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RUSHDIE'S *The Satanic Verses*
AND HERETICAL LITERATURE IN ISLAM

Saadi A. Simawe

As a postmodern critique of Islam, Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* should be understood, I think, in the context of the ancient but on-going battle between philosophy and theology, begun immediately after the death of Muhammad (d. 632). Scholars familiar with the formative period of Islamic philosophy may find the seeds of this ancient quarrel not only in the very early period of Muhammad's Mission (Radinson 110–11) but even in his own household. Ayesha, Muhammad's favorite wife, from whom the prophet urged all the faithful to "draw half of their religion" (Saadawi 131), often challenged Muhammad himself in relation to certain Qur'anic verses. When the Qur'an allowed Muhammad to marry as many women as he wished, she protested with cynicism, "Allah always responds immediately to your needs" (Saadaw 131). It is even said that "some women in the first Islamic community, such as the ancient warrior Nusaybah, were ardent feminists. She asked Muhammad why, in the Qur'an, God always addressed himself to men and never to women. The legend has it that God recognized the validity of her question, for thereafter Revelation referred to 'believers' in both genders" (Bouhdiba 19).

Ayesha went so far as to declare on many occasions that Muhammad did not physically go to heaven on that night of *Isra* (i.e., nocturnal journey). She insisted ascension, which is mentioned in the Qur'an (Q.XVII:1), was a dream, because during that night his body "remained where it was but God removed his spirit" (Ibn Ishaq 183). Despite the prophet's wife's testimony, orthodox Muslims chose not to believe her, and believed instead the story of the prophet's night journey on his magical and/or divine horse, al-Buraq ("the lightning" in Arabic) led by the Archangel Gibreel (Gabriel). This human hunger for the supernatural, for the mythical, and for the mysterious is one of the major issues that *The Satanic Verses* tries to explore.

As this paper will argue, the main object of the satire in Rushdie's novel is not Muhammad, the "very interesting person" who is "the only prophet who exists even remotely inside history" as Rushdie said (Leonard 348), but the idealization and idolization of Muhammad, and of the Qur'an, the angels, and early Muslim society.

The history of schisms and sects in Islam as documented by Medieval Muslim historians such as Ibn Hazm (b. A.H. 384/A.D. 994), al-Baghdadi (d. 429/1037), and al-Shahrastani (b. 469/1076) reveals the heated and prolonged speculation concerning basic theological questions such as the credibility of Muhammad's prophethood, the validity of the Qur'anic portrayal of God and Satan, the supposedly miraculous *I'jaz* (inimitability) and divine nature of the Qur'an, and rational discourse in relation to the Qur'anic discourse. During the Renaissance of Islam (3rd–4th/9–10th centuries), these questions were publicly debated. That age of free speculation ended when the door of *Ijtihad* (the right to individual reasoning in religious matters) was closed by the beginning of the fourth century (A.D. 900). In *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie not only reactivates long-forbidden theological questions and debates, but goes so far as to question their validity as rational questions: If we, in the twentieth century, cannot prove that God exists, Rushdie seems to cry throughout the novel, how can we believe in the existence of His Archangel Gibreel, let alone in what the latter revealed to Muhammad? However, most of these "forbidden" metaphysical questions that *The Satanic Verses* raises are neither original nor unthinkable; they were discussed publicly by many Medieval Muslim and non-Muslim thinkers and writers.

The question of Gibreel's existence and credibility and the Qur'anic account of the relationship between Gibreel and the prophet were questioned as early as the first century of Islam when several individuals with poetic talents claimed that they, too, were given holy books by the same divine sources. Maslama and Sadjah, two of several prophets who sprang up in Arabia during the general Apostasy after the death of Muhammad, were fought by the state-Islam and, after their defeat, cursed as "false prophets." Their holy books were distorted into jokes or destroyed (*The Encyclopedia of Islam*). Al-Ghahmiya, a Muslim sect that emerged in the second century (A.D. 9th century), argued that if the Qur'an denies God personal and anthropomorphic form, how can one believe that the Qur'an is God's speech, and in Arabic at that (Madelung 504–25)? Speech, al-Ghahmiya argued, requires human organs. Al-Ghurabiya, another sect that flourished around the 4th/10th century, undermined Gibreel's credibility by arguing that Ali ibn Abi Talib, the prophet's cousin (d. 661), was the true prophet. Muhammad became a prophet through Gibreel's mistake. When "the Angel Gibreel was commissioned by God to bring the

revelation to Ali,” he gave it to Muhammad because the two were “so like in physical features as to be confused” (al-Baghdadi 67–8). This episode and its bizarre consequences would make wonderful magical realism in the hands of postmodern novelists such as Rushdie.

To any serious study of the heretical literature in Islam, including *The Satanic Verses*, it is important to remember that the Qur’an has always been a literary and philosophical challenge to Muslim and non-Muslim thinkers and writers. According to the Qur’an, Muhammad is just a Messenger from God. Unlike previous prophets, Muhammad, being the last and the final prophet sent to a relatively more advanced age (7th century), did not need to perform miracles such as those done by Moses and Christ and other prophets. His miracle, the Qur’an insists, was the Qur’an itself—a miraculous, inimitable, and divine utterance whose Letters are inscribed in the celestial Preserved Tablet (Q.LXXXV:22) and the Heavenly Archetype (Q.XLIII:4). On many occasions, the Qur’an challenges all humans and djinn to produce one comparable verse (Q.LII:33–4, X:38, XVII:88). Many prominent writers and poets took the challenge and tried to imitate the Qur’an. Al-Ma’ari (b. 363/973), a well-known ascetic, philosopher, and poet, ridiculed the notion of the prophecy and holy books as “mere myths and inventions” (Ibn al-Jawzi 185). In his *Risalt al-Gufuran*, an imaginary journey to Heaven and Hell, and in contrast to the hostile Qur’anic attitude to poetry and poets (Q.XXVI:223–27), Al-Ma’ari puts most of the heretical poets in paradise. Al-Mutanabbi (b. 303/915), regarded by most critics as the greatest Arab poet of all ages, gained his cognomen from his leadership of a heretical revolutionary movement staged in Syria in 932. In Arabic, *al-mutanabbi* means “one who claimed prophethood,” an insult the poet claimed with pride. Ibn al-Rawendi (b. the middle or the end of the 4th/10th century), another stormy figure in the history of heretical philosophy in Islam, “submits,” in his *Kitab al-Zum-murrdh*, to “mordant criticism the idea of prophecy in general and the prophecy of Muhammad in particular. According to him, religious dogmas cannot be accepted by reason and ought therefore to be rejected. The miracles attributed to the prophets are pure inventions. The Kuran [Qur’an] is not a revealed book at all and does not possess either lucidity or inimitable beauty” (*Ency. of Islam*).

However, the most significant intellectual anti-Qur’anic movement in Islam was al-Mu’talasila which flourished during the 3rd–4th/9th–10th

centuries. Its powerful and widely accepted argument forced state-Islam during the Caliphate of al-Maamun (b. 170/789) to recognize its main doctrine concerning the createdness (the historicity) of the Qur'an. The Mu'tazilites, who were primarily rationalists, refuted the orthodox concept of the pre-existence of the Qur'an on a Heavenly Table beside God as a downright idolatry. By vigorous analysis of particular historical references in the Qur'an, the Mu'tazilites demonstrated the impossibility of the uncreatedness of the Qur'an: How can one accept the absurd notion that God had talked to Moses or Muhammad before they were created, the Mu'tazilites questioned (Guillaume 106–9). It was during this period of Islamic Renaissance cherished by the most latitudinarian Caliph, al-Maamun, that the well-known *The Apology of al-Kindy written at the Court of al-Maamun (A.H. 215; A.D. 830) in Defense of Christianity Against Islam* was publicly debated. The Christian writer of *The Apology* not only rebuffed his Muslim friend who invited him to accept Islam, but vigorously attacked the very foundations of Islam: He denounced the prophetic claims of Muhammad, his and his wives' moral integrity, his plagiarism of Christian heritage, his Message as Satanic, and his Book, the Qur'an, as imperfect, inspired by a Christian Monk called Gabriel, tampered with and composed by different hands through generations (Muir 19, 25, 29).

Less than a century later, a group of Muslim thinkers calling themselves *Ikhwan al-Safa* (i.e. Brothers of Purity, ca. 350/961) took the Mu'tazilite concept of the createdness of the Qur'an a step further by declaring in their *Epistles*:

Our prophet, Muhammad, was sent to an uncivilized people, composed of dwellers in the desert, who neither possessed a proper conception of the beauty of this world, nor of the spiritual character of the world beyond. The crude expressions of the Koran [Qur'an], which are adapted to the understanding of that people, must be understood in a spiritual sense by those who are more cultured.

Their humanistic vision of Islam was expressed in their rejection of the orthodox "belief in the God of Anger, in the punishment of Hell and the like [as being] irrational" (De Boer 94).

The battle between secular philosophy and Islamic theology during medieval times reached its highest point in the dialogue between the two

philosophical giants of the time, Ibn Rushd (Averroes in Latin, b. 520/1126) and al-Guzzali (Algazzel in Latin, b. 450/1058). In *Refutation of Philosophy*, al-Gazzali attacked the claim of philosophy to higher truth and held that religion is a safer access to knowledge. In his *Refutation of the Refutation of Philosophy*, Ibn Rushd proclaimed that:

Theologians did not have the right to intervene in this activity [philosophy], nor to judge its conclusions. Theology was necessary as an intermediate discipline, but it must always be under the control of philosophy.

Nevertheless, Ibn Rushd seemed to be wiser than Rushdie. His elitism and deep distrust of the layman's ability to appreciate higher knowledge compelled him to warn that "neither philosophers nor theologians should unveil to the people their interpretations of the ambiguous verses of the Qur'an" (Eliade 137).

But Rushdie, like the Hallajan Satan in his refusal to bow to anyone but God, and like Muhammad himself in his insistence on the destruction of the idols in Mecca, is too honest and too stubborn to compromise. In the face of the angry mobs and the death threats unleashed by *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie tries his best to remind Muslim protestors of a simple historical fact:

Muhammad Ibn Abdalla, one of the great geniuses of world history, a successful businessman, victorious general, and sophisticated statesman as well as a prophet, insisted throughout his life on his simple humanity. There are no contemporary portraits of him because he feared that, if any were made, people would worship the portraits. He was only a messenger; it was the message that should be revered. (Rushdie, "Burning" 26)

Here Rushdie not only refers to a fact of history recognized by the most authoritative Muslim and Western biographers of Muhammad, but he also recapitulates the basic theme of *The Satanic Verses*—the individual's right to free speculation on the nature of Muhammad's Revelation and Prophethood. The resulting dialogue between Rushdie and the infuriated Muslims, which has now been broadcast internationally, and in which the

boundaries between fiction and reality are almost totally obliterated, may be read as the most compelling, though unwritten chapter of the novel. For the dominant element in this extremely complex polyphonic novel is the dialogue between Gibreel Farishta (“farishta” means Angel in Urdu and Persian), the actor who has lost his faith, and all of Islamic history. After his loss of faith and under the spell of his angelic name, Gibreel Farishta keeps changing into the Archangel Gibreel and becomes fascinated with the freedom he starts to enjoy in parodying and mocking Islamic narratives and their main characters.

Throughout the novel, Gibreel Farishta and/or the Archangel Gibreel vehemently tries to vindicate himself/themselves from the responsibility of delivering any revelatory messages to the prophet Mahound, or to the exiled Imam, or to the mystic Ayesha, the butterfly-girl:

All around him, he thinks as he half-dreams, half-wakes, are people hearing voices, being seduced by words. But not his; never his original material. — Then whose? Who is whispering in their ears, enabling them to move mountains [Mahound], halt clocks [the exiled Imam], diagnose disease [Ayesha the butterfly-girl]. (Rushdie, *Verses* 234)

Each of these three characters has significantly distinct mystical experiences with the Archangel Gibreel. Each of them more or less employs Gibreel, the passive one, to fulfill his or her political, psychological, or moral needs. Mahound is the most practical, most tentative, “most pragmatic” prophet (381); his revelations are of convenience (365). Overwhelmed by his mystical experience, Mahound interprets it according to the philosophical “sciences” available in the Arabia of the 7th century where people were obsessed with receiving prophets from heaven whenever social conditions became unbearable.

As the novel indicates, Mahound’s struggle against Jahilia (Arabic for Ignorance, a name used to refer to the pre-Islamic society of Arabia) is not just religious, it is also economic and social (104). Significantly, Mahound’s followers, as the wealthy of Jahilia see them, are “the water-carrier Khalid . . . and some sort of bum from Persia by the outlandish name of Salman, and to complete this trinity of scum there is the slave

Bilal, the one Mahound freed, an enormous black monster” (101).

The circumstances that lead Mahound to utter the famous Satanic verses are vividly and insightfully described in the novel. The entire chapter titled “Mahound” suggests that Revelation is a highly complex historical and psychological phenomenon. Too many visible and invisible factors participate in shaping the final version of a Revelation. And the Archangel Gibreel, exactly like the figure of Satan, is a convenient way to explain Revelation and Temptation. When Abu Simbel, the Grandee of the Jahilia, offers Mahound a deal for mutual recognition, that is, Mahound’s recognition of the three female idols in return for the Jahilia’s tolerance of the new religion, the businessman in Mahound jumps at the opportunity (105). But the prophet/reformer in Mahound starts to suffer the pangs of conscience and the blame of the hungry and humiliated disciples (105): “Mahound’s anguish is awful. He asks: is it possible that they [the three female idols] are angels? Lat, Manat, Uzza—can I call them angelic? Gibreel, have you got sisters? Are these the daughters of God? And he castigates himself, O my vanity, I am an arrogant man, is this weakness, is it just a dream of power? Must I betray myself for a seat on the council?” (111).

When, finally, Mahound, tormented by the businessman and the prophet within, retreats to Mount Cone to consult the Archangel Gibreel, the latter is nonplussed: “*Mahound comes to me for revelation, asking me to choose between monotheist and henotheist alternatives, and I’m just some idiot actor having a bhaenchud nightmare, what the fuck do I know, Yaar, what to tell you, help. Help*” (104). But Mahound has no choice; he needs the Revelation to support his pragmatic designs. After a long painful struggle with the Archangel, the Revelation happens as Mahound wishes, and the words of the Satanic verses come out “‘Have you thought upon Lat and Uzza, and Manat, the third, the other’ — After the first verse Hind gets to her feet; the Grandee of Jahilia is already standing very straight. And Mahound, with silenced eyes, recites: ‘They are the exalted birds, and their intercession is desired indeed’ ” (114). That was, we are told, a “desolating *triumph of the business man* in the tent of the unbelievers” (115, italics mine).

Then who or what makes Mahound believe that those three verses were inspired by Satan, and that he must quickly recant them and “strike them from the record for ever and ever” (123)? Not the Archangel Gibreel, for sure. Actually, Mahound, for many practical reasons, starts to suspect the wisdom in his acceptance of Abu Simbel’s deal. Immediately after his

utterance of those verses, Mahound feels that he weakened morally. In the ominous events that happened during the same night of the concession, Mahound reads his own moral downfall: the forces of darkness and chaos were unleashed in the city of Jahilia; several murders shocked the entire city that night; Mahound found himself sleeping in Abu Simble's wife's silky bed with a bursting hangover (119); his disciples, feeling betrayed, fell in "the grip of a self-destructive unhappiness" and started drinking heavily (117). Symbolically, to Mahound's dismay, the triumph of the businessman in him was, in fact, the triumph of the social forces he initially set out to change. It seems that the guilt he felt and the social chaos he thought he endorsed by recognizing the moral establishment of the Jahilia collaborate in one way or another to make him blame the utterance of the three verses on Satan. Through the detailed description of the circumstances that influence Mahound's mind, the novel seems to suggest that it is neither Satan nor Gibreel who inspires prophets. Rather, it is social forces, the historical moment, and the pressing needs of that moment. After all Mahound was able, due to the social reaction to those verses, to distinguish between the sacred and the profane.

In contrast to Mahound, whose personality is complex, whose mind is tentative, and whose will is always flexible, the exiled Imam is in effect exiled from history, from life, from the flux of time (210, 212, 213). His slogans are "Burn the books and trust the Book; shred the papers and hear the Word as it was revealed by the Angel Gibreel to the Messenger Mahound and explicated by your interpreter and Imam" (211). To the Imam, "History is a deviation from the path, knowledge is a delusion, because the sum of knowledge was complete on the day Allah finished his revelation to Mahound" (210). Like Mahound, the Imam claims to commune with the Archangel Gibreel. But the Archangel tells us that he only weeps in the chilling presence of the Imam. Significantly, even the Archangel Gibreel, the eternal passive, reticent, and inert, protests the Imam's concept of love: "'That isn't love,' Gibreel, weeping, replies, 'It's hate'" (214). In proclaiming that History and Knowledge were completed with the death of Mahound, the Imam has virtually turned Mahound and the Qur'an into idols, the very practices that Mahound revolted against thirteen centuries ago. In his rejection of History, Time, Change, and Progress, the Imam has exiled himself in the idolized past and waged *Jihad* (holy war) against humanity and life. Furthermore, in abusing the Archangel Gibreel by

riding him like a flying carpet—in contrast to Mahound who used to let the Archangel wrestle him to the ground (124)—the exiled Imam is denying the human and humane possibilities of the moral imagination:

Gibreel speaks querulously, to hide his fear. “Why insist on arch-angels? Those days, you know, are gone.”

The Imam closes his eyes, sighs. The carpet extrudes long hairy tendrils, which wrap themselves around Gibreel, holding him fast. “You don’t need me,” Gibreel emphasizes. “The revelation is complete. Let me go” (212).

Allegorically, the exiled Imam may represent the idea of religious fanaticism in general, and Islamic fundamentalism in particular.

Ayesha the butterfly-girl is the third character in the novel who understands her mystical experience and utterances as a divine Revelation through the Archangel Gibreel. Like Mahound, she is an orphan and epileptic (221). Unlike Mahound, she is living in the twentieth century in the Indian Muslim village, Titlipor. When the villagers first see Ayesha eating the butterflies that accompany her like a colorful sari, they think of her as a demented girl (221). But when she diagnoses Mrs. Akhtar’s disease as cancer, the entire village starts to consider her a prophetess. Like Mahound and the exiled Imam, Ayesha is endowed with the capability to commune with the Archangel Gibreel. Her relationship with the Angel, as Ayesha claims, developed into marriage (225). But the Archangel denies having “laid finger on her” (226). Like the exiled Imam, Ayesha hates the other sex (221); like him she looks (though she is only nineteen years old) very old and her hair has turned “as white as snow” (225). When more villagers start to believe Ayesha’s miracles, she feels more confident to reveal to them the divine Message she received from the Archangel: She is ordered by God to lead the villagers on a pilgrimage to Mecca walking across the Arabian Sea. Like Mahound, using her magical power of language, Ayesha mesmerizes more and more villages: “Everything is required of us, and everything will be given” (233).

Despite the opposition of Mirza Saeed Akhtar, an atheist whose European wife and mother-in-law were seduced by Ayesha, the majority of the villagers abandon their vocations and start preparing for the historic pilgrimage when the waters of the sea will part and they will walk to Mecca

on the bed of the Arabian sea. After days of walking towards the shore, the pilgrims' feet touch the water and they, actually, see the parting of the Arabian Sea. Yet Mirza Saeed Akhtar, who desperately tries to save his wife from drowning, insists that the sea did not part. Despite the fact that "already the drowned bodies are floating to shore, swollen like balloons and stinking like hell" (505), the survivors, to Mirza Saeed's Akhtar's fury, swear that they saw the sea divide "like hair being combed" (504). Whom are we, readers, supposed to believe in this case? The Archangel Gibreel and/or Gibreel Farishta do not deny the possibility of seeing things as one wishes to. The Archangel Gibreel, from his experiences with all kinds of prophets, is already familiar with that. But certain clues to the truth of the matter are scattered through the chapter. Ayesha's butterflies are not, we are told, butterflies, but "hopes long since shown to be false" (222). Moreover, the butterflies are directly associated with death and dying: "they had been the familiar spirits, or so the legend ran, of a local saint, the holy woman known only as Bibiji, who had lived to the age of two hundred and forty-two" (217). Significantly, Mirza Saeed Akhtar, who refused to believe in Ayesha and her miracles, succumbs "on the last night of his life" (506) to the reality of the butterflies and the possibility of the parting of the sea.

Ayesha the butterfly-girl and the exiled Imam may be viewed as two extremes forced to meet as one uncompromising idea: the exiled Imam as pure idealization and idolization of the past; Ayesha, being married to the Archangel Gibreel and clothed with butterflies, as death and fascination with the otherworld. Comparatively, Mahound is more complex, more human; he may represent the middle ground between Ayesha and the exiled Imam. Actually, the Archangel Gibreel, who spends most of the time defending himself and rarely passes judgment, reveals to us his experience with the three characters:

With Mahound, there is always a struggle; with the Imam, slavery;
but with this girl, there is nothing. (234)

Mahound, the exiled Imam, and Ayesha the butterfly-girl are not the only ones capable of seeing the Archangel Gibreel. Like Mahound, Gibreel Farishta is not only able to see the Archangel, but he is able to become one with him through the power of dream. Gibreel Farishta's revelatory mes-

sage from the Archangel is unique: It is the message that abolishes all previous messages as distortions, inventions, lies, and wish-fulfilling dreams. More importantly, Gibreel Farishta seems quite intent on justifying his own loss of faith and vindicating the Archangel from what the prophets of history did in his name. The essential difference between Gibreel Farishta on the one hand, and Mahound, the exiled Imam, and Ayesha the butterfly-girl on the other, is that Gibreel Farishta, the postmodern artist, does not claim access to or believe in any absolute truth. He is the Apostle of doubts, tormented by his own inability to believe.

Nevertheless Gibreel Farishta does not by any means suggest that the revelatory experiences of the prophets were false. He simply assumes the classical stoic attitude of the agnostic. His exploration of Mahound's, Ayesha's, and the exiled Imam's mystical experiences deftly suggests that prophets, mystics, and Imams were not able to understand their own mystical experiences; hence they probably misled themselves and their followers. Despite his capability of communing with the Archangel, Farishta seems uninterested in claiming any prophethood, primarily because he tends to understand his experience with the Archangel as an artistic experience. The capability of seeing and communing with the Archangel Gibreel, Farishta seems to imply, is an artistic talent that enables one to momentarily obliterate his or her rigid walls of the self and open up to the voices of the historical moment. It is similar to what John Keats calls negative capability—that gift that allows the greatest artists to become a medium, or a huge cipher in the Emersonian sense. From this perspective, the incarnated Archangel, Gibreel Farishta, describes what appears to Mahound as a divine Revelation:

It happens: revelation. Like this: Mahound, still in his nonsleep, becomes rigid, veins bulge in his neck, he clutches at his centre. No, no, nothing like an epileptic fit, it can't be explained away that easily; . . . The dragging again the dragging and now the miracle starts in his my our guts, he is straining with all his might at something, forcing something, and Gibreel begins to feel that strength that force, here it is *at my own jaw* working it, opening shutting; and the power, starting within Mahound, reaching up to *my vocal cord* and the voice comes. *Not my voice* I'd never know such words I'm no classy speaker never was never will be but this isn't my voice it's a Voice. (112)

Farishta seems quite certain that the Voice is neither his voice, nor the Archangel's voice. Every time Mahound communes with the Archangel, Farishta hears that Voice and does not know where it comes from. Is it from heaven? From Mahound's unconscious? Is it the Voice of the social forces that were pressing on Mahound's conscience, which is described as very sensitive to the social injustices of the time?

Throughout the novel the Archangel Gibreel keeps asking those who commune with him a crucial question: "*What kind of idea are you?*" Now it is our turn to ask: What kind of idea is the Archangel Gibreel who is open to all kinds of ideas (prophets and satans 123), but feels suffocated by fanaticism and idolatory (the Imam and Ayesha)? A careful examination of the characterization of the Archangel and his interactions with other characters may illuminate his identity. He is described as "inert, usually asleep in the dream as he is in life"; as people come to him he always "half-dreams, half-wakes" (234). In his experience with Mahound, which is the most extensive one, the Archangel tells us that he is inside and outside Mahound (110); "his dual role is both above-looking-down and below-staring-up" (111). In all cases, whether with Mahound, or Ayesha, or the Imam, words, the Archangel tells us, were put in his mouth. He insists that he has not given any Messages, nor should he do so. What kind of idea, then, is the Archangel?

Allegorically, the Archangel may represent the Imagination, an ever-expanding energy that keeps rupturing and bursting all kinds of idolized theories, ideologies, and religions. Hence he feels temporarily at home with the destroyers of idols such as Mahound, with the innovators who "philosophize with hammers," to use Nietzsche's phrase. With hammers, often humorous, Rushdie attacks idealized and idolized concepts of Muhammad, the Qur'an, the angels, and early Islamic community hoping to liberate the more humanistic vision of Islam which has long been imprisoned, like the genie of the *Arabian Nights*. By allowing Gibreel Farishta to commune with the Archangel, who has been monopolized and manipulated by the prophets, and hence to demystify him, Rushdie seems to elaborate exactly what Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Zakariya al-Razi (b. 250/864; Rhazes in Latin), the greatest physician of Islam, said in his *Fi Nekdh al-Adyan* (Refutation of Religions) more than one thousand years ago:

All men being by nature equal, the prophets cannot claim any intellectual or spiritual superiority. The miracles of the prophets are impostures or belong to the domain of pious legend. The teachings of religions are contrary to the one truth: the proof of this is that they contradict one another. It is tradition and lazy custom that have led men to trust their religious leaders. Religions are the sole cause of the wars which ravage humanity; they are hostile to philosophical speculation and to scientific research. The alleged holy scriptures are books without values. (see *Ency. of Islam* and Hodgson 431–33)

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