

The Rushdie Symposium

PARADISO - AMSTERDAM

Chairman - Prof. drs. Fons Elders

June, 1990

FONS ELDERS:

The Rushdie Symposium is an initiative of the University for Humanist Studies, established in 1989 in Utrecht, The Netherlands. The University provides an education based on humanistic tradition and values culminating in the profession of moral advisor. From this background, the Rushdie issue is being followed with especially great interest. It touches upon a number of values which traditionally lie at the basis of what we consider the "better" traditions in our culture.

The forum members are Arne Naess from Oslo; Frank Martinus from Willemstad; Ghassan Ascha, originally from Beirut and presently living in Utrecht, Islam specialist; Hans Mooij from Groningen, literary scholar and philosopher; and Maureen Duffy from England, writer.

The choice of the forum members was not made on the basis of any religious or political affiliation. We wanted intellectuals active as author, as philosopher, or as in Ascha's case, as Islam specialist, but who are especially characterized by their independent position.

We are going to discuss the texts of Salman Rushdie, *Is There Nothing Sacred Anymore?* and *In Good Faith*, written in hiding. The debate will have a serious character because we are dealing with the ideas and values of someone who is condemned to death. While most of the facts are known, it might be helpful to put some of the incidents in chronological order, using *The International Rushdie-Dossier*, published by Van Genep:

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| 29 November 1988 | <i>The Satanic Verses</i> by Salman Rushdie published in England by Viking Penguin; |
| 5 October 1988 | <i>The Satanic Verses</i> banned in India; |
| 8 October 1988 | <i>The Satanic Verses</i> wins the Whitbread Prize for the best novel; |
| 24 November 1988 | <i>The Satanic Verses</i> banned in South Africa; |
| 14 January 1989 | book burning in Bradford, Yorkshire; |
| 27 January 1989 | demonstration in Hyde Park and presentation of a petition to Penguin; |
| 1 February 1989 | Douglas Hurd, British Minister of the Interior announces that the British government is not planning to change the blasphemy laws; |
| 12 February 1989 | six people are killed in riots in Islamabad, Pakistan; |
| 13 February 1989 | one dead and more than one hundred wounded in riots in Kashmir, India; |
| 14 February 1989 | Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran pronounces the death sentence "fatwa" on Salman Rushdie; |
| 15 February 1989 | national day of mourning in Iran, demonstration at the British embassy in Teheran, all Viking Penguin publications are banned in Iran. Viking offers its apologies. There is a price of one and a half million British pounds on Rushdie's head. Harald Pinter leads a writer's delegation to Downing Street 10; |
| 17 February 1989 | the president of Iran proposes that Rushdie apologize; |
| 18 February 1989 | Salman Rushdie apologizes; |
| 19 February 1989 | Salman Rushdie's apology is not accepted. The death sentence is renewed; |
| 20 February 1989 | England receives substantial support during the EEG ministers of Foreign Affairs conference; |
| 22 February 1989 | <i>The Satanic Verses</i> appears in the United States. The American branch of the writers' club sponsors a meeting of writers in New York; |
| 24 February 1989 | riots in Bombay; |

- 2 March 1989 declaration of the International Writers Union in defence of
Salman Rushdie and the freedom of speech and of the press;
- 7 March 1989 Iran breaks diplomatic relations with Great Britain;
- 15 March 1989 the Nobel Prize Committee is divided;
- 16 March 1989 †he Islamic Conference Organization refuses to support Iran's
death threat;
- 29 March 1989 two "moderate imams" are shot to death in Brussels.

The Observer of 19 February described the fatwa as being announced on Radio Teheran just before the afternoon news at 2:00. It was a fatwa, or a decree from Ayatollah Khomeini, the revered spiritual leader of the fifty million Shi'ite Muslims in Iran. "In the name of Almighty God," the radio announcer recited, "there is only one God to whom we all shall return. I want all inform all courageous Muslims that the writer of the book entitled *The Satanic Verses*, produced, printed and published in defiance of Islam, the Prophet and the Koran, and also the publishers who were aware of the contents, are condemned to death. I summons all good Muslims to execute them quickly wherever they find them so that no one will dare to offend the principles of Islam again. Those who might die in this endeavor will be considered a martyr for God's will. Afterwards, anyone who reaches the writer of the book but does not have the power to kill him, shall deliver him into the hands of the people so that he can be punished for his deeds. May God's blessings be upon you.
Signed, Ruollah Mussafi Khomeini."

And finally, in today's newspaper *Trouw* there is a short article about the Pakistani film *International Guerillas* in which a fictive Rushdie is portrayed as a decadent pro-Israeli playboy whose goal is to overthrow Islam. Following several turbulent scenes combining elements of an inferior James Bond script and a top-class Rambo performance, the evil-doer is finally struck by lightning and dies on a tropical island. During a press conference, the president of Iran, Ali Akbar Rafsanjani called for Great Britain to relinquish its support of Rushdie, literally so that the relations between the two countries could be resumed. Rafsanjani confirmed the sentence against Rushdie - a religious decree which is irrevocable. A day earlier, the Iranian leader Ayatollah Ali Khomeini said that Rushdie should be handed over to British Muslims so that they could kill him for his sacrilege.

Now each of the members of the forum, beginning with Arne Naess, will introduce him or herself and outline their view of the Rushdie question.

Arne Naess:

Originally, I was a kind of a naturalist. I preferred the company of small animals to that of humans, whom I found too complex. I went into philosophy to find out the meaning of my life. I was a professor for thirty years in Oslo and a guest professor in many places. Mostly I try to be in nature, Grand Nature, tiny nature. For the last ten years, I have been very involved in what is called deep ecology, which is trying to generalize a feeling of solidarity which may exist among humans, to include every living creature on this earth. It is a philosophical, but also a spiritual ecology. *And it is a protest.*

Frank Arion:

I am a writer and linguist, and I have also studied literature. I am very much involved in the study of my mother tongue, Papiamentu. We have established the first humanistic school in the world. Though it is small, I am very proud of it. We thought a humanistic school was a good idea in our situation. We called it Erasmus College because of our admiration for Erasmus. As writer I've also suffered this kind of medieval attack, so I have some idea of what poor Mr. Rushdie is experiencing.

Ghassan Ascha:

I was born in Beirut, but of Syrian parents, so I am actually Syrian. I have lived in The Netherlands, in Utrecht, for the last thirteen years. I am married to a Dutch woman and I have three children. I grew up in Damascus and Beirut in an Islamic tradition. Thus, I

grew up just like most Muslims, kissing the bread and the books and my parents hands. I am here as a scholar of religion, an Islam scholar and not as an imam or a representative of an Islamic organization. Therefore, everything that I say, I say for myself, hopefully representing Muslims who think the same way as I do. I think that the importance of the Rushdie affair lies in the effects - for example, the amount of people who have written about it.

Hans Mooij:

My field is philosophy and literature and therefore, philosophical questions regarding literature. Also the cultural-historical aspects, a few of which, I believe, are of immediate interest to this case. One is the relationship between religion, and art and literature, especially as it has developed in modern times. Rushdie writes rather extensively about this in *Is Nothing Sacred?*, but in *In Good Faith* he also touches on the relationship between the two areas.

In addition, there is the question of the relationship between ethics and art, between ethics and aesthetics which I may perhaps be able to bring up later on.

Maureen Duffy:

I am principally a writer, the author of some twenty published books of fiction, poetry, criticism, history, biography, etc., some of which I am glad to say were banned in the bad old days in South Africa and in Ireland. I am honorary president of the Gay Humanists; I am the chairperson of the British Copyright Council and of the Authors Licensing and Collecting Society. So I am concerned about this issue both as a writer and as a humanist living in Britain. The effects of this happening on British life, and literary and cultural life in particular, have been very profound. Division, pain, violence and death have all come about because of the response to a work of fiction. And what we are considering tonight raises all the issues of tolerance, freedom of expression, racism, cultural validity, as well as the nature of language and the nature of artistic presentations. This is not just a British issue, it is not just a European issue. It is an international issue of profound importance. And that is why I am, if not pleased to be here, pleased to have been asked anyway. And very pleased to see so many people who are also concerned about it.

Fons Elders:

I'd like to begin by asking Ghassan Ascha to briefly explain the status of the fatwa, Khomeini's decree by which Rushdie is sentenced to death, within the Islamic culture.

Ghassan Ascha:

I will gladly answer that, but first I'd like to make a short remark. I speak as a scientist, that is, an expert on Islam. I mean, I will try to deal an unemotional way with the juridical aspects of the fatwa.

In short, the Ayatollah did not have the right to do that. In the introduction to the book about Rushdie's essay, it says: "In February 1989 Ayatollah Khomeini, then leader of the Islamic world, etc..." That is incorrect. Khomeini was not the leader of the Islamic world. The Islamic world actually has no leader. The Ayatollah Khomeini was a leader of Iran, of fifty million Muslims, and if we also calculate that he is the leader of the Shi'ite Islam, of the Shi'ites who actually live in Iran and that the Shi'ites are approximately ten percent of all Muslims, then we see that he could be the leader of ten percent of all Muslims.

Nevertheless he did not have the right to call for the murder of someone. It is very clear in Islam. And that is why the ulama, the community of religious authorities and scholars in ^{Al-}Al-Azhar, the largest Islamic center in the world, has actually condemned Khomeini. Unfortunately, we don't get this kind of information here, but he was clearly condemned because he did not have the right to do such a thing.

Fons Elders:

What we're actually talking about is values. If you talk about tolerance, etc., then you are not talking as much about facts as about values. The question I'm going to ask the forum is the following:

Al-Azhar

Are there moral arguments that would make a ban on the written or spoken word acceptable if not desirable?

Frank Arion:

They aren't easy to find. As far as the Rushdie case is concerned, and from the viewpoint of the writer and the individual, I believe that we have to see it as a continual struggle to discover the individual, the flesh and blood person as opposed to the abstractions of religion, community and nation, and so on. This valuable discovery is relatively young although it was also the struggle of Antigone, Socrates and Seneca. There are always individuals who say, in the face of the hypnosis of the masses, that the emperor is naked. It must be possible to investigate the sacred. I would propose that everyone may declare that sacred things exist, as long as it is not forbidden to investigate that sacredness. So, canonization without taboos.

I believe that being able to investigate the sacred is one of the few really things and it is expressed in the declaration of civil rights of man. new

We could debate the validity of Rushdie's means or the adequacy of his research, but the right of research has to exist. There may be moral grounds for rejecting unreliable research, but it must always be possible to do research. of

The two positive things at the present stage, are on the one hand a criminal law system that condemns the misuse of freedom of speech and the press, and at the same time, we have the right of freedom of expression. That is the important thing.

Hans Mooij:

To return to the moderator's question: if moral condemnation, even censorship is permissible. In my opinion, the starting point is that the question about the value of literature is a moral question. It is not an aesthetic question, nor is it a purely artistic question. The aesthetic and the artistic value are only a partial value. If you ask about the value of literature, then you are asking what literature has to offer us; how much time, attention, energy and money literature is worth. A moral question. This means that literature is not immune to moral judgement or even condemnation in principle.

To put it more simply: to see writing and publishing as an action, and open to moral judgement as every other action. You can make the decision, as we have in Europe during the last few decades, to shield the work of writers from moral judgement. In that case, literature becomes a sanctuary. Rushdie himself argues that this is desirable, a sanctuary in which everything may be said and all kinds of verbal experiments can take place. So the question is not really if one can find reasons for the moral condemnation of literature. Those reasons have always existed.

But there are special reasons for shielding literature from moral judgement. So the impossibility of moral condemnation requires a special moral decision and not the condemnation. In this way, a high degree of tolerance towards literature has been reached in the West. It is not perfect, because we don't accept everything yet, and the criminal law system is always in the background. Nor is it absolute. It can always be repealed. But in so far as it exists, it can only exist in combination with a certain marginalization of literature. Rushdie expresses this beautifully in the fantasy at the end of *Is Nothing Sacred*, in which he visualizes living in a house you cannot leave. You can take it as long as there are rooms in which you hear voices. These rooms represent literature. He says that life is unbearable without these rooms. But the essence of the whole idea is that literature is in special rooms. Because it is cut off from the rest of life, you can be very tolerant towards literature. But it has its price.

Fons Elders:

It is well known that there is a prohibition on the publication of a Dutch translation of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, while there are publishers prepared to do it. What do you think of this, in regard to your own statement?

Hans Mooij:

In principle, I'm not against banning certain texts. If certain texts prove to be too offensive and dangerous then you can ban them. I don't believe that this case applies,

though, because *Mein Kampf* does not belong to the category literature.

Fons Elders:

Not to literature, but it does fall under the category of freedom of the press.

Mr. Arion, your position is closer to that of Voltaire's, who believed that everything could and should be said, even though Voltaire eventually sent a hired killer to Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Which just goes to show that no one is perfect. What do you think about this viewpoint, Mr. Arion?

Frank Arion:

It's a bit too dangerous. I mean, I think that literature is becoming religion again. Then you have a sanctuary, as the church was in the Middle Ages. I believe it would be castrating to literature.

It has to remain dangerous. There has to be a risk because it is research. And it has to surprise and amaze and it must not be innocent before it begins. That's why I say it has to be judged only by the coherence of the literature itself. Perhaps we need literary judges to determine if an attack has been cheap, unworthy or incorrect in any way. But if literature seriously investigates something or gives psychological motivations for the phenomenon of people being revered as gods, then literature is offering a service to mankind. Then it should be taken seriously even though the way the writer expresses this is different than the way the psychologist does. Symbols and metaphors are a worthwhile method. Look at the way the Dutch author Gerard Reve has helped to free homosexuality with his books. Many other authors have worked for this freedom. Some have even died for it. The Spanish writer Unamuno said to Franco: "There is a time that a writer may not write," and this has happened in all cultures.

This is the way to make all the hard myths of the state relative. You have to write about the ridiculousness of war to make patriotism relative. You even have to make it ridiculous. It is a very serious occupation which can be dangerous and I accept the danger. But therefore it is fair play for me to make use of literary means to obstruct my enemy. That's why I say that this case has to be handled juridically.

Hans Mooij:

My point is that there is a correspondence between a degree of isolation on the one hand and on the other hand a degree of immunity for moral judgement, etc. And that you can only expect immunity in a moral sense and in a juridical sense when you are also prepared to remain within that sanctuary. If you don't want the sanctuary, then you have to be fully prepared for moral reactions.

Fons Elders:

That is more a cultural-psychological argument than a moral argument. You say it is a kind of balance. In the degree that you intrude, regardless of the quality of the intrusion, you can expect a reply. Similar to the law of communicating vessels.

But that is an argument on another level than the point you were making, which was that it is a moral decision, for example, to decide that it is impossible to express moral judgements with regard to literature.

Hans Mooij:

That remains my starting point. In addition, I acknowledge that, based on one of the arguments which Rushdie advances, there is much to be said for granting literature the freedom to bring out anything and everything. And society can react positively, but then I say that it is only realistic to introduce that when you have created the isolation. Otherwise I go back to my principle starting point that there is sufficient reason for moral reactions.

Maureen Duffy:

Being British, perhaps I should add a couple of pragmatic notes to this. In Britain there is a law which says you may not incite to racial violence. *Mein Kampf*, which I regard as a work of fiction but not a work of literature, would fall into this category of inciting to racial violence. It is realistic, in a post-colonial world with very large and wounded

ethnic minorities within the majority population, to have some limitations on what may be said and what may be written. Britain should have repealed its blasphemy laws many years ago, but it has not. Britain's blasphemy law applies only to the Church of England. You cannot blaspheme against anyone else's God in Britain - only the Anglican God may be offended. The state still has an established religion. And this, of course, is a cause for offence to other religions. While the state funds churches and schools of other religions, Muslim schools have been refused state funding. Our Muslim community is subjected to most appalling racial violence, both verbal and physical. Their houses are set on fire and their children are assaulted in the streets. They are forced to leave places where they wish to live. Against this background, some British Muslims- in particular, women who want greater emancipation - have reacted to Rushdie's book with relief and congratulations. But many others who see themselves as threatened and racially abused, have found themselves forced in to the arms of the extremists, and therefore find themselves being forced to support a fatwa issued by a foreign power for its own internal reasons. British media is full of Iran's pronouncements, moderate or extreme, on the Rushdie affair. In these circumstances, it is very difficult to enunciate a simple view about freedom of expression.

Freedom of expression is an ideal to which writers, myself included, aspire. I knew that when I stepped beyond the pale, it was only me that was going to suffer. In this case, it is a great many poor, racially afflicted people who have suffered in Britain; people deluded by propaganda who have been killed in other countries. This adds an extra dimension to this particular question.

As writers, we cannot be entirely outside society. If we can foresee the consequences of our work, should we inflict them on other people?

On the other hand, discussion, especially through poetry and fiction, aids us in our progress against the monoliths. That is one of the ways communism has been fought throughout Eastern Europe.

Ghassan Ascha:

I agree. I'd like to go back to the moral conditions for banning something. I always find moral questions difficult. I can only answer by making it relative. We were talking about *Mein Kampf*, but there are many books in the library now about Islam and the Arab world which are racist and clearly anti-Islam. Not anti-Khomeini, but anti-Muslim, anti-religious. I can agree with making someone or something appear ridiculous to provoke discussion. But then it must apply to everyone, not just the Arabs and the Muslims.

But as someone who has grown up in an Islamic or Arabic world, I feel angry sometimes. We are trying to change things in our own society, as intellectuals, but because of the attack by some Westerners, also via literature and best-selling novels which make the Islam and the Arabic world ridiculous "en bloc", you don't dare, as intellectual, to express criticism of your own society anymore. The West makes it very difficult for Muslims who want to achieve something in their own society. It is time that the Islamic world critically approaches the history of Islam. Attacks from the West do not stimulate this process.

Fons Elders:

I'd like to add as background information that Mr. Ascha has written a book about the inferior status of the woman in Islam, a book which is banned in the Arab world. His remarks are based on his experiences in the two worlds he is trying to bridge.

Arne Naess, what about the question of the moral side of being a writer and the associated question, how far must one go in relation to the freedom of expression in spoken and written word?

Arne Naess:

I feel differently than the others here because I've been interested in deep cultural differences for a very long time. From this viewpoint, you will find things in practically every culture today which you think are repulsive, brutal and so on. As major powers in this contemporary world, I don't think we should interfere, except indirectly. In some cultures, certain things should not be said. Killing is bad, but saying something that

should not be said may be much worse. I wouldn't like to make a moral or ethical statement about this. I would say that people who enter the territory of a culture have to have a certain humility.

A major tragedy today is that more than a hundred cultures are almost eradicated through ridicule, humiliation, commercial exploitation, etc., and most of those cultures don't have any literature. These things disturb me ethically.

The Muslim world is very powerful whereas most cultures have no power at all. They are being trampled on and disappearing very fast.

We are provincial in our outlook in that we only consider these big, big cultures, not the small ones which are just as deep and which are really under terrible pressure. Writers have an obligation to be available to the downtrodden. They should express in simple language what we stand for and what we don't. That has not been done in the Rushdie case. It is difficult for him to say something directly, but then friends should have clearly stated for him from the beginning what he has expressed as his opinion and what was not. The intellectual circles talking to each other cloud the basic question, whether something humiliating has been meant by a certain author, *or not.*

I also think that distributing books in another culture is a very serious undertaking. We especially, as rich, influential nations, have the obligation to foresee the consequences. Writers, just as scientists, are responsible to some extent for the way they are used. My conclusion is that we, as writers, as tourists, and as plain citizens on this globe, have a responsibility to counteract the diminishing of differences in culture. We need very deep cultural differences and a great concern and care for any culture that is not overly hostile to every other culture. That is the only limit of tolerance; we cannot have Hitlers.

*He is invited
to express*

Hitlers

Fons Elders:

Frank Arion has radically defended the principle of freedom of expression, saying that every author, just as every person, should at the same time be juridically accountable. Maureen Duffy has spoken about the fact that only the Anglican God is legally protected in Britain, although there are discussions about expanding this protection to other religions so that they would also fall under the blasphemy law.

Perhaps we can generalize the question to one of the tension between the secularized society versus the more religious society. Perhaps the heavy tensions arise from the fact that Islam, one of the largest religions in the world, is the least secularized in a societal or cultural sense.

My question to the members of the forum is, do you agree that the protection the state provides should be expanded, or do you think that the state should interfere as little as possible?

Frank Arion:

I am for as little protection as possible.

Maureen Duffy:

I think there should be as little as possible and what we have in Britain should be instantly abolished.

Frank Arion:

I'd like to explain why freedom of expression is so especially important for the Third World. Without it, Third World countries would lose one of the most important means of growth since the Renaissance in Europe. If Galileo Gallilei had not been able to express his opinion, perhaps we would be heading to the center of the earth, but, in any case, not to the moon.

Freedom of expression provides an important drive for developments in all sectors. When I followed the student movement in Amsterdam ten years ago for World Broadcasting, conservatives in Surinam refused to broadcast it. They were afraid. But they prevented the whole student movement in Surinam from gaining a normal insight into the changed relationships. In other words, the wrong application of protection of an authentic culture.

Freedom of expression as means, freedom of the press, freedom of production which has been so important to Europe in the last five hundred years - these have to be

generalized. They have to function in the Third World, too.

Arne Naess:

We must clearly distinguish between freedom of expression within a culture and freedom of expression across cultures. I agree completely that freedom of expression is very basic and important. But if I look at three cultures that I know very well, the Sammic, the Arctic and the Eskimo cultures, I see these wonderful, but politically feeble cultures disappearing because of the communication between them and the powerful nation-states. The Sammic culture is so decentralized that there are no priests, no presidents, and no local politicians. There you really have the question of who offends whom and what is freedom. I think we underestimate the responsibility of cross-cultural communication. *The Lapps were quite heroes.*

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Hans Mooij:

I am in favor of more attention being paid to the ethical and the philosophical/metaphysical aspects of literature. I don't mean the expansion of juridical sanctions, but moral attention to literature is necessary.

This fits into Professor Naess' remarks that the weaker groups also have to be represented on the level of public discussion. Thus, that the critical discourse is not entirely dominated by one group.

Ghassan Ascha:

The Muslims in The Netherlands wanted to ban a book on the basis of blasphemy laws here. Minister van Dijk of the Department of the Interior empowered a commission to study this. A high-level civil servant read the book and decided it was not offensive to Christians. But that was not the point. The Muslims requested it, so that means that even your right to feel offended is taken away from you. You are not allowed to feel offended. The feeling here in the West was, what, you feel offended too?

As it is now, if the present laws are maintained, then other Gods have to be included. Or get rid of the laws. It is very clear.

Fons Elders:

Yes, it is a question of consistency.

In the replies of all the forum members, the tension is discernable between what you could call in cultural-sociological terms the tension between the values of a very secularized society such as ours, and a society which is dominated by a religious background. This tension can also be approached from the viewpoint of language. At least three religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam have traditionally seen language as the primary vehicle of the truth, that is the truth as revealed by God or the prophets. The respect they have for language is illustrated in Singer's autobiography, in which he tells that his father, a pious Polish rabbi, believed that the world would fall apart instantly if even one letter of the alphabet would disappear. Or the beginning of the Book of John - "In the beginning was the word, the word was with God and the word was God."

One of the amazing paradoxes in the Rushdie question is that we have a struggle between two parties which are both extremely respectful with regards to language; with the proviso that Rushdie, who sees himself as belonging to the post-theological age, would say that language is primarily the instrument of the imagination, certainly in the hands of a writer, and language should not be interpreted as the primary source of truth but as a source of meanings. The other party, with equally great respect for language, sees it primarily as a guide or a source of truth and thus, will not tolerate any discussion about it.

Do any of the members of the forum want to add anything to this question about the tension between the secularized versus the sacred society?

Ghassan Ascha:

We know that religious believers base themselves, at least in book religions like Islam, Christianity and Judaism, on texts. And these texts have been declared sacred in order to

protect the norms and values. If they acquire a supernatural legitimation, then they are timeless.

My criticism of Islam, that is of Islamic scholars, is that they consider the texts timeless and therefore applicable to all times and places. I don't think it is correct and it is not good for the Muslims themselves.

Islam consists of belief and law. Belief in God is eternal; belief as a spiritual experience. This is not a problem. But you begin to interfere with others if you try to impose on them your own system of laws which are sacred to yourself. That I don't accept. The result is tension between the texts and societal truth. That is why I am in favor of an historical-critical approach to Islam in which we consider the laws as time-bounded. This will solve many problems. Islam would not need to defend itself on all fronts then. In this way you can protect the belief and the sacred language.

Hans Mooij:

The moderator's question reminds me of an experience I had on the day the death sentence was announced. On the one hand I felt completely sympathetic and horrified. On the other hand I felt that many critics showed a very large amount of moral self-satisfaction; an overly haughty attitude towards religious feelings. That illustrates the tension that exists.

But it also has to do with the fact which Rushdie himself pointed out, that religious needs are not extinct, and that in the nineteenth century, and even in the twentieth century, art has filled these religious needs. I'm thinking of the temple-like character of museums and concert halls and the veneration, the reverence for music. Thus the modern conflict between literature and religion, also literature in a secularized society, is indeed a kind of struggle between brother and sister; areas which appeal to closely related feelings.

Arne Naess:

Going back to the question of language - this knowledge of the difference between the language in a novel and so-called matter of fact language, which is clearly not a universal knowledge.

When ordinary non-intellectual Muslims say, for example, that Rushdie has done something terrible, they refer to concrete things which could be explained in simple language. For instance they refer to a dream of a character of Rushdie's, in which whores have the names of the wives of the prophet. For them, this is a terrible thing. But it is easy to explain that the book clearly states that the real wives are living chastely in their harem. The author has not said anything at all about the wives or Mohammed. I wonder how much is available, in plain language, for the ordinary Muslim to see what Rushdie gives as his own opinion and what has been told as the dream of some *invented* character. As far as I can see, they would not feel as offended as they do from reading complicated pamphlets.

So my question is, are there any good texts written in languages which can be understood by ordinary Muslims which state what has been said, and what has not been said, and mostly by Rushdie? Or has that been neglected? That is a terrible thing if that has been neglected.

Maureen Duffy:

The answer I think is almost certainly no.

Many of the people who have been led to feel most passionately by being given snippets from the book, do not have English as their first language. They would in all probability find it extremely difficult. The book is very long and complex and is difficult for those of us whose first language is English and who use it professionally. Certainly most ordinary people whose first language is not English would find it impossible.

So what is required is that those who would wish to explain clearly and simply, would have to do so in the languages of Urdu and Bengali and other languages spoken by the Muslim community.

That would mean that those texts would have to be written by people, probably from the Muslim community, who would expose themselves to ostracism and hatred from the more extreme wing. So there we have a very difficult problem.

There was an attempt to deal with the question on the religious program which is broadcast Sunday night. Six people were taken to a remote house, I think three Christians and three Muslims, and brought together to discuss the problems. Some understanding did emerge from this. But it was a late night program, it was in English, it has a small audience and this is not the kind of thing that Arne Naess is obviously hoping will take place.

Going back to the other question the chairman posed, it seems to me that art and religion have been intertwined for the most of human history. Whether it is visual arts, music or literature. Religion has always used art to make itself accessible to people. Because of the enormous increases in the human population, religious groupings, each with their own artistic expressions, can no longer be kept secret from each other.

For a long time we were happy to wage religious wars and it is significant that in the Muslim community we go back to the Crusades. The Crusades are mentioned in connection with the Rushdie affair. Nothing is forgotten.

And we were content for a very long time to wage those religious wars and indeed we continue to wage a religious war in Northern Ireland. All over Eastern Europe small religious and nationalist wars are springing up all the time.

But the truth is that now the human race cannot afford those wars. We are too self-destructive. We are too many. We are in danger of destroying ourselves and the whole planet.

I believe we have to encourage the spread of secular states in which people may nurture their own religious beliefs. But they cannot be allowed any more to impose them on other groups, because it is too dangerous for the whole of human kind.

We need a different solution today. We have to have a secular overall blanket under which many people may nurture their personal belief. I believe that the secular state has to be overriding in this respect and has to sometimes enforce tolerance.

Fons Elders:

Rushdie himself has pointed out the enormous importance of the secular character of the Indian state; that an unimaginable hell would break loose the moment that India would give up its secularization and its constitution based on the freedom of religion.

There is a statement of Rushdie's which relates to Maureen Duffy's comments. He said that if religion is an answer, as political ideology is an answer, then literature is an investigation. Great literature poses questions, exceptional questions, and thus opens new doors for our mind.

QUESTIONS FROM THE AUDIENCE

Marijke Emeis:

I translated *The Satanic Verses* into Dutch. My question is actually a remark. Ms. Duffy was the first to mention blasphemy, mentioning the Anglican God in that regard. Mr. Ascha mentioned the Christian God in The Netherlands after that. My first remark is that you undoubtedly are aware that the Anglican, Christian, Jewish, etc. including the Muslim God, are all the same historically. It is a Trinity.

My second remark is intended to make the first unnecessary. Mr. Ascha implied that the book was not banned here because some civil servant in the Ministry of Justice reviewed the book and said: This book is not offensive to our Christian God.

I was involved in this process. I can assure you that it did not happen that quickly, but it does not even matter if it did. *The Satanic Verses* is not blasphemous in any way. I challenge you to find one line, one sentence that is blasphemous. God is not blasphemed in this book. I concede that Mohammed took a beating. For that matter, Rushdie did not make that up himself. It comes from other sources, Islamic sources. But can you tell me why *The Satanic Verses* had to be banned according to Western laws?

Ghassan Ascha:

It was not my intention to defend God. I told it as a joke.

It was theater. The Ministry of the Interior and a civil servant determine if it is offensive to Christians. What is offensive to me may not be determined by another. That was the

point.

Marijke Emeis:

The point is if this book can be banned according to our laws. You say it was banned because it was declared not to be blasphemous by employing a few tricks. According to our laws we may offend Mohammed. We may also offend Christ. I remember a film in which Christ was portrayed as chasing after whores, but it was not banned.

Ghassan Ascha:

It doesn't matter to me, I am completely against the banning of the book.

Marijke Emeis:

But the point is the reason why.

Ghassan Ascha:

It still doesn't matter to me. We are going to investigate it, but the results are already known.

Marijke Emeis:

No, it was not just theater and it was not presented as such. It was very seriously evaluated.

Ghassan Ascha:

If a Muslim had been in the committee, perhaps the result would have been different. Probably.

Marijke Emeis:

No. The results could not have been different because God was not blasphemed. Therefore, according to Dutch law, there was no reason to ban the book. It does not matter which religion the civil servant had. It does not matter what religion the majority of the Dutch population follows, even though I recently read that the majority is not religious. But none of that matters, because the book is not blasphemous. The only thing that has been brought into doubt by Rushdie is the value of the word. You were just speaking about language. I have personally spoken with Rushdie, and he told me that one of his starting points is to show how ridiculous it is in essence to declare a written word sacred. Because what he has written in the book is very clear: God gives the word. God gave the word to the angel Gabriël - in a dream in the structure of the novel. God also gave Mohammed the word. He then gives it to the people. According to Rushdie, it is just a children's game of telephone. The word is distorted. So if he wanted to show something, it is the ridiculousness of the word, but not of God himself.

Fons Elders:

Thank you very much. The issue of offense is an interesting one. If you say, Mr. Ascha, that the one who is offended must be allowed to be heard, the problem arises that language is misleading; if I would now try to offend you and you would not let yourself be offended, then I cannot be an offender.

But apparently it is possible for some people to say something by which another feels offended, and at that moment you have become an offender. Therefore, the party which allows himself to feel offended determines if there is an offender and not the other way around. That is why everyone who feels offended should consult ~~them~~ himself about whom ^{him} he let ~~them~~ himself be offended by. That struggle has to be resolved with oneself. ^{him}

Henk Manschot:

I'd like to ask a question about self-reflections on religion and if we should respect these. I wonder if Khomeini's reaction had been different if it was not a novel but a totally other kind of text, for example, a scientific text. He didn't say anything about the novel, but about the writer; that the writer attacked the fundamentals of Islam. And therefore, as an example, he should be condemned to death.

My question is not about the relationship between literature and religion, but should we

respect every self-reflection on religion? It has been said that Khomeini did not have the right. I'm glad to hear that. Even if he did have the right, I think that in these times, this kind of self-reflection on religion is not any longer acceptable for humanity.

I agree with Ms. Duffy that we live in a time in which we want to combine two different things: freedom of religion and respect for people. I think that freedom of religion is a restriction with regard to self-reflections on religion. If religions want to interpret themselves as fundamentalist, they fall outside the right of freedom of religion.

I thought you were too friendly regarding this point, actually. A bit too friendly considering the fact that Rushdie has been condemned and that that can possibly be made to be acceptable from a religious perspective. I am convinced that that is not in any way possible in these times, and I would like to hear your opinion about this.

Arne Naess:

Perhaps it is a little paradoxical, but in order to have a richness of deep different cultures, there must be something in common having to do with non-violence and the difference between person and institution, or person and social product, such as religion

What's good about Ghandi's non-violence is that we separate clearly the inherent value of a person. We distinguish this question of the infinite value of a person from the question of any kind of doctrine or belief. Our problem is not so much for or against secular society as it is against indifference. We must try to protect religious feeling, what Rushdie calls "religious spirit," as it was in communism a hundred years ago, without fanaticism towards other people's meanings.

We must try to stand up in our secularized society and clearly say: "This is correct; this is false." If someone disagrees, then we must ask them to try to convince us. It is a combination of complete certainty of basic values with a complete openness towards other people. This combination should not be called humanism. Complete openness should apply to the sanctity of any living being, even a mosquito. We don't kill them because we are more intelligent *and valuable*.

It takes time and a lot of courage to communicate with people we detest. You have to go beyond the distinction of secularized and religious.

Frank Arion:

I think I agree. But on the other hand, it is important to make it clear that Rushdie has offended people. Rushdie's defence disappoints me. He cannot deny that people have been offended. And it doesn't matter if it is the people's own fault that they are offended. If someone insults my mother, then I am offended. I haven't yet become so philosophical that I am not offended. Maybe it is my fault, but I am offended. The point is to acknowledge the offense, that a sacred person, a god has been humanized by a satanic literary art. And they are good passages, but they are terrible because they are so well written.

A sacrifice has to be found for the offense.

The point is: how are we going to deal with the necessity of investigating sacred things; the offense which results, etc. I believe that Rushdie's defense should be: you are offended, but first look to yourself to see where the offence comes from. Is the evidence for a human Mohammed correct or not? If not, then you should actually re-interpret your own religion and not shift the offence onto others.

But, it is wrong for Rushdie to avoid the problem by saying it is a literary work and he didn't mean it that way.

It would be a good thing if mercy could play a role in all of this. It would be an embellishment to this religion and it is perhaps another way which we all have to take.

Hans Mooij:

Perhaps there is an even more practical, common sense argument for not treating such cases in the principled way that Henk Manschot suggested. Modern constitutional democracies have learned to handle their system of law with a certain flexibility. If on the one hand farmers can impede traffic for weeks without punishment, then there is no a priori reason why a religious fundamentalist who breaks the law should be regarded as out of order.

Member of the audience:

Do I understand that we now have to see a farmer blocking the road with a tractor as equivalent to a Muslim who calls for someone's death?

Hans Mooij:

No, they are two different things.

Same speaker:

But we have to approve of it all. We're very tolerant.

Hans Mooij:

No. I highly disapprove of the latter. But Henk Manschot's position, I thought, was: as soon as a fundamentalist says something...

(from the audience: that "something" is murder here!)

Then I have nothing to say. But I don't think that's what we were talking about. If we're talking about murder, we all agree. I thought he was talking in more general terms, but he can explain that the best himself.

Henk Manschot:

No, I was referring to murder and self-reflections on religion.

I agree with Frank Arion that Rushdie has caused suffering and you have to do something about it. On the other hand, there are people who are offended by what Khomeini said, and you have to do something about that too. But I don't think the state should be solving this problem; I think it is the responsibility of the religions.

Fons Elders:

But all values have the unavoidable tendency to be universal. The problem is that values on different levels come into conflict with one another. Arne Naess' solution is a hierarchy of values, but not based on the question of religion, but based on the individual person with freedom of expression. The second value is on the basis of non-violence. In this way the debate centers on the question of priority.

Ron Moser:

The problem is not universal values, but the fact that certain religions are making claims about universal and untouchable truths. I think Mr. Arion is right, that literature, and in general art, has to investigate the domain of the sacred. If a religion does not discriminate between fiction and truth, then everything written in fiction about values can be seen as offensive.

Member of the audience:

I can imagine from a cultural-relativistic view, that here in Western Europe we have rights and values that don't apply to other parts of the world. Our classic freedom is tolerant but also a system of values which we defend. But I can imagine that it is different in Islamic countries, and that you cannot simply transplant the classic freedoms of the French revolution.

Fons Elders:

No, but they come looking for us even if we're not looking for them.

The question you bring up is treated extensively in Stefan Sanders' *Mixed Experiences and Mixed Feelings* in which he opposes what you just said because cultural relativism, especially in leftist circles, has called up a kind of double standard.

This question is related to the paradox of Herbert Marcuse: tolerance which accepts intolerance becomes intolerance itself.

Maureen Duffy:

I just wanted to say that we in Europe, and especially the EC, must make sure there is no cause of offence within our own societies. The fatwa was propounded some six months

after the publication of the book and I believe it was put forth because of Iran's own position in the world of Islam. The fatwa can almost be seen as a piece of propaganda for Iran.

If Britain had been utterly without blame in matters of racism and intolerance, then I believe there would have been a much stronger response from British Muslims. Those who themselves wish to pursue a more tolerant and open line would have felt more able to respond positively and to fully reject the fatwa if British society had not been as it is - riddled with racism and intolerance.

I think we have to begin with ourselves. As Arne has said, humanism begins with humans.

Fons Elders:

Thank you, Maureen Duffy. I can hardly think of a more appropriate conclusion. I also want to thank all of the forum members, and the whole audience for the great interest and concentration they showed concerning this question.

Personally, I'd like to end with a quotation of Karl Popper:

"Let's kill each other's ideas instead of each other's bodies."