

In March 1989, shortly after Ayatollah Khomeini issued his decree sentencing Salman Rushdie to death for his novel *The Satanic Verses*, London's Observer newspaper published an anonymous letter from Pakistan. "Salman Rushdie speaks for me," wrote its author, who explained: "Mine is a voice that has not yet found expression in newspaper columns. It is the voice of those who are born Muslims but wish to recant in adulthood, yet are not permitted to on pain of death. Someone who does not live in an Islamic society cannot imagine the sanctions, both self-imposed and external, that militate against expressing religious disbelief. "I don't believe in God" is an impossible public utterance even among family and friends. . . . So we hold our tongues, those of us who doubt."

Seven years later, the author of that letter is joined in his heterodoxy by the pseudonymous Ibn Warraq -- a man who is identified only as a native of a country that is now an "Islamic republic" and who lives and teaches in Ohio. He too, was outraged by the Khomeini decree, so much so that he wrote a book called *Why I Am Not a Muslim* (Prometheus Books, 402 pages, \$ 25.95) that transcends *The Satanic Verses* in terms of sacrilege. Where Rushdie offered an elusive critique of Islam in an airy tale of magical realism, Ibn Warraq brings a scholarly sledgehammer to the task of demolishing Islam. Such an act, especially for an author of Muslim birth, is so incendiary that the author must write under a pseudonym; not to do so would be an act of suicide.

And what does Ibn Warraq have to show for this unheard-of defiance? A well-researched and quite brilliant, if somewhat disorganized, indictment of one of the world's great religions. While the author disclaims any pretense to originality, he has read widely enough to write an essay that offers a startlingly novel rendering of the faith he has left.

To begin with, Ibn Warraq draws on current Western scholarship to make the astonishing claim that Muhammad never existed, or if he did, had nothing to do with the Koran. Rather, that holy book was fabricated a century or two later in Palestine, then "projected back onto an invented Arabian point of origin." If the Koran is a fraud, it's not surprising to learn that the author finds little authenticity in

other parts of the Islamic tradition. For example, he dispatches Islamic law as "a fantastic creation founded on forgeries and pious fictions." The whole of Islam, in short, he portrays as a concoction of lies.

Having thus dispensed with religion, Ibn Warraq takes up history and culture. Turning political correctness exactly on its head, he condemns the early Islamic conquests and condones European colonialism. "Bowing toward Arabia five times a day," he writes, "must surely be the ultimate symbol of... cultural imperialism." In contrast, European rule, "with all its shortcomings, ultimately benefited the ruled as much as the rulers. Despite certain infamous incidents, the European powers conducted themselves, on the whole, very humane.

To the conventional argument that the achievements of Islamic civilization in the medieval period are proof of Islam's greatness, Ibn Warraq revives the Victorian argument that Islamic civilization came into existence not because of the Koran and Islamic law but despite them. The stimulus in science and the arts came from outside the Muslim world; where Islam reigned, these accomplishments took place only where the dead hand of Islamic authority could be avoided. Crediting Islam for the medieval cultural glories, he believes, would be like crediting the Inquisition for Galileo's discoveries.

Turning to the present, Ibn Warraq argues that Muslims have experienced great travails trying to modernize because Islam stands foursquare in their way. Its regressive orientation makes change difficult: "All innovations are discouraged in Islam -- every problem is seen as a religious problem rather than a social or economic one." This religion would seem to have nothing functional to offer. "Islam, in particular political Islam, has totally failed to cope with the modern world and all its attendant problems -- social, economic, and philosophical." Nor does the author hold out hope for improvement. Take the matter of protecting individuals from the state: "The major obstacle in Islam to any move toward international human rights is God, or to put it more precisely . . . the reverence for the sources, the Koran and the Sunna."

In a chapter of particular delicacy, given his status as a Muslim living in the West, Ibn Warraq discusses Muslim emigration to Europe and North America. He worries about the importation of Islamic ways and advises the British not to make concessions to immigrant demands but to stick firmly by their traditional principles. "Unless great vigilance is exercised, we are all likely to find British society greatly impoverished morally" by Muslim influence. At the same time, as befits a liberal and Western-oriented Muslim, Ibn Warraq argues that the key dividing line is one of personal philosophy and not (as Samuel Huntington would have it) religious adherence. "IT]he final battle will not necessarily be between Islam and the West, but between those who value freedom and those who do not." This argument in fact offers hope, implying as it does that peoples of divergent faiths can find common ground.

As a whole, Ibn Warraq's assessment of Islam is exceptionally severe: The religion is based on deception; it succeeded through aggression and intimidation; it holds back progress; and it is a "form of totalitarianism." Surveying nearly 14 centuries of history, he concludes, "the effects of the teachings of the Koran have been a disaster for human reason and social, intellectual, and moral progress."

As if this were not enough, Ibn Warraq tops off his blasphemy with an assault on what he calls "monotheistic arrogance" and even religion as such. He asks some interesting questions, the sort that we in the West seem not to ask each other anymore: "If there is a natural evolution from polytheism to monotheism, then is there not a natural development from monotheism to atheism?" Instead of God's appearing in obscure places and murky circumstances, "Why can He not reveal Himself to the masses in a football stadium during the final of the World Cup"? In 1917, rather than permit a miracle in Fatima, Portugal, why did He not end the carnage on the Western Front?

It is hard for a non-Muslim fully to appreciate the offense Ibn Warraq has committed, for his book of deep protest and astonishing provocation goes beyond anything imaginable in our rough-and-tumble culture. We have no pieties remotely comparable to Islam's. In the religious realm, for example, Joseph Heller turned several Biblical stories into pornographic fare in his 1984 novel *God Knows*, and no one even noticed. For his portrayal of Jesus' sexual longings in the 1988 film *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Martin Scorsese faced a few pickets but certainly no threats to his life. In the political arena, Charles Murray and Dinesh D'Souza published books on the very most delicate American topic, the issue of differing racial abilities, and neither had to go into hiding as a result.

In contrast, blasphemy against Islam leads not only to threats on the life of Salman Rushdie, but to actual murder -- and not just in places like Egypt and Bangladesh. At least one such execution has taken place on American soil. Rashad Khalifa, an Egyptian biochemist living in Tucson, Arizona, analyzed the Koran by computer and concluded from some rather complex numerology that the final two verses of the ninth chapter do not belong in the holy book. This insight eventually prompted him to declare himself a prophet, a very serious offense in Islam (which holds Muhammad to be the last of the prophets). Some months later, on January 31, 1990, unknown assailants -- presumably orthodox Muslims angered by his teachings -- stabbed Khalifa to death. While the case remains unsolved, it sent a clear and chilling message: Even in the United States, deviancy leads to death.

In this context, Ibn Warraq's claim of the right to disagree with Islamic tenets is a shock. And all the more so when he claims even the Westerner's right to do so disrespectfully! "This book is first and foremost an assertion of my right to criticize everything and anything in Islam -- even to blaspheme, to make errors, to satirize, and mock." *Why I Am Not a Muslim* does have a mocking quality, to be sure, but it is a serious and thought-provoking book. It calls not for a wall of silence, much less a Rushdie-like fatwa on the author's life, but for an equally compelling response from a believing Muslim.

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McCaskill, Accusing Gorsuch of 'Stunning Lack of Humanity,' Backs Filibuster

Nuked?

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One day after audio surfaced of her questioning the implications of blocking Supreme Court nominee Judge Neil Gorsuch, Senator Claire McCaskill announced Friday that she would back a filibuster of his confirmation vote, moving the upper chamber closer to the potential "nuclear option" of eliminating the procedural maneuver for High Court appointments.

With McCaskill's declaration, there are now at least 36 Democrats supporting the filibuster, based on an *Associated Press* count earlier Friday of at least 35. With 41, Gorsuch's confirmation would be held up. She accused Gorsuch of exhibiting a "stunning lack of humanity" in his jurisprudence.

"I cannot support Judge Gorsuch because a study of his opinions reveal a rigid ideology that always puts the little guy under the boot of corporations," McCaskill said in a statement. "He is evasive, but his body of work isn't. Whether it is a freezing truck driver or an autistic child, he has shown a stunning lack of humanity."

THE WEEKLY STANDARD reported on a tape of the Missouri Democrat speaking about the dangers to her party of a filibuster, first written by the *Kansas City Star*:

"The Gorsuch situation is really hard. There are going to be people in this room that are going to say, 'No, no, no. You cannot vote for Gorsuch,' " McCaskill said in the recording. "Let's assume for the purposes of this discussion that we turn down Gorsuch, that there are not eight Democrats that vote to confirm him and therefore there's not enough to put him on the Supreme Court. What then?"

She pointed to the list of potential nominees that Trump released before the election to galvanize conservative support. "By the way, Gorsuch was one of the better ones," McCaskill quipped. "So they pick another one off the list and then they bring it over to the Senate and we say no, no, no, this one's worse. And there's not enough votes to confirm him. They're not going to let us do that too long before they move it to 51 votes," she said.

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