

Identity and Religion of the Status Quo: The Rushdie Affair in the West

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In 1988 Salman Rushdie published *The Satanic Verses*, a novel that focuses on issues of migrant identity by contrasting the sacred and the profane, absolutism and pluralism, and methods of identity formation. In his essay, "In Good Faith," Rushdie describes *The Satanic Verses* as "a migrant's-eye view of the world. It is written from the very experience of uprooting, disjuncture and metamorphosis...that is the migrant condition" (Rushdie, 1991, p. 394). *The Satanic Verses* features surreal events and a mythological narrative style mimetic of religious texts, yet the novel simultaneously critiques the formation of a religious identity, offering a postmodern alternative. Rushdie develops his critique through the character of Gibreel Farishta, whose dreams depict the development of a fictional religion analogous to Islam.

The publication of *The Satanic Verses* was met with great controversy. Muslims in many countries felt betrayed by Rushdie's portrayal of an Islam that suppresses women and dwells extensively on rules and ritual. *The Satanic Verses* also contains passages that, taken out of context, accuse the prophet Muhammad of fabricating his recitation of the Quran. Hence in 1989 Ayatollah Khomeini imposed a *fatwa*, an Islamic religious decree, calling for Rushdie's death and forcing the author into hiding. In Canada and Britain, Muslims protested against the novel and appealed for its censorship; some even publicly burned copies of the novel. Collectively known as the Rushdie affair, these events revealed the precarious relationship between the secular and the sacred in the West.

As a secularist and former Muslim, I find the Western opposition

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to Rushdie particularly interesting: while the novel reaffirms my own method of identity formation, for those Western Muslims who protested the book, *The Satanic Verses* constituted a scathing attack on their religious tradition. Ironically, though *The Satanic Verses* denounces absolutism of all kinds, the British government responded to the Rushdie affair with demands of assimilation and homogeneity for its immigrant Muslim populations. Though the British government ostensibly defended Rushdie's rights as an author, its reaction to Muslim protestors evinced the state's monocultural interests. In this essay I will explore themes of identity formation and immigration in *The Satanic Verses* in order to evaluate the critical Muslim perspective, and to demonstrate the link between the British state's reactionary stance and its ideological interests.

Models of Identity Formation

Three distinct methods of identity formation are addressed in *The Satanic Verses*: the religious, the secular, and the postmodern. Rushdie arguably endorses the last; he illustrates the benefits and consequences of each method through the development of his characters. Before explicating each method through character analysis, I will give definition to these terms and establish a model for cultural identity and transmission.

Individual identity is molded to varying degrees by socialized ideologies, or traditional, structured patterns of thought, and constructed proportionately by individual agency. A person's group identity recognizes a community of individuals who share similar cultural features (e.g. ideologies, traits, values, history). Evolutionary biology and anthropology provide a fruitful method for distinguishing units of culture.

Biologist Richard Dawkins' landmark work, *The Selfish Gene*, describes culture as a population of *memes*, or 'copy-me' programs similar to genes. Cultures transmit certain sets of notions and values (analogous to genes) in a society through communication between persons (the analogue of reproduction). Memes evolve over many cycles of communication as individuals continually internalize, amend, and transmit these cultural units. Thus successful memes are those units of culture (religions, notions, values, etc.) that act in certain

ways to make persons both store and transmit these “mental units” (Boyer, pp. 35-37). Memes can take the form of religions, traditions, or cultural notions such as moral, sexual, and aesthetic values. Memes are dynamic culture systems that evolve like living species, surviving only if successfully transmitted over time. There are substantial variations of any meme; it is difficult to find two persons with identical understandings of their religion. Nonetheless, we can productively imagine religions as units of culture that pass from generation to generation through communication. The mimetic model of cultural transmission provides an invaluable approach to identity formation.

In the case of religious identity, one’s values, conception of the self, and subsequent choices are anchored to a particular religious tradition. Such persons naturally identify with others who share their beliefs. Bearing the “cultural memes” model in mind, we can say that the acquisition of a religious identity is organic to the human condition: religions have “evolved” in such a way to achieve optimal individual acceptance and transmission, just as species evolve to achieve optimal likelihood of survival reproduction. In a secular state a religious identity may seem abnormal, but the acquisition of a traditional worldview and an understanding of the self based on religious convention is indeed a common process.

The second method of identity formation presented in *The Satanic Verses* is the secular. A secular identity is utterly rational; it rejects any notion that cannot hold up to reason. The secular identity cannot be understood as devoid of cultural values; secularists, too, are subject to the acquisition and transmission of memes, but only those that can be accepted rationally. One who forms a secular identity acquires notions of morality and cultural values selectively, and here individual agency is imperative.

Secular identity formation requires one to choose among various cultural materials. Since cultures have particular values, notions, and beliefs, within any culture there exist archetypal, non-religious identities that, like religions, evolve over time. Just as religion can provide a “package” of beliefs, values, and community for persons with religious identities, these cultural archetypes supply individuals with attractive identities, worldviews, and membership in cultural collectives. Archetypal identities are more abstract and diverse than religious

identities; they are artifacts of cultural value and may seem to lack concrete, traditional means of transmission, like sacred texts. Such identities often reflect cultural notions of normality, like the “British gentleman” or the “American housewife” of the 19th century, but counter-cultural identities, such as the American “hippie,” also exist. For archetypal identities to survive in a culture, they too must evolve towards optimal acceptability and transmission. These archetypes provide the individuals of secular cultures with stable models of identity. Secular identity formation does not necessarily lead to archetypal norms, but it does subject the self to secular, rational notions of normality.

The postmodern critique of identity formation, secular and religious alike, holds that acceptance of any traditional identity, religious or cultural, affords one little individual agency. To indiscriminately accept a religious identity or pursue a secular identity is to become subject to authoritative definitions of regularity. This postmodern identity can more appropriately be labeled an anti-identity; it calls for the refusal to remain tied to any definition of the self, because self-definition amounts to passive acceptance of artificial limits and conventions. The postmodern mentality offered by Foucault is his ethic of permanent resistance to definition and limits (Simons, p. 22).

For Foucault identity formation should be a constant struggle between the self and its constraints. One is afforded complete agency in the selection of values and beliefs, but must never confuse individual self-definition with culturally defined models of identity. While the postmodern method of identity formation can coexist with the secular, it opposes the passivity that accompanies religious and archetypal identity models. Simply put, this method is the resistance to participation in the transmission of cultural memes. As I shall argue, a close reading of *The Satanic Verses* reveals Rushdie’s preference for this postmodern method.

Identity Formation in *The Satanic Verses*

In *The Satanic Verses* Rushdie addresses identity formation through the experience of immigration, a theme that is indeed essential to the novel. Major immigrant characters include Saladin Chamcha (India), Gibreel Farishta (India), the Cone family (Poland), the Sufyan family

(India), the Imam¹ (Iran), and Dr. Uhuru Simba (Africa). London is presented to the reader as primarily an immigrant city; we are never taken to the homes of native British citizens and only hear of true “Britishness” in the idealized tones of Saladin or the short quips of Gibreel. These two characters present two versions of the migrant search for identity in Britain, and represent alternative methods of identity formation. Saladin constructs his postmodern identity through experience and selective cultural digestion, affirming individual agency and choice, after suffering the consequences of his pursuit of an archetypal ideal. Gibreel faces initial turmoil and ultimately returns to a traditional, enduring identity molded by religion.

Since Saladin Chamcha was a child he loathed his father and culture. Given the opportunity to leave India at the age of thirteen to attend school in “proper London,” he jumped at the chance. Even before visiting London for the first time, “the mutation of Salahuddin Chamchawala [his name at birth] into Saladin Chamcha began...in old Bombay...When the England cricket team played India at the Brabourne Stadium, he prayed for an England victory, for the game’s creators to defeat the local upstart, for the proper order of things to be maintained” (Rushdie, 1988, p. 38). Upon arriving in London, Saladin has dreams of mastering British culture. In a telling childhood moment, Saladin arrives at breakfast to find a kipper on his plate. Saladin doesn’t know how to eat the fish without getting a mouthful of bones, and his fellow-pupils watch in silence during the ninety minutes required to finish his meal. Consequently, he decides that “England was a peculiar-tasting smoked fish full of spikes and bones, and nobody would ever tell him how to eat it...The eaten kipper was his first victory, the first step in his conquest of England” (Rushdie, 1988, p. 44). Thus Saladin, at the onset of his immigration, was determined to conquer his host culture. In a cruel twist of fate, Saladin’s mother later dies choking on a similarly bony fish as Saladin waits, motionless (Rushdie, 1988, pp. 46-47). By passively observing the death of his only loved Indian relative, Saladin effectively reserves his knowledge of Britishness, as his fellow-pupils once had. Tethered no longer to Indian roots, Saladin immerses himself in British culture in a search for new values and understandings — in short, a new identity.

Saladin strives to acquire the identity of the archetypal English

gentleman. He finds a job as a voice-over actor, mimicking the accents of various nationalities, and marries an English wife. Saladin's desire for Britishness is often sexual: he even dreams of "making tender love to the Monarch. She was the body of Britain, the avatar of the State, and he had chosen her, joined with her, she was his Beloved, the moon of his delight" (Rushdie, 1988, p. 175). Rushdie often reverses Orientalist metaphors for his immigrant characters; Saladin's dream of conquering the Queen is reminiscent of colonial sexual domination of the female Other.

As the narrative proceeds, Saladin's pursuit of an idealized archetypal identity is disrupted by bizarre, supernatural consequences. After falling from an exploding aircraft and landing on an English shore, Saladin is mistakenly arrested for illegal immigration. As the police officers try to detain him, he slowly begins to transmute into a devil-goat creature. He soon enough resembles "the devil," even exhaling sulfur and growing a tangled turban of horns. Saladin is taken to a hospital full of hybrid animal-human creatures, including tigers, water buffalo, and a woman with glass skin. In the hospital, a fellow hybrid creature explains the situation: "'They describe us,' the other whispered solemnly. 'That's all. They have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct'" (Rushdie, 1998, p. 174). In this scene Rushdie symbolically addresses Western stereotypes of the Other and the act of internalizing such stereotypes.

Saladin is surrounded by immigrants who have quite literally externalized the "evils" of their home countries. Here Rushdie's use of magical realism provides the reader with a stunning allusion to the nature of his character. Saladin did not simply denounce Indian culture by striving for Britishness. Rather, his pursuit of an archetypal identity forced him to subject his "Indianness" to Orientalist stereotypes. Having rejected his cultural identity, Saladin is without enduring, ahistorical values to appraise himself; thus, faced with British stereotypes of his kind, Saladin is powerless against them. Saladin's metamorphosis into a foreign identity cannot be completed because it requires the demonization of his indigenous culture and, by implication, of himself.

For Saladin the pursuit of an archetypal identity is disastrous. Everything British eventually abandons Saladin: his career, his wife,

and his government. In time he does transform back into his human self, becoming whole only after he returns to his roots by visiting his dying father (Rushdie, 1991, p. 398). His successful rejection of cultural standards culminates in the decision to visit India once again. Saladin does not revert to his indigenous identity, but instead recognizes the fluidity of the self. He observes “many alternative Saladins...which had apparently continued to exist, perhaps in the parallel universes of quantum theory” (Rushdie, 1988, p. 538). That Saladin is finally made whole speaks to Rushdie’s preference for the postmodern model of identity formation in which one selectively constructs values.

While Saladin initially pursues an archetypal identity and then struggles between individual choice and cultural subjection, Gibreel forms a religious identity, denying his own agency in favor of assumed access to the sacred. Gibreel Farishta, a Bollywood superstar of religious epics, is a practicing Muslim who receives a strong blow to the head one day on the set. Comatose, Gibreel “spent every minute of consciousness calling upon God, every second of every minute... then it occurred to him that he was being punished, and for a time that made it possible to suffer the pain, but after a time he got angry” (Rushdie, 1988, p. 30). Hence, upon being discharged from the hospital, Gibreel tests the existence of God. He goes to a hotel buffet and rapidly consumes bacon and pork sausages — food prohibited to the devout Muslim — to prove the non-existence of an Islamic deity. From this point forward Gibreel suffers painful dreams in which he assumes the role of the Angel Gibreel (the analogue of Gabriel), dreams Rushdie describes as “nocturnal retribution, a punishment for his loss of faith” (Rushdie, 1991, p. 398). In these dreams Gibreel becomes an archangel, and in a series of chapters visits a mythological city named Jahilia, built of sand. These bizarre circumstances mirror Islamic history: the prophet Muhammad, too, was called to God in dreams; Jahilia references *al-Jabiliya*, the period of ignorance prior to the advent of Islam. Gibreel even witnesses the history of the prophet “Mahound,” a name taken from a medieval European demonization of the name Muhammad and part of Rushdie’s theme of “reclaiming language from one’s opponents” (Rushdie, 1991, p. 402). Use of the label ‘Mahound’ for a character analogous to Muhammad fueled the Muslim opposition to the novel, though within *The Satanic Verses*

Rushdie promotes the ability of minorities to neutralize their opponents' invidious language by acquiring and championing derogatory terms. Nonetheless, the author offers a critique of Islam through these references to Islamic history, a point clear to Muslim readers.

Throughout the novel *Gibreel* goes in and out of a mythological dream state, and his dreams of Mahound frequently parallel early Islamic history.² Within these dream sequences one encounters the majority of passages considered offensive by Muslims. In one passage that stands out as particularly pernicious to the Islamic reader, the character Salman complains about Mahound's methods and revelations:

Amid the palm-trees of the oasis Gibreel appeared to the Prophet and found himself spouting rules, rules, rules, until the faithful could scarcely bear the prospect of any more revelation, Salman said, rules about every damn thing, if a man farts let him turn his face to the wind, a rule about which hand to use for the purpose of cleaning one's behind. It was as if no aspect of human existence was to be left unregulated, free. The revelation —the *recitation* — told the faithful how much to eat, how deeply they should sleep, and which sexual positions had received divine sanction, so that they learned that sodomy and the missionary position were approved of by the archangel, whereas the forbidden postures included all those in which the female was on top...After that Salman began to notice how useful and well timed the angel's revelations tended to be, so that when the faithful were disputing Mahound's views on any subject, from the possibility of space travel to the permanence of Hell, the angel would turn up with an answer, and he always supported Mahound...(Rushdie, 1988, pp. 376-377).

Salman also reveals that he, the recorder of Mahound's revelations, had altered parts of the Holy Book without Mahound's notice, to such an extent that Mahound was evidently unknowledgeable of his own recitation (Rushdie, 1988, pp. 379-381).

Salman accuses the prophet Mahound, a businessman, of artificially creating a religion based on extensive rules and regulations. This accusation is no doubt also aimed by the author at traditional Islam, given its strict regulations toward cleanliness and daily action. When questioned, Mahound claims his arguments are infallible, citing their divine support; Salman then reveals that the prophet is ignorant of various altered prescriptions.

Gibreel's quest for identity is subjected to a similar critique. The simple, selfish actor perceives himself balanced between a secular and holy realm, often battling between the two. Gibreel's disposition represents an alternate method of identity formation, one founded on enduring religious belief. The character inherits a traditional identity and, because of his believed access to the transcendent, resists any self-criticism or personal change. Increasingly convinced of his angelic, exclusive authority, Gibreel alienates and insults those who support him. As the novel continues, it becomes apparent that Gibreel is psychotic; he eventually breaks from reality and commits suicide (Rushdie, 1988, pp. 346-347, 472-473, 554). Unlike the successful Saladin, who slowly builds his identity through trial and error, Gibreel pursues a fundamental, ahistorical identity founded on religion. He clutches onto the absolutism of faith, seduced by its claims of the transcendent.

The contrasting journeys of Saladin and Gibreel illustrate that Rushdie advocates the individual construction of identity over the inheritance of an identity founded on absolutism. Saladin undergoes initial turmoil; by subjecting his identity to an archetypal image, he faces a demonization of his indigenous culture, but overcomes this struggle by accepting India as an important part of himself. Gibreel, by contrast, avoids the postmodern struggle with the self and acquires an enduring, religious bedrock for his identity. Yet the assumption of exclusive authority distances the character from reality and pollutes his values, ultimately leading to his death.

The Muslim Perspective

In the words of its author, *The Satanic Verses* "dissents most clearly from imposed orthodoxies *of all types*, from the view that the world is quite clearly 'This and not That'" (Rushdie, 1991, p. 396). In his

juxtaposition of the absolute and the relative, Rushdie uses mythological, surreal imagery and recurring parallels of the sacred and the profane. In *Jahilia*, for example, there exists a brothel with twelve women who take the names, and eventually the personalities, of Mahound's twelve wives. Baal, a former poet, or "creator of profane texts," assumes the role of the brothel's "Mahound" (Rushdie, 1991, p. 401). Rushdie's use of magical realism to describe a surreal plane of existence between dreams and reality provides an engaging, fantastic story for the modern reader.

To many devout Muslims, however, this mythological narrative style makes its own authority claims. A cursory reading of Rushdie's references to the Islamic tradition is enough to make clear that those references are often profane and parodic, which would seem to make *The Satanic Verses* overtly anti-Muslim. Who, then, is Salman Rushdie to gauge the merit of this religious tradition? To subject Islam to a cynical caricature is to claim authority over others' sacred beliefs. According to this perspective, Rushdie falls prey to the incoherence of postmodernism, rejecting Islamic absolutism in favor of an equally intolerant and absolutist secularism. Liberal supporters of Rushdie may argue that *The Satanic Verses* commits no such folly, but this perspective is nonetheless authentic to the critical Muslim reader. From this Muslim perspective, Rushdie is indeed critical of elements of the tradition.

The character Mahound, for example, is often represented in critical fashion, while Baal, the very antithesis of the prophet, receives sympathy and understanding. Throughout *The Satanic Verses* the reader is presented with what Paul Brians labels an existentialist morality: there are no absolutes, for every character is responsible for his own choices (Brians, p. 4). Saladin's transmutation exemplifies this morality: if "devils are not necessarily devilish, angels may not necessarily be angelic...From this premise, the novel's exploration of morality as internal and shifting (rather than external, divinely sanctioned, absolute) may be said to emerge" (Rushdie, 1991, p. 402). Rushdie's existentialist morality is symptomatic of the postmodern perspective and supports a secular, constructive method of identity formation that relies primarily on individual choice. For Western readers who have themselves constructed hybrid identities, Rushdie's novel is an

affirmation of that method. Western Muslims who ground their identity in religion instead find a scathing critique of their traditional values.

Rushdie exalts his postmodern perspective as a former insider who has escaped absolutism's clutches. It was partly for this reason that the Rushdie affair provoked such a strong response in Islamic communities in the West. Rushdie was not a dubious stranger to the Islamic tradition, but an accomplished public figure to whom many Western Muslims could relate. As Timothy Brennan argued, "this extreme response had everything to do with Rushdie's special position as an 'insider/outsider'" (quoted in Hussain, p. 10). Many Western Muslims were quoted as having once viewed Rushdie with great respect. Though Rushdie lost his faith at the age of fifteen³ and his secularism was never hidden, his status as a successful Western author with an Islamic background positioned him in the role of representative and, to some extent, role model for the successful immigrant. Hence Western Muslims viewed Rushdie's dissent as extremely hurtful. Common to a number of quotes from Canadian and British Muslims was not the language of violence, but that of betrayal. A Somali Muslim in Toronto stated: "I don't know about Khomeini; we have different ways, Shi'a and Sunni. And Rushdie is an individual...But what is unforgivable to me is the West. Why did they have to jump to be on his side? He insulted us. If he is hurting us, what kind of freedom is that?...It is the lack of respect for Muslim feelings that the West showed that bothered me, not everyone, but the majority of people" (Hussain, p. 20). Another Canadian Muslim asked, "Why does he wish to hurt us so much?" (Hussain, p. 23).

Those in opposition to *The Satanic Verses* in Canada and Britain did so through secular means, by appealing to blasphemy laws concerning free speech. When this was unsuccessful, many concluded that blasphemy laws only applied to Christians, and that Rushdie had been joined by the state in suppressing Muslim liberties. The reaction of Zaheera, a British Muslim teacher, illustrates this point:

But right from the beginning, I have felt that everyone has treated the Muslim protest as if it was completely crazy. This freedom of expression — why do we have pornography and libel laws, and a law of blasphemy which only applies to

Christianity? How can that be fair? How can they say this is a multi-racial country when there is one law for Christians and one for Muslims? And what hurts so much is that one of our own, someone I really used to admire, someone who stood up on television and told the White British how racist they were, has let us down so badly (quoted in Asad, p. 278).

Zaheera's arguments are grounded primarily in a discussion of fairness.⁴ Religious theorist Talal Asad notes that "her sense of unfairness does not connect with any demand for extending the law of blasphemy; it points to an old and unresolved anxiety about minority vulnerabilities in the modern state" (p. 278). Zaheera also conveys the emotions of betrayal. Rushdie, who she "really used to admire," let her down.

From the critical Western Muslim perspective, a specific division characterized the Rushdie Affair: on one side were those Muslims who rightly opposed the novel, appealing to their secular government through the law, and on the other were Salman Rushdie and the state, acting together to support both insult and double standard. Thus a particular line of symmetry divided the Rushdie affair in the West. *The Satanic Verses* promotes a postmodern model of immigrant identity formation that lends itself to secular pluralism, and is thus ideologically aligned with the interests of a multicultural nation-state; Rushdie's critique of absolutism, and specifically of Islamic notions of exclusivity, invoked the opposition of those Muslims within Western, secular states whose identities alternately rested on religious convention. The resulting tensions between Muslims opposed to *The Satanic Verses* and the British state were thus somewhat analogous to the conflict within the novel itself, between different methods of identity formation. If the Muslim protestors represented the model of religious identity, the British state alternatively represented a secular, archetypal model with its demands for assimilation.

Memes and Religion of the Status Quo

It is important here to distinguish between "nation" and "state." I endorse the terminology utilized by noted religious studies scholar Bruce Lincoln, in which "nation" refers to a population with a constructed, sustained and unitary collective identity, and the "state"

to a governmental apparatus that manages the affairs of those nations over which it exercises power. States can contain many nations; nations can exist within multiple states (Lincoln, p. 62). The broad cultural unit that binds a nation to a collective identity, such as religion, is a meme (as discussed above). In the case of the Rushdie affair in Britain, British Muslims constituted a nation with a unitary collective identity. Members of this nation were at odds with the British state, a governmental apparatus that exercised authority over a great number of nations. The British Muslim nation was also bound to a common meme, acting in that meme's best interest by both internalizing and promoting its particular values. Though Dawkins' model is quite valuable for an understanding of macro-cultural competition, categorizing single cultures is a necessarily ambiguous process.

As described by Lincoln, culture "can refer both to a group or community...and to some x that is a prime source of collective identity" (Lincoln, p. 51). The x on which collective identity is anchored is necessarily dynamic, but generally includes habits, customs, history, and a shared language. Naturally, cultural identity is not only inherited, but can be acquired through education and socialization (Lincoln, pp. 51-61). Nor can it be said that cultures are monolithic, as they "actually assume more 'foreign' elements, alterities, differences, than they consciously exclude" (Said, p. 15). Within a society there are multiple groups with unitary collective identities, or nations, and one particular dominant fraction of that society, the state, which in turn has great influence over cultural politics.

On Dawkins' evolutionary model, competition exists between a number of memes, and their representative nations, within a multinational state. Each nation competes for ideological prominence (or, ideally, ideological dominance and sovereignty) in order to optimally support and transmit its values. Lincoln's "religion of the status quo" fits this model; that is, the ideology that serves the interests of the dominant fraction of a society has the "characteristic goal of... ideological hegemony throughout the state or empire in which it is active" because it is afforded the greatest resources and opportunity for promotion and preservation (Lincoln, p. 82).

In *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie promotes his own postmodern method of identity formation, one that perhaps inadvertently serves

the interests of the secular pluralist state. To the extent that the novel may further the interests of the British state, is it thus representative of Lincoln's religion of the status quo?

The liberal nation-state, which consists of "an aggregate of citizens, each with the same legal personality," is forced to place religion within "the private domain, where difference is permitted" (Asad, p. 272). Hence Rushdie's secular model of identity, which understands religion as an individual and thus a private affair, furthers the pursuits of a pluralist state with a population containing disparate ideologies. To this extent, *The Satanic Verses* fits Lincoln's model because it serves the interests of the state. Yet every state also has its own particular history, social conventions, and prevalent ideologies. If there existed some state that made no normative claims, promoting a form of secular pluralism devoid of specific cultural values, *The Satanic Verses* would represent that state's religion of the status quo. But, as Lincoln notes, the religion of the status quo serves the interests of the *dominant fraction of society*, of a particular nation that assumes authority.

The Rushdie Affair in Britain

The secular nation-state is often criticized for promoting its own particular values. The United States, for example, overtly promotes Christian ideals in the guise of universal moral norms. Assuming that *The Satanic Verses* promotes secular pluralism and the privatization of religion, and that its opposition alternately favors the institutionalization of religious demands, wherein lies the state? What role did the dominant fraction of society play in this conflict? Through analysis of the British reaction to the Rushdie affair we can align the British state and its prominent ideology.

The Rushdie affair was treated in Britain as a political crisis. The government warned Muslims that they were isolating themselves from their host society, the media almost unanimously condemned the "fundamentalism" of British Muslims, and home secretary Douglas Hurd made a speech at a gathering of Muslims emphasizing the importance of integration for ethnic minorities (Asad, p. 239). This was a rather strong reaction, considering there were no arrests or injuries as a result of the demonstrations. Other angry demonstrations through London streets by abortion rights activists, antiracists and fascists,

trade unionists, and students (in which both injuries and arrests occurred) received no such treatment.

In an open letter addressed to leading and “influential British Muslims,” published in the London *Times*, home minister John Patten intervened publicly in the Rushdie affair (Patten, p. 13). Instead of simply explaining why blasphemy laws could not be extended to ban *The Satanic Verses*, Patten used a firm, paternal voice to explain the importance of British institutions to an injured, alien population. Patten expected British Muslims go beyond paying taxes and obeying the law. “The single most important guiding principle as we move forward must be the aim of full participation in our society...there can be no room for separation or segregation. It is to the benefit of all, including the minorities themselves, that they should be part of the mainstream of British life.” Patten implied that “full participation” in British society meant falling in line with mainstream British culture, presupposing that the political demands of British Muslims for censorship, even though they appealed to British laws and to the British political process, did not count as participation at all.

Patten maintained that, though British Muslims should not be expected to cut all ties with their tradition, “new roots must be put down and must go deep, too.” While immigrant children were not expected to “lay aside their faith,” there were some essentials that Muslims children must learn: “a fluent command of English,” and also “a clear understanding of British democratic processes, of its laws, the system of Government and the history that lies behind them” (Patten). These are rigorous demands; it is doubtful that most British natives confidently possess such knowledge.

The British press generally admired these parochial demands. For example, in his article, “Ground Rules for the British Way of Life,” the *Sunday Times* political editor Michael Jones described Patten’s reasoning as “clarity itself,” and praised the government’s “bold approach... to face up to the meaning of what being British means.” Jones further noted, “Nobody is trying to force ethnic minorities to assimilate with the rest of us. But they must actively participate in our society and that means recognizing and supporting those loyalties which bind this country together” (Jones). Jones and Patten shared a common mentality, one in which valuable political participation must

be supportive of common British culture.

Though the British government and press treated the Rushdie affair as a symptom of immigrants' difficulties adjusting to a more "civilized" world, Asad argues that it was instead a "perceived threat to a particular ideological structure, to a cultural hierarchy organized around an essential *Englishness*, which defines *British* identity" (Asad, p. 241). By taking a political stance divergent from the common culture, British Muslims threaten the very "assumptions on which British secular identity is constructed" (Asad, p. 265).

As a secular, multicultural state, Britain could not violate censorship laws for a single religious group. The politicization of a religious stance is a perilous enterprise for the secular state, oftentimes only possible if promoted as antithetical to some threatening Other. I am not arguing that the British state should have supported the opposition to *The Satanic Verses*, but the state's overreaction to the protests suggests a second perceived threat to the state's authority. By making "demands to exclusive loyalty and its totalizing cultural projects," the British state did not simply advocate Rushdie's model of pluralism, but demanded complete homogeneity (Asad, p. 266).

The promotion of an essential Britishness, characterized by loyalty and integration, subjected British Muslims to cultural notions of normality. An archetypal model of "Britishness," to use Lincoln's terminology, served the interests of both the British state and nation. The British state, a governmental apparatus concerned with effective rule, defended its authority by subjecting dissent to juridical review. The British nation promoted loyalty to an archetypal Britishness as essential to constructive social and political participation. Thus "Britishness" itself emerges as the religion of the status quo, aiding the pursuit of ideological hegemony within the state, and can be further categorized as a dominant cultural meme.

By condemning "fundamentalism" and demanding complete loyalty from its immigrant population, the British state made its own authority claims, ironically violating the postmodern values that Rushdie endorsed and that sparked the protests against the novel. Hence the Rushdie affair in Britain was, in essence, a conflict between two nations — following Lincoln's use of the term — promoting similar ideologies. Both nations, British and Muslim, advocated absolute models of

identity in order to defend enduring values threatened by an outside force. British Muslims were insulted by Rushdie's critique of Islam, appealing to secular laws in order to defend their values, while the British state perceived the attempt to politicize Islamic values as a threat to its authority and cultural identity. Within this diametric opposition lay a novel that denounced absolutism and promoted the individual's role in identity formation. The Rushdie affair in the West was indicative of the tension between immigrant and indigenous nations in a multicultural state. Sparked by a novel that celebrated this very tension as the birthplace of newness, hybridity, and change, the conflict stimulated new discourse between nations. Over a decade later these tensions still exist; cultures continue to mingle, and the search for identity has become increasingly dependent upon selective amalgamation. For those cultural hybrids who advocate Rushdie's postmodern method, *The Satanic Verses* sing, in the words of its author, "a love-song to our mongrel selves" (Rushdie, 1991, p. 394).

Notes

¹ This character served as a scathing satire of Ayatollah Khomeini, presented as cannibalizing his entire following in one of Farishta's dreams. See Rushdie, 1988, p. 221.

² Rushdie introduces various additions and exaggerations, such as the implication that Mahound loathes poets, while Muhammad in fact had poets among his early followers. See Asad, p. 288.

³ Interestingly, Rushdie's essay "In God We Trust" reveals that after this decision he ate a ham sandwich to prove God's nonexistence, an experience on which Gibreel Farishta's actions were based. See Rushdie, 1991, p. 376 and Rushdie, 1988, p. 30.

⁴ A detailed analysis of Zaheera's and other British Muslims' responses can be found in Asad, 1993, pp. 274-282.

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