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Blasphemy and the Free Society

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Six-page essay ca. 1991 focusing on the controversy surrounding the publication of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*.

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One of the most obvious features of the controversy which has been aroused by the publication of *The Satanic Verses* has been the general incomprehension in British society of the Muslim charge of blasphemy. Although the ancient laws against blasphemy are still on the statute book and can occasionally be invoked, they no longer correspond to general public belief. They are widely perceived as being merely a protection for the feelings of some Christian believers. For most people blasphemy has ceased to be a serious matter. It is a relic of a bygone age. The idea that there are score realities so sacred that they must be protected from attack is dismissed as a relic of the time before 'man came of age'. On the contrary, 'sacred cows' of all kinds are a fair target for attack, and it is thought to be the mark of a mature society that it should be so.

The Elimination of the Sacred

It is not difficult to tell the story of how this change in public feeling has come about. When the society which had held together the barbarian tribes that inhabited Europe for a thousand years by a common allegiance to the Christian faith broke up and was torn to pieces by the religious wars of the 17th century, the intellectual leadership of Europe turned to a new vision of reality, inspired by the brilliant achievements of the new science, and especially by Newton's vision of a universe wholly explicable in mathematical terms. The Age of Reason accepted the challenge thrown out by its greatest thinker, Immanuel Kant, in the words 'Dare to Know'. Autonomous human reason and conscience, liberated from the shackles of tradition, was capable – given the necessary courage – of grasping and mastering the world of phenomena. There might be more ultimate realities beyond the reach of the human kind, but these must remain unknowable. Opinions about these were only speculation. As far as the world available to our knowledge is concerned, human reason is capable of grasping and, to an increasing degree, mastering it. All claims to truth must be open to critical examination in the light of reason. There are no forbidden questions.

As the old structures of a unitary Christendom crumbled, their place was more and more taken by the national state. Nations were to be the agencies through which man's mastery of the

world was to be achieved. The triumph of 'Enlightenment' in France led straight into the Napoleonic programme of conquest. The 19th century continued the triumphs of the age of reason, now extended to the whole world in the 'civilising' mission of the European colonial powers. And the 20th century saw the apotheosis of the state. The symbols of sacredness now clustered round the nation state. Blasphemy against God became a meaningless idea; but treason against the state becomes the ultimate crime. Men who die in defence of their religion are ignorant fundamentalists; men who die in defence of their country are heroes.

There is much evidence that the age of reason is drawing to a close through the exhaustion of its spiritual resources. The critical principle necessarily turns against itself. When it is taken to its logical conclusion it can only lead to nihilism, as we have seen in the modern history of Europe. When that point is reached there is nothing left except the will to power – as Nietzsche saw. And when the structures created by the ideologues of power collapse, there is only a spiritual vacuum. Europe is not far from that condition, and it is at this point that Islam makes its powerful challenge to Europe. When the last great ideology has collapsed, what have you to believe in?

The answer given by the intellectuals of this country is 'The Free Society'. And that means a society where blasphemy laws are out of place. I want to affirm that this reply will not stand. To do that I must enquire into the concept of blasphemy. What is it, and why is it important?

Meaning and Nonsense

Human beings have an unquenchable desire to understand the world in which they are placed. They share this with animals which, within the limits of their capacities, seek to understand their situation. The insatiable curiosity of a healthy child is something that delights us and often defeats us. To understand is to find meaning. The opposite of meaning is nonsense. We cannot live long in situations where everything is nonsense. Eventually such a situation destroys sanity. The human mind is defeated. The mind can only function reasonably if the world around is perceived to make some sort of sense.

To find meaning in a situation, an experience, a happening, is to relate it to some larger whole. What seems to be a random event in the physical world becomes meaningful when we see it is an example of a more general law. A word or an act is meaningless until we see it relates to the purpose which the speaker or actor had in mind.' Single blobs of ink on a page are meaningless; when we see them as constituting words which are parts of sentences which are parts of a coherent story or argument, they are no longer meaningless nonsense. When we have grasped the meaning of the sentence, the blobs of ink on the paper no longer command our attention. We attend from these marks on the paper to the meaning of the whole sentence. If the paper is half burned and only a few ink-marks remain, they are meaningless. A single note on the piano conveys no meaning. At a certain moment in a piano concerto it can have a meaning that overwhelms me.

These larger wholes which make sense of details otherwise meaningless are themselves only parts of a much wider whole, of the whole experience of being a human person, brought into existence by the mingling of two genetic codes, shaped and buffeted by innumerable chance happenings, finally rolled into an incinerator., Is this concatenation of fragmentary happenings meaningful, or is it nonsense? Human societies exist, and great human civilisations persist through centuries, surviving the apparently meaningless catastrophes which happen in all parts of human history, because they cherish some ultimate symbol of meaning which enabled people to 'make sense' of their experience. This ultimate symbol is not 'explained' by means of something else. It is not made meaningful by being set in a wider framework. It is itself the ground of all explanation. It is the ultimate point where questioning ceases. To destroy that ultimate symbol. To destroy that ultimate symbol is therefore to destroy the society for which it is the ultimate symbol of meaning. It is to destroy the shared frame of rationality which makes the continued existence of the society possible.

I have used the word 'symbol' to cover a very wide range of different kinds of entities, but of course to the society for which it functions as ultimate the symbol stands for what is real, for

that beyond which one cannot go. This is the area of the sacred, of that which cannot be balanced against anything else, that which commands reverence, that which is supremely real and the source of all reality. It is that which cannot be questioned because it is the final answer to all questions. To bring down the sacred to the level where it can be compared with or balanced against any other reality is to destroy the possibility of ultimate meaning, and therefore to destroy society. To put it in a phrase which has been used in the context of the Christian society, 'If there is no God, everything is lawful'.

In the programme of the Enlightenment nothing was sacred except the right to question all claims to sacredness. The autonomous human reason and conscience was sovereign. All truth claims were to be subjected to critical examination in the light of reason. In the early stages of this programme its full implications did not become clear. There was, and still is, a vast hidden area of human feeling and valuing which has been formed by the thousand years' schooling of Europe in the Christian tradition. Kant believed that sceptical questionings about God and morals would not do any harm because the masses would never understand them. He lived before the age of mass education. We know now that the ideas of the elite intellectuals of the Enlightenment are now part of the common stock of unquestioned assumptions. Indeed the reason for which state governments took education out of the hands of the church, the guilds and the families was precisely in order that the ideas of the Enlightenment, with their fruits in useful technology, might become widely shared.

Today we are aware of the fact that a world dominated by the kind of critical reasoning which the savants of the 18th century celebrated can become a world with no meaning. The outward evidences of this are all too familiar – the mindless vandalism which finds pleasure in destroying what is beautiful and useful, and the spreading abuse of drugs in all sectors of society to such an extent that the drug traffic becomes one of the major issues in international affairs. But the deeper consequences of an uncritical elevation of the critical principle to the commanding heights of intellectual and academic life are even more important. It did not take long for the tools of critical analysis to be turned against reason itself. Since all things are to be explained by the tracing of the cause-effect linkages between them, and since 'good' and 'evil' correspond to no realities available to empirical scientific research, it follows that what claims to be 'good' behaviour is to be explained in other terms. It is the result of the operation of other forces, economic, political, psychological or whatever. Claims on behalf of such invisible entities as 'Justice' or 'mercy' are merely screens to cover the real moving forces. The only way to escape the charge of hypocrisy is to profess no moral values at all. To quote words from a popular songwriter: "I'm interested in anything about revolt, disorder, chaos, especially activity that has no meaning. It seems to me to be the road to freedom".

Freedom and Idiocy

I think we can all recognise this familiar voice. It is the voice of those who have chosen the road to an illusory freedom, that freedom which was originally called idiocy – the situation in which the self has achieved total autarchy by severing itself from all reality. When the great fore-runner of the Age of Reason, Descartes, found the basis for the certainty which he sought in 'I think, therefore I am', he set Europe on a path which has led through the autonomy of the critical reason to this final idiocy.

Criticism of accepted ideas is a necessary element in the whole human enterprise of seeking to understand reality. The Age of Reason ushered in an era in which this principle was exalted to a status which threatens to throw the whole enterprise out of balance. Criticism is the negative factor in the enterprise. It cannot exist without the positive – namely the exercise of our power to open our eyes and ears and minds to receive the signals which reality gives us. The primal element in the enterprise of knowing is this openness to and awareness of a reality beyond ourselves. We begin with something which is a kind of faith, a confidence that there is a reality to be known and that we can trust our faculties. Appearances may indeed deceive and the critical faculty is essential. But it is secondary in two respects. It cannot be our first move. If we begin by

distrusting all the evidence we end alone, shut up in our own illusory freedom. And, secondly, criticism is only possible on the basis of beliefs which we have accepted as true. Traditions of knowledge are proper objects of critical questioning, but such criticism rests upon a vast background of belief accepted uncritically – upon a tradition.

All knowing depends upon tradition. I cannot begin to know except by depending on the guidance of parents, by learning to use a language which embodies past experience, by studying books, listening to the teachers and internalising a great deal of the ways of understanding which are inherited from previous centuries.

The idea that human reason without any of this vast store of tradition, could – in each generation – discover the truth about the universe is obviously absurd. And so is the concept of freedom which underlies this idea. The only intellectual ‘freedom in which we can have any interest is the freedom to explore and – if possible – shape reality, and the more of reality we get to know, the less we are free to say whatever we like about it. Freedom and reality are reciprocally related. We need to be free in our intellectual effort in order to penetrate into the reality we are exploring; the reality we are exploring must govern the exercise of our free intelligence, Freedom which is simply the freedom to say and think what we like is simply another name for idiocy.

Tradition and the Sacred

In our exploring of reality we are dependent on tradition, the tradition" embodied in the language in which we have learned to think, in the concepts and images we use, in the vast treasury of knowledge and experience embodied in books and in teachers and master craftsmen and women. Even when we are led to criticise some element in this tradition we can only do so by relying uncritically on all the rest. We cannot criticise the whole tradition without become speechless idiots. Moreover, all the several intellectual traditions which the different people of the world inherit are parts of a larger tradition which makes it possible for us to communicate with each other across the divides between languages and cultures. For most of human history as far as we know it, the centre of the tradition has been expressed in religious terms, in terms of allegiance to a symbol of ultimate meaning in which all things find their coherence and which is therefore sacred. To acknowledge that ultimate symbol, to reverence the sacred, was the precondition for knowledge and understanding. If that is destroyed, things fall apart. European society has tried to live without an ultimate sacred except (as I said earlier) in so far as the nation has been regarded as that for which one is ready to die, and that against which ‘treason is unpardonable. In spite of the enormous power which can still be mobilised in time of emergency behind the nation-god, it cannot claim final allegiance. In contemporary ‘modern’ society there is no ultimate sacred. The blasphemy laws no longer correspond to the shared public mind of our society. They are a relic of ‘Christendom’.

A society which has finally lost the sense of the sacred, in which there is nothing worthy of reverence, must eventually dissolve into nihilism. In such a society no meaning can finally be affirmed. Art and literature, as well as behaviour must eventually be meaningless. Because freedom degenerates into idiocy if it loses contact with reality, a free society cannot be sustained forever without the commitment of its people, or at least some of them, to something which is sacred, for which life itself may be surrendered. I think that British people must be grateful to Muslims for challenging a false idea of freedom. But Christians cannot invoke the power of the state to protect the sacred. The final breakdown of the Constantinian attempt at a

Christian theocratic state has surely taught us to look again at the New Testament where the ultimate power of God is veiled in weakness. Islam (surely not uninfluenced by the Byzantine model) has developed the idea of a society in which there is no distinction between the religious and the political communities. Because there stands at the heart of Christian believing the cross on which the Son of God accepted death at the hands of the agents of public truth and right, Christians are bound to acknowledge – that the ultimate fusion of truth and right with power lies on the other side of death and resurrection. Both Christians and Muslims can, however, join in unmasking a false concept of freedom, in warning against its consequences, in bearing witness to

the reality of the sacred, and in protesting when that which is sacred is treated with contempt or ridicule. Among ourselves, both in the internal discussions of matters of faith within the Christian and Muslim communities, and in dialogue between them, we shall always need to use our critical faculties in serious discussion with one another. But it will be done with reverence for the sacred, even when we differ in our understandings. For, as has been well said, it is no more possible to understand the reality by which we are surrounded and sustained without reverence, than it is to penetrate the secrets of the galaxies without a telescope.

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