes:

An individual is not a free-floating atom but a member of a specific community and his identity is at once both personal and social. His self-respect is therefore necessarily tied up with, and partly grounded in, the general respect for his community. To say that 'all Jews are mean, unreliable, rapacious and selfish' is to implicate and demean every one of them. Or to say that 'all blacks are thick, stupid and sexy', or that 'all Indians are effeminate, devious and liars' is to degrade every black man and every Indian. Such untrue and damaging remarks, which nurture and perpetuate perverse stereotypes, lower the social standing of the communities involved, demean them in their own and others' eyes, and treat them less equally than the rest. In so far as they go beyond fair comment they amount to communal libel or defamation (Parekh, 1990, 705).

Thus, Parekh proposes a communal libel law to protect the members of minority groups against damage to their social standing and self-image (both of which are central to a person's quality of life). As to the question of which groups ought to receive this protection, Parekh proposes that they must: (1) be easily distinguishable from the rest of society; (2) be composed of individuals who relate to and identify with their community in such a way that they would consider an attack on their group to represent an attack on them

² Though see Kymlicka (1993) and Momood (1993) for disagreement over the extent to which Muslim anger was attributable to Rushdie's status as an apostate.

personally; and (3) be particularly susceptible to discrimination and stereotyping (ibid., 316).

Parekh is keen to stress that his communal libel proposal is continuous with, and an apparently natural extension of, existing laws on hate speech, which tend to offer protection to racial, but not religious or cultural, groups.³ Nonetheless, however, many liberals are likely to have strong reservations. Will Kymlicka (1995a), for example, has opposed group libel laws by drawing upon his distinction between *internal restrictions* and *external protections*. As we know from Monica Mookherjee's chapter of *Issues in Political Theory*, Kymlicka endorses the demands of minority cultures for group rights that take the form of external protections (that is, protections against the influence of the encroaching majority culture), but rejects those that would constitute internal restrictions (that is, powers to restrict the freedom and rights of group members). In the case of group libel, Kymlicka argues (ibid., 43) that, while conferring upon a group the right not to be defamed appears at first blush to represent an instance of an external protection, there is an unacceptable danger that such a right would be exercised as a means of internal restriction, to silence dissent from within the group itself. For Kymlicka, the example of Rushdie himself is instructive here: he argues that, if British Muslims had had recourse to a group libel law in 1988–9, then that law would have been invoked as a *de facto* means of punishing Rushdie as an apostate. In other words, '[l]aws that are justified in terms of external protection can open the door to internal restrictions (ibid.).'

It is unclear that Kymlicka's objections manage to capture all of what liberals often worry about in proposals for group libel laws. For the latter will likely not want to base their argument wholly on the claim that individuals should be free from reprisals from other members of their own group when they criticize aspects of their culture. Rather, they will want to defend free speech in a way that is not contingent upon the speaker's cultural membership. To put it another way, a robust liberal defence of free speech will still apply against a libel law that would be used by a community exclusively against outsiders—that is, as an external protection.

Such a defence might be provided by citing an interest of somebody other than the speaker, and that also dictates against prosecuting people for religious defamation. Kymlicka, as we have seen, argues that it is the speaker's interest in escaping reprisals from his own community that justifies refusal to meet the demands of that community for a group libel law. But liberals often claim that free expression also serves the interests of *listeners*, who, through exposure to uncensored views and commentary, are provided with intellectual resources that they can put to use in reappraising their own beliefs, convictions, and conceptions of the good (see, e.g., Barry, 2001, pp. 31–2). Crucially, many of the listeners who benefit in this way may be members of the very culture against which the alleged libel is directed. Thus, in the case of *The Satanic Verses*, some

³ As it happens, Britain introduced a new offence of incitement to religious hatred in 2006, which goes some way to meeting Parekh's concerns, and which has proven highly politically controversial.

Muslims, to repeat, found the book a valuable and challenging interjection. Group libel laws, such as those proposed by Parekh, may thus seem to be in danger of ignoring the interests of these individuals, instead grouping members of a culture into a homogeneous whole, which as a *whole* is said to be harmed. Proponents of these laws, then, will need to address the question of how we are to decide whether an offence of group libel has occurred when the group itself is split on that very issue. Opponents of communal libel, meanwhile, face a challenge of their own: namely, to explain whether their stance commits them to the repeal of existing provisions against hate speech directed towards racial minorities, and, if not, what marks the moral difference between the two types of law.

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