

# BUDDHISM BETRAYED? THE SATANIC VERSES AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

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If this had been a sermon, instead of the address that it is, I would have adopted as my text for it, the following passage from the Buddha's *Discourse to the Kalamas*:

*Yes, O kalamas, it is right for you to doubt, it is right for you to dissent, it is right for you to waver.*

*Come, O Kalamas, do not accept anything on heresy thinking thus have we heard it for a long time. Do not accept anything by mere tradition. Do not accept anything on account of rumors. Do not accept anything because it accords with your scriptures. Do not accept anything by mere supposition. Do not accept anything by inference. Do not accept anything by merely considering appearances. Do not accept anything because it seems to the multitude acceptable nor yet because the monk is respected by you.*

*But when you know yourselves - these things are moral, these things are blameless, these things are praised by the wise, these things when performed conduce to well-being and happiness - then should you live and act accordingly.*

These words and the attitude of mind which they encompass are of profound relevance to the issue which concerns me today. That they were spoken by the founder of a great religion, over 2,500 years ago is of immense significance. That they were spoken by the founder of the very religion whose adherents are the subject of Prof. Stanley Tambiah's critique in *Buddhism Betrayed?* one of the works which has generated the current controversy in Sri Lanka and led to a discussion, at least among those who may be referred to as the chattering classes, about when, if ever, a book should be banned, adds a dimension of immediacy.

This controversy is no more than a storm in a tea cup when contrasted with the global upheaval caused since 1989, following the publication of *The Satanic Verses* by the celebrated novelist, Salman Rushdie. While several Sinhala nationalist ideologues and intellectuals whose attitudes do not absolve them of the charge of racism, have

been quick to point out that there has not been a clear demand for the ban of *Buddhism Betrayed?* the governments of several countries did ban *The Satanic Verses* and it must be said that the Government of Sri Lanka is, to its shame, among them.

Along with the Buddha's words from his *Discourse to the Kalamas* another, to my mind no less sacred, secular text must inform our reflection of whether, and if so, what books ought to be banned. I have cited this passage in many other contexts and was delighted to observe that a learned judge of the Supreme Court has done so in relation to the freedom of conscience of the Members of Parliament. It must be cited here for it movingly asserts the antithesis of the mindset of those who would ban and burn books. The passage I refer to is from John Stuart Mill's classic work, *On Liberty*:

*If all mankind minus one were of one opinion and only one person were of the contrary opinion mankind would no more be justified in silencing that one person than he, if he had the power would be justified in silencing mankind.*

It is now appropriate that I should examine the elements of similarity and difference between the modest Sri Lankan controversy over *Buddhism Betrayed?* and the highly-charged global one over *The Satanic Verses*. From such an examination, I trust I shall be able to discover whether a similar mindset is to be found among the denouncers of both these books and whether they emerge from the same stable.

*Buddhism Betrayed?* is a work of sociopolitical analysis while *The Satanic Verses* is a novel. *Buddhism Betrayed?* is a publication with a narrow circulation, of little interest to those outside the small group of academics and perhaps a few journalists and politicians in Sri Lanka and South Asia, and has been published as a monograph of the World Institute for Development Economics Research (WIDER) of the United Nations University. *The Satanic Verses*, was guaranteed a large circulation in the English speaking world and beyond and the controversy surrounding it served only to further increase its sales. Nevertheless, both *Buddhism Betrayed?* and *The Satanic Verses*, one centrally and the other peripherally, stepped on the corns of religion. While *Buddhism Betrayed?* angered some militant Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists and chauvinists, *The Satanic Verses* succeeded in earning the wrath of the more militant elements in Islam.

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The authors of both these books live in the West. Stanley Tambiah is an expatriate Sri Lankan who is Professor of Anthropology at Harvard University. He has lived in the United States for several decades. Similarly, Salman Rushdie was born in Bombay of an Indian Muslim family and received both his school (Rugby) and university (Cambridge) education in Britain, and is now a British subject.

*Buddhism Betrayed?* is a study of Buddhist militancy in Sri Lanka particularly among the Buddhist clergy. It examines the evolution of this militancy from the 19th century; the romanticized renderings of history in the chronicles of Buddhist monks; and the use of the *Mahavamsa* and other ancient works in shaping the attitudes of contemporary Buddhist militants, principally clerical but also lay. Speeches and writings of the Anagarika Dharmapala and leading Buddhist monks such as the Ven. Dr. Walpola Rahula, the Ven. Maduluvave Sobitha and the Ven. Muruthetuwe Ananda are subjected to analysis. The Ven. Dr. Walpola Rahula's work in justification of the political engagement of the Buddhist clergy in defence of the nation, the race and religion, *Bhiksuvage Urumaya*; the report of the Buddhist Commission of the 1950s entitled *The Betrayal of Buddhism*; and more recent works such as Dr. Sarath Amunugama's monograph, *Buddhaputra and Bhumiputra? Dilemmas of Modern Sinhala Buddhist Monks in Relation to Ethnic and Political Conflict* are extensively cited.

*The Satanic Verses* is a surreal fantasy of a novel that contains a large element of black comedy. Its principal characters are two friends, obviously of Indian origin (here I take India to encompass the borders of the British Indian Empire). They are Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha "two real, full-grown, living men" who fall

*from a great height, twenty-nine thousand and two feet towards the English Channel without benefit of parachutes or wings, out of a clear sky.*

Much of what follows in this 547-page novel (in paperback) is the fantasy the friends have as they descend. What aroused the wrath of militant Muslims, is not these two friends, but one of the objects of their fantasy, the Prophet Mahound, in whom they recognize an unflattering portrait of the Prophet of Islam. As a non-Muslim I am unfamiliar with intimate details of the Muslim sacred texts, but I must say that from a limited, though by no means, nonexistent, knowledge of the life of the Prophet Mohammed, I would not recognize Mahound as a character based on him.

Treading on the corns of the militantly and intolerantly religious (if indeed such persons can be described as religious), is something both Tambiah and Rushdie have done. Being Asiatics in western climes has made them obvious targets to those whose desire to ban and burn books comes

among other attributes, from hatred of all that is western.

What does it mean to tread on the corns of the religious? Why is religion to have a special, hallowed status, that permits it to expect and to demand that its founders, its primary texts, its clergy, its practices, must be insulated from criticism, from ridicule, from condemnation—a status denied to all other areas which have ennobled and vitalized life? Controversies of philosophy, history, politics, literature, art, music, mathematics, physics, architecture, economics, medicine, the law and so many other fields of human activity have not aroused the insensate, raw, raucous, brute and brutal passions that the rousing of religious sensitivities have evoked. Is it precisely because these are indeed fields of **human** activity and thus may well be criticized, whereas religion, has about it the attributes of the divine, is in most cases the emanation of the divine, and therefore must not be open to abuse by puny and mere mortals?

This would certainly be the position of many of the enemies of *The Satanic Verses* and of the advocates of religious persecution in Europe in centuries gone by, and in the Middle East now. For the Buddhist critics of *Buddhism Betrayed?* however, such an argument poses problems. Buddhism is **not** a religion based on divine revelation but on **human** attainment. It is precisely from the standpoint of recognizing the human individual as the agent of his or her own salvation that the Buddha asserted the value of free enquiry in his *Discourse to the Kalamas*. Those who claim to be the followers of one who invited free debate and criticism on his own views while he lived can hardly, in the name of defending Buddhism, seek to suppress books perceived to be critical of Buddhism. It is, of course, evident, that Tambiah does not in any way seek to criticize Buddhism as it is understood in terms of doctrine and in terms of its principal texts. On the contrary, the suggestion of *Buddhism Betrayed?* seems to be that many of the vociferously Buddhist in Sri Lanka, clerical and lay, have during the course of this century been abominably false to the essence of Buddhism. I certainly find it difficult to associate the Buddha with the intolerance, invective and mean-spiritedness of those who shout loudest in his name.

Salman Rushdie can no more be said to have insulted the Prophet of Islam.

The issue here is, however, a far larger one. Although many of the religions demand that their religions be insulated from criticism, ridicule and condemnation, all religions have been subjected to these, and probably have become more vibrant as a result. While many debates on religious issues have been pointless and immature, many debates on religion, both spoken and written, have contributed enormously to the evolution and reform of religion. It is a feeble and worthless religion indeed that



would require the state to use its coercive power to insulate it from criticism.

What is significant here is the mindset that those excited by *Buddhism Betrayed?* and *The Satanic Verses* share. Whether in religion or in politics, the sad reality is that the temptation to suppress that which one does not like, is real. As the brilliant liberal philosopher Sir Isaiah Berlin declared in his moving lecture on the political ideas of the founder of modern liberalism, entitled *John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life*:

*the periods and societies in which civil liberties are respected and varieties of opinion and faith tolerated, have been very few and far between, oases in the desert of human uniformity, intolerance and oppression.*

Whether in religion or in politics such a desire, however common it may be, must be condemned without reservation because it is cruel, bigoted, and in the final analysis, stupid. To force a human being to live in fear of the expression of his or her opinions, which the repression of opinion entails is cruel. To believe that no one has the right to think differently from oneself is bigoted. To restrict the free expression of ideas, which curtails the possibility of reform is stupid for it converts disagreement into rebellion. As Mill said:

*The peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is that it is robbing the human race, posterity as well as the present generation, those who dissent from the opinion still more than those who hold it.*

Are there then to be no limits on the freedom of expression? What about publications which incite racial hatred? What about the publication of blatant falsehood? What about the advocacy of armed rebellion?

I believe that the only restraints on freedom of expression must be those which can be proved to be necessary to prevent assaults on the freedom of others. If someone seeks to publish in Sri Lanka a pamphlet that calls on all Sinhalese to kill Tamils or which calls on all Tamils to kill Sinhalese, such a publication should indeed be prohibited. There must indeed be laws of libel so that the publication of falsehood, should require the payment of just compensation. In a liberal democratic state in which diverse political opinion and electoral choice is permitted, in other words, in which any opinion can be freely canvassed, no one should be permitted in a book or in a speech to advocate the violent overthrow of the constitutionally established order. The right of armed rebellion will, however, justifiably be resorted to if the essential freedoms guaranteed by a liberal democratic state are denied.

By these standards, Stanley Tambiah and Salman Rushdie and their works *Buddhism Betrayed?* and *The*

*Satanic Verses* stand vindicated. One does not have to approve of what they said to uphold their right of publication. One does not have to think their respective books to be magnificent intellectual or literary productions, to defend them against abuse and vilification.

I do not find *Buddhism Betrayed?* to be a particularly well-written work even if I am very sympathetic to its essential thesis. I do not think *The Satanic Verses* is Rushdie's best novel although I must admit that many, more distinguished figures have thought otherwise. The *Sunday Times* (of Britain) called *The Satanic Verses* "a masterpiece" while the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* called it "a towering work of fiction; a tour de force... One of the most complex and beautifully written novels in recent memory."

It is important to remember that though it is my conclusion that those who condemn *Buddhism Betrayed?* belong to the same stable as those who would burn and ban *The Satanic Verses*, there is an important difference between them. The criticism in Sri Lanka of Stanley Tambiah even by the worst elements, contains none of the venom of the campaign against Salman Rushdie. Let no one forget that the *fatwa* of the late Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran, sentenced Salman Rushdie to death for the sole crime of writing a novel that he didn't like. Even now Rushdie lives in peril of his life and several translators of his novel have been killed. To my mind such behavior is redolent of barbaric long-gone days, not of the world in which we live. We must act to ensure that it has no place in our world.

I conclude with the following reflections.

Only a principled commitment to uphold the freedom of any human being to publish anything that does not incite violence, or advocate rebellion in a liberal democracy can ensure a civilized world. To resort to special pleading is dangerous, inconsistent and hypocritical. It is the absurdity put forward so well in the words of the enemies of liberty to us, its friends:

*I demand liberty in the name of your principles.  
I refuse it to you in the name of mine.*

In this context, I cannot help but recall that among the signatories of an appeal of intellectuals and academics for tolerance to *Buddhism Betrayed?* and its author, couched in terms that I as a Liberal find acceptable, was one who presented a paper on the controversy on *The Satanic Verses* which bent over backwards to sympathize with those who would kill Salman Rushdie, while expressing no support for him or those who defend his right of expression. Such hypocritical special pleading is pathetic.

I stand full square in defense of Salman Rushdie, Stanley Tambiah and all such authors; and against all the banners and burners of books, in the past, present and the future.