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# QUEST

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Essay 1

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## **Dare to Blaspheme and Dare to Be Free**

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# QUEST

*QUEST is a publication about human freedom, especially freedom of the human spirit— a freedom grounded in the supremely human God. The editors, sponsors and publishers believe that this freedom is the essential, indispensable condition of being truly human, both personally and corporately.*

*QUEST stands for freedom from every form of tyranny over the human spirit— the tyranny of religion, ideology, authoritarianism, popular prejudice and, above all, the fear of freedom itself.*

*QUEST aims to explore and report on any research, discovery or other information that may assist the venture into a free and open future.*

*Essay 1, 1989*

## **What's in a Name?**

The editors and publishers of this journal have felt for some time that a name change was overdue. The name Verdict was chosen during the 1970s, when our theological interest was oriented toward the heritage of the classical Protestant Reformation. That theology was centered in the death of Christ. Like classical Christian theological tradition, it was systematic, dogmatic, legally structured, and closed like the Newtonian universe. The name was especially suited to the legal connotations of substitutionary atonement, forensic justification, and “the third use of the law.”

In the 1980s our entire center of “gravity” changed from the cross to resurrection, not as a matter of neglecting one to emphasize the other, but as a matter of primacy in interpretive meaning. The result has been a change as astounding as the change from death to life— from the static to the moving, from the systematic and dogmatic to the historical and open, from the legally explained ways of God to the sheer joy of living, which goes immeasurably beyond anything legally explainable. And finally, it is a change from the religious spirit to a profoundly nonreligious spirit.

The name QUEST has been chosen to express the joy, the risk and the surprises of an unending journey in an open universe and into an open future. QUEST not only implies a journey of discovery, but a venture together. The old image of a celestial Ruler handing down a verdict is gone. That vertical relationship has been replaced by a horizontal relationship in which even God is neighbor. He is with us and beside us on a journey into a future which even he has not rigidly determined.

You are invited to join this QUEST, not only as a reader, but as an active contributor, sponsor, scout, critic and researcher. We will take no prisoners (submissive converts). The freedom to participate is personal, and so is all the responsibility. — THE EDITOR

# Beyond the Blasphemy of Salman Rushdie

“Rules, rules, rules . . . rules about every damn thing,” says a fictitious character in Salman Rushdie’s novel, *The Satanic Verses*. 1 Though this is only a novel, it embodies the protest of a human spirit against the tyranny of religion— in this instance, the Moslem religion.

*Islam* literally means “submission.” Allah is the transcendent, altogether nonhuman ruler in heaven. He issues his orders and rules to the angel Gabriel. Gabriel, in turn, literally dictates them to the prophet Mohammed. The faithful must hear and submit. Revelation tells the faithful how to eat, how to sleep, how to have sex, how to dispose of property— how to regulate every aspect of human existence. Allah even determines the entire course of personal history. The future is strictly determined.

Rushdie recognizes that such religion makes human freedom impossible. Freedom is the essential, indispensable condition of being truly human. Even if he must commit the ultimate sin of blasphemy, he must do so in the quest of human freedom. Thus, by means of his novel, Rushdie rejects the claim that the Koran contains divine instructions handed down from the sky.

The Moslem world is enraged by Rushdie’s sacrilege. Millions are demanding that he be assassinated and “sent straight to hell”— to use the very words of Ayatollah Khomeini.

The Western world is outraged that one of its own citizens could be threatened with death for offending the religious sensitivities of Moslems. The arguments for religious freedom are well known. But let us not in hypocritical haste condemn the Moslem world. Not too long ago thousands of Christians in America were furiously protesting the blasphemy of *The Last Temptation of Christ*. They demanded boycotts and government action against this motion picture. In its long history Christianity has probably put more people to death on account of blasphemy than has any other religion. Or have we forgotten the Salem witch trials, the Thirty Years’ War, Calvin and Servetus, the Spanish Inquisition, Augustine and the Donatists, not to mention the programs against the Jews and the Crusades against the Moslems. Says Czeslaw Milosz, “The civilization that calls itself Christian was built on the blood of the innocent.” 2 Protestant scholar, Jacques Ellul, declares:

**Whenever the church has been in a position of power, it has regarded freedom as an enemy. 3**

**If one turns to history, it is surely apparent that Christians have more often imposed restraints than championed liberty. . . . Freedom finds little place within the church’s history. . . . It has been a serious failure and indeed a veritable catastrophe for man in general. 4**

Rushdie's blasphemous novel is a parabolic thrust against all religion. As a secular Moslem, he writes in a Moslem setting. But he could easily have adapted his story to a Catholic, Mormon, Adventist or Fundamentalist setting. The verdict of the oppressed human spirit would have been the same: "... rules, rules, rules . . . rules about every damn thing."

The concept of a transcendent nonhuman God who rules the faithful with the words of a book is common to the religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. (While Catholics add papal encyclicals, Adventists add the Spirit of Prophecy, and Mormons add the Book of Mormon, the principle is the same.) God's entire will is revealed in written instructions. Man must obey or else! The God of these religions is overwhelmingly authoritarian—a celestial Dictator. When elements of Christian theology are added such as total depravity, predestination, irresistible grace, and eternal torment for all who refuse to submit, man is left with little more freedom than a worm.

The apostle Paul discerned the evils of a religion of written instructions. (In Judaism this was called the Law or Torah, the letter, the written code.) Paul depicted life under the Law as a life in prison and in bondage. To announce freedom from the Law (which is simply freedom from religion) to the Gentiles was bad enough; but when he encouraged the Jews to forsake the Law, his opponents could tolerate his blasphemy no longer. Certain Jews shaved their heads and vowed not to eat until they had assassinated this apostle of the free spirit.

Even before Paul, Jesus had announced his intention to liberate the oppressed. The religious authorities were appalled at his blasphemy and put him to death. Jesus was the greatest religious blasphemer who ever lived. His free human spirit was totally inimical to a religion of "rules, rules, rules . . . rules about every damn thing."

The Christian religion was no better than Judaism and in many respects worse. The church was authoritarian. People were taught obedience and submission to authority, not freedom and personal responsibility. The Christian religion was responsible for the Dark Ages. Under its influence civilization turned its back on the world. Only Islamic culture kept learning, art, science, architecture and medicine alive; and it was Islam which introduced the universities, hospitals, science and the Renaissance to a stagnant Christian civilization.

The Reformation brought some improvement, but it gave people no freedom to think for themselves in religious matters. They were forced to accept the state religion. Infant baptism symbolized the actual choice people had under the Protestant religion. Religious creeds were drafted with meticulous rules, rules and more rules on how to think on every conceivable theological subject.

The religious authorities had good intentions, of course. They never wavered in their convictions that the great God of heaven desired total control over the lives of his

people in all their thoughts and actions. Why then should not the true religion strictly govern people's thoughts and actions?

All religious organizations (and especially those that are Fundamentalist) are no better than cages of human oppression where people can neither think nor act for themselves. This is the worst outrage against the human spirit, because freedom is the essential, indispensable condition of being truly human. How can such organizations trust people with any genuine freedom so long as they themselves are bound with convictions of a celestial nonhuman Tyrant and doctrines of original sin, total depravity, and the bondage of the human will? In this context, freedom of religion only means that people have the freedom to choose the sectarian enclosure in which they prefer to live.

It is not possible to leave this vast religious prison except through the one door called "Blasphemy." The fear of blasphemy restrains people from the freedom of being truly human. But we must dare to blaspheme if we dare to be free. Then we must fling the charge of blasphemy back on the religious powers. It is they who blaspheme humanity by depriving man of the freedom to be truly human.

## The Tyranny of the Vertical Dimension

It is often said that we have a vertical relationship to God above us and a horizontal relationship to humanity beside us. This seems to be supported by Jesus' reference to the Old Testament:

**"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." – Matt. 22:37-39.**

Judeo-Christian tradition also emphasizes this vertical and horizontal relationship in terms of the first and second tables of the Decalogue.

The vertical relationship is the domain of religion. When God is perceived as a transcendent nonhuman reality, human beings attempt to relate to him through the mediation of sacralized places, times, rituals, water, food, persons, documents, etc. A sacrament is not merely a symbol or reminder of God; it embodies the mysterious presence or power of the Divine. It is a spiritual conductor by which man makes contact with the transcendent nonhuman reality called God.

In a previous issue we showed how Jesus dismantled the entire sacral system by abolishing all distinctions between sacred and secular things, thereby offering every person the reality of immediate rather than mediated contact with God. 5

By this daring, preposterous step Jesus was offering humanity freedom not only by abolishing religion, but by abolishing the vertical dimension. Thus, he seemed to place man on the level of God and God on the level of man (see John 10:33-36). To

his opponents Jesus had leveled an outrageous attack not only on the glory and majesty of God, but on everything the religion of Israel represented. This was intolerable blasphemy “We have a law,” they cried, “and by that law he ought to die” (John 19:7). This Law, of course, was regarded as the “law of God.” Their murder of Jesus was viewed as a sacred duty— an act of obedience to Almighty God.

Abolishing the vertical dimension means that we must join Jesus in his “blasphemy” if we dare to be free. While abolishing the “God” of the vertical dimension may be called the ultimate blasphemy, it is the only road to ultimate freedom.

### **“The Evil I Do Not Want Is What I Do”**

It has often been said that *homo sapiens* is *homo religiosus*. The ubiquity of religion in all cultures, ancient and modern, demonstrates that man is a religious animal who is never able to escape the religious impulse to posit a higher or supreme good.

In the Judeo-Christian-Moslem tradition the higher or supreme good is the transcendent Creator-God. This tradition tends to become a religious “ism”— i.e., *Judaism*, *Christianism*, *Catholicism*, *Protestantism*, *Fundamentalism*, *Calvinism*, etc. — in which devotion embraces a system of thought instead of a Person.

The higher good of the great religions may, in fact, be exchanged for other forms of the higher good. Thus, Marx replaced theism with communism. Others have made capitalism, science, money, even pleasure (hedonism) the higher good which gives meaning and direction to their lives. Any object of our supreme devotion or “ultimate concern” 6 is our “God,” the “ism” which determines our world.

In all the great religions of the world, including Marxism, the second great commandment (“You shall love your neighbor as yourself”) is freely confessed and advocated. Every religion professes to live and work for the good of humanity. But each assumes a higher good than humanity— a first great commandment that precedes the good of humanity— so that humanity is always subordinated by religion. Humanity is therefore mistreated and dehumanized whenever there is a devotion to some good higher than humanity.

When devotion to any *nonhuman* reality is given precedence, such devotion becomes an inhuman reality. People are inevitably deprived of their own humanity and dehumanized.

Concrete examples of the ill-treatment, abuse and neglect of humanity, which inevitably follow such devotion to a higher good (religion), can be multiplied:

Saul of Tarsus was a human spirit with compassion for humanity, empathy for those who suffer, and the impulse for positive human good. But devotion to the Law (and the God of the Law) drove him to profoundly inhuman acts. He persecuted fellow human beings to the death. Did he care for the cries of fatherless children? Was his heart touched by the grieving widows and by all the other human pain caused by his religious zeal? Of course he cared! It was painful for him to kick against the barbs of

his own human sympathy (Acts 26:14). But religious intoxication made him treat such human sympathies as temptations of the devil which must be silenced for God's sake. So he treated the Jesus people exactly as Jesus foresaw would happen: "The hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God" (John 16:2).

Was Augustine aware of the "second commandment" when he persecuted the Donatists? Of course he wanted to be faithful in his love to humanity! But devotion to God came first. Augustine was a classical example of "I hate to do this to you, but God says ..."

Were those who conducted the Inquisition simply beasts without compassion or respect for human life? On the contrary, we know that they were profoundly human and shrank from inflicting suffering on anyone. But devotion to a higher good drove them to subordinate their better human impulses.

John Calvin was moved by human compassion at the thought of executing Michael Servetus. Calvin was personally appalled at the thought of burning a fellow human being at the stake. He favored a more humane execution— such as decapitation. But the blasphemy of Servetus seemed so terrible that human feelings had to be subordinated to the higher good. Calvin's colleague, William Farel, offered prayer before they lit what was to be a hideously slow fire.

Devotion to Zionism by young Israeli soldiers today forces them to indulge in brutal behavior. It is also difficult for them to kick against the pricks of their common humanity. Some now recognize that their brutalization of children and women is degrading, humiliating and dehumanizing to themselves. They, too, sense the terrible tension between devotion to the higher good and to humanity.

Like Judaism and Christianity, the Moslem religion clearly teaches love to fellow man. Why then do Shiite Moslems subject the gentle Bahai people to arrest, imprisonment, torture and death? Because Allah commands that heretics and blasphemers must be put to death! Did not even Yahweh instruct the Jews to utterly slaughter the Canaanites: "Your eye shall not pity them" (Deut. 7:16)? The higher good demanded these inhuman deeds.

America fought the Vietnam War because of its redeemer-nation mentality and because of its commitment to the holy war against communism. Vietnam was an expression of the civil religion of America. Decent American boys were forced to outrage their own human sensibilities by subjecting other innocent human beings to napalm incineration.

And what about communism? Marxist theory proposes that while capitalism is self-centered, communism is fellow-man centered, so that it seeks the common human good rather than the private good. This new world religion promises to redress the failure of the old theistic religions by fulfilling the second commandment. But in practice communism is no more human than the ugly Berlin wall.

Today religious fundamentalism and revivalism are moving millions toward a “jihad” of human destruction and violence—in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, India, Ireland, the Middle East, and even in America.

We turn from the more violent consequences of religion to other manifestations of its dehumanizing influence. Because the human race is not all devoted to the same higher good, they are divided by different devotions. Religion draws lines of demarcation through the human race. The chosen people are distinguished from the unchosen, insiders from outsiders, clean from unclean, saved from lost, believers from unbelievers, Jews from Gentiles, the enlightened from the unenlightened, Catholics from non-Catholics, Moslems from infidels—and so the lines which separate people are drawn again and again. People who live within separate barriers cannot even effectively communicate. They are like confused Babel builders who cannot understand one another. What is orthodoxy to one group is blasphemy to the other, and *vice versa*. Each “ism” produces an elitist group that regards itself as superior to the rest of mankind by virtue of possessing the truth or belonging to the elect. Such arrogance breeds estrangement and hostility (see Eph. 2:14, 15). Bertrand Russell rightly states:

**Any average selection of mankind, set apart and told that it excels the rest in virtue, must tend to sink below the average. Z**

All major religions preach love of neighbor, and all the faithful in all the “isms” desire to be truly human. But as long as they live by the “rules, rules, rules . . . rules about every damn thing,” they are continually forced to deny the true love of neighbor. Thus, when Paul describes life under the tyranny of the Law or religion, he says, “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do” (Rom. 7:19). While in his mind he gave allegiance to the law of God, he was in fact committing inhuman deeds (Rom. 7:25). Devotion to God dehumanized him. His experience is a paradigm of all life lived under the tyranny of religion.

When we observe the inhuman havoc caused by zeal for God, we must not naively think that it is only the result of false religion and that the answer lies in finding the true religion. This is the greatest deception of all. The more people are nourished by their conceit over having the one true religion, the more arrogant, authoritarian and inhuman they become. The most dangerous human leaders are those who are certain they know God’s will for everyone else and believe they are instruments of the divine will. Far better, to fall into the hands of those, who are agnostic concerning the will of God and the instrument for fulfilling his purpose.

By its very nature, the vertical relationship (i.e., a higher good than humanity) is inevitably a relationship with a nonhuman reality. Devotion to the nonhuman results in inhuman behavior. The vertical relationship always dehumanizes.

As with the great Hebrew prophets before him, the teachings of Jesus emphasized man’s inhumanity to, man. He taught that our duty to love on the horizontal level of



humanity embraces everything and takes priority over everything. God is not absent here; but if he is loved, he is only loved in and through our fellow man.

“So whatsoever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets.” – Matt. 7:12.

“So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” – Matt. 5:23, 24.

And behold, one came up to him, saying, “Teacher, what good deed must I do, to have eternal life?” And he said to him, “Why do you ask me about what is good? One there is who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments.” He said to him, “Which?” And Jesus said, “You shall not kill, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as your self.”— Matt. 19:16-19.

“And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.’” – Matt. 25:40.

Paul also says:

He who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law.... Any other commandment . . . [is] summed up in this sentence, “You shall love your neighbor as your self.” – Rom. 13:8, 9.

For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” – Gal. 5:14.

## The Meaning of God According to Jesus

Now we come to the heart of the matter. Jesus gave such a new revelation of God that it made all preceding revelation dark and obsolete (1 John 2:8). This issue is beautifully stated by Albert Nolan in his book, *Jesus Before Christianity*. 9

The traditional image of God has become so difficult to understand and so difficult to reconcile with the historical facts of Jesus’ life that many people are no longer able to identify Jesus with *that* God. For many young people today Jesus is very much alive but the traditional God is dead.

By his words and his praxis, Jesus himself changed the content of the word ‘God’. If we do not allow him to change our image of God, we will not be able to say that *he* is our Lord and our God. To choose him as our God is to make him the source of our information about divinity and to refuse to superimpose upon him our own ideas of divinity

This is the meaning of the traditional assertion that Jesus is the Word of God. Jesus reveals God to us; God does not reveal Jesus to us. God is not the Word of Jesus, that is to say, our ideas about God cannot throw any light upon the life of Jesus. To argue from God to Jesus instead of arguing from Jesus to God is to put the cart before the horse. This, of course, is what many Christians have tried to do. It has generally led them into a series of meaningless speculations which only cloud the issue and which prevent Jesus from revealing God to us.

We cannot deduce anything about Jesus from what we think we know about God; we must now deduce everything about God from what we do know about Jesus. Thus, when we say that Jesus is divine, we do not wish to *add* anything to what we have been able to discover about him so far, nor do we wish to *change* anything that we have said about him. To say now suddenly that Jesus is divine does not change our understanding of Jesus; it changes our understanding of divinity. We are not only turning away from the gods of money, power, prestige or self; we are turning away from all the old images of a personal God in order to find our God in Jesus and what he stood for.

This is not to say that we must abolish the Old Testament and reject the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It means that if we accept Jesus as divine, we must reinterpret the Old Testament from Jesus’ point of view and we must try to understand the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as Jesus

understood him. We accept the God of the Old Testament as one who has now changed and relented of his former purposes in order to be totally compassionate towards mankind— all mankind.

To accept Jesus as our God is to accept the one whom Jesus called Father as our God. This supreme power, this power of goodness, truth and love which is stronger than any other power in the world, can now be seen and recognized in Jesus— *both* in what he had to say about the Father *and* in what he himself was, the very structure of his personal life and the almighty power of his convictions. Our God is both Jesus and the Father. Because of their essential unity or 'exact sameness', when we worship the one we worship the other. And yet they are distinguishable in that Jesus alone is visible to us, Jesus alone is our source of information about divinity, Jesus alone is the Word of God.

We have seen what Jesus was like. If we now wish to treat him as our God, we would have to conclude that our God does not want to be served by us, he wants to serve us; he does not want to be given the highest possible rank and status in our society, he wants to take the lowest place and to be without any rank and status; he does not want to be feared and obeyed, he wants to be recognized in the sufferings of the poor and the weak; he is not supremely indifferent and detached, he is irrevocably committed to the liberation of mankind, for he has chosen to identify himself with all men in a spirit of solidarity and compassion. If this is not a true picture of God, then Jesus is not divine. If this is a true picture of God, then God is more truly human, more thoroughly humane, than any human being. He is what Schillebeeckx has called, a *Deus humanissimus*, a supremely human God.

## 10

That is it! A supremely human God! When the Old Testament writers employed anthropomorphic expressions in referring to God, they were correct. They were simply not able to go far enough. When God revealed himself in the historical Jesus, he did not suddenly become a supremely human reality. He always was supremely human. He is the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb. 13:8). Was not the human made in his image and likeness?

Because he is supremely human, Jesus is in profound solidarity with the entire human race without distinction of race, color, gender, culture, religion or anything else. Wherever there is a human spirit, there is the God of compassion in solidarity with all human oppression, suffering, loneliness and need.

"Who are you, Lord?" asked Paul when he was arrested on the road to Damascus by the Lord, who demanded, "Why do you persecute me?" Persecuting God? Can God be persecuted? Paul knew that he was persecuting people. But how could he be persecuting the Lord? Then the Lord said to him, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (see Acts 9:3-5).

The question: "Who are you, Lord?" The answer: "I am this man who was condemned, spat upon and executed for blasphemy. I am those whom you, Paul, are arresting and imprisoning for blasphemy. I am Servetus, who burned at that wretched stake. I am the Jew who died in the gas chamber, desperately crying, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' I am every human being persecuted, neglected, misunderstood, driven out and executed because of religion! I am the starving child of Biafra, the slum dweller of Manila. I am any and every person who is human. Each is my son, my Jesus, as if I had no other son in the universe."

**"And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.'" – Matt. 25:40.**

**When I sought myself, myself I could not see.**

**I sought my God, and he eluded me.**

**I sought my brother, and lo, I found all three.**

The light shining in the face of Jesus, finally frees us from the dehumanizing tyranny of the vertical dimension— of devotion to a higher good than humanity. God is shown to be our neighbor in Jesus Christ. Humanity is the highest good. In this light we at last are free to be truly human, free to fulfill our whole duty, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

## **Notes and References**

**Unless otherwise indicated, biblical quotations are from the Revised Standard Version.**

1. Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, quoted in *Newsweek*, 27 Feb. 1989, p. 38.
2. Czeslaw Milosz, “The Lesson of the Baltics,” in *The Captive Mind* (1953), quoted in *The Nation*, 25 Feb. 1989, p. 259.
3. Jacques Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), p. 12.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 88-90.
5. See “The Gospel and the Unmediated State,” in “Farewell to Religion—A Manifesto of Christian “Atheism,” *Verdict*, Essay 31, 1987, pp. 16-18.
6. Paul Tillich.
7. Bertrand Russell, *Bertrand Russell on God and Religion*, ed. Al Seckel (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1986), pp. 110-11.
8. Rushdie, *Newsweek*, 27 Feb. 1989, p. 38
9. Albert Nolan, “*Jesus Before Christianity*” (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1976).
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 136-38.

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