

ISLAM, SOUTH AFRICA AND THE SATANIC VERSES

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It is a question today...not whether we are Christians or heathens, theists or atheists, but whether we are or can become men, healthy in soul and in body, free, active and full of vitality...In place of the illusory, fantastic, heavenly position of man which in actual life necessarily leads to the degradation of man, I substitute the tangible, actual, and consequently also the political and social position of mankind .
Ludwig Feuerbach¹

Incoherence of the 'Democratic Movement'

The Islamic campaign for suppression of Salman Rushdie's novel, *The Satanic Verses*,² and its sentence of death against the author, are so important that they transcend all local interests. Within the general issue there is a South African dimension, and it is essential that both be clarified.

The left in South Africa has always shunned a serious study of philosophy, and has shied throughout its history at a critical examination of religion. That conforms in general with its anti-theoretical bias. Yet the sudden, violent irruption of theology as an important current in world politics in the late 20th century proves that if the left wishes to leave religion to itself, religion nevertheless will not leave it alone. Thousands of socialists, left nationalists, secularists and members of the Bahai faith murdered within prison walls in Iran before the Ayatollah Khomeini's decree of death against Rushdie are witness to a weakness of theory and programme in international political life, all the more fatal as in 1979 the Iranian left – above all, the Tudeh (or Masses) Party, sister party of the South African Communist Party (SACP) – welcomed the Islamic Republic.

The secular intelligentsia of the world has now been confronted, in the furore over Rushdie's novel, with a phenomenon it thought had disappeared: the bursting forth of mass popular irrationalism, which many governments are eager to conciliate. In South Africa, the so-called 'mass democratic movement' found itself divided between conflicting tendencies during the book week in Cape Town and Johannesburg in October/November last year, organized jointly by

the *Weekly Mail*, the Congress of South African Writers (Cosaw – an organization loosely in sympathy with the African National Congress) and various publishers. The leading speaker was to have been Salman Rushdie, speaking on censorship. In the event, the left and its intelligentsia were covered in shame. According to a report by Chris Louw (1988), the book week had

been billed around the participation of Rushdie, whose invitation had been made possible by the intervention and agreement of the 'broad democratic movement' in South Africa. Implicitly, this also meant that his participation had the approval of the international anti-apartheid movement, and therefore, indirectly, of the ANC.

At the moment when Rushdie was due to embark for South Africa he found himself the focus (or target) of a process of censorship directed simultaneously from several sources. Life proceeded to excel his own fiction in the grotesqueness of its contradictory elements. Firstly, certain Muslims in Cape Town and Johannesburg threatened Rushdie with death, should he have the temerity to arrive in South Africa to speak on censorship. These gentlemen threatened also to bomb his meetings and attack those who had invited him. Muslim organizations could not be persuaded to ensure Rushdie's safety, despite nearly six hours of talks with leaders of Cosaw, among them its executive representative, the novelist Nadine Gordimer.

The South African government (no friend of literature) then banned Rushdie's novel, along with the governments of India, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Egypt, Malaysia, Pakistan, Thailand, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Iran and many others. Shortly afterwards it shut down the *Weekly Mail* – which had organized this and previous book weeks – for a month. These actions followed the demand of the South African Muslim Judicial Council that the government ban the book (*Cape Times*, 1 November), and its call on Muslims to boycott the book week.

As the victim of these forces of censorship, against which he was invited to speak, Rushdie was at the last moment dis-invited by Cosaw, represented by Gordimer, the very people who had invited him. The decision to deprive South African audiences of Rushdie (and to deprive Rushdie of a South African audience) was taken without his being consulted, on the grounds of his own safety. This provoked a first-rate row in Cape Town among participants in the book week, many of whom were sharply critical of the 'experience of censorship' (Louw's phrase) to which they and Rushdie had been subjected.

In Cape Town, Cosaw's decision was attacked from the platform by the novelist J.M. Coetzee, who alleged the visit had been sacrificed

in 'some kind of trade-off' between Cosaw and Muslim leaders, 'for the sake of not making life too difficult for Muslims in the alliance' [the United Democratic Front]. Cosaw upheld freedom of speech, he said, only so long as it did not threaten this political alliance (*Sunday Tribune*, 6 November). From the same platform, Gordimer repudiated Coetzee's accusation, insisting that Rushdie's safety had been Cosaw's prime consideration, and that this could not have been secured without the tender services of the South African Police.

Behind Coetzee's allegation, however, lay this fact: in demanding that Cosaw cancel Rushdie's visit, Muslim groups had been joined by two political organizations allied for many decades with the ANC—the Transvaal and the Natal Indian Congresses (*Star*, 11 November). After the withdrawal of one panellist, 'in the face of death threats from elements within the Muslim community' (Louw), this political dimension became more apparent. Another panellist, Professor Fatima Meer, withdrew from the book week in solidarity with the call by the Muslim Judicial Council. Meer departed with a statement in which she denounced Rushdie as someone who played the 'colonizer', despite Rushdie's transparent anti-colonialist views, set out clearly in his book on Nicaragua (1987). 'In the final instance', said Meer, 'it is the Third World that Rushdie attacks, it is the faith of the Third World in itself, and in its institutions, that he denigrates...' Rushdie had made 'a malicious attack on his ethnic past', in defiance of millions 'who combat the tyranny of materialism by their faith in an ideal or ideology', for whom 'the absolute is imperative'. He was guilty of 'parodying the faith by which the generality of human beings live' (*Cape Times*, 4 November).

Meer's contribution is interesting, since she was prominent in the activities of the United Democratic Front (UDF) in the years of upsurge from 1984 to 1987, and had published a biography of Nelson Mandela only a month previously. The principal speaker at the launching of her book had been Winnie Mandela. Her confusion of Rushdie's views on religion with his attitude towards imperialism is in harmony with the Iranian theocracy, which shortly afterwards decreed death to the 'apostate', having pronounced him guilty of a 'colonial atheistic challenge to holy Islam' (*Times*, London, 14 March 1989).

As Louw reports, the book week 'had originally been made possible precisely through the good offices of [Mongane Wally] Serote as the ANC'S Arts and Culture representative in London', and it was Serote—in his dual capacity as poet and official representative of the ANC—who at short notice replaced Rushdie as panellist in Cape Town, via a telephone hotline from London. (When the book week

continued later in Johannesburg, Rushdie spoke for himself by telephone from London to the audience).

The ANC appears to have taken no stand on the threat to Rushdie's life as the guest of Cosaw, nor to the banning of his book by the South African state, nor to his forced exclusion from South Africa by organizations informally allied to itself. The SACP carried no report, either on the book week or the principles at stake, in either of the two subsequent issues of its journal, the *African Communist*. Yet Rushdie was the first really major world cultural figure to be invited to the country by supporters of the 'broad democratic movement'. Its leading organizations are now silent, after the international murder hunt set in motion against him. To their credit, however, a number of prominent South African cultural workers—including Gordimer, J.M.Coetzee, Athol Fugard, Don Mattera, Andre Brink, Pitika Ntuli and Barney Simon—joined the world protest by writers and publishers against the international lynching of Rushdie and suppression of his book. The main victor in this affair was the state, indicating what a poor thing in South Africa is any really democratic, let alone socialist, politics.

Irreligious Criticism

The standard of enlightenment is central to the issue of *The Satanic Verses* and its author. In South Africa it is all the more crucial, since the country has yet to experience a climate of thought such as preceded both the French and the Russian revolutions, and such as Marx's thought took shape in during the 1830s and 1840s in Germany.

Clearly, what has most offended Muslims in Rushdie's novel is his use of ribald language in association with sacred characters in Islam, through sequences involving dream, fantasy or madness: in style reminiscent of the surrealist film *L'Age d'Or* by Buñuel and Dali, which provoked the anger of the Catholic Church. In several passages the sacred is discussed through everyday language of the streets. Ultimately it is the novel's secularizing tendency that is at issue, its intention (says Rushdie) to 'discuss Muhammad as if he were human'. As he explained after the storm had broken over him, his aim was to

discuss the growth of Islam as a historical phenomenon, as an ideology born out of its time. These are the taboos against which *The Satanic Verses* transgressed (these and one other: I also tried to write about the place of women in Islamic society, and in the Koran)...I have tried to

give a secular, humanist vision of the birth of a great world religion (*Observer*, London, 22 January 1989).

This of course is a proper theme for study, whether by means of literature, historical research or philosophical critique.

Precisely such a project, beginning as a movement of theological criticism, culminated in the revolution in thought brought about by Marx. This was the philosophical movement of the Young Hegelians in Germany in mid-19th century, in which Marx learned to think. It involved from its inception a critique of religion that drove it successively to more and more radical conclusions. His critique of social relations in *Capital* is unthinkable outside the criticism of religion developed by these young Germans of the 1830s and 1840s. One of the most harmful legacies of the Althusserian current of the 1970s is that it cut off many South Africans from study of this conceptual relation. Arising from Hegel's system of philosophy, the movement in thought of the Young Hegelians led Marx to develop the theory of the place of the working class in the modern world. Marx was not issuing an empty slogan when he wrote in 1843/1844 in 'A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction', that 'the critique of religion is the prerequisite of all criticism'.³ In this article – in which he first set out his conception of the revolutionary role of the proletariat – he wrote: 'The foundation of irreligious criticism is: Man makes religion, religion does not make man' (p.244). Here he summed up the fatal 'sin' (or blasphemy) running through the entire school of Left Hegelians, whose thought was a necessary prerequisite to his own. In this, notwithstanding differences between their thought, there is something in common with Rushdie's project concerning Islam.

Rushdie's novel involves (as one of many elements) an attempted fictional, surreal 'biography' of the prophet Muhammad as an actual religious and political leader living under imagined historical conditions, in which history is transmuted through fantasy, and theology through an artistically presented history. By comparison, the first major act of Young Hegelian criticism was *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* by David Friedrich Strauss, published in 1835.⁴ As the editor of a recent anthology of Young Hegelian writings explains, Strauss argued that the reports of miracles in the New Testament were

ultimately grounded in a shared mythic consciousness of their authors, a consciousness so excited by messianic expectations that it set a series of totally unhistorical supernatural episodes about the natural historical personage of Jesus (Stepelevich, p.19).

That is, Strauss treated Jesus as an ordinary historical individual (as Rushdie does Muhammad), about whom the messianic longings of the Jews created a vast superstructure of myth – in a word, ideology. Further, for Strauss, as his editor Stepelevich writes, ‘mankind is the actual Christ insofar as it is its own savior’ (p.7). The real, active, moving principle towards a betterment of human existence is shifted with Strauss from heaven to earth, from the divine to human, from the ideal to the material. The fact that Strauss’s philosophy did not exclude an ultimately religious conception of the world was not least of the contradictions at the birth of this movement of radical criticism. The German enlightenment after Hegel was the history of the unravelling of these contradictions latent in Strauss’s critique of religion. Marx was its culminating figure. *The Life of Jesus* – translated into English by the novelist George Eliot – created a sensation in intellectual life. For his blasphemous assault on the sensitivities of the good Christian Germans, Strauss was sacked from his post at Tübingen university and never permitted to teach again.

Less than ten years later, following study of the English classical economy of Ricardo and Smith, Marx found the active, moving principle of modern conditions to lie in alienated human labour, as the source and substance of value. In much the same way as the Young Hegelians drove towards the conclusion that the concept God was the inverted reflection of man, and that the imagined creative powers of the deity were an inverted mirror image of the powers of humanity and nature, so Marx concluded that living human labour must re-possess for itself its own alienated powers embodied against it in the fetishized form of capital. The study of capital, and participation in the struggle for emancipation from capital by its producers, the proletariat, was Marx’s life’s work. Thus his remark in his article of 1843/44 that it was the task of philosophy to ‘unmask self-estrangement in its *unholy* forms [i.e. through criticism of the state, political economy, etc.] once the *holy* form of human self-estrangement has been unmasked’ (p.244).

Before that, in his doctoral dissertation, Marx had written that ‘The proclamation of Prometheus, "in a word, I hate all the Gods", is [philosophy’s] own profession, her own slogan against all the gods of heaven and earth who do not recognize man’s self-consciousness as the highest divinity’.⁵ Much later, in 1865, in reply to a questionnaire prepared by one of his daughters, Marx gave as his favourite motto the Latin phrase: *De omnibus dubitandum*, to doubt in everything.⁶ Against the fatal certitudes of orthodox Islam, the theme of doubt, and loss of faith, is one of the most persistent in Rushdie’s book. This was sufficient to bring the charge of apostasy, and the penalty of death, upon him, particularly from Iran. A well-known survey of Is-

Islamic theology explains that from its beginnings, the Shi'ite branch of Islam was

a movement that places the emphasis on the leader...It was the manifestation of a deep unconscious need—a feeling in men's hearts that they would be happier and more satisfied spiritually if they had a charismatic leader to follow. The imam of whom the Shi'ites dreamed is precisely what is meant by a charismatic leader...Since the imam was...held to be divinely preserved from error, Shi'ite doctrine was encouraging a very autocratic form of government.

Between the critical artist and Islamic theocracy there could only be the sharpest contradiction.⁸

Profanity of the Sacred

Bruno Bauer, Strauss's immediate successor in the debate, and like him a theological scholar, went one stage beyond Strauss in considering Jesus to have been not merely not a god but a creation of fiction. For Bauer, Strauss's theory of a historical Jesus surrounded by a-historical myths was inconsistent. To invalidate the miracles of the New Testament, with their central place in the Gospels, was to invalidate the Gospels as a whole. Bauer argued that Strauss had not investigated the problem of historical priority in the writing of the Gospels, and concluded that a single author (he thought Mark) had been the actual source of what Strauss regarded as a social myth unconsciously and collectively cast up by the Jews. In his eyes, Strauss was no less superstitious and unhistorical than the biblical texts he criticized, since he had failed to produce any factual evidence of an actual Jesus. By contrast, Bauer attempted to identify a specific human source for the Christ legend.

Like Strauss before him, Bauer was removed from his teaching post in 1842 and forbidden to teach in any Prussian university: a sentence benign compared with the decree against Rushdie. Earlier still, the fate of Strauss and Bauer had befallen the most materialist of the Young Hegelians, Ludwig Feuerbach. In 1844, writing from Paris, Marx tried earnestly but without success to persuade Feuerbach to join the future Communist League, though years later (not long before his death) Feuerbach did join the First International. Feuerbach's career as a university lecturer had been ruined in 1830, when he published a work critical of the notions of an immortal personal soul and of the transcendence of God. His *Provisional Theses for a*

Reform of Philosophy was banned by the German censors in 1843. How ridiculous it is, Feuerbach wrote later that year,

to wish to suppress the 'atheism' of philosophy without suppressing at the same time the atheism of everyday experience! How ridiculous it is to persecute the theoretical negation of Christianity and at the same time to let the actual negations of Christianity, in which the modern world abounds, to stand as they are...And yet how rich with such ridiculous things is history. They repeat themselves in all critical periods'

Rushdie's presentation of sexual themes in relation to Muhammad compares with Feuerbach (also the poet Heine, and the young Marx) in emphasizing profane sexual love in opposition to the abstraction of religion, with its hostility to the senses and its supposed happiness (or torments) after death. Against the pious self-image presented by Islam as to its own origins, *The Satanic Verses* displays an imagined prosaic reality. Rushdie presents a 'secret, profane mirror' in which the triumphant Islam of the seventh century registers its own nature through its own 'profane antithesis', twelve prostitutes who assume the identities of the prophet's twelve wives on behalf of their clients, and who are then 'sentenced to death by stoning to punish them for the immorality of their lives' (pp.384, 376, 391). This is a matter that carries its own weight for today. In one passage, concerning a central character in *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie writes: 'He saw now that the choice was simple: the infernal love of the daughters of men, or the celestial adoration of God' (p.321). There is a more than implied criticism of the status of women in Islamic society as 'obedient, and — yes — submissive helpmeets' to the patriarchal husband, a notion that is developed through Rushdie's emphasis of the English translation of the term *Islam*, submission. ('The name of the new religion is *Submission*', p.125).

Rushdie's book is a celebration of the metaphysical, through a constant counterpoising of the categories of good and evil, ideal and material, life and death, sacred and profane, in association with a recognition of the senses, especially through the form of sexual love. Relating to Islam, it explores a theme developed long ago in relation to the Catholic Church by Boccaccio, Chaucer, Rabelais, Aretino and Balzac. Rushdie has done no more than claim the same rights of citizenship claimed long ago by literature, and more recently the women's movement, against Christianity. One of his characters, Salman the Persian, who rejects the prophet, puts it thus: 'It's his Word against mine'. This is the answer of Salman the Persian to another character, a poet (later executed on the prophet's orders), who asks: 'Why are you sure he will kill you?' (p.368). Rushdie's fiction is here confirmed, in its critical tendency, by the mirror subsequently held

up to it by life. Seldom has fiction anticipated so accurately the fate of its author. Written against the contemporary background of Khomeini's republic in Iran, with its mass executions and its mass sacrifice of youth in the interests of a clerical theocracy, Rushdie's portrayal of the exiled Imam ('Burn the books and trust the Book', p.211) was sufficient for the death sentence delivered against him by Khomeini, on account of its transparent *lèse-majesté*.

For Khomeini, Rushdie's book is a calculated move aimed at rooting out religion and religiousness, aimed above all at Islam and its clergy'. He argues that the war of Iran with Iraq 'was the war of poverty against wealth', and asserts that the 'genuine ulema of Islam have never given in to capitalists, money worshippers and landlords...The committed clergy are thirsty for the blood of parasitical capitalists.' Rushdie for him is not an independent literary figure, he is a 'foreign mercenary...the result of foreign infiltration of Islamic culture.' Khomeini is hostile in particular to 'the propagation of the slogan of the separation of religion from politics', which he represents as the 'first and most important move' by colonialism against the clergy and the seminaries.¹⁰

Here is a fully developed world view with a mass appeal in the modern world, sharing a good deal in common with attacks by National Socialism on 'international finance' and 'plutocracy', which for Dr Goebbels and his ideologists were the creation and social expression of the Jews. A species of ideological anti-capitalism was for them a means to genocide. Stalinism similarly deified its own Great Leader and autocratic secular clergy with its own demonology (Trotskyism), and its equally spurious claim to represent the poor (workers and peasants) against the rich (capital).

Within Islamic thought, Rushdie has introduced the dimension of critique in a manner even more disquieting than the defence of philosophical reason by the mediaeval thinker and Aristotelian, Ibn Rushd (Averroes), against the defender of dogma, al-Ghazali. As a teacher of philosophy, Khomeini understands this. The development of a materialist current within Islamic philosophy had important consequences:

Al-Ghazali, the 11th century Islamic theologian, in his *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, complained that 'skeptical, nihilistic, and sensualistic philosophers' profess atheism. The same accusation was made against all those — including Averroes, the great 12th century representative of Islamic philosophy in Spain — who professed the eternity of the world, thereby implying the existence of uncreated matter...In his response to al-Ghazali [in a book entitled *Incoherence of the Incoherence*], Averroes...affirmed the primacy of reason over faith...Latin Averroism was

undoubtedly the most significant source of atheism during the Renaissance.

From Ibn Rushd to Rushdie there is a thread of continuity. Averroes was dismissed from his position, exiled to north Africa, threatened with hell-fire; in Muslim Spain, books on logic and metaphysics were burnt. His later followers were condemned as heretics by Judaism and the Catholic Church.¹² Grounded in a knowledge of the Indian sub-continent and the experience of blacks in the Britain of 'Mrs Torture' (p.266), Rushdie's free and independent standpoint as an artist takes forward a long-standing conflict of tendencies within the intellectual heritage of Islam.

Rushdie's book has a place in the history of thought, because he has dared to challenge and explore the supremacy of faith in the minds of millions. Contrary to Meer, this for him is not an absolute, it requires investigation. His project of inquiry is similar to that set in motion by Ibn Rushd, Strauss, Bauer and Feuerbach, but one that is specifically literary and artistic. It is a brave, self-exploratory, personal vision whose right to exist, and the existence of whose author, a socialist defends. Drawing on thought currents from Gramsci, Brecht, Nietzsche, Kafka and a wealth of other sources in literature, it is perhaps with Joyce's *Ulysses* — with its stream of consciousness, and its long history of suppression in Joyce's native Ireland — that Rushdie's novel may best be compared: not least because both Joyce and Rushdie are writers in revolt (and exile) from the religious universe of their compatriots.

Trotsky, in particular, took the view that in the present century 'true art is unable not to be revolutionary, not to aspire to a complete and radical reconstruction of society'. His view was that modern conditions made the artist the natural ally of revolution. Calling in 1938 for the 'complete freedom of art' in a manifesto signed with the Mexican painter Diego Rivera and the French surrealist poet and critic André Breton, he demanded 'No authority, no dictation, not the least trace of orders from above!' He considered that the artist 'cannot serve the struggle for freedom unless he subjectively assimilates its social content, unless he feels in his very nerves its meaning and drama and freely seeks to give his own inner world incarnation in his art'.¹³ For doing this the writer is now condemned to death, as in Hitler's and Stalin's time, and his book burnt. The issue with Rushdie is not different from that of the poet Mandelstam, who died in Stalin's prison transports, or Diderot (locked up for his 'godless' writings in mid-18th century France) or Jean-Jacques Rousseau, driven from one place of exile to another, whose writings — subsequently the most

important texts of the French revolution – were condemned in Rome and burned in Paris and Geneva by the common hangman.

From Feuerbach to Marx

The decisive transition of Marx towards his own mature conception is in his *Theses on Feuerbach* of 1845. In this turning point in his own thought, Marx examined Feuerbach's theory of an alienated human essence as the source of religious alienation, taking it critically beyond Feuerbach. Not satisfied, like Feurbach, to locate production of religion by human beings in their estrangement from their own needs, Marx stressed that the estranged conditions of this world be overcome in practice. 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it'.¹⁴

Here we arrive at a point beyond which Rushdie is powerless to assist us. Once the myths in the minds of millions of human beings are stripped down to a purely human, historical source – as Rushdie imaginatively attempts in relation to Islam – then the real problem is posed, since the conditions that drive these millions to these fictions remain intact. Rushdie's work, as Marx wrote of Feuerbach,

consists in resolving the religious world into its secular basis. But that the secular basis detaches itself from itself and establishes itself as an independent realm in the clouds can only be explained by the cleavages and self-contradictions in this secular basis. The latter must, therefore, in itself be both understood in its contradiction and revolutionized in practice (ibid).

Here Marx is making the same point as in his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*:

Religious suffering is at one and the same time the expression of real suffering and a protest against that suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people.

The abolition of religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is the demand for their *real* happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their conditions is to *call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions...*The criticism of religion disillusion man, so that he will think, act and fashion his reality like a man who has discarded his illusions and regained his senses so that he will move around himself as his own true sun (p.244).

Thus the baying for Salman Rushdie's head does not indicate absence of respect for international law, a deficiency in secular bourgeois culture, or a return to the middle ages. It is the deficiency of late 20th century conditions that has produced this intellectual paroxysm. The cry against Rushdie is more than just the cry of power-hungry priestly zealots. Far more important, it is the cry of the oppressed creature of the late 20th century, wrapping his chains around himself with indefatigable fury because no more substantial project of emancipation has yet presented itself. The high tide of Islamic reaction is the result of the absence over decades of any international politics that would address things by the root. The campaign against Rushdie is not purely or even primarily a religious affair. It is a form of self-expression of the wretched of the earth, a major part of the world's downtrodden, in which a contradictory mass of material and social impulses are confusedly bound together in a self-negating, self-destructive form. It is a form of anger at this world that serves only to strengthen its chains. Indignation at insults, at oppressiveness, at impoverishment is turned, not against the axes of power, but against an incidental target. As with religion, such politics is a medium in which the powerless are for a period of time permitted to indulge in the illusion of power, in order to subjugate themselves the more effectively.

It is easy to foresee, in countries such as Britain, west Germany and France, which retain gigantic resources of wealth and technique, how Muslim demands will strengthen even more powerful and more effective 'Christian' demands. The imperialist state is strengthened politically among the majority of its citizens, while racist and Christian groups are permitted to assume the mantle of Charles Martel the Hammer (victor against the Muslims at Tours) and El Cid (victor against the Muslims in Spain). Rushdie's novel, an enormously cosmopolitan work, working backwards and forwards between the consciousness of east and west, meets its antithesis from both sides at once.

Orchestrating and manipulating the fears and resentment of the Muslim poor, as so much raw material, the Islamic campaign in each country is in the hands of this or that stratum of the property-owners. These are out to strengthen their position relative to other classes through a political alliance with the imams, in which the mosques serve as nuclei of a political organization aimed, above all, at preventing access to civil society by the younger generation of Muslim women. The anti-Rushdie campaign is thus a question of existence for the women's movement, and a test of its internationalism. It embodies patriarchal violence in the crudest form. In many of the major bourgeois countries, as well as in the cities of the former colonial

world, young women from a Muslim background are leaping across centuries in their personal development. No other section of society in Britain is so much in motion as these young women, whose parents came mainly from the Indian sub-continent. Their personal development violates the power relationships of the family at every point. To this exceptionally important social phenomenon, Rushdie is acutely sensitive, and this alone earns him the hatred of those in revolt against the 21st century. All the more is it essential for socialists to take up the cudgels, not just for Rushdie, but for the new generation of women.

The sole consistent reply to these heavenly storms is honest and fearless criticism, preparing the way for a material liberation that will permit the billions of the world to take production of their own social life into their own hands, without mystification. The principal source of mystification in modern conditions is these modern conditions themselves, rooted in money-dealing capital. What, for instance, is one to make of the statement that a certain monetary forecast had 'disappointed the dollar' (Oracle news, Channel 4 television, 9 March 1989)? Feudalism presented a grandiose heavenly abstraction derived from the creative powers of humanity, yet capitalism humanizes a pure abstraction. ('Fictions were walking around wherever he went, Gibreel reflected, fictions masquerading as real human beings', p.192). Everyday life is determined for the vast majority of humanity by alien, hostile forces beyond rational control, under present conditions. By comparison, the ethical dogmas of Islam appear as simplicity itself.

Religion in the modern world finds its principal source of nourishment in capital, in self-generating and self-expanding value, in which the product of human hands appears as a mystical thing, dominating and negating its human producers. The international heretic hunt serves notice that modern everyday life is a source of uncomprehended, and in the present consciousness, incomprehensible, horrors. These horrors are openly present in South Africa, where human life has been dominated for a century by social relations summed up in a metal, gold. But the nightmares of Soweto are not more vivid than those of Beirut, Belfast or the Bronx. The contemporary spectacle of mass popular reaction is not confined to Islam, though Islam has mobilized a fanatical army where other militant ideologies have (for the time being) proved less successful. Despite important differences between imperialist Europe in the 1930s and the world of Islam of the 1980s, the violent obscurantism of the anti-Rushdie campaign draws the mind again and again to the classic form of 20th century popular counter-revolution, in which the burning of books preceded the burning of people. It is only appropriate

that the South African government should have banned this book, that supporters of the 'national liberation movement' should have menaced its author and that luminaries of South African culture should at the critical moment have joined in silencing him.¹⁵

Policing of the Mind

Special treatment by law for any religion is incompatible with democracy. So also state restriction on religious belief. Religion cannot be abolished: like the state, and like value relationships, it can only wither away when the necessary social conditions come into existence. Religion disappears only when the need for it disappears, and for this the conscious participation of all in determining the development of society is a basic precondition. While there is a single beggar, there is still myth.¹⁶ Anti-religious oppression has never removed religious consciousness and never will. By emphasizing the powerlessness of individuals over their own lives in the most offensive way, it serves in the end only to nurture what it claims to be abolishing, as the history of the USSR and eastern Europe shows. Anti-religious oppression, like religious oppression, is the negation of freedom of criticism, which includes above all the freedom of religious criticism: above all, because the domination of religion over the mind can disappear only in the absence of constraints serving to justify its existence. The Muslim heretic hunt and the South African state are at one with each other in repudiating such freedom of criticism, indispensable to democracy. Their interference with the right of individuals (whether Muslim or non-Muslim) to read Rushdie's book accords with their joint tendency towards a general despotism over society.

At the same time, faith is set against faith by this police meddling in civil society, just as it is set against the preconditions of democratic life.¹⁷ This is in keeping with the Christian-National colouration of the South African state. The end result is to strengthen the fissiparous, divisive forces among the oppressed—above all, among workers—obstructing the development of general, purely human bonds, reinforcing the powerlessness of society, its dependence, its lack of conscious maturity and self-responsibility. It is the old formula: Divide and rule, and complements the Bantustan and race classification policies of the South African state. Formation of the proletariat into a revolutionary class becomes impossible where religious, linguistic, racial, tribal, national, sexual or other such differences take precedence over its universal interest as the producer of mod-

ern society. The anti-Rushdie campaign is thus of first-rate concern to the working class movement. Muslim workers who uphold the South African state's ban on Rushdie's book look effectively to this state, steeped in blood, to uphold purely sectarian interests against the whole class. They uphold this state against themselves, negating the possibility of emancipation.

Professor Meer's suggestion that Islam represents the interests of the oppressed of the colonial world is nonsense. By the same token, the Roman Catholic Church could claim to represent politically the people of Lesotho, the Philippines and the whole of South and Central America. One need merely point to the service given by Islam to imperialism in Spain during the war of revolution and counter-revolution in the 1930s (see *Searchlight South Africa* No.1), or the mass extermination of trade unionists, peasant leaders and intellectuals in Indonesia in 1965-67 under an Islamic pogrom – supervised by the military, and its policy managers in the US¹⁸ – or the mass murder of Christian Armenians in Turkey in 1915. In France, the demonstrations of Muslims for religious censorship and the murder of Rushdie can only strengthen the main fascist party, the Front National, led by the ex-paratrooper in Algeria, Jean-Marie Le Pen. The Islamic war against literature comes also at a time of increased support for the two main neo-Nazi parties in Germany, which are opposed mainly to the Turkish immigrant workers. Instead of serving to strengthen unity between the minority Muslim population and the main body of the working class in these countries, the Islamic agitation isolates and weakens the very people it claims to represent.

Contrary to Khomeini, it was a tremendous step for human culture when the founders of the American republic, especially Jefferson, moved to separate church and state in the early years of the USA. Against the 'loathsome combination of Church and State', Jefferson drafted an Act for Establishing Religious Freedom, passed by the Virginia assembly in 1786, stating that 'our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions, any more than our opinions in physics or geometry'; that 'truth is great, and will prevail if left to herself'; and that no-one

shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall he be enforced, restrained, molested, or burthened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer, on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities (See Peterson, pp.252-53).

Both the French and the Russian revolutions brought about the separation of church and state. Religion then ceases to exert executive power as it does today in countries such as Sudan — a multi-religious country, where enforcement of Islamic law has brought civil war and the death of tens of thousands, mainly non-Muslims. It finds its mirror image in the tyranny of the Jewish state, with its thousands of Muslim victims. Not only unification of the working class but unification or federation of groups of states becomes impossible once a religion seizes special privileges in the state. Religious division then threatens continuously to spill over into political division, civil war and war between states.

As for the demand for state-funded schools controlled by this or that religion, modern Irish history offers proof of the mischievous effect of clerical control of education. To demand that clerical education should be extended (as many Muslims in Britain now demand) is to strengthen the oppressiveness and divisiveness of bourgeois society, which maintains itself increasingly through the obscurantism opposed by Jefferson. The revolutionary demand, by contrast, is for all schools to be secularized free of the oppressor state, and all blasphemy laws to be repealed.

The most important theme running through education in Northern Ireland, has been the 'seemingly irresistible demand for segregated schooling', in which religious leaders and most lay people believe that children 'should be taught by teachers of their own denomination, that children should attend school with their own co-religionists, and that religious instruction should be woven into the school curriculum' (Akenson, pp.193-95). Yet nothing serves the oppression of the Irish (or the Lebanese, or the Cypriots) so much as political and religious division of the workers, which segregated schooling promotes. The Muslim agitation in Britain for state-funded Islamic schools must ghettoize social life all the more completely, both on religious and racial grounds, further extending the conditions of Belfast and Beirut within the main British cities. Thus far there is no evidence of substantial campaigning for state-funded Islamic schools in South Africa. But the campaign against Rushdie, like the statement by Professor Meer, augments the principle of racial segregation in South Africa with that of segregation by religion. The whole force of the struggle against segregation in South Africa over decades is negated by the Muslim campaign.

Nevertheless, where private religious schools are already financed by the state out of general taxation for some religions, as in Britain, it is not enough to demand an end to religious control of education. So long as discrimination persists against one faith, to the material advantage of another, the hold of religious zealots on the main body

of its members is strengthened, not weakened. Before the sweeping away of all privileges, those who seek that change have no choice but to concede the principle of equal treatment of religions in relation to education. If Muslims demand separate schooling, as in Britain, then bourgeois society must be required to concede to them no less than it already concedes to others, precisely so that Muslims may freely take issue against their own religious self-limitation, as Rushdie has dared to do. There is no other way towards developing a genuinely democratic consciousness, spread widely throughout the society. Without such a consciousness, intolerant of the least sign of special privilege, social revolution is impossible. To subvert the principle of religious privilege *in toto*, it must be made general.

Birth of the New

'If the old refused to die, the new could not be born'. This remark, adapted from Gramsci, with which *The Satanic Verses* begins and ends, speaks against Rushdie's traducers. Rich, complex and various, by its end the book attains a synthesis in the death of old Changez Chamchawala, with his eyes open, and without any word of God on his lips. Not having read the book before condemning it, the representatives of the Transvaal and the Natal Indian Congresses, like Professor Meer, could only miss the author's point. Old Changez's two loving and united wives, Nasreen and Kasturba, are of Muslim and of Hindu origin. It is a conception of the future union of the peoples of the Indian sub-continent, irrespective of religion. This is a point that has importance in South Africa, where social protest is strongly infused with religion: witness the political prominence of Archbishop Tutu and the Rev. Allen Boesak, or the funding of the *New Nation* by the Catholic Church, or the religious ban on intermarriage between Muslim and Christian and between Hindu and Muslim, in a state which for a long time banned Bertrand Russell's *Why I Am Not a Christian*.

The attack by state, clerics and nationalist political figures on Rushdie and his book amounts to a campaign for suppression of criticism of religion. Stridently asserting the principle of segregation in personal and social life, the clamour for Rushdie's blood further narrows the scope of political criticism, itself under ban. It is essential to state: every blow against publication of *The Satanic Verses*, and still more against Rushdie himself – whether by governments or clerics or religious zealots, whether in Cape Town, Teheran, Islamabad or London – is a blow against the emancipation of humanity. Of all

popular movements, the least supportable is a pro-slavery rebellion of the slaves.

But the book will not be silenced. Its notoriety as well as its uniqueness will compel it to be read – especially among Muslims – and its merit as literature will ensure its survival. We are at the birth, painful, bloody and difficult, of a new period of revolutionary enlightenment.

NOTES

1. Quoted in Hook, pp.222-23.

2. The uproar against Rushdie derives from the text: 'Idolatry is worse than carnage' (Sura 2, 186ff., *The Koran*, pp.352,355). Also: 'When the sacred months are over, slay the idolaters wherever you find them...make war on the leaders of unbelief' (Sura 9, 4ff., p.321).

3. Marx, (1977), p.243.

4. Studies of the movement of criticism initiated by Strauss, include Hook, Löwith, McLellan (1969), Wartofsky and Stepelevich.

5. Marx (1971), p.13.

6. Watt, pp.20, 24, 52.

7. Text in Marx and Engels (1971), p.179.

8. 'Poets are followed by none save erring men...Not so the true believers...' (*The Koran*, Sura 26, 227, 'The Poets', p.208). Poetical contests, once the forum for satirical verses directed against Islam, were stopped by the historical Muhammad. A character in Rushdie's book argues: 'A poet's work...To name the unnameable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world and stop it from going to sleep' (p.97).

9 Feuerbach (in Wartofsky, p.25) considered the Dutch philosopher, Spinoza (a leading element in Hegel's philosophical synthesis) 'the Moses of modern freethinkers and materialists' because he conceived of God as an extended – i.e., a material – being (p.24). For this heresy Spinoza was expelled from the Jewish community in Amsterdam in 1656. No doubt it was said then of him, as Professor Bhikhu Parekh does of Rushdie, that he had been 'unnecessarily provocative' to the pious Jews and had shown 'lack of elementary respect' for this immigrant and refugee community, and tended to 'demean [Jews] in their own and others' eyes' ('Between holy text and moral void', *New Statesman and Society*, 23 March 1989). Parekh is deputy chair of the Commission for Racial Equality in Britain.

10. Extracts from a speech of 22 February 1989 by Ruhollah al-Musavi al-Khomeini, (*Guardian*, 6 March 1989). The SACP's embarrassment over the anti-Rushdie campaign follows its uncritical support for the

Khomeini regime, associating it with 'popular forces' and the 'mass of the Iranian people' (Editorial Notes, *African Communist*, No.82, 1980). It also published: 'Why Communists Supported Khomeini: The Anti-Imperialist Tide in Iran', praising the 'leader of the revolution, Imam Khomeini' and calling for 'unity of all patriotic forces supporting Imam Khomeini's line' (ibid., pp.56-7). As with Stalin, so with the Imam.

11. 'Atheism', *Encyclopaedia Britannica. Macropaedia*, 1979, Vol.2.

12. See Russell, pp.446-49, 474-75.

13. Trotsky, 'Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art' (1938), in Siegel, pp.117-20.

14. Marx, 'Theses on Feuerbach', in *Early Writings*, p.423.

15. Muslim ideologues invoke the climate of Weimar Germany to justify their death-squads against Rushdie in their attacks on 'liberalism', 'the politicians' and the 'dictatorship of parliament' in Britain, coupled with demands for a return of the death penalty, by Yusuf Islam, who in a previous incarnation was known as pop singer Cat Stevens ('Open to Question', BBC2, London, 15 May 1989).

16. A remark by Walter Benjamin, quoted in Adorno, p.199.

17. In Saudi Arabia, the religious police, the *Mutawa*, enforces slamic law over Muslim and non-Muslim alike. The British official guide for expatriates working in Saudi Arabia states: 'Murder and sexual immorality such as adultery or homosexual acts carry the death penalty in Saudi Arabia. So does apostasy... The death penalty is carried out in public, usually by decapitation...being seen with a woman who is not a member of your family, for example, can lead to trouble with the authorities...' (*Times*, 17 March 1989). The South African press cited Saudi Arabia as the source of the campaign against Rushdie.

18. 'The mass slaughter...increased in intensity as the month of Ramadan approached...In five months between 300,000 and 500,000 people were killed...By the end of [October 1965] a new army entered the field: the fanatical Muslims who claimed it as their duty to cleanse Muslim Indonesia of atheism...[launching] an attack on the communists and their associates which grew through five months into one of the most appalling massacres of human history. The butchery was soon spiritually escalated into a *mujahid* – a Holy War.

'The *Ulamas* – the Religious Teachers – ruled that devout Muslims should regard communists as *kafir habir* – infidels of war – who, according to tradition, had to be put mercilessly to death' (Vitachi, pp.138-40). The secularized intelligentsia in Afghanistan face a similar massacre Funded by the US and Saudi Arabia, and US armed, the mujahidin aim forcibly to thrust the city women back under the veil. Like the prison murders in Iran, the campaign against Rushdie expresses a general social reaction.

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