

Bangladesh

TASLIMA NASRIN

Taslina Nasrin, the writer from Bangladesh, shot into international fame and limelight with the publication of her novel 'Lajja' (Shame) which criticized Muslims for attacking minority Hindus in Bangladesh following the 1992 destruction of a mosque by Hindu zealots in neighbouring India. Nasrin's writing so angered Muslim sentiments in Bangladesh that Khaleda Zia's government ordered her arrest in 1994 on charges of blasphemy. After a year in hiding, Nasrin fled Bangladesh for four years of exile in Europe. Several Muslim religious leaders demanded her immediate arrest and trial. They warned the government of serious consequences if she is not put on trial for suggesting that the Qur'an should be rewritten. Nasrin has denied making the comments. However, it was finally confirmed that the 36-year old author should indeed stand trial. Nasrin has appealed to the international community for help.

I am not a great philosopher, a great historian, nor a great writer. I am a simple ordinary writer. But I am a writer who has been threatened in Bangladesh by the religious fundamentalists. They have decreed a *fatwa*, a religious sanction, against me and have set a price on my head. Even today you have only to mention my name to provoke their angry reaction. Not only that, I am a criminal according to my government, which accuses me of having exposed society's injustices and the government's failure to protect the rights of the religious minority. Now, the government has banned my book and issued an arrest warrant against me for committing blasphemy. As a result I have been forced to go underground. With the help of my friends, I managed to hide for sixty long days. Because of the pressure created by the international human rights movement, the Bangladeshi government granted me bail and let me leave. Away from my own country, I was surrounded by police who not only saved me from harm but also imprisoned me by their total protectiveness. My future is uncertain.

Although I have been far from my country and my own people for several years, I still remain true to my own ideals. I continue to believe in humanism, not in any religion. I do not pray to any god to end my sufferings. I still have confidence in myself. And, I assure you, I most definitely will continue my ideological fight against religious fundamentalism.

I am an atheist. Let me explain, although I am not a specialist in the study of religion, how because of my personal experiences I have come to the atheist position. I was born of a Muslim family. When I grew up I was shocked to learn that some of my neighbours were not the real owners of their houses. The actual owners had been Hindus forced to leave their homeland by the partition of India in 1947, a partition forced on the basis of religion. Just across the border was the land of the Hindus. The violent and fratricidal partition forced many Hindu families out of my country to seek refuge in the Hindu-majority country on the other side of the border. Meanwhile, many Muslim families came over to my country. I heard that it was religion that had led to all these disasters. So it followed that, when young, I could not understand what religion was, what type of thinking could lead to such negative acts.

Over time, and during the course of my training in science, I developed the powers of observation, experiment, analysis, and reasoning. Without reasoning, I found, nothing should be accepted as fact. I knew about the Hindu texts that are called *Aptabakya*, 'received wisdom,' facts which are supposed to have been received from some superior authority, an authority that cannot be questioned. There are similar unquestionables in all religions. But I could not accept the concept that some things are supposed to be unques-

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tioned. When I began to study the Koran, the holy book of Islam, I was surprised to be told that 'the sun revolves around the earth,' just one more example of unreasonableness. Also, the Koran taught discrimination against women, describing females as slaves and as sexual objects. Naturally, I set aside the Koran. Meanwhile, wherever I looked I continued to find that religion was oppressive.

One day, I resolved to fight back. I took up my pen and started writing against injustice, unreason, and prejudice. I exposed the crimes of religion, particularly the injustice and oppression against women. And what happened as a result? My government, as I previously mentioned, has accused me of blasphemy and forced me to move from my friends, my family, my home, my homeland.

I am against religion for other reasons. Religion as practised does not always teach people to love one another. On the contrary, it often teaches them to hate people of a different faith. Religion also leads people to depend on fate, to be led, and thus to lose self-confidence in making individual decisions. It unnecessarily glorifies poverty and sacrifice and thus serves the vested interests of the wealthy few.

In all countries and throughout the ages, conscientious people have exposed the unethical aspects of religion. The *Charbakas*, philosophers of the *Lokayata* tradition, were the materialists of Ancient India. They raised many questions about religion, questions that appear simple but actually are very subtle. These materialists did not believe in reincarnation, did not believe in heaven, and did not believe in hell. They were quite vocal against the dominance of the priests. But priests did not allow the materialists to succeed, and their texts have almost been obliterated, only a few fragmentary references remaining. Despite this, they had a big influence on the common people. Hence, perhaps, their name: *Lokayata*, which really means (the option or philosophy of) the common people.

Today we are still carrying the same fight against unreason and prejudice. The rise of fundamentalism all over the world shows that the battle remains urgently necessary. What is behind the rise of religious fundamentalism? The rise of Islamic fundamentalism, I think, is attributable to the failure of secular democracy on the one hand, and of communism on the other, to solve the problems of the world's economic underdevelopment and its social inequities. Disillusioned and hopeless people are now seeking salvation by turning to the blind forces of faith. Beaten by science, overwhelmed by other civilizations, Islam is now in search of its 'roots'. There is an element of fear in its search. Of course the responsibility of inciting fundamentalism should not be laid fully on the so-called secular leaders of the ex-colonies who have used fundamentalism to serve their own interest. The responsibility should be shared also by the democratic and secular states of the developed world. It is they who have made compromises with the fundamentalist forces. We have seen how the so-called secular political parties in Bangladesh

use the religious sentiments of the people to get votes. But similar instances of rank opportunism have been seen in India and elsewhere, too. We have also seen how the powerful Western states have declared the protection of human rights to be one of their supreme objectives, but then they patronized fundamentalism both overtly and covertly. Democratic governments recognize military dictatorships for short-run political interests. Secular states make friends with autocracies as well as theocracies. They even tolerate the completely inhuman behaviour of their own fundamentalists. Such double standards practised by so-called democratic and secular states at home and abroad give the fundamentalists a sort of legitimacy. Governments then have to succumb to the fundamentalists' pressure and proscribe books and make arrangements to send its writers and authors to prison.

Some authors in the West are coming forward in support of the fundamentalists. They argue that not all the customs in vogue in the third world countries are harmful for women. They find a sort of stability and social peace in the oriental world. They think that even *harems* are not necessarily bad for women, because they provide a degree of autonomy and independence! May I humbly observe that all this is plain nonsense. For me, there can be no difference in the concept of human rights between the East and the West. If the veil is bad for Western women, then it is bad for their oriental sisters as well. If patriarchy is to be fought against in the West, it should be equally fought against in the East. The fight, in fact, is more urgent there because most of the women have neither any education nor any economic independence. If modern secular education is good for Western women, why should the Eastern women be deprived of it. The peace that some authors visualize in the Eastern countries is, clearly, the peace of the graveyard. The point is, the fundamentalists cannot be countered without a relentless and uncompromising fight. The struggle should be both theoretical and tactical.

Democracy and secularism should be applied in practice and not remain a mere play of words. Fundamentalism is an ideology that diverts people from the path of natural development of consciousness and undermines their personal rights. I find it impossible to accept fundamentalism as an alternative to secular ideas. My reasons are: first, the insistence of the fundamentalists on divine justification for human laws; second, the insistence of fundamentalists upon the superior authority of faith, as opposed to reason; third, the insistence of fundamentalists that the individual does not count, that the individual is immaterial. Group loyalty over individual rights and personal achievements is a peculiar feature of fundamentalism. Fundamentalists believe in a particular way of life; they want to put everybody in their particular strait-jacket and dictate what an individual should eat, what an individual should wear, how an individual should live everyday life – everything is to be determined by the fundamentalist authority. Fundamen-

talists do not believe in individualism, liberty of personal choice, or plurality of thought. Moreover, as they are believers in a particular faith, they believe only in propagating their own ideas (as autocrats generally do). They do not encourage or entertain free debate, they deny others the right to express their own views freely, and they cannot tolerate anything which they perceive as going against their faith. They do not believe in an open society and, although they proclaim themselves a moral force, their language is one of hatred and violence. As true believers, they are out to 'save the soul' of the people of their country by force of arms.

Is it possible for a rationalist and humanist to accept this sort of terrible repression? The fight between obscurantism and enlightenment, between rationality and faith, is therefore inevitable. But it is to be fought in the realm of ideology, in the field of education, on political platforms, and in all the spheres of daily life. ♦

*This is a shortened version of a speech delivered at the Humanist World congress in Mexico City (November, 1996).*