

Bennion Attacked Over Rushdie

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Review

Keeping Up with Salman Rushdie

By [James Fenton](#)

Haroun and the Sea of Stories

by Salman Rushdie

Granta Books/Viking, 219 pp., \$18.95

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On Christmas Eve last year, six Muslim scholars held a meeting with Salman Rushdie, at the end of which the novelist affirmed the oneness of God and the genuineness of the prophecy of the Prophet Muhammad. At which point somewhere between six and sixty million newspaper readers around the world set down their coffee cups and said: Oh.

But every Oh that was uttered had its own special flavor, its own modifier, its own tinge of meaning. Oh he *did*, did he? Oh so they got him in the end! Oh how convenient! Oh what a defeat for secularism! Oh what a shame! Oh Allah be praised!

For myself, the Oh that escaped my lips began life as a vibrant little cerise cloud of wonderment. For a few seconds, as it hung in the air, I thought I detected in the cloud the broken features of Galileo. I looked again, and Galileo seemed to have turned into Patty Hearst. I thought of Oslo...no, not Oslo, the Stockholm syndrome. Then the cloud turned pale beige and I thought: drat it, if I hadn't been so dilatory with my review of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, I would not now be faced with the task of writing about *this*.

For it is hard enough, when reading and thinking about *Haroun*, to separate the book from its author's plight. But who could be expected to concentrate on any text when, somewhere at the edge of vision, the author was undergoing such an exotic metamorphosis 'Look, you just carry on reading my book. Don't mind me. I'm just turning into a peacock...a vase of flowers...a comet...a constellation.'

At this point I can already hear Rushdie's voice objecting that it's not so exotic, if your grandfather was a devout Muslim, to embrace Islam yourself. As country folk in England say of an interest in beekeeping, 'It often skips a generation.' And it is true that, in normal circumstances, one might be happy to accept any of the 'natural' explanations on offer. Salman had, as he has said before, a God-shaped hole in him. If it was going to be any religion, it was always going to be Islam. He had always been interested in the spiritual aspect of human experience; but how could one talk of spirituality and the soul without positing a God? That had been the problem in the old days. These days, by accepting God, he has made things easier for himself . . .

These 'natural' explanations, put forward in interview, with patience and much charm, will do little to change the minds of those who believe that they have witnessed—and this is what makes the case so exotic—an example of a forced conversion. It was this that caused the initial dismay. Then there was the question of Salman's decision not to allow a paperback version of *The Satanic Verses* for the moment, and to prevent any further translations of the book. While the conversion was considered (by some, not all) a matter of private conscience,

the climbdown over paperback publication was taken as a public issue. Some people thought Salman had sold out. The lawyer Francis Bennion was quoted, on his resignation from the Salman Rushdie Defence Committee, as saying:

There are several reasons why Rushdie is not worth defending.... He has decided not proceed with the paperback, so surrendering to would-be murderers. He has decided not to proceed with translated editions of the book, another form of surrender. Worst of all, he has now confounded his supporters by embracing the bigoted creed that holds its followers entitled to murder a novelist for what he has written in a novel.

The most creepy sentence in this outburst is the first. What, in the actual case in question, is Salman being defended *against*? Oh—a death sentence, was it? The revenge of the mob, perhaps? Free-lance hit squads in pursuit of bounty money? Mr. Bennion the Barrister, who presumably finds it ‘worth defending’ obvious criminals against lesser penalties, has, in this taxing and protracted case, decided to take umbrage.

Umbrage is the word. There is a jilted tone to the remarks of the Dismayed Friends. The circumstances of Rushdie’s personal catastrophe are such as to arouse in others the most intense fantasies of friendship, and if a friendship is really a fantasy it is as prone to the disease jilt as a clematis is prone to wilt. Mr. Bennion was suffering from jilt. The dream Salman, the plucky little atheist Mr. Bennion was singlehandedly hauling out of the well, turned out to be a nasty muddy Muslim after all, and Mr. Bennion let go of the rope. Bumpety, bumpety, splosh. Back into the well fell the nasty dream Salman.

I tried to explain over the phone to the real Salman the way this process operated, how powerful our fantasies of friendship can be, and so forth. He heard me out, or he just about heard me out. Then he reminded me rather sharply that at his end of the phone there was more at stake than hurt feelings.

To return, then, to the Galileo comparison: as soon as I saw it in print, even though it had been my first thought, I disliked it intensely. For a start, Salman has not turned his back on *The Satanic Verses*, has not denied it or called for its suppression. He has agreed to delay paperback publication for the time being, to let things cool. This for him was a concession, although I hardly think that Penguin was keen on the paperback anyway. I believe, in common with many of Salman’s supporters, that this concession was wise. You can still buy the hardback—it’s a bit like the way it must have been purchasing condoms in the Fifties (and how dismaying to set out to write a novel, and to find that what you’ve written is a packet of one dozen Durex Nu-form lubricated with Sensitol—unless of course you are a magical realist, in which case you should take it in your stride)—but it’s possible. As to the question of any further translations, when has it ever been a writer’s *duty* to have his work translated into the maximum number of languages? One should not introduce new fanaticisms into an argument against fanaticisms.

As to the conversion itself, there is no doubt that it took place under circumstances of duress, but the Patty Hearst comparison does not enlighten. Salman has affirmed the religion of his ancestors. As far as we know, none of Patty’s ancestors was a member of the Symbionese Liberation Army. The Stockholm syndrome, the phenomenon known as projective identification, seems on reflection inapplicable in this sense: according to the theory, the captor (in, as it were, a hijack) projects all feelings of helplessness, weakness, and smallness onto the captive, who responds by projecting onto the captor all capacity for power, rational thought, decision, and action. The captive thus ends up identifying with the captor.

It makes a difference that Salman Rushdie is only metaphorically the captive of a certain branch of fundamentalist Islam, and that physically he is under the protection of the British Special Branch. It is also most striking that Salman has not projected onto the ayatollahs all capacity for rational thought. If he had done, one would expect him to be running around shouting, ‘Off with my head.’

For the *fatwa* did not call for the conversion of Salman Rushdie. It called for his death (and, do not forget, the death of all those involved in the publication of *The Satanic Verses* who were aware of its content). Conversion wasn't mentioned or implied as a way out, and in this sense, whether we see the conversion as sincere or as a ruse, it has a quality that frustrates the intentions of the late Ruhollah al-Musavi al-Khomeini.

And it is consistent with what I know of the preconversion Salman Rushdie, in the sense that it points in the direction of a nonfundamentalist, tolerant, disputatious Islam, and indeed calls that tendency to its aid. I don't believe that Salman ever thought of Khomeini as representing Islam itself, that he confused the *fatwa* with the creed in the manner of Bennion's outburst. On the contrary, he was extremely alert to nuances within the religion and the political implications of that religion. His life, after all, depends on such considerations.

My (purely speculative) point is that I doubt it felt to Rushdie, when he embraced Islam, that he was yielding to Khomeini, any more than it would seem to me that I was yielding to Rome if I began attending Protestant services in Belfast. The hand of friendship had been proffered. The six Wise Men from the East agreed that *The Satanic Verses* had been wildly misread. It was pointed out that, in becoming a Muslim, you do not have to imply that you are a perfect Muslim—doubts can be retained about this and that. And anyway, as Salman has said since, Islam is a very private religion. You don't even have to set foot in a mosque. The whole thing is a matter between you and your God.

The conversion did not succeed in lifting the *fatwa*, but maybe it was never expected that it would. One thing it did achieve, besides making some of us jump out of our skins, was a clearing of the air as far as some of Salman's most hostile critics were concerned. I take the example of Shabbir Akhtar, from the Bradford Council of Mosques, who had written in *The Independent*:

If Rushdie decides to cancel the paperback and engage in a dialogue with people whom he has thus far contemptuously dismissed as ignorant and anti-intellectual, there is scope for reconciliation. All Muslims look forward to the end of the Liberal Inquisition. Islam is a religion of militant wrath as well as conspicuous mercy. The magnanimity which has been denied to both parties may yet seek an occasion.^u

On January 4 this year, after Rushdie had overfulfilled these conditions somewhat dramatically, Shabbir Akhtar had another letter in *The Independent*:

Sir: Salman Rushdie, the prodigal son of Islam, wishes to return home. And there should be much rejoicing in paradise over such a sinner.

But there is a distant land from which no one returns. It is not that the Muslim father won't forgive. Rather, Rushdie can't find his way home. For there are sins that permanently rust the heart, corrode the mind and blur the vision.

Home is certainly the one place where they have to believe you when you insist on it. The tricky part is finding the way there. The way back to the household of Islam is paved with bad intentions; and the safest bet is never to leave it in the first place.

Why does the prodigal want to return anyway? Because, as they say in that Yorkshire colloquialism, he's skint. He's run out of supplies. And the best provision is the love of God.

The far country of double standards and false absolutes still pulls Rushdie back. There he formed friendships and ties he could never break in good faith. What, then, of the kindness of the security men, the goodness of [Rushdie's defenders] Pinter, [Arnold] Wesker and St. Fay [a reference to Fay Weldon]? Do these count for nothing? Surely these have a place in Rushdie's heart. There are choices that can seal one's fate—even before death intervenes to end both the dilemma and the choice. Many battlefields lie outside the heart. And God has every affair in his care.

Yes, this clears the air. Salman Rushdie has committed the sin for which there is no forgiveness—the sin of having Arnold Wesker as a friend.

Wesker in fact is one of the Dismayed Friends. He described Rushdie's conversion as a victory for religious terrorists. To which Rushdie retorted that it was 'none of Arnold's business.' With me, when I suggested we might record a little talk together, Salman was gentler but still firm: what was none of Arnold's business was none of mine either . . .

Notes

^[1] Quoted in W.J. Weatherby, *Salman Rushdie: Sentenced to Death* (Carroll and Graf, 1990), p. 211.

^[2] *Illustrated Weekly of India*, October 7, 1989, cited in Malise Ruthven, *A Satanic Affair* (Hogarth Press, 1991).

See also:

<http://www.francisbennion.com/pdfs/fb/1991/1991-009-rushdie-press-notice.pdf>

<http://www.francisbennion.com/pdfs/fb/1993/1993-011-dt016-salman-rushdie.pdf>

<http://www.hvk.org/articles/0597/0220.html>