

PLURALISM IN PERIL

BY DANIEL PIPES

Among its many significant aspects, the controversy over Salman Rushdie's novel, *The Satanic Verses*, marked the first major political initiative by Muslims living in the West. As such, it pointed up two facts: that the Muslims who have been immigrating to Western countries since the 1960s have now reached sizable numbers, and that these people may not wish to assimilate to Western values, especially political ones.

Muslims now total about 11 million in Western Europe and 6 million in the United States. France has more than 3 million Muslims, West Germany about 2.5 million, the United Kingdom 1.5 million, and Italy almost a million. In most Western European countries, Muslims constitute the second-largest religious community. In France, they outnumber all non-Catholics combined, including both Protestants and Jews. A resident of Paris described the situation metaphorically: "For the price of a subway ticket, you can find yourself in Marrakesh."

As their numbers have grown, so have Muslims' political power and ambitions. These ambitions were strikingly symbolized about the time of the Rushdie crisis when French and German newsweeklies reported parallel statements on this subject. A French woman of North African origins told a reporter, "Tomorrow I will be mayor, the day after president of the republic." Meanwhile, a German politician sought to scare his conationals by announcing, "In the year 2000 we will have a federal chancellor of Turkish origins."

President or chancellor may be fanciful, but a Muslim named Mohammed Ajeeb has already served as lord mayor of Bradford, England. Especially in Britain, where most Muslims are citizens and



Muslims now number 1.5 million in Britain, and they turned out in force to protest Rushdie's novel.

most share a common origin in the Indian subcontinent, they carry significant electoral weight. The Labour Party has come to depend on them in several districts.

Thus, not coincidentally, the member of Parliament representing Bradford West, Max Madden, was at the forefront of appealing the ayatollah. On one occasion, he filed a bill proposing to extend the British blasphemy laws to cover Islam. Later, Madden submitted a motion to Parliament calling on Rushdie to instruct his publishers to withdraw the book from sale; then he and two other Labour MPs (also representing sizable Muslim constituencies) urged a ban on further production of the book. Perhaps most symbolic of this appeasement was the fact that an elected politician, Barry Seal (Labour), the member of the European Parliament for Yorkshire West, spoke at the very rally in Bradford at which *The Satanic Verses* was attached to a stake and burned.

The presence of power quickly gives rise to the question whether that power will be used to change some fundamental aspects of Western life—and of how readily non-Muslim politicians will concede basic Western values in pursuit

of votes at home and friends abroad. Two principles seem especially in jeopardy in the aftermath of the Rushdie affair: freedom of speech and secularism. Neither principle has much of a role in the Middle East or other parts of the Muslim world, and both came under attack by the great majority of Muslims living in Western countries.

Muslims in Britain have already succeeded in getting the government to establish single-sex schools for them that serve *halal* (the Islamic equivalent of kosher) foods and teach the Islamic religion. By a special act of Parliament,

the Belgian government recognized aspects of Islamic law in 1974. Soon after, the British House of Lords decided that oral pronouncements of divorce along Islamic lines were valid in courts.

In some cases, at least, the intention to remake Western life is explicit. The editor of a Bengali-language newspaper in England, Harunur Rashid Tipu, explained that the leaders of the Young Muslim Organization seek ultimately "to build an Islamic society here." And in the editor's view, "With the speed with which they are building up their character, there is a high chance of success." An outside observer is not likely to agree with this assessment; nonetheless, the very fact that Muslims even conceive of building an Islamic society in Europe, rather than merely coexisting alongside Western culture, speaks of a dramatic change in expectations.

In response to these challenges, the British home secretary, Douglas Hurd, traveled to Birmingham in late February to address worshippers at the city's central mosque on the responsibilities of living in Great Britain. In addition to lecturing Muslims on the principles of free speech and the separation of church and state, he

asked them to make greater efforts to integrate their children into society. Many others echoed his sentiments. Ian Davidson, writing in the *Financial Times*, warned Muslims that "they may be entitled to their own distinct cultural and religious identity; but only within the limitations permitted by the law."

Beyond the xenophobes and the demagogues who cashed in on the whole business, the Rushdie affair confronted Western and Islamic civilizations in a manner which had not been seen in centuries. In the West, writers referred easily to the "unquestioning, perhaps fanatical" faith of the East. And for the first time in many years, the Western press resorted to the term "the civilized world," which it contrasted with the Muslims.

On the Muslim side as well, the Rushdie incident brought out atavistic attitudes. The ready support offered Rushdie by Western governments was almost universally interpreted in the Muslim world in an anti-Islamic light.

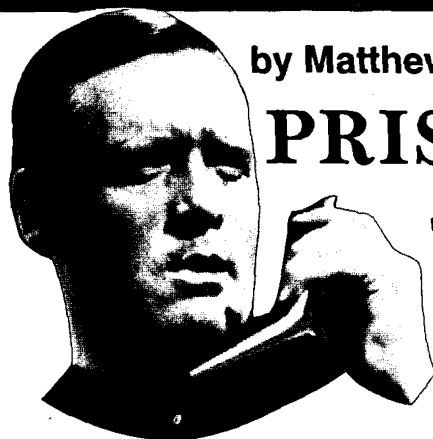
Insistence on freedom of expression was seen as a covert endorsement of Rushdie's views on Islam. This in turn confirmed the Muslims' deepest suspicions about Westerners still harboring Crusader impulses. "The whole affair of that diabolical book has reactivated age-old religious and intellectual intolerances towards the Muslims that are reminiscent of the dark days of the Crusaders," wrote one commentator in the *Jordan Times*.

The issues raised by the Rushdie affair were explosive, touching on the basic values in each civilization, and made more explosive by the presence of substantial numbers of Muslims in the West. To those imbued with Western ideals, it was a question of what is possibly the single most important principle in modern liberal ideology, freedom of speech. To those imbued with Islamic ideals, it was the equally important question of the dignity of Islam. Westerners stood together, by and large, and so did the Muslims. And

far more than Americans, Europeans came to feel that the combination of a rapidly expanding Muslim population in the West and their growing assertiveness added up to a momentous challenge.

No one can say, at such an early date, what the consequences will be, but the matter seems likely to go one of two ways. Either Westerners will stand by their principles, especially those of free speech and secularism, leaving the newcomers no choice but to accommodate. Or Westerners will not stand up, in which case—as one analyst put it, "the political influences of Libya, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Iran will begin to be felt," and then those Western principles will begin to erode.

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