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Recommended Citation

Hussain, Amir. "The Atheistic Imagination." In *The Atheistic Imagination: A Challenge for Jews, Christians and Muslims*, edited by Patrick J. Ryan, 30-37. New York: Fordham University, 2012.

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The Atheistic Imagination

A Muslim Response to the Spring McGinley Lecture Delivered by Rev. Patrick Ryan, SJ

April 24 and 25, 2012, Fordham University

Professor Amir Hussain, Ph.D.

Greetings and good evening, *al-salaamu alaikum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatahu*, peace be upon you and the Mercy and Blessings of God. I am honoured and delighted to be invited back to Fordham to offer a brief response to the wonderful Spring McGinley lecture that we heard from Father Ryan. A very simple and a very sincere “Thank you” to all of you here. I need to single out, as always, Father President Joseph McShane for his hospitality, Provost Stephen Freedman for his support, Sister Anne-Marie Kirmse for her help with the arrangements, Doctor Peggy Steinfelds for her kind introduction, Rabbi Polish for his wise words, and of course, to Father Ryan for inviting me to respond to his lecture.

When I got the text of Father Ryan’s lecture, I read it carefully, and prepared what I thought was an appropriate response. Then I read Rabbi Polish’s response, which made me realize that I needed to tear up the response I had written and begin again. For that, I want to thank Rabbi Polish. It’s not often that you have the privilege of reading someone who makes you rethink your own work. And may I say that one of the many things I admire about the Jewish tradition is the questioning, the rethinking, and the arguing, even with God. As Rabbi Polish put it, “to call G-d to the docket as the accused.” That’s not something that you’d find Muslims doing very often.

I will focus my response to Father Ryan’s lecture on Salman Rushdie and *The Satanic Verses*. Let me state at the outset my respect and, indeed, love for Rushdie’s work as a whole. He

is one of my favourite writers, equally brilliant in the essay and the novel, and I think one of the two or three greatest living writers in English (the second being Michael Ondaatje, and the third—whomever you think). That he has not won the Nobel Prize in Literature is a travesty. Then again, Winston Churchill has an award while James Joyce does not, and Jorge Luis Borges has been safely dead for over 25 years and still has not received his award. So in that respect, Sir Salman Rushdie is in good company.

I wrote my dissertation on Muslim communities in Toronto, and included a chapter on Canadian reactions to *The Satanic Verses*. My first serious scholarly piece, a revised version of that chapter, was published almost exactly a decade ago, the lead article in the March 2002 issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. A decade later, I find myself the editor of that journal, a punishment, no doubt, for my many sins.

The Satanic Verses is a 547-page novel that had preoccupied Salman Rushdie for decades. As Father Ryan noted, it was Rushdie's fourth novel. To quote from an interview that Rushdie gave prior to the publication of the book: "Parts of the novel have been in my head since I first began to study Islamic history at the university [King's College, Cambridge] 20 years ago. But I started work on the book in early 1984. I stopped after my first draft." In another interview, Rushdie explained that he was writing about his own multiple identities:

In writing *The Satanic Verses* I think I was writing for the first time from the whole of myself. The English part, the Indian part. The part of me that loves London, and the part that longs for Bombay.

But most of the time, people will ask me—will ask anyone like me—are you Indian? Pakistani? English?

What is being expressed is a discomfort with a plural identity. And what I

am saying to you—and saying in the novel—is that we have got to come to terms with this. We are increasingly becoming a world of migrants, made up of bits and fragments from here, there. We are here. And we have never really left anywhere we have been.¹

It was this theme of migration, of being brown in England, about which Rushdie wrote. Father Ryan is quite right to describe Rushdie as a “British Indian” who is distinctively from Bombay.

In 1990, Rushdie wrote:

I was born an Indian, and not only an Indian, but a Bombayite—Bombay, most cosmopolitan, most hybrid, most hotchpotch of Indian cities. My writing and thought have therefore been as deeply influenced by Hindu myths and attitudes as Muslim ones (and my movie star Gibreel is also a figure of inter-religious tolerance, playing Hindu gods without causing offence, in spite of his Muslim origins). Nor is the West absent from Bombay. I was already a mongrel self, history’s bastard, before London aggravated the condition.²

However, Rushdie has also been shaped, or “aggravated” by his time in the United States of America. It is instructive to remember that he was 13 ½ years old when he left Bombay to come to London, and that since the death sentence was lifted in 1999, he has lived here, first in New York City and then like any self-respecting citizen of the world, moving to Los Angeles. He has lived for almost exactly the same amount of time in America as in India. So what does that make him, Indian or American? Indo-Anglo-American? I too share that hybrid identity, and often wonder who I am. I was born in Pakistan, and lived there until I was four years old. Then

we moved to Canada, where I lived for the next 27 years. The first language I learned to speak was Urdu, the first language I learned to read and write was English. I have lived in Los Angeles for 15 years now, over three times as long as I lived in Pakistan. I am a Canadian citizen, who was born in Pakistan, who is now a Resident Alien in the United States. What connects me to Rushdie (aside, I blush to add, from our shared elegance and eloquence in writing) is that our experiences of Islam are as members in the minority community. For most of our lives, we have lived in countries like India, Canada, England and America, where as Muslims we have been religious minorities.

In the introduction to *Imaginary Homelands*, his first collection of essays, Rushdie wrote about his experiences 30 years ago, at a conference in London in 1982 about Indian writing in English:

One distinguished novelist began his contribution by reciting a Sanskrit *sloka*. Then, instead of translating the verse, he declared: “Every educated Indian will understand what I’ve just said”. This was not simply a form of intellectual grandeur. In the room were Indian writers and scholars of every conceivable background—Christian, Parsi, Muslim, Sikh. None of us had been raised in a Sanskritic tradition. We were all reasonably “educated”, however; so what were we being told? Perhaps that we weren’t really “Indian”?

Later in the day, an eminent Indian academic delivered a paper on Indian culture that utterly ignored all minority communities. When questioned about this from the floor, the professor smiled benignly and allowed that of course India contained many diverse traditions—including Buddhists, Christians and “Mughals”. This characterization of Muslim culture was more than merely

peculiar. It was a technique of alienation. For if Muslims were “Mughals”, then they were foreign invaders, and Indian Muslim culture was both imperialist and inauthentic. At the time we made light of the gibe, but it stayed with me, pricking me like a thorn.³

In that same year, 1982, Rushdie wrote a magisterial essay, “The New Empire Within Britain,” which described the experiences of being a racial minority in Britain. It was presented as a lecture on British television (Channel 4), and Rushdie wrote this about how it was received:

The many British blacks and Asians who phoned in or wrote agreed, virtually unanimously, that the lecture had done no more than tell the simple truth. To them, I had gone no further than the ABC of racial prejudice in Britain. There was also, unsurprisingly, a hostile response from some members of the white community, though they were outnumbered by other white Britons who had found the piece informative and useful. My purpose had been simple: to tell the white majority how life in Britain all too often felt to members of racial minority groups. (I’ve been in a minority group all my life—a member of an Indian Muslim family in Bombay, then of a “mohajir”—migrant—family in Pakistan, and now as a British Asian.) By articulating a grievance, I could help, or so I hoped, to build bridges of understanding.⁴

Here, there is a connection to be made between Muslim and Jewish minority communities. As I mentioned earlier, my experience of being a Muslim for almost my entire life has been as a member of a minority community. In this way, I have a connection with the experiences of Jews as a minority community in the United States. However, as my Jewish teachers have pointed out to me, there is an order of magnitude difference when it comes to our

numbers worldwide. Roughly speaking, we have the same number of Jews as Muslims in the United States, about seven million each. However, if, God forbid, all of the Jews in the United States were wiped out, that would leave us with less than seven million Jews left in the world. If all of the Muslims in the United States were similarly wiped out, that would still leave us with over a billion Muslims.

It was with his characteristic concern for members of minority communities that Rushdie could write the following about the banning of his novel and the death threat that he received:

Let me say this first: I have never seen this controversy as a struggle between Western freedoms and Eastern unfreedom. The freedoms of the West are rightly vaunted, but many minorities—racial, sexual, political—just as rightly feel excluded from full possession of these liberties; while, in my lifelong experience of the East, from Turkey and Iran to India and Pakistan, I have found people to be every bit as passionate for freedom as any Czech, Romanian, German, Hungarian or Pole.⁵

If there is one difference that I have with Rushdie, it is his understanding and use of the word “secular.” He seems to confuse it with the term “atheist.” So, for example, he can write the following: “To accept that the world, here, is all there is; to go through it, towards and into death, without the consolations of religion seems, well, at least as courageous and rigorous to us as the espousal of faith seems to you. Secularism and its work deserve your respect, not your contempt.”⁶ I would argue that secularism, at least in the context of North America, does not mean the same thing as atheism. When we say that North America is secular, we do not mean that we are a society consisting mostly of atheists. We are much more religious, for example, on any measure of religiosity, than Europeans. What we mean by secular is that there is no official

state religion. That because President Obama is a member of the United Church of Christ, that doesn't mean that the UCC becomes the official American church. This secularism is very different, for example, from the disestablishment of religion in Europe, expressed for example as *laïcité* in France.

In 1990, Rushdie became a Muslim. It's quite clear that he has left that religious community, and taken up the mantle of atheism. In describing the horrors of the massacres in Gujarat in 2002, Rushdie wrote: "...religion is the poison in the blood. Where religion intervenes, mere innocence is no excuse.... So India's problem turns out to be the world's problem. What happened in India, happened in God's name. The problem's name is God."⁷ In a letter that Father Ryan quoted, Rushdie wrote to the world's six billionth citizen: "As human knowledge has grown, it has also become plain that every religious story ever told about how we got here is quite simply wrong. This, finally, is what all religions have in common. They didn't get it right."⁸

Here, I would argue, is perhaps for the first time a narrowness or a meanness in Rushdie's vision. He rightly praises the fabulous work of Gabriel García Márquez, but reads the Bible in a surprisingly literal fashion. At the University of Toronto, I had the extraordinary privilege of knowing Northrop Frye, whose last book was entitled *The Double Vision: Language and Meaning in Religion*. In his famous undergraduate course, "The Mythological Framework of Western Culture," Professor Frye would remind us that when the Bible is historically accurate, it is only accidentally so. In the same vein, with respect to the teaching of science in Kansas, none of my Jewish friends think that the Bible, important as it is, is a very good science textbook. It is, however, much more important than history or science. It tells us about our place in the world. It gives us not facts, but something much more important, truths. Or to quote from Professor Frye:

What “the” truth is, is not available to human beings in spiritual matters: the goal of our spiritual life is God, who is a spiritual Other, not a spiritual object, much less a conceptual object. That is why the Gospels keep reminding us how many listen and how few hear: truths of the gospel kind cannot be demonstrated except through personal example. As the seventeenth-century Quaker Isaac Penington said, every truth is substantial in its own place, but all truths are shadows except the last. The language that lifts us clear of the merely plausible and the merely credible is the language of the spirit; the language of the spirit is, Paul tells us, the language of love, and the language of love is the only language that we can be sure is spoken and understood by God.⁹

Professor Frye took his title “The Double Vision” from a phrase in a poem that William Blake incorporated into a letter to Thomas Butts on November 22, 1802. And there is a lovely connection here with Rushdie, who said that the two greatest influences on him when he wrote *The Satanic Verses* were Blake’s *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and Mikhail Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita*.¹⁰ In the letter to Butts, Blake wrote:

For double the vision my eyes do see,
 And a double vision is always with me:
 With my inward eye ‘tis an old man grey;
 With my outward a thistle across my way.¹¹

With that double vision, we see the spiritual and the physical world as simultaneously present. It is that imagination, not the atheistic one, which I would wish for us all.

NOTES

¹ From an interview in Bombay in June, 1989, recorded in Bhikhu Parekh, “The Rushdie Affair and the British Press,” in *The Salman Rushdie Controversy in Inter-Religious Perspective*, ed. Daniel Cohn-Sherbok (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 71B95, at 73.

² Salman Rushdie, “In Good Faith,” in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981—1991* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1991), 404.

³ Rushdie, “Introduction,” in *Imaginary Homelands*, 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵ Rushdie, “In Good Faith,” 396.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 413.

⁷ Salman Rushdie, “March 2002: God in Gujarat,” in *Step Across This Line: Collected Nonfiction 1992—2002* (New York: Random House, 2002), 346.

⁸ Salman Rushdie, “‘Imagine There’s No Heaven’: A Letter to the Six Billionth World Citizen,” in *Step Across This Line*, 142.

⁹ Northrop Frye, *The Double Vision: Language and Meaning in Religion* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 20-21.

¹⁰ Rushdie, “In Good Faith,” 403.

¹¹ Frye, *The Double Vision*, 22.