

EMBLEM OF DARKNESS

The fatwa marked a new era: a retreat from the ideal of tolerance and the spirit of the Enlightenment, says
Bernard-Henri Lévy

Twenty years already. I remember it as if it were yesterday.

Salman Rushdie was not yet the great man of letters that he has since become. He and I are, though, pretty much the same age. We share a passion for India and Pakistan, as well as the uncommon privilege of having known and written about Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (Rushdie in *Shame*; I in *Les Indes Rouges*), the father of Benazir, former prime minister of Pakistan, executed ten years earlier in 1979 by General Zia. I had been watching from a distance, with infinite curiosity, the trajectory of this almost exact contemporary. One day, in February 1989, at the end of the afternoon, as I sat in a cafe in the South of France, in Saint Paul de Vence, with the French actor Yves Montand, sipping an orangeade, I heard the news: Ayatollah Khomeini, himself with only a few months to live, had just issued a fatwa, in which he condemned as an apostate the author of *The Satanic Verses* and invited all Muslims the world over to carry out the sentence, without delay.

In common with many other writers, my reaction was immediate, and totally in opposition to the acts of prudence, the shillyshallying, indeed to the

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conciliatory – not to say collaborationist – declarations of the majority of political and religious leaders on the planet. It was instinctive and unconditional solidarity, with no fault and no debate, with the novelist whom they determined to kill.

And that was because I felt, then, that something essential was under threat, amongst all the confusion, the uproar, the cries of the assassins: a man's life, of course; the right of a novelist to be free to write fiction, naturally; but also, and perhaps above all, a seismic shift, an unanswerable landslip, a definitive and fatal turning point in the course of 20th century history.

Twenty years later my feelings remain unchanged.

Salman is today a little more at ease, almost free (I say 'almost' . . . I say 'a little' . . . because I know, even if he has the elegance to live as though it was nothing, that a suspended, or interrupted, fatwa that has never actually been annulled remains a fatwa and continues to weigh like an unlifted threat), but the feelings that I had then have been confirmed and honed with the years.

The Satanic Verses affair or, more precisely, the global reaction to the novel's condemnation, the embarrassed declarations on the one hand, the gestures of appeasement on the other – the declaration, for example, of the French president at the time, condemning the fatwa of course but not without also condemning in the same breath the 'provocation' which brought it about – initiated a series of retreats which would be repeated at intervals over the course of the next two decades; the two latest examples being the affair surrounding the non-publication [by Random House in the US] of Sherry Jones's novel and the more serious affair of the cartoons of Mohammed that were published in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*. These are different circumstances. And there is no straightforward analogy with Salman Rushdie. But, particularly in the case of the cartoons, it is the same fear. The same reaction infected those mainstream newspapers, which are in principle free but which, with rare exceptions, took great care not to align themselves with their vilified colleague. The same capitulation [that we see in France] to those groups, in this case Islamist extremists, who demand that their religious laws be substituted for the laws of the Republic. A diminishing of freedom of expression. The failure of the principle under which freedom of speech suffers no exceptions other than those that the civil courts of a democratic society may, if they are called upon, pronounce. In France, the weekly satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* [which printed the Danish cartoons – translator's note] was the only publication to salvage our honour.

The affair marked a turning away from the ideal of tolerance that is central to our notion of democracy. Tolerance, until the fatwa, was the principal according to which the voice of the majority acceded to the claims of the minority and conceded public spaces for minorities to express themselves. Since the fatwa, an almost imperceptible series of shifts of meaning now grants any minority the right to express sentiments that are the actual negation of the democratic spirit and that threaten the dignity, even the lives, of men and particularly of women. Thus, in Amsterdam, we were witness to the notion that the opinions that armed the murderer of the film maker Theo Van Gogh must be tolerated to the same degree as the 'provocative' views of Van Gogh himself. Thus, in Paris, we witnessed the idea that the feelings of Islamist leaders who felt offended by Ayaan Hirsi Ali's apostasy are no less admissible than those of the former member of parliament who insists on the indefeasible right, for every man and woman, to choose to be a member of, or to cease to be a member of, a religion. And thus, everywhere, we see this idea of tolerance brandished like a banner by all those who insist on judging by the same standards those cultures where women are seen as a different species, where they are perceived and treated as disturbing elements whose bodies and faces must be hidden. Multiculturalism. Differentialism. Moral relativism and, should the occasion arise, assassin. That is the other legacy of the Rushdie affair.

The affair marked a real retreat from what we used to call – and, thank heavens, still do call in Europe and the United States – the spirit of the Enlightenment. What does it mean, the Enlightenment? It is the right to believe, or not to believe. It is the right of the unbeliever to mock others' beliefs. It is the right to blaspheme, in other words, which was a real victory of the philosophical spirit of Voltaire and which was eventually imposed, not without pain and drama and convulsions, on Jewish and Christian monotheism; and which, in the wake of the Rushdie affair, is once more being called into question from within Islam, by those who murmur, insinuate and sometimes yell: 'Freedom of opinion, all right; the right not to believe, all right; but only on condition that that is expressed quietly, without any fuss or noise and without it being perceived in any way as offensive by the community that does believe; on condition that the very idea of God should not be insulted or sullied by the unbeliever.' I won't dwell on the feeble notion of God entertained by those who think that a novelist or a cartoonist or a God-doubter might have the power to sully it. I'll pass over the fact that the true caricaturists of the prophet, those who insult him most deeply and who disfigure his noble message, are those who make him the

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figurehead of their urge to commit murder and ethnic cleansing. The truth is that a world where we no longer have the right to laugh at dogma would be an impoverished world. The truth is that a world where we are not permitted to write fiction on any and every subject would be a much sadder place where whole areas of freedom will cave in. Dark times. The darkening of the spirit. The spirit of the times.

The ayatollahs are not the first to burn books and murder writers. The fascists did it before them. Fascists of all kinds. Such attacks on the integrity of the spirit have almost always been an early warning sign of the imminent worsening of the prevailing order. Which is a way of suggesting that the Rushdie affair was also perhaps an early sign. Of suggesting that it too had the same purpose, to sound the death knell of the old world. And perhaps it is one of the dates, if not the actual date, which marked the appearance in broad daylight of this new variation of fascism that I have named 'fascislamism'. There was 11 September and its three blows... the death of [Ahmad Shah] Massoud, the prologue... the martyrdom of Daniel Pearl, a little later... the mass murders in Algeria, earlier... the persecution of women, everywhere... the slow but steady awakening of the spirit of the Muslim Brotherhood, in the only part of the world where one might have thought it possible to effect a true denazification... the first part of the sequence, the fundamental moment of the revival, of the real beginning of this terrible history and the point at which an entire wing of Islam entered an era of darkness, was without the slightest doubt the death sentence passed on a writer found guilty of causing offence to the word of the Quran.

What a strange adventure, for an enchanter of letters to have become the emblem of a dark moment in the history of literature and ideas. □

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Translated by Natasha Lehrer

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Bernard-Henri Lévy's many books include *Left in Dark Times* (Random House), *American Vertigo* (Random House) and *Who Killed Daniel Pearl?* (Duckworth)