

Reconsidering the Rushdie Affair

Freedom, censorship and American foreign policy

by

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Introductory Note by Francis Bennion Richard Webster, the author of the following essay, was born in 1950 and died at the relatively early age of 60 in June 2010. It is intended to continue to operate his website www.richardwebster.net

Richard Webster studied English literature at the University of East Anglia. He is the author of *A Brief History of Blasphemy: Liberalism, Censorship and 'The Satanic Verses'*, 1990; *Why Freud Was Wrong: Sin, Science and Psychoanalysis*, 1995; *Freud* (Great Philosophers), 2003; and *The Great Children's Home Panic*, 1998. His last book, *The Secret of Bryn Estyn: The Making of a Modern Witch Hunt* (2005), was shortlisted for the Orwell Prize.

I have, with permission, put the following essay on my website because I consider it important. It opened my eyes about such matters as the true significance of Milton's *Areopagitica* (paras. 16 to 20) and of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (paras. 49 to 58). It is enlightening throughout about the Rushdie affair, mentioning my own small part (para. 112). Also particularly interesting (and arguable) is the following:

'It would be unwise to refuse to support campaigners against apartheid in South Africa on the ground that this cause has sometimes been supported by terrorist action. It would be equally unwise to rule out the possibility of a Palestinian state because some Palestinians have committed atrocities in order to further this aim.' (para. 160).

For ease of reference I have added paragraph numbers to the essay.

Text of Richard Webster's essay

'In the democratic system, the necessary illusions cannot be imposed by force. Rather, they must be instilled in the public mind by more subtle means. A totalitarian state can be satisfied with lesser degrees of allegiance to required truths. It is sufficient that people obey; what they think is a secondary concern. But in a democratic political order, there is always the danger that independent thought might be translated into political action, so it is important to eliminate the threat at its root. Debate cannot be stilled, and indeed, in a properly functioning system of propaganda, it should not be, because it has a system-reinforcing character if constrained within proper bounds. What is essential is to set the bounds firmly.'

Noam Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions*

'... in the context of historical reality, rights are not a matter between man and God, but between man and his fellow man, his neighbour, his enemy. A right that is recognised by no one but yourself is not a right; at best it is a claim or a demand.'

Amos Oz, *The Slopes of Lebanon*

1 Freedom and censorship

'Our cause is sexual liberation. Our tactic the defiance of censorship ... Censorship is the outward and continuing expression of the distortion of the human erotic faculty. It is the one public point at which we can join battle with what enslaves us.'

1. The words are Germaine Greer's, the time 1971, the occasion a backwards look at the Wet Dream Festival which took place in Amsterdam in November 1970. The Festival itself was designed as a celebration of the erotic. It was enlivened, if that is the word, by an incident

in which the British poet Heathcote Williams and the journalist Anthony Haden-Guest contrived to steal from the film director Otto Muehl a live goose which he was just about to torture on stage as part of his act. In the climax of this act Muehl was supposed to decapitate the 'sexy goose', enclose its bleeding neck in a condom and then use it to bugger an actress. In the performance which Germaine Greer witnessed the goose was stolen just in time. She recalled the theft a year later without remorse and with mordant humour:

'It was bloody good fun, and we cheered like workers at a melodrama. Muehl flapped around the stage brandishing his knife. Come his last truly great performance he will gut himself and fuck his own liver. What is life where art is concerned?'

2. Few moments in our recent cultural history encapsulate so well the difficulties and the dilemmas faced by those who seek liberation through art. For if the Wet Dream Festival had a single enemy, then that enemy was, as Germaine Greer's words indicate, censorship. Ironically, however, in the very midst of a festival held in order to defy the powers of the censor, Greer found herself applauding the suppression of a work of art.
3. It is perhaps significant that in her account of the episode, Germaine Greer herself fails to spot the full irony of her own predicament and fails to acknowledge that her friends had indeed become censors of a kind. Censorship, it would seem, is something that *other people* do; it is not something we would ever do ourselves.
4. Yet the simple fact is that both in Britain and in America, as in every other Western democracy, we live in the midst of censorship. Our 'free society' turns out, on inspection, to be a society where – for good or ill – practically every medium of expression other than the novel is subject to elaborate restrictions; where every programme we watch on television has been vetted by the guardians of public decency; where every film we see has been censored; where truly erotic works of art can scarcely be seen in any public gallery, and where every non-artistic picture ever published or displayed is subject to rigorous obscenity laws. These laws express, in their selective prohibitions and permissions, a seemingly profound antipathy to sexual love and a deep and almost insane horror of some of the most ordinary parts of the human body, particularly when these are conjoined in some of the most ordinary ways.
5. What is perhaps even more important than all these examples of public censorship, however, are the kinds of censorship we exercise upon ourselves. In the dark safety of the theatre of our own imagination we are permanently able, should we so desire, to watch demonstrations of sexual affection and erotic largesse so extraordinary, they could not be shown in any cinema. Simultaneously we are able to view and participate in scenes of passion and emotional generosity more reckless than any novelist would dare create. Yet for the most part it is probably true to say that we do not make much use of this extraordinary resource. For most of the time the theatre of our imagination remains locked – empty, unvisited, and unloved.
6. In our private, as in our public lives, far from being free from censorship, we are in almost permanent thrall to it. Unable to face up to this fact, however, we have developed an elaborate self-congratulatory myth of freedom. In the midst of repression we celebrate freedom; from the depths of our own puritanism we proclaim liberation.
7. It is largely because we decline to acknowledge the censor within ourselves that we tend to regard anyone who openly seeks to impose censorship upon us as irredeemably alien. Instead of joining in a debate with such censors or would-be censors, we are prone to imagine ourselves engaged in a battle – a kind of Holy War fought against opponents whose own feelings, arguments and beliefs may be safely disregarded because they are in some way inhuman or anti-human.

8. Some understanding of our tendency to demonise censors seems necessary if we are to have any success at all in unravelling the various strands in one of the most complex of all recent cultural tragedies – the Satanic Verses affair. For whichever view we take of the central issue, it is difficult not to come to the conclusion that Muslims who protested against Rushdie’s novel were regarded not simply as uneducated barbarians but as agents of darkness. Again and again the conflict was presented as one in which ‘we’ were in possession of all the virtue while ‘they’ were the personification of impure bigotry. In *The Bookseller*, the main organ of the British book-trade, Muslims calling for the withdrawal of *The Satanic Verses* were described as ‘the enemy’. In *The Observer* in January 1989 Salman Rushdie himself talked in terms of a battle between the secular and the religious, the light and the dark: ‘Now that battle has spread to Britain I can only hope it will not be lost by default. It is time for us to choose.’
9. At the end of 1990 Rushdie turned away from such crusading rhetoric and even announced that he had ‘embraced’ Islam. There then followed a considerable period in which the Rushdie affair appeared to fade from the news media almost completely. Many people concluded that the entire problem had been successfully resolved. This illusion was destroyed in July 1991 when Rushdie’s Italian translator was stabbed during an attempt to murder him. A week later the Japanese translator of *The Satanic Verses*, Hitoshi Igarishi, was stabbed to death near his university office in Tokyo. The murder of Igarishi helped to precipitate a new crisis and by December 1991 it had become clear that Rushdie’s attempt to build bridges of understanding with his Muslim opponents was over.
10. In the light of the assassination of Rushdie’s Japanese translator, and after the renewed threats against the novelist’s own life, it would be difficult not to sympathise with him and to feel the depth of the despair which led him to abandon his attempts at reconciliation. It is also difficult not to understand his own feeling that, while British and American hostages had been released at the cost of much diplomatic effort, he had apparently been abandoned to his fate not only by the British government but also by the intellectual community as a whole.
11. By far the most positive aspect of the revived publicity which has recently surrounded the Rushdie affair has been the determination of so many of Salman Rushdie’s supporters to continue to demand that the *fatwa* against the author and his publishers be lifted.
12. What is disturbing, however, is that few if any of the distinguished writers and intellectuals who have been making this demand seem to have thought carefully about the complexities of the affair itself. This failure has much more than merely academic significance. For if we are to have any hope at all of releasing Salman Rushdie from his cruel ordeal, the first priority must be to put aside the glib certainties and the Manichean simplicities which tend to proliferate whenever the Rushdie affair is discussed. Above all we need to lift the demonic image we have imposed upon hundreds of thousands of Muslims throughout the world. We need to recognise that the Rushdie affair is not a clash between the forces of freedom and the forces of censorship and darkness. It is a clash between two ancient cultures which are both founded upon restraint and self-denial, and which, partly because of the depth of their own rigidity, have tended historically to demonise one another.
13. One of the most astonishing and at times frightening features of the debate which has developed around the Rushdie affair has been the willingness of so many literary intellectuals to defend the Western fortress of free speech in unconditional terms without ever pausing to inquire why that fortress was erected in the first place, and which values it was designed to defend.
14. In December 1991, on the occasion of the two hundredth anniversary of one of the most sacred events in the Western calendar of freedom, the signing of the First Amendment to the American constitution, Salman Rushdie himself reviewed his current plight. Having implicitly repudiated his conversion to Islam he renewed his campaign for his novel to be

published in paperback. The brief paragraph which he devoted to the particular issue of free speech ran as follows:

“Free speech is a non-starter,” says one of my Islamic extremist opponents. No, sir, it is not. Free speech is the whole thing, the whole ball game. Free speech is life itself.’

15. That the issue of free speech in the *Satanic Verses* affair could ever be reduced to such slogans and to this level of intellectual banality is disturbing in itself. That this could happen not in the immediate traumatic aftermath of the *fatwa*, but almost three years afterwards, when there has been ample time for mature consideration, might well seem to be almost beyond belief. Perhaps, however, Salman Rushdie’s words and his readiness to recite a creed whose history he has clearly never taken the trouble to study critically, are all too easy both to understand and to forgive. For being under a sentence of death does not always concentrate the mind wonderfully, and it does not always lead to profound reflection. What is truly disturbing is not that Rushdie himself should be content to leave the argument at this level but that his own uncritical acceptance of Western orthodoxies should be implicitly endorsed by countless journalists, writers and intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic who are *not* under sentence of death and who therefore have no excuse for such shallowness.
16. The confusion which still surrounds the issue of free speech in the affair of *The Satanic Verses* can be traced back to the very beginnings of the debate. Few have worn their historical innocence on their sleeve so boldly as the novelist, Anthony Burgess. On 16 February 1989, two days after Khomeini’s *fatwa*, Burgess wrote an article in the *Independent* in which he implicitly set forth his own understanding of the history of free speech. ‘I do not think,’ he wrote, ‘that even our British Muslims will be eager to read that great vindication of free speech, which is John Milton’s *Areopagitica*. Oliver Cromwell’s Republic proposed muzzling the press, and Milton replied by saying, in effect, that the truth must declare itself by battling with falsehood in the dust and heat.’
17. In pointing to John Milton as one of the most influential ancestors of modern doctrines of free speech, Anthony Burgess was, of course, absolutely correct. It is a pity, however, that before upbraiding Muslims about their assumed reluctance to read Milton’s essay, this distinguished novelist did not take the trouble to re-read it himself. Had he done so he might have noticed that Milton’s celebrated defence of the freedom of the press was simultaneously a plea for maintaining a particular kind of religious intolerance.
18. For although Milton loudly demanded freedom to expound his own opinions, his libertarianism did not extend to the opinions of those he hated. ‘Popery and open superstition’, he wrote in *Areopagitica* should be ‘extirpated’. At the same time Milton upheld existing bans on the ‘impious or evil’ which ‘no law can possibly permit.’ As the Dean of St Paul’s, W. R. Matthews, bravely pointed out more than fifty years ago:

‘Milton did not support freedom of religious debate for Catholics ... Atheists or non-Christians ... [I]t is clear that Milton himself would have excluded not only the overwhelming majority of Christians but the greater part of the human race from the benefit of his tolerance.’
19. In this respect, as in many others, Milton was merely following in the footsteps of the leaders of the Reformation. For it is unfortunately not the case that the Reformation replaced a state of religious tyranny by a state of religious freedom. It may well be that Martin Luther is sometimes celebrated as a champion of such freedom, but this view of his achievement rests upon a misconception. His famous pronouncement at the Diet of Worms of 1521, ‘Here I stand. I can do nothing else. God help me. Amen’, was certainly not a declaration of untrammelled liberty. For Luther was simply fighting against the authority of the pope in the name of an authority which was even higher than that of the pope – the word of God. As Joachim Kahl has observed, ‘submission to this objectively present authority was freedom of conscience as he understood it.’ In 1531, Martin Luther gave

evidence of his own conception of religious freedom by assenting to Melancthon's suggestion that Anabaptists should be punished by death. In 1536 he persuaded Philip of Hesse to accept the principle of the death penalty for all 'heretics'.*

20. For the successors of Luther, including Puritan intellectuals such as Milton, freedom of speech was increasingly regarded as a holy ideal not out of any abstract reverence for liberty or tolerance, but because the liberty of conscience they demanded was very specifically liberty of the *Christian* conscience. For them the highest form of freedom was always the freedom to read, contemplate and preach the word of God. Indeed many Puritans distinguished specifically between two kinds of liberty – between 'natural liberty' and 'civil liberty'.
21. This distinction was drawn clearly by John Winthrop the Governor of Massachusetts in a speech made in 1645 which American children were still learning by heart in the nineteenth century. Winthrop, like any Christian, either at that time or in previous centuries, accepted as axiomatic the truth of the doctrine of Original Sin. It followed from this doctrine that, since men and women are corrupt, 'natural liberty' was to be shunned. As a potential source of evil as well as good, it was the great enemy of truth and peace, the wild beast which the ordinances of God existed to restrain and subdue. The form of liberty which Winthrop advocated was 'civil' or 'moral' liberty which was derived directly from political covenants and moral law.
22. This liberty was seen as the proper end and object of government and as something which could not exist without the laws and restraints imposed by governments. For it was the liberty of Christians which was maintained by subjection to authority. 'If you stand for your natural corrupt liberties,' declaimed Winthrop, 'and will do what is good in your own eyes, you will not endure the least weight of authority, but will murmur, and oppose, and be always striving to shake off that yoke; but if you will be satisfied to enjoy such civil and lawful liberties, such as Christ allows you, then will you quietly and cheerfully submit unto that authority which is set over you, in all the administrations of it, for your good.'
23. Winthrop's orthodox Puritan theory of liberty clearly explains why, in the tradition of secular liberalism which eventually evolved out of it, it was assumed as a matter of course that 'freedom' was actually conditional upon legal and moral restraints – something which applied in the realm of speech just as much as it did in the realm of action. 'Freedom', far from signifying freedom from orthodoxy, actually signified subjection to orthodoxy. For as Winthrop himself clearly explains, it was only by complete submission to the laws of Christ that freedom could be guaranteed.
24. This meant in effect that traditional Protestant advocacy of 'freedom' actually went hand with attitudes which were rigid and profoundly intolerant. In the Puritan revolution, as later in the American revolution, 'liberty of speech,' as Arthur Schlesinger has put it, 'belonged solely to those who spoke the speech of liberty.'

2 The chosen nation

25. To militant Puritans anything which hampered their 'freedom in Christ' was anathema and, lest their own liberty be diminished or encroached upon, they saw it as their duty to attack it as such. It was for this reason that post-Reformation Christians so often came to regard the freedom to abuse other creeds and to speak or write offensively about other people's religious beliefs as a particularly important element in their own liberty. This was, indeed, one of the most ancient and fundamental of all Christian freedoms. The Bible itself implicitly makes the vilification of non-Christian faiths into a sacred right. So long as the Bible's authority remained paramount in Christian Europe, and so long as literalist or fundamentalist interpretations of it prevailed, any attempt to take this right away would have been unthinkable.

* Joachim Kahl, *The Misery of Christianity*, Penguin, 1971.

26. While protection against religious abuse was treated as an inalienable human right for Christians, the notion that this right should be extended to Jews, Muslims, unbelievers or, in Protestant countries, Catholics, would (until the eighteenth century at least) have been profoundly heretical. To take away the right of Christians to anathematise Jews as 'sons of the Devil' would have been to proscribe the words of Jesus himself. To deny to an extreme Protestant his right to vilify the Roman Catholic church as a prostitute – the Whore of Babylon – would have been to undermine the authority of the Scriptures. There are, indeed, some enclaves of extreme Protestantism – in Northern Ireland for example – where the right to vilify Roman Catholicism is still regarded as one of the most sacred civil liberties, even though it may run counter to the law.
27. Since the time of Luther and Milton the long tradition of Anglo-American and European libertarianism has had many other religious and political strands plaited into it. Many of these have come from a genuine concern to protect the powerless against the powerful and to preserve the rights of those who are governed against the inertia and complacency of those who govern. Still others have come from a desire to free the realm of science and scholarly inquiry from taboos, and thus to facilitate the growth of human knowledge. In view of this it is quite clear that many aspects of the tradition of free speech in the West are indeed precious and should be vigorously defended against those who attack them.
28. It remains the case, however, that the strongest element in the tradition of Western libertarianism, by virtue of which alone 'freedom of speech' gained the aura of sacredness it still enjoys even in our secular culture, derives directly from Christianity. It derives, moreover, from a form of Christianity which is full of authoritarianism and intolerance. The freedom which Luther and Milton sought to seize for themselves was of a kind which meant that a form of tyranny should be imposed on others. 'Freedom' in effect signified freedom to wield the sword of Christ – either literally or figuratively – and to use that sword in order to enlarge the kingdom of Christ, subjugating, where necessary, not only tyrants and kings but all those, however poor or powerless, who resisted that form of Christian dominion which could alone guarantee liberty.
29. Up until the eighteenth century this militant conception of Christian freedom was held primarily by Puritans who habitually opposed themselves to the tyranny which supposedly prevailed in all Catholic countries. One of the classic battle-cries of this Protestant libertarianism was uttered by the Puritan leader Lord Brooke in the speech he made at Warwick Castle at the outset of the Civil War.
30. In Brooke's view the issue which was ultimately in contention in this war was none other than that of freedom of conscience. 'Your religion and freedom of your consciences, which far transcends your corporeal liberty,' proclaimed Brooke to the assembled officers, 'invokes you to stand up its champions against these Papistical Malignants, who would strike at God through the very heart of his known truth, so long practised among us. And surely nothing can be dearer to any of conscience, than the security of conscience and its invaluable freedom.'
31. The strongly anti-Catholic animus of Protestant libertarianism was very much in evidence among those Puritan pioneers who emigrated to New England in the seventeenth century. According to the Puritan divine Thomas Crashaw the real enemies of the English effort to colonise America were the Devil and the papists. 'The Devil hates us, because we purpose not to suffer heathens, and the Pope because we have vowed to tolerate no papists.'
32. In the earliest years of the history of colonial America the Protestant aspiration towards freedom of conscience, together with the associated ideal that there should be no compulsion in matters of religion, fought an unequal battle with the need to establish Puritan ideals as an uncontestable orthodoxy. Around the year 1650 Sir Richard Saltonstall composed a letter from North Wales to the preachers of the Boston church to complain against their intolerance. 'It does not a little grieve my spirit,' he wrote, 'to hear what sad

things are reported daily of your tyranny and persecutions in New England, as that you fine, whip and imprison men for their consciences.’

33. He received a fierce reply to the effect that England itself should be ‘more zealous against horrid blasphemies and heresies.’ For, wrote one of the Boston ministers, ‘Do you think the Lord hath crowned the state with so many victories that they should suffer so many miscreants to pluck the crown of sovereignty from Christ’s head? Some to deny his Godhead, some his manhood; some to acknowledge no Christ, nor heaven nor hell but what is in a man’s self? Some to deny all churches and ordinances, and so to leave Christ no visible kingdom upon earth? ... Now God forbid, God from heaven forbid, that the people and state of England should so ill requite the Lord Jesus.’
34. The colony which would eventually become the cradle of religious toleration was thus established over a considerable period in an atmosphere of religious zealotry in which repression and persecution were the very watchwords of liberty. Only when Puritans had firmly established their own religious ascendancy and brought about on a very wide scale the particular kind of subjection to Christ which they saw as constitutive of freedom, did they begin to face up to the contradictions in their own ideology and to advocate for others the freedom of conscience they claimed for themselves.
35. One of the most celebrated calls for toleration was made by one of the founding fathers of the New World, William Penn in 1685:

‘All forms of persons are for liberty of conscience for themselves, even those that are most imposing upon others. As a variety of flowers may grow on the same bank, so may Protestants and Papists live in England. Union in affection is not inconsistent with disagreement of opinion. We cannot come together in the same church but may live in the same land and as we are under the same gracious King, he may protect both and suffer no party to persecute one another.’
36. Although anti-Catholic zealotry remained a feature of English and American life long after Penn’s words were uttered, his theory of toleration was gradually translated into legal practice not only in Britain and America but throughout most of Europe. It would be quite wrong, however, to suggest that this development spelt the end of the long association between ideologies of freedom and intolerance. What happened in practice was that the sense of divine election which had once animated individual Christian sects tended now to be transferred to the nation-states who guaranteed them their religious freedom. America above all assimilated to its sense of secular nationhood the Puritan belief that a holy remnant of God’s people had, through the creation of the United States, been divinely elected to carry through the will of God on earth.
37. One of the most significant expressions of this view is to be found in the original formulation of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny. When, in 1845, the patriot and editor John L. O’Sullivan originated this phrase, he wrote that the American claim to the country of Oregon, then in dispute, was perfectly legal. But it was not ultimately on any legal arguments that the claim was based:

‘Away, away with all these cobweb tissues of rights of discovery, exploration, settlement, contiguity, etc. ... [The American claim] is by the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federative self-government entrusted to us. It is a right such as that of the tree to the space of air and earth suitable for the full expansion of its principle and destiny of growth. ... It is in our future far more than in the past history of Spanish exploration or French colonial rights, that our True Title is to be found.’

38. One of the reasons that we may fail to recognise the full significance of these words is that it is no longer as apparent today as it was in 1845 that, when O’Sullivan talked of a continent having been granted to the American people by ‘Providence’, he was making a clear reference to ‘divine providence’. He was referring in other words to the orthodox belief that America had been singled out by God as the vehicle through which the divine plan of history would be completed. We might well place his words alongside those of de Tocqueville in his *Democracy in America* (1835):

‘When the Creator handed the earth over to men, it was young and inexhaustible, but they were weak and ignorant; and by the time that they had learned to take advantage of the treasures it contained, they already covered its face, and soon they were having to fight for the right to an asylum where they could rest in freedom. It was then that North America was discovered, *as if God had held it in reserve* and it had only just arisen above the waters of the flood.’

39. In a ringing declaration made six years before the doctrine of Manifest Destiny was pronounced, O’Sullivan himself placed the Christian basis of that doctrine beyond doubt:

‘The expansive future is our arena ... We are entering on its untrodden space, with the truths of God in our minds, beneficent objects in our hearts, and with a clear conscience unsullied by the past. We are the nation of human progress, and who will, what can, set limits to our onward march? Yes, we are the nation of progress, of individual freedom, of universal enfranchisement ... We must onward to the fulfilment of our mission – to the entire development of the principle of our organization – freedom of conscience, freedom of person, freedom of trade and business pursuits, universality of freedom and equality. This is our high destiny, and in nature’s eternal, inevitable decree of cause and effect we must accomplish it. All this will be our future history, to establish on earth the moral dignity and salvation of man – the immutable truth and beneficence of God. *For this blessed mission to the nations of the world, which are shut out from the life-giving light of truth, has America been chosen*; and her high example shall smite unto death the tyranny of kings, hierarchs, and oligarchs, and carry the glad tidings of peace and goodwill where myriads now endure an existence scarcely more enviable than that of beasts of the field. Who, then, can doubt that our country is destined to be the great nation of futurity?’[†]

40. Seeing itself as one nation under God, America thus came to regard itself as a kind of secular Church which could act with justifiable militancy in defence of its own ‘freedoms’. ‘Our spirit is greater;’ declared John Adams at the beginning of the nineteenth century ‘our laws are wiser; our religion is superior.’

41. In January 1900, when Senator Albert J Beveridge rose to address Congress on the question of American expansionism the new argument of racial destiny, implicitly informed by an appeal to social Darwinism, was added to the older religious view. But it was this religious view which remained paramount:

‘Mr. President, the times call for candor. The Philippines are ours forever, ‘territory belonging to the United States’, as the Constitution calls them. And just beyond the Philippines are China’s illimitable markets. We will not retreat from either. We will not repudiate our duty in the archipelago. We will not abandon our opportunity in the Orient. We will not renounce our part in the mission of our race, *trustee, under God, of the civilization of the world*. And we will move forward to our work, not howling out regrets like slaves whipped to their burdens, but with gratitude for a task worthy of our strength, and *thanksgiving to Almighty God that He has marked us as His chosen people*, henceforth to lead in the regeneration of the world. Mr. President, this question

[†] Italics added.

is deeper than any question of party politics: deeper than any question of the isolated policy of our country even; deeper even than any question of constitutional power. It is elemental. It is racial. God has not been preparing the English-speaking and Teutonic peoples for a thousand years for nothing but vain and idle self-contemplation and self-admiration. No! He has made us the master organizers of the world to establish system where chaos reigns. He has given us the spirit of progress to overwhelm the forces of reaction throughout the earth. He has made us adepts in government that we may administer government among savage and senile peoples. Were it not for such a force as this the world would relapse into barbarism and night. *And of all our race He has marked the American people as His chosen nation* to finally lead in the regeneration of the world. This is the divine mission of America, and it holds for us all the profit, all the glory, all the happiness possible to man. We are trustees of the world's progress, guardians of its righteous peace. The judgment of the Master is upon us: 'Ye have been faithful over a few things; I will make you ruler over many things.'[‡]

42. Since the time of John Adams and Albert Beveridge the American belief in its destiny as a godly nation entrusted to guard the freedom of the world has, if anything, become even stronger. When President Eisenhower reminded Americans that the nation was based on a deeply felt religious faith common to Protestant, Catholic or Jew, he was appealing to the secularised sense of divine election which Adams and Beveridge had upheld, and which was derived ultimately from the original ideals of the Pilgrim Fathers. When in 1980 Ronald Reagan made his acceptance speech to the Republican convention he invoked these ideals directly, while at the same time quoting indirectly the words of de Toqueville:

'Three hundred and sixty years ago, in 1620, a group of families dared to cross a mighty ocean to build a future for themselves in a new world. When they arrived at Plymouth, Massachusetts, they formed what they called a 'compact': an agreement among themselves to build a community and abide by its laws. The single act – the voluntary binding together of free people to live under the law set the pattern for what was to come ... Isn't it once again time to renew our compact of freedom; to pledge to each other all that is best in our lives; all that gives meaning to them – for the sake of this, our beloved and blessed land?...Can we doubt that only a divine providence placed this land, this island of freedom, here as a refuge for all those people in the world who yearn to breathe freely?'

43. The litany of freedom, then, has remained the holy and constant refrain of the American nation since its very beginnings. What has changed, and changed in some respects quite dramatically, has been the willingness of American religious and political leaders to acknowledge that their own concept of freedom rests on a profoundly authoritarian view of government and of human psychology.

3 Evil empires

44. The foundations of the American state were laid, as we have seen, by religious zealots who did not hesitate to fine, whip and imprison men and women into conformity with their own religious ideals. For the most part these zealots were quite unembarrassed about the fact that their ideals demanded obedience, subservience and complete subjection to authority. Since the authority in question was none other than Christ's it was unthinkable to most Puritans that any Christian would dream of rebelling against it.
45. Such rebellion was made even more unlikely by the extraordinarily powerful spiritual propaganda which provided the medium for the Puritan revolution in both Britain and America. For in order to render more attractive the tyranny which they themselves sought

[‡] Italics added.

to establish over the minds of men and women, and to disguise the destruction of human affection and of the wealth of intimate and community relations which was demanded by their religious ideals, Puritans never ceased to oppose to the kingdom of God they sought to institute, a vision of an evil empire. This evil empire, which was supposedly ruled over by Satan or Antichrist, had many of the attributes of fantasy. But it was clearly identified by all orthodox Puritans with the Roman Catholic church.

46. It was by defining themselves against the real and, even more importantly, the imagined tyrannies of Roman Catholicism, that Puritans both in America and in Britain were able to sustain the delusional view of the world in which their own fierce and tyrannical demands for restraint and conformity could be represented both to themselves and to others as the very lineaments of freedom.
47. In the earliest years of American history the contradiction between the Puritan claim to be instituting 'Christ's freedom' and its simultaneous demands for subordination to Christian ideals was openly displayed and tolerated, as we may see from the words of John Winthrop, quoted above. But as Puritan ideals were gradually accepted as the basis for secular politics, and as 'freedom' became the battle-cry of the War of Independence, there was increasing pressure to deny or disguise the extent to which the American nation and the American character were founded on an almost complete submission to religious doctrine and religious ideals.
48. Perhaps the clearest example of the manner in which America has subjected its own history to expedient refashioning is provided by shifting interpretations of the most important American constitutional pronouncement on Free Speech – the First Amendment of 1791. Those who drafted the First Amendment certainly never intended that it should ever be seen as a charter for absolute free speech. For although they saw liberty of speech and of conscience as important ideals, they never doubted any more than did the Puritan founders of America, that the essential freedoms of America would always be subject to and limited by the laws of Christ.
49. Thus, while the First Amendment did indeed vouchsafe to American citizens very significant freedoms, and safeguarded their liberty of speech in many areas, there was never any suggestion that it should override existing restraints on freedom of speech such as those contained in the laws of libel. The laws of obscene libel, of blasphemous libel and of seditious libel remained in force, and the clear purpose of all these laws was to prevent and punish any speech which tended to subvert the laws of Christ or to undermine the Puritan ideals out of which the First Amendment had itself sprung.[§]
50. One of the most remarkable aspects of modern American history is the manner in which this crucial aspect of its own constitutional heritage has been obscured. For it would scarcely be an exaggeration to claim that much of the effort of American constitutional historians in the twentieth century has been given over to the systematic rewriting of the history of the First Amendment in a manner which completely disregards the motives and intentions of those who framed it and successfully misrepresents, almost to the point of inverting, one of the key episodes in American history.
51. Thanks largely to the work of Leonard Levy, this exercise in historical revisionism has not gone unchallenged. But in practice it is the revisionist view which has triumphed not only in American schools and universities but in the Supreme Court as well. As a result the overwhelming presumption among American citizens is that it was always the intention of those who framed the First Amendment to confer upon American citizens an almost unconditional right to free speech of the kind which has recently been created by a variety of extreme libertarian judgments in the Supreme Court.
52. One of the main results of this expedient rewriting of history has been the effective suppression of any real critical inquiry into the repressive and authoritarian origins of

[§] See Leonard W. Levy, *Jefferson and Civil Liberties: The Darker Side*, Harvard, 1963, *passim*.

Western democracy in general and the American constitution in particular. What has been disguised above all is the manner in which the constitutional ‘freedoms’ vouchsafed to American citizens have grown historically not out of the openness and flexibility of American political institutions, but out of the effectiveness with which narrow and repressive Puritan ideals have been evangelised and internalised within American society.

53. In constitutional theory American citizens are members of the ideal ‘free society’ and as such they enjoy unprecedented and unequalled freedom of speech. This freedom of speech is protected for three main reasons. In the first place it is held that open discussion is important since it promotes the discovery and dissemination of the truth. In the second place free speech is seen by some as an integral aspect of each individual’s right to self-development and fulfilment. In the third place freedom of speech is seen as an essential precondition for the citizen’s participation in democratic processes. In the words of Brandeis’s judgment in *Whitney v. California*:

‘Those who won our independence believed that ... freedom to think as you will and to speak as you think are means indispensable to the discovery and spread of political truth ... that the greatest menace to freedom is an inert people; that public discussion is a political duty; and that this should be a fundamental principle of American government.’
54. Many of the recent decisions in the American Supreme Court would seem, however, to be far-removed from such high-sounding principles. It is by no means clear, for example, which of the three arguments given above was operative when the Supreme Court ruled that the slogan ‘Fuck the Draft’ should be treated as constitutionally protected speech, or when it ruled that racist speech and the display of swastikas should enjoy similar protection under the constitution. It is difficult not to draw the conclusion that one of the main considerations which have shaped the development of free speech judgments in the United States in recent years has been the need to preserve the historical fiction that the First Amendment emerged not out of a deeply repressive patriarchal society, but out of a society opposed to all forms of restraint and dedicated to freedom and self-fulfilment.
55. As increasingly extreme interpretations of the First Amendment have delivered to American citizens larger and larger portions of theoretical liberty, American society has remained in practice profoundly conformist. One of the great advantages of the current American interpretation of First Amendment rights is that, while sustaining the mirage of freedom by holding out to American citizens all manner of formal liberties, it simultaneously helps to ensure that, at a more informal level, American society remains in thrall to an entirely false version of its own history.
56. So powerful and pervasive is the propaganda of freedom conveyed in and through First Amendment libertarianism that most American citizens would no more dream of questioning the substance and reality of the liberties they have been vouchsafed, than would the Founding Fathers have dreamed of questioning the reality of the God they worshipped. The view that America’s precious constitutional liberties are based in some respects not on freedom but on authoritarianism and internalised repression is a heresy so extreme that few would be so bold or so foolish as to utter it. The fact that they have the formal freedom to do so is ultimately an indication not that truth has been liberated but that the battle between truth and falsity has become so uneven that truth is no longer to be feared by those who wield real economic and military power and can, for the most part, be discounted as an irrelevancy.
57. One of the reasons why this First Amendment libertarianism has become so powerful is that modern America has preserved almost unchanged the delusional view of the world which was first created by the Founding Fathers. For just as the Founding Fathers saw all human existence as a constant and earnest battle between good and evil, between Christian liberty and the European Antichrist, so modern American foreign policy continues to be built on similar demonological assumptions.

58. The clearest instance of this continuity can be seen in the relationship between America and the Communist bloc from the time of Senator MacCarthy to the time of Ronald Reagan who, of course, explicitly designated the Soviet Union as an 'evil empire'. More recent instances of the same tendency are provided by America's relationship with some parts of the Islamic world, notably with Iran under Khomeini and with Saddam Hussein's Iraq.
59. As in the anti-Catholic zealotry of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the representation of real tyrannies as fantastic, Satanic empires of evil powerfully reinforces the historical fantasy according to which America defines its own political culture as the embodiment of perfect freedom. The two fantasies, indeed, feed upon one another. For, by creating a sacred area of complete theoretical liberty, and celebrating this sacred area as the very foundation of its political culture, America follows in the historical footsteps of British imperialism and arrogates to itself the moral and psychological right to designate all societies where its own sacred freedoms do not exist as inferior and in need of 'liberation'.
60. Although this view has become more powerful in America than it has in any other nation, it originated in the European Reformation and is also reflected in the political orthodoxies of most Western democracies. The majority of Westerners are easily persuaded of the veracity of this delusional view for the simple reason that the differences between the morality of the West and the moral cultures of those nations to which it opposes itself are very far from being mythical and are, in some respects, very real indeed. Most Western democracies, really have renounced violence and torture as a means of coercing public opinion, they do not persecute or imprison dissidents, and their desire to share the benefits of their freedom with others is entirely genuine.
61. It is precisely the fact that the West's sense of its own moral distinctiveness is in some respects well-founded, however, that renders it so dangerous. The perils of feelings of moral superiority can perhaps best be illustrated by reapplying to the realm of international politics what George Orwell wrote about individual 'saints' such as Tolstoy and Ghandi. The crucial passage occurs in Orwell's essay 'Lear, Tolstoy and the Fool':

'A sort of doubt has always hung around the character of Tolstoy, as around the character of Ghandi. He was not a vulgar hypocrite, as some people declared him to be, and he would probably have imposed even greater sacrifices on himself than he did, if he had not been interfered with at every step by the people surrounding him, especially his wife. But on the other hand it is dangerous to take such men as Tolstoy at their disciples' valuation. There is always the possibility – the probability indeed – that they have done no more than exchange one form of egoism for another. Tolstoy renounced wealth, fame and privilege; he abjured violence in all its forms and was ready to suffer for doing so; but it is not easy to believe that he abjured the principle of coercion, or at least the desire to coerce others. There are families in which the father will say to his child, 'You'll get a thick ear if you do that again,' while the mother, her eyes brimming with tears, will take the child in her arms and murmur lovingly, 'Now, darling, is it kind to Mummy to do that?' And who would maintain that the second method is less tyrannous than the first? The distinction that really matters is not between violence and non-violence, but between having and not having the appetite for power. There are people who are convinced of the wickedness both of armies and police forces, but who are nevertheless much more intolerant and inquisitorial in outlook than the normal person who believes that it is necessary to use violence in certain circumstances. They will not say to somebody else, 'Do this, that and the other or you will go to prison', but they will, if they can, get inside his brain and dictate his thought for him in the minutest particulars. Creeds like pacifism and anarchism, which seem on the surface to imply a complete renunciation of power, rather encourage this habit of mind. For if you have embraced a creed which seems to be free from the ordinary dirtiness of politics – a creed from which you yourself

cannot expect to draw any material advantage – surely that proves that you are in the right? And the more you are in the right, the more natural that everyone else should be bullied into thinking likewise.’

62. What is perhaps most interesting about this passage is that what Orwell says in relation to Tolstoy can be applied with even more force and profundity to Jesus. It is primarily for this reason that his words can also be re-applied both to the Christian ethic in general and to all political creeds which have been profoundly influenced by Christianity.
63. The Puritan ideals which inform American political culture at almost every level are a particularly good example of the kind of moral self-deception which Orwell analyses. For we should note that it is the complete renunciation of political violence in one sphere – that which is concerned with the control of intellectual discourse and political debate – which has again and again been invoked by American politicians as the ultimate justification for the deployment of massive military force in other spheres – such as in Vietnam, or indeed at Hiroshima – where evil and tyrannical powers are supposedly at work undermining the ‘free’ world and its strategic and economic interests.
64. The more carefully we study the historical development of the ideals associated with free speech, the more it becomes clear that the original association between the Puritan aspiration to liberty of conscience and religious intolerance is not accidental. More importantly still, perhaps, this association cannot be dismissed simply as a crude and primitive historical prototype which has long since been refined and transcended. For the association has been a constant feature of Western politics from the Reformation to the present.
65. Again and again the ideology of ‘freedom’ has been associated not with political philosophies of tolerance, mutuality and coexistence, but with imperialistic crusades launched against ‘evil empires’ with the purpose of subjugating or annexing those empires. Philosophies of freedom in general, and of free speech in particular have repeatedly served Christian and post-Christian regimes as the moral high ground from which they have launched imperialistic crusades against alien cultures, whose rigidities and cruelties they have unerringly observed, but whose own rights to seek emancipation through self-determination they have never been prepared to admit.
66. One of the great tragedies of the Rushdie affair is that, in failing to register the strategic role which has been played by the doctrine of free speech in the history of post-Reformation Europe, all but a tiny proportion of the critics and intellectuals who have discoursed upon the affair have misread it, and have done so to catastrophic effect. In their understandable anxiety to protect a Western novelist against threats which have been murderous and at times racist in their character, the supporters of Salman Rushdie have not paused to consider the origins of the crisis in our own cultural history, or to discriminate between the pernicious and constructive uses to which ‘freedom’ can be put.
67. Instead, almost without exception, they have endorsed the ideal of ‘free speech’ without qualification, as though it possessed a single uncomplicated historical origin which is entirely benign. By doing this there can be no doubt that they have defended traditions which are precious and which need to be defended. But they have simultaneously defended a profoundly authoritarian tradition which is full both of intolerance and of religious hatred.

4 Blasphemy and defilement

68. If one of the main problems with the debate on the Rushdie affair has been the reluctance of Western thinkers to examine the doctrine of ‘free speech’ critically, there has been a parallel failure which is almost as serious. This has been the willingness of some commentators to take refuge in the received view that there is something intrinsically subversive or liberating about blasphemy itself. Early in January 1991, a few days after the Christmas-eve statement in which Rushdie clearly disavowed any blasphemous intent, *The*

Sunday Telegraph published an article entitled 'The Importance of Being Blasphemous'. In the article Cambridge academic John Casey implicitly rejected Rushdie's disavowal, writing that 'Rushdie's healthy instinct for blasphemy' was 'obvious from his novel':

69. One definition of blasphemy is a desire to degrade or pollute something just insofar as one has a sense of its sacredness ... Blasphemy, then, reveals a sense of the sacred; it is an ever possible temptation to the devout; and is a way of arguing against a religion you do not believe in ... Let us insist upon the right to be deeply offensive towards pieties, both secular and religious, which we do not believe in, and intimately blasphemous towards those we hold dear.**
70. Perhaps the first thing which should be said about this argument is that it is an extremely attractive one. It seems to be a genuinely subversive view which strikes at the psychological roots of authoritarianism and it certainly makes a great deal of sense so long as we are dealing with blasphemies uttered by the relatively powerless against those who hold power.
71. Yet religious history is full of instances in which blasphemy is used by those who are already powerful. The Christian church itself, while fiercely resisting and punishing blasphemies directed against Christ, has sometimes actively encouraged Christians to use both blasphemy and obscenity as weapons in order to insult and humiliate rival faiths.
72. Historically the main victims of such religiously motivated blasphemy have been Jews and Muslims. The Christian anti-Islamic tradition has never been quite as strong as its anti-Jewish one. But ever since Pope Innocent III described Muhammad as 'the Beast of the Apocalypse', Christians have regularly engaged in the demonisation of Islam. During the Crusades Christian armies sometimes went further and desecrated mosques. On some occasions they deliberately left heaps of their own excrement inside the mosques they entered.
73. During the same period a number of Christian orders, including the followers of St Francis, organised pilgrimages to Muslim territories. One of the main aims of these pilgrimages was to seek martyrdom at the hands of the infidel. The most common way of achieving this was to break into the Friday mosque in order to abuse Muhammad and Islam, or to stand outside mosques in order to preach 'the deceits and falsities and blindnesses' of the Prophet.
74. Frequently Muslim leaders showed extraordinary restraint in dealing with the riots which broke out as a result of these provocations. On other occasions they succumbed to popular pressure and gave these Christian monks the martyrdom they sought by executing them. The ultimate function of these Christian exercises in faith-baiting was, it would seem, to establish the moral superiority of Christianity. For if Muslims were insulted until they were actually provoked to violence Christians could then 'prove' the inferiority of Islam and justify their own efforts to subjugate it with the sword in the name of the Prince of Peace.
75. We should have no doubt whatsoever that when Salman Rushdie wrote *The Satanic Verses* he never intended for one moment that it should be used in a latter day faith-baiting exercise of this kind. Yet one of the most remarkable aspects of the entire Rushdie affair is the closeness of the various parallels which exist between the anti-Islamic campaign waged by some Christian monks during the middle ages, and the 'accidental' crisis in relations between the West and Islam which was brought about by the publication of *The Satanic Verses* in 1988.
76. In the first place it must be noted that, although almost a thousand years separate the two incidents, the same caricature of the Prophet is common to both. For in Rushdie's novel, where Muhammad is presented as an insincere businessmen, making and breaking rules as he pleases, we once again encounter 'the deceits and falsities and blindnesses' of the

** *The Sunday Telegraph* 6 January, 1991.

Prophet. There can be no doubt that Rushdie had all manner of sophisticated justifications for reviving the ancient, hateful Christian stereotype of Muhammad along with the abusive medieval name 'Mahound'. Yet this rationale is by no means clear from the novel itself. The overriding impression is that the novelist is making use of the ambiguities and uncertainties of fiction to disguise a deliberate attempt to defile the most precious sanctities of Islam in a language which is simultaneously wounding and obscene.

77. From the day the novel was published, the Muslim reaction was one of outrage. When this outrage was consistently met with disdain, silence, or contempt, as it was both by Salman Rushdie himself and by his publishers, it was almost inevitable that it would be translated into anger and, indeed, violence. When the violent threats made by a small minority of British Muslims were eventually eclipsed, first by the book-burning in Bradford, and then by the Ayatollah Khomeini's *fatwa*, one of the most significant features of the response of liberal commentators was the manner in which entirely reasonable condemnations of Khomeini's cruel threat were mixed with outbreaks of Western triumphalism on a quite unprecedented scale.
78. When the Conservative MP George Walden defended Rushdie's freedom of expression in an article entitled 'West is Best', when Fay Weldon used her *CounterBlast* pamphlet on the Rushdie affair to denigrate the Koran and to sing, however improbably, the merits of the Bible, there were signs that the affair was indeed being used to 'prove' Western supremacy.
79. When white children in Bradford shouted 'Rushdie' on the streets, scrawled 'Rushdie rules' on underpasses, taunted Muslim youths with chants of 'Salman Rushdie is our leader' and pulled knives on those Muslims they succeeded in provoking, the shadow of the Crusades and of the intolerance of our Christian forefathers fell unmistakably across the twentieth century.
80. Ultimately the cruelty and intolerance of a small but powerful faction of Islam was met in the West not with the combination of toughness and sensitivity which was required, but with all the intolerance, insensitivity and triumphalism which Christendom had traditionally shown towards one of its oldest religious enemies. 'Who is this man of God,' asked Leon Wieseltier during the course of an American writers' rally, 'who has no mercy in his heart? But then let us be his match, and in defense of Rushdie, in defense of the imagination, in the defense of the mind, show no mercy ourselves. Let us be dogmatic about tolerance...'
81. Once again it must be quite clearly acknowledged that Salman Rushdie himself never intended to bring about such a catastrophe, in which Muslims were consistently insulted and humiliated. We must also bear in mind, however, that the followers of St Francis who sought martyrdom in Muslim countries were not motivated by any conscious contempt for ordinary Muslims either. On the contrary they were motivated by feelings of fraternity and deep spiritual love. Their contempt was directed purely at the dungeon of superstition in which these Muslims had been compelled to live. Their overriding desire was to strike off their heathen chains and allow them to enter freely into the liberty of Christ. It was only at an *unconscious* level that they were engaged in an exercise of faith-baiting whose 'purpose' was to provoke their antagonists to violence, and thus to demonstrate their own spiritual superiority.
82. Something very similar seems to have happened in the way Rushdie's novel has been deployed by Western intellectuals. For there can be no doubt at all that both Rushdie himself and his most energetic supporters are sincere in their belief that they represent the forces of freedom and enlightenment and that they are right to attack cruel and repressive forms of faith. What they have failed to understand, like the Christian monks who preceded them, is that the contemptuous disrespect which they have shown for the sanctities of others is itself repressive and destructive. That so many Western commentators have seen

such offensiveness as part of a programme of liberation only goes to show how deeply we have ourselves internalised a repressive form of religious faith.

83. John Casey's suggestion that we should 'insist upon the right to be deeply offensive towards pieties...which we do not believe in' may well seem subversive and liberating. But if we inspect this view closely it turns out to be little more than a restatement in secular terms of one of the most ancient of our religious orthodoxies. As the Bible itself bears witness, one of the distinctive characteristics of Judaeo-Christian monotheism has always been the contempt in which it holds other people's religious faith.
84. Far from bringing liberation, the essentially religious habit of hurling obscene or blasphemous insults at those who profess a different faith to yours is one of the very engines of religious bigotry. For, by rewarding believers according to the intensity of the insults that they hurl, and by enraging those whose faith is attacked, such strategies strengthen the hand of religious extremists on both sides and turn even moderates towards militancy. This is what Christian and Jewish and Muslim zealots did to one another throughout the middle ages, and this is what we have been doing again recently in the Rushdie affair.
85. Our failure to think carefully both about the history of free speech and about the nature of blasphemy has undoubtedly deepened the cultural tragedy brought about by the publication of *The Satanic Verses*. But there is a third crucial factor which has contributed to the seriousness of the crisis. This is the continuing difficulty we have, in our puritanical, post-Christian culture, in thinking sensitively and systematically about the whole realm of obscenity and about the problem of pollution and purity.
86. John Casey, as we have seen, suggests that blasphemy may be defined as 'a desire to degrade or pollute something just insofar as one has a sense of its sacredness.' This definition is a good one partly because it reminds us how closely blasphemy is related to other aspects of our behaviour. A very similar desire is quite commonly found in the context of sexual behaviour. Some of the most common erotic rituals, for example, involve the eager and affectionate acceptance by the mouth, whose 'sanctity' is normally zealously preserved from defilement, of the very parts and substances of the human body which are usually treated as dangerously sexual and rejected as unclean. The extraordinary power that such rituals can have and the fulfilment they can afford are related not, it would seem, to any merely biological satisfaction they provide, but to the fact that they help to bring about a complete abrogation of the taboos which normally control the sense we have of our own bodies and of our own identity. In such 'eucharistic' rituals, as in the rituals of some primitive religions, impulses and feelings which are normally rejected as 'dirt' are suddenly brought back into communion and celebrated openly as a part of the riches of the self and of the body.
87. If many of our most positive rituals do indeed involve the exultant defilement of the body's various sanctities and of a holiness which is otherwise zealously guarded, then this might seem to lend support to the view that blasphemy is itself intrinsically liberating. It is just here, however, that we need to tread carefully. For it is probably true to say that the factor which most deeply affects the fulfilment afforded by sexual rituals is the degree of assent or mutuality – or of simple undisguised eagerness – which they involve. Within trusting and affectionate relationships taboos are not so much violated as abrogated by agreement; sanctities are defiled not in order to degrade but because defilement is actively sought out in order to enrich. Violence is used, if it is used at all, not to intimidate or subjugate but to prise open the vaults of obscenity in order to release the vitality and the psychological riches which are locked up within.
88. When the element of assent and of trust is missing then sex, instead of being the medium for psychological liberation, can very rapidly become an authoritarian weapon which is used to intimidate, to subjugate, and to bully. The impulse to defile, which is indeed one of the most significant elements in our imagination, can be used not positively but in order to

degrade and humiliate. In the case of rape, in many forms of sexual abuse, and indeed in some established sexual relationships, sex itself actually becomes part of the currency of repression.

89. One of the particular failures in our response to the campaign against *The Satanic Verses* has been our reluctance to recognise how important the element of assent and trust is to any liberating use of obscenity – whether in literature or in life. The Muslim objection to the obscenity of the language Rushdie uses in relation to Islamic sanctities is not an objection to sex or even to obscenity *per se*. The objection, together with a great deal of the deep anger which the novel has caused, stems from the feeling of many Muslims that a sacred area of their own identity has been violently broken into and deliberately defiled.
90. In other words, whatever the intentions of the novelist may have been, the very fact that the element of assent has been missing, has made Muslims feel as though they have been the victims at a cultural level, of precisely the kind of sexual violence and degradation which Western society would rush to condemn were it to happen in reality at the level of intimate human behaviour. In the words of one of Britain's most liberal Muslim leaders, Dr Zaki Badawi:

‘What [Rushdie] has done is far worse to Muslims than if he had raped one's own daughter. It's like a knife being dug into you – or being raped yourself.’
91. It is tempting to try to defend ourselves against the disturbing implication of words like these by rejecting them as ‘mere analogies’. Such defensiveness may be understandable, but I believe that it is mistaken. When Martin Luther wrote of Paul's *Letter to the Galatians*, ‘I am married to it ... it is my wife’, he was not merely spinning a metaphor. For the relationship between religious believers and the scriptures and prophets they revere is not abstract and weak; it is emotionally charged and immensely strong. It is a relationship – at least at some buried level of the psyche – not only of fear and submission but also of deep affection and, above all, passionate personal love.
92. We may not like this kind of religious ‘marriage’. We may believe that it is repressive and dangerous. We may be right. But unless we wish actually to strengthen it by exacerbating further the quite massive resentment which many Muslims throughout the world already feel towards the repressive and dangerous ideologies of the West, we should perhaps begin to make the attempt to understand it, and with it the Muslim reaction to the publication of *The Satanic Verses*.
93. In this regard George Chryssides has suggested that ‘secular humanists might profitably reflect on how they would react if a novelist used their spouses for artistic subject matter and fictitiously portrayed them as unfaithful, criminally immoral and totally lacking in integrity’. Such an approach to the Rushdie affair is useful, I believe, precisely because it conveys the intimacy of the feelings of hurt and violation which many Muslims felt on the publication of Rushdie's novel. It is useful also because it helps us to resist the strong temptation to demonise all censors and would-be censors by reminding us that there could well be circumstances in which we might wish to call for the suppression of a work of art ourselves.
94. Today, some three years after Khomeini pronounced his *fatwa* it is possible to see just how huge the consequences of Penguin's decision to publish Rushdie's novel actually were. The Rushdie affair has led directly to demonstrations, riots, murder-threats and the death of more than thirty people; it has also resulted in the destruction of international good will on a huge scale, at the same time that it has caused incalculable damage to race relations both in this country and throughout Europe.
95. Perhaps most tragically of all *The Satanic Verses* has had almost precisely the opposite effect on Islamic fundamentalists and on the worldwide Muslim community from that which was apparently intended by its author. For instead of undermining the cruel and murderous rigidity which is so clearly a part of some forms of Islamic fundamentalism, the

publication of Rushdie's novel has strengthened the hand of fundamentalists in countless Muslim communities throughout the world. In this respect it is interesting to compare the attitude of the Pentagon towards the bombing of Saddam Hussein's Iraq during the Gulf War of 1991 and Salman Rushdie's literary 'aim' in 1988.

96. Some aspects of the US military's bombing strategy, above all the decision to bomb reservoirs and sewage installations, were not simply cruel, they were also militarily unnecessary and in apparent contravention of international law. It is significant, however, that at the same time that it set out to destroy Iraq's infrastructure, the Pentagon went to great lengths to avoid bombing mosques or any sites which were in any way associated with Islamic sanctities.
97. This policy was adopted, of course, not out of any affection for Islam, but because of a recognition that any direct, or even indirect hit on a sacred Islamic site might be politically disastrous. Such sacrilege would have the effect of enraging the Muslim community worldwide and would almost inevitably push countless moderate Muslims, including some entire Muslim states, towards supporting the pan-Arab militancy of Saddam Hussein.
98. It is, I believe, peculiarly significant that Salman Rushdie, one of the most distinguished British novelists and an artist of world stature, should have shown in this regard far less strategic sensitivity and political intelligence than the Pentagon in one of its most imperialistic and triumphalist moods. For, largely because of his own sophisticated insensitivity to the language of faith, Rushdie appeared to be aiming his precision literary missile not exclusively against the narrow fortresses of Islamic tyrants, but against the Prophet and against the simple sanctities which are revered by all Muslims throughout the world.
99. By doing this he was playing into the hands of the very tyrants he sought to subvert. For authoritarian religious leaders have always known how to exploit blasphemous attacks for their own narrow ends. As a result of Rushdie's ill-judged attack they suddenly found their all-but empty propaganda armouries had been miraculously filled with some of the most lethal psychological weapons it is possible to imagine. The real consequence of the Rushdie affair throughout much of the Islamic world has thus been to destroy or destabilise significant elements in the psychological infrastructure of Muslim moderation. As Mahmood Jamal has written, Salman Rushdie, by choosing to attack Islamic rigidity in the particular way he did, 'galvanised all Muslim opinion behind the bigots, hence furthering the cause of revivalists and fundamentalist forces within Islam'.
100. Looking back with the hindsight afforded by the three years and more which have elapsed since *The Satanic Verses* was published, it is difficult not to come to the conclusion that both Salman Rushdie himself and Penguin Books were guilty of an understandable, but nevertheless catastrophic error of judgment when a decision was taken to publish the novel in spite of a warning from Penguin's Indian literary adviser that publication would be 'lethal'.

5 A fictional conversion

101. Perhaps the most difficult of all aspects of the Rushdie affair is that Khomeini's *fatwa*, although it drew worldwide attention to the magnitude of the offence felt by countless Muslims, simultaneously created conditions in which it became almost impossible either for Salman Rushdie himself, or for Western commentators to publicly acknowledge the huge error which had been made. For by holding a gun to Rushdie's head, Khomeini effectively closed whatever avenues to dialogue and debate had previously been open.
102. As the first anniversary of the *fatwa* approached at the beginning of 1990 it seemed at times that a moment of possible reconciliation was in sight. That opportunity was missed largely because Salman Rushdie chose to offer British Muslims the rhetoric rather than the substance of reconciliation, and to hold out in his essay 'In Good Faith' an olive branch on which the leaves had already withered.

103. In December 1990 another attempt was made at reconciliation when Salman Rushdie took the extraordinary step of embracing Islam. At the same time he announced that he would not authorise either any further translations or a British paperback edition of his work as long as the risk of further offence existed.
104. In some ways it would be difficult to imagine a more reckless and more generous gesture of reconciliation. A number of Muslims, recognising, perhaps, the genuine anguish which had gone into Rushdie's decision and the generous impulse which was buried somewhere inside it, welcomed his statement and went out of their way to counsel moderation. But the most influential Muslim grouping in Britain, the UK Islamic Action Committee, while by no means an extremist or fundamentalist organisation, held fast to its original position and continued to demand the withdrawal of the hardback.
105. There were a number of reasons for this seeming intransigence. Perhaps the most important were the terms in which Rushdie described his return to Islam. For although stories about Rushdie's 'conversion' appeared throughout the international press, Rushdie himself studiously avoided using this word and talked instead about his 'embrace of Islam'. When asked in a BBC television interview whether he had now 'actually become a Muslim', he did not answer the question directly but said that he had moved 'closer and closer to an engagement with religious faith' and that he had 'no quarrel with the central tenets of Islam'.
106. The impression that he was choosing his words with great care was confirmed by Frances de Souza, the director of Article 19 and Chairwoman of The International Committee for the Defence of Salman Rushdie. Three days after Salman Rushdie's Christmas eve statement, she was quoted in *The Times* as saying that 'Salman Rushdie feels very strongly that he has not necessarily changed his position ... He has talked about embracing the religion. Conversion is not the word he has used.'
107. The consensus which rapidly emerged among those Muslims who had campaigned against the novel was that Rushdie's new position was inconsistent and in some respects dishonest. It looked very much as though he was trying to appease both Muslims and Western liberals simultaneously through a formula which in the end would please nobody. This view was put forthrightly in a statement issued by the UK Action Committee on Islamic Affairs on 29th December 1990. What this statement made clear was that for many Muslims Rushdie's 'conversion' was just as much a fiction as the book which had provoked the crisis which had led to it. Far from assuaging the deep sense of cultural humiliation they felt, it merely added insult to injury.
108. By the time the second anniversary of the *fatwa* arrived in February 1991 there could no longer be any doubt that Rushdie's 'conversion' had failed to produce any miraculous rapprochement between the two sides and had led only to renewed deadlock. Tragically this has remained the case in the time which has elapsed since. In July 1991 the attack on the Italian translator of *The Satanic Verses* and the murder of its Japanese translator, Hitoshi Igarashi, pushed the entire affair further into the realms of tragedy. The Rushdie affair, it is clear, is still not over. The *fatwa* remains [in 1992] in place, Salman Rushdie still lives his life under the very real threat of death, and, both in Britain and throughout the world, many Muslims remain embittered. Though the affair may periodically recede from the headlines for months or even years, the threat that it may suddenly erupt again in tragedy cannot be discounted.
109. The question which remains is whether there is any realistic chance of breaking the deadlock which has lasted for so long. This now seems possible only if one of the two sides goes back on the position it has previously declared and makes a magnanimous gesture. Such a gesture, it might seem, could now be made very easily by Muslim leaders. Instead of carefully counting up the precise number of coins which Rushdie has thrown into the hat of reconciliation and deciding that the total is insufficient to buy his release, they could accept the gestures he has already made with warmth and gratitude. They could

not, of course, guarantee that the *fatwa* would be lifted. For they have no control over the Iranian religious authorities, who have already expressed the view that the death-threat is irrevocable. But they could repudiate the *fatwa* in terms which are quite unequivocal and speak out in the strongest terms against any further attempt to threaten Salman Rushdie or inflict violence on him.

110. The failure of Muslim leaders to respond in this way clearly contributed to Rushdie's subsequent decision to abandon attempts at conciliation and to renew his original intransigent position. In spite of this development there are undoubtedly many Muslims who would still welcome a relaxation of Islamic rigour on the entire issue, and who would like to see above all the removal of the Iranian threat against Rushdie. Yet although many British Muslims might be prepared to repudiate the campaign against the author of *The Satanic Verses* – indeed a large number have done exactly this – few Muslim leaders wish to give up their campaign for the withdrawal of the book. For Muslims to compromise with Rushdie on such terms would be tantamount to conceding that their entire campaign against the book had been a mistake. Most Muslim leaders have no desire to make any such concession.
111. It might well seem that the only other direction in which we can turn for a solution to the crisis is to Salman Rushdie himself. From a Muslim point of view, the magnanimous gesture which he could make is quite simple and straightforward. He could authorise the withdrawal of all unsold copies of *The Satanic Verses*. This indeed is what Muslim campaigners in Britain have demanded ever since the novel was published in 1988.
112. To Muslim observers such action on the part of Rushdie and his supporters seems both simple and long overdue. But once again it must be pointed out that a solution which seems straightforward is fraught with difficulties. For there is very considerable opposition to conciliatory gestures on the liberal side just as there is on the Muslim side. If Rushdie were to announce that he wished to withdraw his novel from sale he too would unleash a great deal of hostility against himself from his supporters.
113. For evidence of this one has only to look at the public response to Salman Rushdie's Christmas Eve statement of 1990. While most people appear to have been perplexed by Rushdie's 'conversion', some commentators did welcome the fact that Rushdie had at last made a real gesture of conciliation. But negative reactions to Rushdie's statement were voiced in much stronger terms. The view which received more publicity than any other was that of a former Oxford law lecturer, Francis Bennion, who implicitly portrayed Rushdie as a coward and a traitor to intellectual freedom. Although he had been an active member of The International Committee for the Defence of Salman Rushdie he now publicly withdrew his support for him, declaring that a man like Rushdie was 'not worth defending'. When Rushdie made his Christmas Eve statement he showed considerable courage by going ahead in spite of such predictable reactions. There seems very little doubt that if he were now to ask for the withdrawal of his book altogether, he would be criticised in even more unforgiving terms by a significant number of his present supporters.
114. The huge pressure there is both on Salman Rushdie and on his publishers to conform to orthodox doctrines of 'freedom of speech' in this respect is one of the most remarkable aspects of the entire affair. For although the defence of Rushdie's novel has always been presented as a defence of individual liberty in a 'free' society, it is not at all clear that either Rushdie or his supporters enjoy any real freedom in this area. Indeed Salman Rushdie himself has said, during the course of an interview with Akbar Ahmed, that if he were to withdraw his book 'his reputation as a serious person in this country and in this civilisation would be destroyed.' In the current cultural climate these words are scarcely an exaggeration. What they suggest is that Rushdie, to some extent at least, has been pinned to a fixed position by the very orthodoxy which is supposedly the guarantee of our individual and collective freedom.

6 Social stigma and the control of heresy

115. The profound significance of this particular aspect of Rushdie's predicament is perhaps best approached by way of John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*. One of the most controversial sections of Mill's essay is that in which he suggested that the old, familiar tyranny of despotic government was, with the rise of popular government, gradually being replaced by a new and even more formidable despotism. Both social and intellectual life were, in his view, increasingly being ordered by the 'tyranny of the majority'. According to this view 'society itself is the tyrant' and is even more repressive than traditional tyrants because 'it leaves fewer means of escape, penetrating much more deeply into the details of life, and enslaving the soul itself.'
116. In such a climate, Mill believed, patterns of persecution from which we have supposedly emancipated ourselves tend to recur for, 'where there is a strong permanent leaven of intolerance in the feelings of a people, which at all times abides in the middle classes of this country, it needs but little to provoke them into actively persecuting those whom they have never ceased to think proper objects of persecution.'
117. Interestingly, as Mill makes clear in a note, what he specifically had in mind was the tendency of British Christians in India to exclude both Hindus and Muslims from their doctrines of toleration and to treat them as inferior on account of their resistance to the orthodoxies of Christianity. But he went on to discern the same kind of intolerance in the way that all those who dissented from intellectual orthodoxy were treated by the upholders of orthodoxy:
- 'For it is this – it is the opinions men entertain and the feelings they cherish, respecting those who disown the beliefs they deem important which makes this country not a place of mental freedom. For a long time past, the chief mischief of the legal penalties is that they strengthen the social stigma. It is that stigma which is really effective, and so effective is it that the profession of opinions which are under the ban of society is much less common in England than is, in many other countries, the avowal of those which incur risk of judicial punishment ...'
118. Those whose bread is already secured, and who desire no favours from men in power, or from bodies of men, or from the public, have nothing to fear from the open avowal of any opinions but to be ill-thought of and ill-spoken of and this it ought not to require a very heroic mould to enable them to bear ... But though we do not now inflict so much evil on those who think differently from us as it was formerly our custom to do, it may be that we do ourselves as much evil as ever by our treatment of them ...
119. Our merely social intolerance kills no one, roots out no opinions, but induces men to disguise them or to abstain from any active effort for their diffusion. With us heretical opinions do not perceptibly gain, or even lose, ground in each decade or generation; they never blaze out far and wide, but continue to smoulder in the narrow circle of thinking and studious persons among whom they originate, without ever lighting up the general affairs of mankind with either a true or a deceptive light.
120. And thus is kept up a state of things very satisfactory to some minds, because, without the unpleasant process of fining or imprisoning anybody, it maintains all prevailing opinions outwardly undisturbed, while it does not absolutely interdict the exercise of reason by dissentients afflicted with the malady of thought. A convenient plan for having peace in the intellectual world, and keeping all things going on therein very much as they do already. But the price paid for this sort of intellectual pacification is the sacrifice of the entire moral courage of the human mind.
121. Mill's splendid analysis of the forms of cultural control which had developed in nineteenth century Britain is equally applicable to the latter part of the twentieth century. What Mill had not understood, however, was that the same doctrine of liberty of which he was the most subtle, searching and critical theologian was, in its narrower and more fundamentalist form, a vehicle for the very kind of repressive orthodoxies which he felt were inimical to

freedom. For, as I have already argued, the strongest element in the doctrine of freedom which has developed in the modern secular state is that which derives directly from Christian beliefs which were intrinsically authoritarian, tyrannical and profoundly contemptuous of any thinker who dared to question or oppose them.

122. It is only when we have recognised the strength of this hidden continuity that we can understand the huge power of the cultural forces which have been deployed in order to uphold Penguin's 'freedom to publish' in the case of *The Satanic Verses*. For, as the development of the Rushdie affair has shown, the doctrine of freedom has become, or is close to becoming, the single most important sacred doctrine of modern secular societies; literalist or fundamentalist interpretations of this doctrine have come largely to replace the literalist or fundamentalist versions of Christianity which ushered in the Reformation.
123. The most extreme, passionate and uncompromising defenders of Salman Rushdie's liberty of speech in the case of *The Satanic Verses* have represented themselves, and been represented in countless newspapers and television programmes, as the defenders not only of free speech, but also of free thought and freedom of inquiry. Almost as a matter of course it has been assumed that they stand for anti-authoritarianism and the kind of nonconformism which is essential to intellectual liberty.
124. Yet we only have to study the arguments which they have put forward – or failed to put forward – to recognise that this view is very far from the truth. For one of the most distinctive features of the campaign which has been mounted in support of *The Satanic Verses* is the reluctance of those who have defended the book to engage in argument or analysis.
125. Instead of behaving as the guardians of critical intelligence and cultural self-awareness, the most extreme proponents of the libertarian position have behaved as what they are – the uncritical defenders of a narrow orthodoxy whose all but universal currency has been taken as a guarantee of its ultimate value. Instead of examining the historical roots of this orthodoxy, they have unthinkingly accepted the destruction of history which is its most secure foundation.
126. Their non-conformism is in some cases real. It is of a kind, however, which bespeaks no vital intellectual curiosity, but which belongs to the non-conformism of our Protestant tradition, whose main quarrel with orthodoxy arises directly out of its anxiety to impose an even narrower conformity upon society than orthodoxy itself has traditionally required.
127. As befits those whose most strongly held beliefs are founded on faith rather than inquiry, on authority rather than reason, extreme liberals have not only avoided extended argument over the case of Rushdie's novel, but they have tended to impose on those who dare to question the sacred doctrine of freedom the sanctions of orthodoxy as they are described by Mill. Critics of the liberal position have thus frequently been met with the kind of stigmatisation, intolerance and abuse which Mill implicitly identifies as the chief instruments of the modern Inquisition.
128. The tendency of libertarians to defend their narrow orthodoxies by vilifying their opponents, or portraying them as agents of darkness, has been seen over and over again in the Rushdie affair. Repeatedly the conflict has been presented as one in which 'we' are in possession of all the virtue, while 'they' are the personification of impure bigotry.
129. We have already seen that Salman Rushdie himself talked of a battle between the secular and the religious, the light and the dark: 'Now that battle has spread to Britain I can only hope it will not be lost by default. It is time for us to choose.' Such crusading rhetoric has been used not only against Muslims campaigners but also against Western writers who have criticised Rushdie, or called into question any item of the liberal creed.
130. This tendency is once again best exemplified by Rushdie himself. For although he presented himself in his essay 'In Good Faith' as a writer who would always 'dissent from the end of debate', one of the most interesting characteristics of the essay is his own

reluctance to engage in debate. Muslim intellectuals who had argued cogently against the liberal position are either ignored completely, as in the case of the formidable Dr. Ali Mazrui, or dismissed in an oblique aside, as in the case of Shabbir Akhtar, the author of one of the first full length books about the Rushdie affair, *Be Careful With Muhammad!*

131. The arguments of non-Muslim critics are treated with little more respect. Indeed Robert Harris accurately described the tone of Rushdie's essay when he wrote that 'unfortunately, one of the characteristics of his "brilliant polemic" is to drip vitriol on anyone – writers, bishops, journalists, historians, politicians – who dared criticise him.' Thus, for venturing to suggest that *The Satanic Verses* should not be published in paperback, the Guardian journalist Hugo Young is anathematised by Rushdie as a racist. For making the same suggestion in entirely reasonable terms, John le Carré finds that he has put into his mouth a destructive and unfair criticism of Rushdie which had actually been made by Roald Dahl. Meanwhile Rana Kabbani, a writer for whose first book Rushdie had expressed admiration, is dismissed as a 'Stalinist' for criticising *The Satanic Verses* in her second.
132. There seems little doubt that this kind of abuse, dispensed as it was under covering editorial fire, was effective in intimidating some of Rushdie's potential critics. As Mill points out, however, it is in the very nature of 'the tyranny of the majority' that it should fall short of the total control sought by despots and that therefore it should not 'absolutely interdict the exercise of reason by dissentients afflicted with the malady of thought'. One of the dissentients so afflicted who, risking the wrath both of Salman Rushdie himself and his supporters, expressed his heretical thoughts about 'In Good Faith' in public, was the philosopher and Wykeham Professor of Logic at the University of Oxford, Michael Dummett.
133. In his celebrated – or notorious – Channel 4 broadcast on racism in Britain, Salman Rushdie had once invoked Michael Dummett as an ally. Now, however, Dummett replied to his 'In Good Faith' in terms which were fiercely critical:

'The Rushdie affair has done untold damage. It has intensified the alienation of Muslims here, and in other Western countries, from the society around them, in reaction to the uncomprehending liberal chorus of support for you. Racist hostility towards them, where overt, has been inflamed, and, where latent, has been aroused ...'
134. Dummett went on to acknowledge that a great part of the blame for this rested with the Ayatollah Khomeini, describing his *fatwa* as an abominable act 'supplying to all those prejudiced against Islam a legitimate ground of accusation'. But he also called upon Salman Rushdie himself to shoulder his portion of responsibility and, as a first step along this path, to cease insisting on his right to have as many readers for his book as possible:

'You have imbibed the assumption of Western intellectuals that religious believers may properly be affronted, indeed deserve to be affronted. Those in the West who have no religious belief are oblivious to the depth of pain caused to those who have by what they perceive as blasphemy: lacking so much as the concept of something's being holy, they lack the will to grasp the magnitude of the affront, although they could begin to imagine it if there is anything they hold dear or in respect ...'
135. What is perhaps most revealing about Michael Dummett's intervention in the debate is the response which it brought forth. That his fierce open letter to Salman Rushdie should have elicited an equally fierce rejoinder from a Cambridge don on the letters page of the next issue of *The Independent on Sunday*, is scarcely surprising. Much more remarkable was the ferocity and the duration of the subsequent reaction. For in the following months the letter was criticised so frequently by commentators both on the right and the left, it seemed at times that the chastisement of Michael Dummett had become a sacred cultural duty.

136. At the beginning of July 1990, almost five months after Dummett's open letter had appeared, Peregrine Worsthorne, editor of the 'Comment' section of *The Sunday Telegraph*, chose to mark the Oxford academic's 65th birthday by publishing what can only be described as a black tribute to him in the form of a full length anonymous profile. In this profile Dummett's open letter was described as 'one of the most remarkable – and some would say the most shameful – documents of the age.' Protected by a mask of anonymity, the writer of the profile then went on to misrepresent Dummett's views. In his letter, as we have seen, Dummett made it abundantly clear that he regarded Khomeini's *fatwa* as an abominable act. He went on to remind his readers that the Muslim campaign against Rushdie's novel had started long before the *fatwa*, stressing, quite correctly, that there would have been a Rushdie affair without Khomeini's intervention.
137. The profile which appeared in *The Sunday Telegraph*, however, implied that Dummett's condemnation of the *fatwa* was merely mechanical. It then went on to discount his condemnation altogether:
- 'Many civilised men believe in the individual and his right of expression with something like sacred faith. By Mr Dummett's own logic, such a person would be justified in threatening murderous violence against Dummett himself for his open letter which insults that belief'.^{††}
138. The first point which the writer of these words has failed to grasp is that it is entirely possible to dissent from somebody else's sacred beliefs without obscenely affronting those beliefs, and that civilised disagreement – or even fierce disagreement – does not in itself constitute an insult. Even more importantly, however, the clear implication of the words which I have quoted is that Dummett's letter actually justified or excused Khomeini's *fatwa* – a view which is a complete inversion of the truth.
139. This distortion of Dummett's argument was characteristic of the technique of the profile-writer, who seemed intent on dragging Dummett's reputation through a mire of malice and misrepresentation in an attempt to destroy it. Not content with attacking Dummett, the writer also set out to ridicule his wife (a highly regarded writer on race and race relations) by relating an apocryphal-sounding story about her which was completely untrue. All in all it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the main function of *The Sunday Telegraph's* birthday tribute – published under the headline *The Silly Sage of Race Relations* – was to punish a distinguished academic with public ridicule for having expressed views which run counter to libertarian orthodoxies.
140. Had such chastisement been meted out only by the ideological right its effect would be limited. Dummett, however, was hit just as hard by the left. One of his fiercest antagonists was Christopher Hitchens. In a letter about the Rushdie affair which was published in *The Times Literary Supplement*, Hitchens condemned Dummett's stance without even deigning to mention his name, as though to utter the name of such a cultural traitor would itself be a form of perfidy.
141. In a review of Salman Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands*, which was published in the Independent on Sunday a full year after the appearance of Dummett's letter, Hitchens' implicit horror of what he clearly considered an intellectual crime was made explicit. Significantly this was done in the course of a review in which he criticised Rushdie for occasional excesses of generosity ('if he has a fault ... it is that of kindness') and praised him for his critical ruthlessness. 'It was a delight,' writes Hitchens, 'to rediscover his tossing and going of 'Dickie' Attenborough ...' He goes on to note approvingly that he 'gives John le Carré quite a leathering'.
142. The unconscious idealisation of intellectual cruelty which is apparent in these metaphors is translated into practice in the single reference Hitchens makes to Dummett's open letter. 'In [Rushdie's] famous address to the British conscience about "the immigrants", delivered

^{††} Author's stress.

in 1982,' writes Hitchens, 'he cites Professor Michael Dummett's caustic remark about "the will not to know – a chosen ignorance, not the ignorance of innocence" and one feels the wet imprint of the Judas kiss still undelivered at that date.'

143. To accuse anyone of being a Judas is an extreme charge. To talk as, Hitchens does, of feeling 'the wet imprint of the Judas kiss' is to evoke a strong sense of defilement and physical repulsiveness which is implicitly attributed both to the supposed betrayer and to his 'crime'. The full force of Hitchens' accusation, however, emerges best if we consider the cultural history of the insult he chooses. For the Judas charge has always been central to the rhetoric of Christian anti-semitism.
144. When Dreyfus was accused of being a traitor and publicly degraded on the parade ground of the Ecole Militaire, he said loudly, 'I am innocent. Long live France!' The anti-semitic newspaper *La Croix* immediately declared, 'His cry of "long live France!" was the kiss of Judas Iscariot.' As Richard Rubenstein and John Roth have commented:

'La Croix's identification of Dreyfus with Judas linked the affair with one of the deepest sources of anti-semitism in the Western world. Judas betrayed Jesus his master for *money*...and did so with a kiss, an act of love and affection. The moral of the identification is clear; like Judas, Jews can never be trusted even when they appear trustworthy ... Undoubtedly, [the] ... readiness to believe in Dreyfus's guilt was due in some measure to the power of the Judas image.'
145. It seems possible that Christopher Hitchens himself was unaware of the specifically anti-semitic history of his chosen insult. But this history merely serves to explain why the insult is so vicious and unpleasant; ignorance of its history does not make it any less vicious or unpleasant.
146. One of the reasons why Hitchens's attack on Michael Dummett is so illuminating is that, examined in the long perspective of history, it helps to reveal the hidden agenda of the entire Rushdie affair. For although Hitchens is defending a novelist's right both to criticise and insult a sacred religious tradition, he actually does this by appealing uncritically to one of the central myths of our own sacred tradition, a tradition whose cultural power and centrality is a direct result of the violence and intolerance with which it once habitually treated its critics.
147. The very fact that Hitchens's Judas-charge involves an oblique comparison of Salman Rushdie to Jesus, and implicitly transfers the sacredness of Christianity to modern doctrines of freedom, should in itself alert us to the inversion of reality which has been perpetrated again and again by the most extreme supporters of *The Satanic Verses*. For although these supporters have argued strenuously and justifiably against the tyranny of extreme Islamic orthodoxies, they have, by the very nature of their arguments, immeasurably strengthened the tyranny exercised by our own cultural orthodoxies.
148. Not the least of the criticisms which must be levelled against them is that in the name of free speech they have stifled debate and effectively silenced many of their own would-be critics. For rhetoric such as that used by Christopher Hitchens, by *The Sunday Telegraph*, or by Rushdie himself in his 'In Good Faith', is not, in any constructive sense of the word 'critical'. It is a form of intellectual abuse which seeks to achieve its effect by character-assassination and the deliberate destruction of personal reputations, and which is therefore deeply wounding to those who are subjected to it.
149. Whenever such rhetoric is treated as a legitimate intellectual currency, as it has been almost throughout the Rushdie affair, one of its effects is to constrain debate by creating a climate of intimidation in which many people feel unable or unwilling to express dissenting views for fear that they will be pilloried or publicly bullied for doing so.
150. Protecting sacred orthodoxies against criticism by this means is neither so crude nor so cruel as resorting to death-threats or *fatwas*. But precisely because the wounds left by words are not visible, verbal bullying is sometimes more insidiously effective than physical

bullying when it comes to enforcing conformity. We are reminded almost inescapably of Mill's words: 'Our merely social intolerance kills no one, roots out no opinions, but induces men to disguise them or to abstain from any active effort for their diffusion ... But the price paid for this sort of intellectual pacification is the sacrifice of the entire moral courage of the human mind.'

7 The battle for free speech

151. If we are to resist the intimidatory power of the rhetoric and the appeals to authority which are constantly deployed by the defenders of *The Satanic Verses* we can best do so in practice by declining to obey the various unspoken taboos which still surround the debate and which still constrain it. This does not mean that we should be gratuitously disrespectful towards liberal beliefs or that we should insult them in any way. But it does mean that we should insist on opening up to the scrutiny of the critical intelligence one particular issue which, at times at least, seems to have become a cultural no-go area.
152. I refer to the simple question of whether, having been the occasion of death-threats, murders, cultural and racial conflict on an international scale, as well as of a great deal of anguish and hurt, *The Satanic Verses* should continue to be accorded the same almost sacred status which has been conferred on it by liberal intellectuals thus far. Is there, in short, an obligation on any democratic society to confer upon novelists an unconditional freedom to publish irrespective of what the social or political consequences of publishing a particular novel may be?
153. The more carefully we consider this question the more it becomes clear that the problem is very far from being clear-cut and that the issue is indeed highly debatable. If this is so then we are entitled to ask why, in the midst of a campaign in support of free and open debate, it has so rarely been debated.
154. The answer to this question, I would suggest, was indicated by Rushdie himself when he said that if he were to withdraw his book 'his reputation as a serious person in this country and in this civilisation would be destroyed.' For the penalty which awaits Rushdie should he decide to rebel against the fundamentalist doctrines of freedom which he has himself endorsed throughout the *Satanic Verse* [sic] affair also threatens anyone else who advocates such a step. We are left to conclude that the reason this step is so rarely even debated may have more to do with fear and intimidation than with any principled argument about freedom. The most extreme supporters of *The Satanic Verses* are best seen, perhaps, not as apostles of liberty but as prisoners of an orthodoxy as unyielding as the Islamic rigidities they seek to subvert.
155. The position which these secular fundamentalists have remorselessly maintained is that Penguin's moral duty to keep *The Satanic Verses* in print is beyond dispute and that any move to withdraw the novel would be wrong – or even unthinkable. Yet if we examine some of the arguments which have been used to shore up this position it is by no means clear that they are persuasive. It may well be that there are good reasons why *The Satanic Verses* should not be withdrawn in the present circumstances. But on this issue, perhaps more than any other, it is extremely important that we should not find ourselves advocating the right course for the wrong reasons.
156. One argument which is frequently advanced is that a principle is at stake and that to withdraw a book merely because some people find that it offends their religious sensibilities would be to undermine an essential freedom. This argument too, however, is far from persuasive. For, in view of the analysis which I have already put forward about the role played by blasphemous insults in history, it is by no means clear that the right to obscenely affront other peoples' sacred beliefs is a precious right at all.
157. In practice, indeed, a quite different and more moderate view has frequently been taken even in the heart of our own liberal society. Not many years ago almost the entire print-run of a Penguin book was burnt on the grounds that its contents were blasphemous and would

be deeply offensive to many Christians. The book in question was Siné's *Massacre*. Siné is one of France's most acclaimed cartoonists and *Massacre* contained a number of scatological, anti-clerical or blasphemous cartoons, some of them with a sexual theme. Many booksellers took exception to the book and some conveyed their feelings to the founder of Penguin, Allen Lane, who had by this time almost retired from the firm. He responded by burning the remaining stock of the books. He took this action not because he was a practising Christian himself, but because many of his friends and bookselling colleagues were, and had conveyed to him how offensive they felt the book was.

158. As if to underline the point, a comparable event took place in Britain in 1990 about eighteen months after the Rushdie affair had begun. One of the firms belonging to the publisher Robert Maxwell published a comic-strip novel, *True Faith*, by Garth Ennis, which made a number of disrespectful references to Christianity, including the statement 'God is a blockage in the world's toilet.' The book was attacked by members of the Evangelical Alliance and because of this it came to the notice of Maxwell himself. He immediately ordered that all copies of the book should be withdrawn and pulped.
159. In both of these cases the effective withdrawal of a book took place without widespread protests from libertarians. This would seem to indicate that our tradition of free speech is not fundamentalist and rigid in practice – at least not when the offended sensibilities in question are those of Christians.
160. The case of *The Satanic Verses* clearly differs from these other two cases in another respect as well. For, unlike them it involves a death-threat and what is, in effect, an international terrorist campaign against both the novel and its author. It has therefore been argued that to withdraw the book would be to give in to terrorism. This argument clearly has some point to it. For if any government or individual showed themselves willing to concede points of principle purely because of death-threats or terrorist campaigns they would indeed be setting a dangerous precedent.
161. It must immediately be pointed out, however, that principled opposition to all causes which have ever had the support of terrorism can itself result in breaking principles that should be kept. It would be unwise to refuse to support campaigners against apartheid in South Africa on the grounds that this cause has sometimes been supported by terrorist action. It would be equally unwise to rule out the possibility of a Palestinian state because some Palestinians have committed atrocities in order to further this aim. Unless we are to abandon all principles of justice, what matters ultimately is not the methods which are used by a militant minority in support of a particular cause, but the justice of the cause itself.
162. It has of course been argued that, given the intransigence and intolerance of a number of Islamic states, any significant concessions made over the case of *The Satanic Verses* would have serious repercussions on a whole range of other free-speech issues. That this objection is potentially a grave one will be clear to anyone who has experienced the degree of censorship and repression which is encountered in some of the more rigid states – in Saudi Arabia for example, or indeed in Iran itself. There are certainly very real risks of sequels to the *Satanic Verses* affair.
163. On the same day that newspapers reported Salman Rushdie's second thoughts over his embrace of Islam and his decision to call for a British paperback edition of his book after all, a story appeared concerning a *Financial Times* journalist who, according to an unconfirmed report, had been sentenced to death by religious activists in Pakistan for some critical remarks about Muslims which had been contained in a book she had written about Benazir Bhutto.
164. This new incident reminds us, if we need to be reminded, that the manner in which we resolve – or fail to resolve – the issue of *The Satanic Verses* does have implications for a whole range of cases which have yet to arise. It would be entirely wrong to conclude, however, that struggling for the freedom of Salman Rushdie and of Penguin Books in this particular case will necessarily help to protect other yet more precious freedoms in the

future. Indeed there are good reasons to suggest that the Western campaign in support of Rushdie's novel has already had exactly the opposite effect.

165. There can be no doubt at all that the freedom of observers in the West to point to human rights abuses in Islamic regimes – including Iran – and to criticise any Islamic leader who uses religion to justify torture and tyranny, is indeed a precious freedom. If we were to surrender this freedom we would ourselves be surrendering to an external tyranny. One of the real tragedies of the Rushdie affair, however, is that it has actually undermined the cause of free of speech within the entire Islamic world. When, in the past, Western writers have used their freedom boldly, responsibly and conscientiously in order to criticise tyrannical abuses of power, they have often met with unreasonable attempts to silence them. It has usually been possible to resist such attempts, however, precisely because the moral issues have been clear. One of the most worrying features of the Rushdie affair is that, by choosing to fight the greatest ever battle of free speech on such ill-chosen terrain, extreme libertarians have jeopardised the position of more moderate liberals who seek to use their freedom of speech critically and constructively. For by championing one of the most intolerant aspects of our tradition of freedom they have at times threatened to bring the entire tradition of Western free-speech into disrepute.
166. Another issue which is closely related to this one concerns the threat posed by Islamic imperialism. In the last twenty years Islam, which earlier this century had begun to look like a tamed and dying force, has re-emerged, in the words of Shabbir Akhtar, 'as a genuinely radical, indeed wholly unmanageable, ideology that proudly takes its place as a major player on the international political stage.' Some aspects of this resurgence of Islam may well be positive. For it promises to many Muslims, almost for the first time in their history, the possibility of cultural self-determination. But at the same time the new militancy of Islam poses a real threat not only to Western power but also to many Western values.
167. Sentimental or idealistic estimates of Islam as an essentially merciful and tolerant faith are, in this respect, far from helpful. For unless we wish to deceive ourselves we should face up to the fact that, at the very heart of Islamic theology lies a belief that the Muslim world and the non-Muslim world are destined to exist in a state of war or conflict – jihad – until such time as the non-Muslim world submits to the supremacy of Islam, the only 'true' religion. In its most extreme, and, arguably, its most authentic form, Islam is, then, an essentially imperialistic faith whose ultimate aim is nothing other than world-domination.
168. One of the reasons why we in the West find this idea so threatening is that we have somehow contrived to forget that Islam does not belong to an alien religious tradition but to our religious tradition; we are the among the chief begetters of the kind of religious militancy which Islam is now making manifest. For Judaism, Christianity, and indeed Marxism, are all, like Islam, apocalyptic and imperialistic faiths. They are all, like Islam, ideologies of world-domination. Largely because we have forgotten this crucial factor in our own history, the new Islamic militancy looms up out of the political darkness like the return of our own repressed fantasies of domination and our collective reactions to it have been profoundly unbalanced.
169. In this climate of repression and deep psychic confusion over our own cultural identity, the Rushdie affair has come to be seen by many Western observers as a crucial battle in a much larger war between the values of the West and an ideology which is imagined as the foundation of a new 'evil empire'. To lose this battle, it is imagined, would imperil our chances of winning the war; it would give heart to cruel extremists and play into the hands of fundamentalist politicians.
170. The problem with this view is that it approaches the Satanic Verses affair from an exclusively Western perspective. From the Muslim point of view, it must be pointed out, the *fatwa*, even if it is disapproved of, cannot be seen as an *attack* on the West. On the contrary it is the publication of *The Satanic Verses* which is regarded as an entirely

unprovoked act of aggression against Islam. In the eyes of many, the Muslim response, including the *fatwa*, is seen as part of a militant and necessary *defence* of Islamic values which have for centuries been under real threat from the imperialism of the West.

171. The failure of Western intellectuals to understand that in this conflict, which started not with the *fatwa* but with the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, they are the aggressors and Muslims are the injured party has led to a quite bewildering willingness on the part of many of these intellectuals to sanction various forms of cultural imperialism sometimes according to the explicitly stated principle 'Better our imperialism than theirs'.
172. If it were true that the only option open to us is to choose between two competing forms of imperialism then this attitude would be easy enough to understand. Given the choice between living in a modern, affluent European state and a poor Islamic state such as the Sudan where starvation is rife and where an authoritarian Islamic regime punishes theft by amputating the thief's hand at the wrist, most Westerners would unhesitatingly choose the former. It is very easy to proceed from this observation to the view that all forms of Islamic assertiveness should be resisted without compromise so that 'their' barbarous imperialism should not be allowed to triumph over 'our' advanced imperialism. The corollary of this view is that we should remain completely intransigent on the question of *The Satanic Verses*.
173. The problem with this position, which is widely held both on the left and on the right, is that it bears no relationship whatsoever to the political, historical and psychological realities of the situation. Far from Islamic militancy being an alternative to Western imperialism, the resurgence of Islam in the last decades has been intimately related to the attempts by Western powers to impose their own 'advanced' imperialism on traditionally Muslim areas of the world. It would, indeed, scarcely be an exaggeration to say that the new Islamic militancy has been inadvertently created by the extraordinary insensitivity with which Britain, America and other imperial powers have annexed Muslim states for their own strategic and economic ends and treated indigenous cultural traditions with arrogant contempt.
174. The clearest example of this process is provided by Iran itself. In 1921 Britain backed Colonel Reza Khan, the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty in his successful attempt to wrest power from the older Qajar dynasty. In order that it could continue to fuel the Royal Navy with Iranian oil it then actively supported an anti-Islamic regime led by a Westernising tyrant who sought to destroy the 'Semitic' heritage of Iran and take it back to its 'Aryan' roots. When the Shah eventually moved too close to Hitler he was forced into exile. But he was replaced by his son, under whom Iran eventually became a client state of the United States.
175. The new Shah continued the most destructive policies of his father, treating both Persian cultural traditions and Islam with contempt. It was largely because the Iranian people had been openly humiliated in their own country that Iranian mullahs, led by Khomeini, were eventually able to mobilise massive popular support for the most dramatic unarmed revolution which history has ever seen. Just as Hitler's rise to power in Germany during the 1930s was directly related to the humiliating conditions which had been callously and foolishly imposed on Germany at Versailles, so Khomeini came to power on the sea of resentment and humiliation which had been created by a related form of Western triumphalism.
176. The history of modern Iran provides a dramatic illustration of the fallacy represented by the modern jingoism of 'better our imperialism than theirs'. For the two forms of imperialism are actually intimately related. By forcefully imposing Western values on Muslim states we are merely creating the ideal conditions for the very form of Islamic imperialism we most fear. At the same time, by maintaining an attitude of almost complete insensitivity in relation to *The Satanic Verses* we are feeding the cruel fundamentalism we seek to oppose. For the continued prestige of the novel in the West is itself a source of

cultural humiliation for countless thousands of Muslims both in this country and elsewhere.

177. Most ironically of all, by persisting in their intransigent support for Rushdie's novel, Western liberals are demonstrating not their strength but their weakness. For it is by having the courage to correct mistakes and misjudgments that cultures ultimately demonstrate their strength.
178. In this respect Salman Rushdie's reflections on his own possible fallibility are highly significant. In his essay 'In Good Faith', he writes: 'Would I have written differently if I had known what would happen? Truthfully, I don't know. Would I change any of the text now? I would not. It's too late. As Friedrich Dürrenmatt wrote in *The Physicists*: "What has once been thought cannot be unthought."'
179. The problem with this argument is that the quotation from Dürrenmatt addresses a quite different problem from that which is at issue. It is quite true that 'what has once been thought cannot be unthought' but thoughts are not words. They are essentially private and the fact that we cannot 'unthink' them is irrelevant to the Rushdie affair. For it is one of the conditions of human freedom that we can choose whether or not to voice in public the thoughts that we have in private. And having once chosen to commit our thoughts to speech or to writing we remain free to have 'second thoughts' – to revise, change or even completely repudiate what we have already said.
180. It is, indeed, almost a precondition of successful human relationships that we should remain free to withdraw or apologise for remarks which have proved hurtful, to 'unsay' things which we have already said and to put right mistakes or misjudgments. To place ourselves in a position where we are unable to do this is a sign not of liberty but of rigidity. Indeed, when Rushdie claims that he cannot alter or withdraw what he has written, he appears to invest himself with the infallibility which traditional religious believers normally ascribe to their gods and their divinely inspired prophets. It is just such delusions which lead to the monolithic and terrible certainties of scripture. By implicitly applying a scriptural doctrine of inerrancy to his own secular writing Rushdie has come close to making a novel – a human fable – into something as rigid and dangerous as scripture itself.
181. The inevitable product of this attitude is a kind of First Amendment fundamentalism according to which any dilution of the absolute freedom of speech we supposedly all enjoy is seen as an almost palpable evil against which we should crusade with all the zeal of our Christian forefathers in their battles against the powers of darkness.
182. It must be pointed out, however, that if the battle over *The Satanic Verses* is indeed the Armageddon of free speech, then it is a battle we have either already lost, or which, at the very least, we are in danger of losing. For the real test of victory in this battle is not whether we can keep *The Satanic Verses* in print in the face of the threats and bombs of Islamic extremists and the impassioned, peaceful protests of Islamic moderates. It is whether we can do so without simultaneously succumbing to self-censorship.
183. In the current situation it is certainly far from clear that there are many serious publishers in the Western world who would be prepared to publish a novel which is judged by those familiar with Islam to be as offensive to Muslims as *The Satanic Verses*. Nor is it clear that very many of our most distinguished authors would be prepared to write such a novel. But if the campaign for Salman Rushdie's freedom of expression is to mean anything at all, it is precisely this future freedom which must be secured. Keeping *The Satanic Verses* itself in print, in other words, is not enough. For it is only by creating and publishing books which are, if anything, even more offensive to Muslims than *The Satanic Verses*, that we can ensure that the frontiers of Western freedom have not already been shifted to the detriment of our absolute right to liberty.
184. Those unconditional supporters of Salman Rushdie who endorse his own view that 'Free speech is the whole ball game. Free speech is life itself' would seem to have no cause to be

squeamish about such matters. For what is involved is a principle on which we compromise at our peril. It may well be that the novel we choose as the next standard bearer of free-speech will be even more directly and even more obscenely insulting to Islamic sanctities than *The Satanic Verses*. If this is so then it will probably give rise to international Muslim protests on an even wider scale than we have yet seen, and to a campaign of violence of unprecedented ferocity. None of this should deter us. For we should not underestimate our own strength. It does not ultimately matter how many Muslim protestors choose to lie down in our path. We can, if we so wish, drive the tank of free speech over the bodies of countless thousands of men and women.

185. The conflict may well intensify. But the battle of free speech is one which we in the West can always win. We have the economic might and the military power to do so. We have all the nuclear weapons which are necessary. We may not need to use those weapons and the defenders of free speech will no doubt disagree among themselves about whether they should be used. But, in extremity, they are available.
186. If we are really serious about absolute liberty, then, we must not allow ourselves to be distracted by the present skirmish. We must fight the real battle which I have just described. If, on the other hand, we are not prepared to go to these lengths, we would perhaps do well to acknowledge as much and to concede openly that the absolutist position on free speech which has been adopted by so many of Salman Rushdie's supporters is mistaken.
187. Perhaps, indeed, the only realistic course now would be for both sides to acknowledge that their ultimate objectives are unattainable, and, indeed, undesirable. Muslims should recognise that even though the original decision to publish *The Satanic Verses* may have been mistaken, forcing the withdrawal of the book in the current climate of threats, intimidation and distrust would be counter-productive. Liberal intellectuals should recognise that absolute liberty of speech can serve repressive ends and that the intellectual ancestry of our own tradition of free speech has sometimes been far removed from the image of tolerance we now like to project on to it. They should begin to work in a spirit of compromise towards a political solution to the conflict.
188. Many Muslim leaders have already spoken out against hounding Rushdie as an individual and they have sought to remove the entire dispute into a larger arena which recognises it for what it is – a clash not between an individual and a culture but between two cultures. Only if Muslim leaders refrain from both personal abuse of Rushdie and violent threats – or equivocally repudiating and simultaneously endorsing the violent threats of others – is it likely that some of the more intransigent liberal intellectuals will feel secure enough to listen to the Muslim case with restraint. Muslims will feel better able to adopt a policy of restraint if it is made clear to them in public, as it has not been up to now, that they do not have a monopoly on critical attitudes towards *The Satanic Verses* and that a very significant number of moderate liberal intellectuals in the West shares their view that the original decision to publish *The Satanic Verses* was a tragic mistake – even if it is a mistake which is now extremely difficult to correct.
189. The intransigence and rigidity which has helped to lock the Rushdie affair into its present impasse should not be underestimated. Indeed it would be unrealistic to hold out the hope that the most extreme and the most rigid zealots on either side of this conflict are likely to soften or moderate their attitudes in response to reasoned arguments, however well-founded those arguments may be. What can be achieved by appeals to reason, however, is the important goal of reinforcing the moderate attitudes of the vast majority of Muslims and liberals who are not attracted by the most rigid and extreme forms of their particular orthodoxies, but whose moderation is likely to become brittle and weak if it is not carefully nurtured.
190. It is because it is so important to sustain the forces of moderation on both sides of the cultural divide that I believe it would be wrong to cease to try to build the bridges of

understanding which alone can help to undo some of the immense damage which has been caused by the Rushdie affair.

8 The destruction of history

191. In the meantime Salman Rushdie remains the victim of a cruel injustice. He is the victim, ultimately, of the rigidity and intolerance not simply of one culture but of two, and it is extremely important that we should face up collectively to our own responsibilities in this regard. Above all we should recognise that it was not Rushdie who betrayed us into the present impasse, but we who betrayed him. For, over the past two or three decades, we have gradually compounded a cultural crisis which goes back at least to the nineteenth century and to the time when Matthew Arnold listened on Dover Beach to the melancholy long withdrawing roar of the sea of faith.
192. In an attempt to escape from the repressive metaphysical and moral doctrines of which our entire intellectual culture once stood in superstitious awe, we have increasingly tended to flee from our past rather than confront it. Instead of recognising the complexity and the seriousness of the moral confusion which is the legacy of our Christian past we have, all too frequently, taken refuge in shallow doctrines of 'freedom' whose main effect has been to allow us to perpetuate and intensify the confusion we have inherited.
193. At the same time, acutely conscious of the human and cultural damage which has been caused in the past by those who believed they were in possession of the truth, we have tried to counter rigidity with pluralism, as though tolerance were a solvent in which we could dissolve the iron of religious and secularist dogmatism. We have behaved as if, by abandoning the search for truth, we may permanently release ourselves from the possibility of error. What we have failed sufficiently to recognise is that an environment of naive tolerance, in which intellectual work is no longer judged by empirical or moral criteria, provides the ideal conditions for the multiplication of error and for hard, dogmatic theories and pseudo-scientific philosophies to thrive and proliferate.
194. In the deep intellectual confusion which has grown out of our cultural identity crisis, the most serious casualty to be trampled beneath the progressive march of structuralism, post-structuralism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Althusserian Marxism *and* neo-Protestant death-of-God theology, has been history itself.
195. What we have obscured above all is the immensity of the role played by the most intolerant elements in our religious tradition in shaping and intimately determining the very secular philosophies which we now treat as the evidence of our rational emancipation from superstition and dogma. We have succeeded in hiding from ourselves not only the repressive elements in our own historical doctrines of freedom but also the authoritarian and destructive elements in what I believe we should recognise as the strongest element in the tradition of Western blasphemy.
196. In the resulting historical darkness it is little wonder that those who have tried to navigate by the stars of post-modernism should so frequently have mistaken repression for freedom and rigidity for liberality of spirit. That one of the most celebrated of post-modern novelists should have done so with such disastrous consequences should ultimately be a matter for collective rather than individual responsibility.
197. Salman Rushdie's case is all the more important because his own individual fate is now intertwined with the relationship between Islam and the West. This relationship has always been a vital one. In the coming decades it will become even more important. If we do not work assiduously to improve it, then the lives of all of us, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, will be imperilled.
198. Three years after the Ayatollah Khomeini's *fatwa*, it is time for the real debate about the *Satanic Verses* affair to begin.

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