

Title : Is Rushdie Worth Defending?

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TRANSCRIPT OF TELEVISION INTERVIEW WITH FRANCIS BENNION

Q. You say that Mr. Rushdie is not worth defending. Why?

A. Because he has let the side down.

Q. What "side" do you mean?

A. The side that is engaged in the battle for free speech. The battle is against religious persecution - an old enemy of libertarians. Most religious creeds prohibit freedom of speech. They know they are right and no argument is tolerated. It might undermine the faith. or insult the deity. Besides, it's disrespectful to the controlling priests or mullahs - or whatever else they call themselves.

Q. Mr. Rushdie says it's no one's business but his own if he converts to Islam.

A. Why did he make a public announcement about it then? That's nonsense. Mr. Rushdie's conversion strengthens the Islamic religion in Britain. It is of concern to all of us.

Q. But if you believe in religious freedom...

A. I support religious freedom, but like all freedoms it has limits. If any religious dogma or practice harms society it is our right and duty to oppose it by law and in every lawful way. That is why British law forbids the Hindu caste system, under which large numbers of people are treated as untouchables.

Q. Are you saying that Islam threatens our society?

A. I am not free to answer that.

Q. What do you mean?

A. When last week I said Islam was a bigoted creed because it sentenced a novelist to death for what he wrote I received threats. A letter was published in a national newspaper saying I must not be allowed to get away with it...

Q. Are you going to allow yourself to be silenced by such threats?

A. Not completely. But I have to recognise that the danger is there. Already our freedom of speech has been damaged by Muslim fundamentalism.

Q. Why then do you not stay on the Rushdie Defence Committee?

A. Because the Committee is ineffective, except as a source of comfort and moral support for Mr. Rushdie. It is paralysed by fear - fear that whatever it does will make matters worse. fear of the wrath of Islam.

Q. How then can we defend free speech?

A. Free speech is only part of the issue. We have to accept that the British state, which is all of us, will not tolerate any religious practice which damages society. The state has both a moral right and a moral duty to ensure that the tenets and actions of any religious system operating within it do not adversely affect the social well being of any citizen, whether a believer or not. Our forbears did not struggle for many centuries to establish a civilised society in order to have its important values undermined now.

Q. The Muslims attack western values?

A. Yes. They attack our values, but we are not permitted to attack theirs. They label America as the Great Satan and dismiss our secular values as worthless. They are not worthless. I am proud of them and mean to defend them.

Q. I believe you have a book on secular ethics coming out soon.

A. Yes. There is such a thing as secular, or non-religious, morality. We need to proclaim it.

Q. How can we do that?

A. The main way is through education. Young people, all people. need to learn the history of how our secular values were won. Let me give just one example from history. In 1222 a church synod met near Oxford. It tried a young Christian man for apostasy, which is what Salman Rushdie was convicted of over The Satanic Verses. The young man had fallen in love with a Jewess, who would not return his love unless he became a Jew himself. The Church found him guilty and delivered him up to the civil power for punishment. He was burnt alive in the grounds of Osney Abbey.

Q. What is the present relevance of that story?

A. Through the struggles of Lollardism and the Reformation, the British people have persuaded the Christian Church not to act in that cruel way. If the Church tried to act in that way again today it would not be allowed to. It has to be the same with the Moslems.

Q. What of the hurt feelings of the Moslems over The Satanic Verses?

A. Hurt feelings are more tolerable than murder. It is vitally necessary that those who consider that any religious creed is harmful to society should be free to challenge it with all weapons available. These include the weapons of satire and ridicule used by Rushdie.

[From the Internet.]