

Reading *Be careful with Muhammad* thirty years later

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THIRTY years since its initial publication, Shabbir Akhtar's second edition (with an extensive additional preface) of *Be Careful with Muhammad* is as relevant as ever, if not more so.

Salman Rushdie's novel, *Satanic Verses*, published in 1988 opened the floodgates to mocking Muhammad (SAW), with the subsequent release of the Danish cartoons in 2005 and the Charlie Hebdo caricatures of Muhammad (SAW) in 2015.

Akhtar's classic remains the most authoritative and persuasive critique of Rushdie's literary terrorism, *Satanic Verses*. He argues against the absolutism of free speech and the necessity for responsible speech.

In a lucid manner, Akhtar's book comprehensively surveys and comments on the events which followed the publication of *Satanic Verses* – from the Muslim protests, the book burning in Bradford, the Liberal inquisition on Muslim sentiment, to Khomeini's infamous fatwa to assassinate Salman Rushdie.

Why is the slander and vilification of Muhammad (SAW) such a sensitive and injurious matter to Muslims? Akhtar pertinently addresses this question

in the opening chapter. He states that, unlike the imitation of Christ, the imitation of Muhammad (SAW) is a religious obligation upon all Muslims.

Muhammad (SAW) represents the moral ideal upon which Muslims pattern their daily lives. To Muslims, he is 'not dead' but ideologically alive. His model of righteousness is closely followed with utmost fervour and enthusiasm. Thus, 'any attack on this holy pattern is already an attack on a Muslim's own professed ideals,' says Akhtar.

This amounts to an injury more significant than a racial slur or libel, it is an attack on the moral exemplar for almost a quarter of the human race. Akhtar notes that, for Muslims, Islam is part of their identity, much like race and gender, an assault on it is an assault on an inescapable part of one's being.

Contenders against Rushdie are often criticised for not having actually read *Satanic Verses*. In an objective manner, Akhtar does a thorough evaluation of the book, on its literary merit and contentious remarks.

He states that the book is not just a work of fiction but its striking resemblance to actual events is a calculated attempt to recast Islamic history in a negative

light and assassinate the character of Muhammad (SAW).

Akhtar clearly shows that any authentic Muslim, or even nominal, will rightfully be enraged by Rushdie's malicious mockery and vicious slander of Muhammad (SAW). Akhtar is in no way averse to debate and legitimate historical criticism but draws the line at 'scurrilous imaginative writing'.

In a balanced manner, Akhtar defends the principle of free speech but deems it immoral to, in its name, wage malevolent attacks on a religious tradition. He states that in mature liberal democracies, writers should indeed condemn evil and injustice without the fear of offending, however, they should not tolerate works that ridicule and demean established religious traditions.

Akhtar states that the tension is not between freedom of speech versus censorship but disciplined criticism versus Western licence to ridicule and slander. He also notes that freedom of speech is not absolute; laws against racial hatred, gender discrimination, libel, blasphemy (as in Britain), obscenity and sedition do exist.

He thus advocates for state legislation to prohibit material such as *Satanic Verses* to protect religious minorities and maintain social harmony. Thus, such laws

will not protect the beliefs per se but 'they protect the people who hold these beliefs against offence'.

What gave the Rushdie affair its momentum? Besides its actual hype (from the book burning to Khomeini's fatwa), Akhtar alludes to a psychic clash of civilisations between Islam and the West; a perpetual tension that exists since the days of the Crusades; a Western animus against Islamic civilisation deeply embedded in its historical memory.

Islam has always been an intellectual and political contender of the West, incessantly fringing on its borders. But now a contemporary fear exists of an ever-increasing Muslim presence in the heart of Europe.

Akhtar states that the expectation for Muslims to swallow and tolerate Rushdie's literary terrorism is not just a campaign of free-speech but cultural imperialism. It is the West that chooses the moral fashion, we dare not express our independence for literary taste, no matter how distasteful it may be.

Our rejection of this very sentiment

fuels the affair, and enrages the West. Akhtar remarks that it is this ideological battle that is the primary reason for the continuous defence to circulate a 'relatively inferior piece of literature'.

Shabbir Akhtar's book is original, persuasive and timely. More than thirty years after the Rushdie affair, Islamophobia is more rampant than ever.

Akhtar's book remains relevant to the debate on censorship and free speech, and without a doubt the best critique against *Satanic Verses* and Salman Rushdie's campaign against Islam. It is essential reading deserving a place on everyone's shelf.

Be careful with Muhammad is published by *Bijak/ Sequoia, Jakarta/ Leicester*, and available on Amazon for 12,99 GBP, plus shipping.

