



Freedom, Blasphemy and Responsibility

(89fbr)

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The Affair of the 'Satanic Verses', which is still rumbling on, raises issues of a theological kind which are at the centre of the concern to relate the Gospel to contemporary Western culture. Granted that the whole uproar has a great deal to do with the internal tensions in the Muslim communities of Iran, Pakistan and Britain; and granted that much of what has been said seriously misrepresents the book; it remains true that this was not a storm in a tea cup but something which exposes some of the unresolved problems of our society. In a very proper sense of outrage against the death-threats to the author, we ought not to evade the underlying issues.

On the one hand there has been the issue of blasphemy (whether or not the book is in fact blasphemous from a Muslim point of view). The leader-writer in the Independent was no doubt expressing normal British assumptions when he implied that the only thing wrong with blasphemy is that it offends the feelings of some people. Since "God" is no longer one of the realities to be reckoned with in public life, and since the State has replaced God as the source from which all blessings flow, the ultimate guardian of our freedom, it is natural that treason against the interests of the State is the ultimate crime, whereas blasphemy against God is merely a possible offence to the feelings of a few people.

On the other hand there is the demand for freedom as an absolute right to publish whatever one wishes, subject only to the constraints of the laws of libel and of the Official Secrets Act. The defence of freedom, so defined, is held to be fundamental to the integrity of our kind of society. The scientist Michael Polanyi was passionately concerned about the freedom of the academic, and particularly the scientific community. The defence of intellectual freedom against totalitarianism was the spur to his entry into philosophy. He distinguished two kinds of freedom which he called 'utilitarian' and 'Lutheran'. The former is the freedom from all external constraint subject only to the limits which are set by other people's right to freedom. The latter kind of freedom is found when the individual gains freedom from personal ends by submission to an impersonal obligation.

Polanyi thought that the two kinds of freedom complemented each other in what he called the republic of science. But a critic (R J Brownhill) has argued that Polanyi was mistaken here,

since in the republic of science it is the Lutheran kind of freedom which operates (1). If a scientist thinks he can publish anything he likes, he soon ceases to be a member of the republic. He gains freedom by submission to the authority of the scientific tradition and to the authority of the facts as he discovers them. With that freedom he can criticise and amend the tradition. The former kind of freedom would very quickly destroy the republic of science.

What the liberal establishment seems to be defending in the Rushdie case is the utilitarian kind of freedom. But there is certainly a very long Christian tradition which affirms that this kind of freedom leads only to bondage, and that freedom is only found in obedience to Him who is the way, the truth and the life. Certainly those whose names are often invoked in the cause of freedom, such as John Milton, defended a freedom which was rooted in obedience to a truth which is more than the individual person. It seems unlikely that a merely utilitarian freedom can in the long run be defended against movements which are committed to firm beliefs about what is the truth. The issues raised by the Rushdie affair are ultimately theological. They compel us to recognise again that the Christian faith about what it is to be human cannot be kept as the private opinion of a group but has to be proclaimed as vital for the very being of society. As I watched and listened to the procession of literary figures on the box defending the rights of authors to write exactly what they pleased, I had two feelings. One was a feeling of pity for those who were unable to understand the realities with which they were dealing, like schoolboys who did not know that they were playing with high explosives. The other was the feeling that when the chips were down they would be powerless before a clear and confident faith such as Islam.

Since C F Snow's introduction of the phrase we have been accustomed to the division of our society into the two cultures. The one, scientific, is vigorous and confident. It is that part of our culture where the utilitarian concept of freedom does not operate. The other, the area of arts and humanities, gives the impression of having lost all sense of direction. The Chinese writer, Carver

Yu, looking at Western culture, sums up what he sees as 'technological optimism and literary despair' (2). In the former half of our culture there is confidence in the authority of a secure tradition to which the individual must submit if he or she is to find the freedom for fresh exploration, and with this a confidence that truth can be increasingly grasped and understood. The freedom of the scientist is freedom to seek and (in part) know the truth. A freedom which is merely freedom to say whatever you like can lead only to despair of ever knowing the truth. It is tempting to think that the position of the Church might be different if the theological departments of our universities had been lodged in the science faculty instead of in the arts. The Rushdie affair could be occasion for fanning afresh the flames of xenophobia which are always smouldering in our society. God forbid that it should be so. It could also be the occasion for a fresh recognition by Christians that the Gospel is public truth for the whole of our cultural life, or it is no truth at all.

1. R. J. Brownhill. "Freedom and Authority: The Political Philosophy of Michael Polanyi," *Journal of the British Society of Phenomenology*, Vol 8, No 3, October 1977.
2. Carver T Yu. *Being and Relation: A Theological Critique of Western Dualism And Individualism*. 1987.

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