

coming AFTER US by Salman Rushdie

I never thought of myself as a writer about religion until a religion came after me. Religion was a part of my subject, of course; for a novelist from the Indian subcontinent, where the supernatural and mundane coexist in the streets and are considered as being of the same order of reality, how could it not have been? But in my opinion I also had many other, larger, tastier fish to fry. Nevertheless, when the attack came, I had to confront what was confronting me, and to decide what I wanted to stand up for in the face of what so vociferously, repressively and violently stood against me. At that time it was often difficult to persuade people that the attack on *The Satanic Verses* was part of a broader, global assault on writers, artists, and fundamental freedoms. The aggressors in that matter, by which I mean the novel's opponents, who threatened booksellers and publishers falsified the contents of the text they disliked, and vilified its author, nevertheless presented themselves as the injured parties, and such was the desire to appease religious sentiment even then that in spite of the murder of a translator in Japan and the shooting of a publisher in Norway there was widespread acceptance of that topsy-turvy view. In spite of all the public calls for violence to be done, not a single person—in Britain or anywhere else—was arrested or charged with any offence. I revisit these bad old days with extreme reluctance, but I do so because now, sixteen years later*, religion is coming after us all, and even though most of us probably feel, as I once did, that we have other, more important concerns, we are all going to have to confront the challenge. If we fail, this particular fish may end up frying us. . . .

People have always turned to religion for the answers to the two great questions of life: where did we come from? And how shall we live? But on the question of origins, all religions are simple wrong. No, the universe wasn't created in six days by a superforce that rested on the seventh. Nor was it churned into being by a sky-god with a giant churn. And on the social question, the simple truth is that wherever religions, with their narrow moralities, get into society's driving seat, tyranny results. The Inquisition results. Or the Taliban.

And yet religions continue to insist that they provide special access to ethical truths, and consequently deserve special treatment and protection. And they continue to emerge from the world of private life, where they belong, like so many other things that are acceptable when done in private between two consenting adults but unacceptable in the town square, and to bid for power. The emergence of radical Islam needs no redescription here; but the resurgence of faith is a larger subject than that. . . .

Religion is everywhere on the march, but that does not mean we should not confront it. Victor Hugo wrote, 'There is in every village a torch: the schoolmaster- and an extinguisher: the parson.' We need more teachers and fewer priests in our lives; because as James Joyce once said, 'There is no heresy or no philosophy which is so abhorrent to the church as a human being.' But perhaps the great American lawyer Clarence Darrow put the secularist argument best of all. 'I don't believe in God,' he said, 'because I don't believe in Mother Goose.'

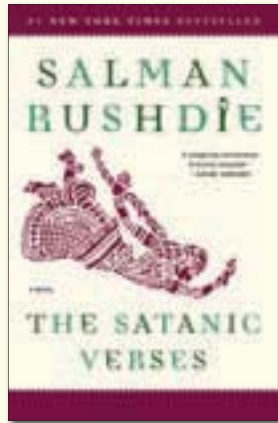
*This essay is excerpted from a piece which ran in the 2005 book *Free Expression Is No Offence: An English PEN Book* by Lisa Appignanesi (Penguin Books Ltd.)

About the Writer

SALMAN RUSHDIE is the author of eight previous novels: Grimus, Midnight's Children, Shame, The Satanic Verses, Haroun and the Sea of Stories, The Moor's Last Sigh, The Ground Beneath Her Feet and Fury. He has published a collection of short stories, East, West; a book of reportage, The Jaguar Smile; two collections of essays, Imaginary Homelands and Step Across This Line; and a work of film criticism about The Wizard of Oz. Salman Rushdie's second novel, Midnight's Children, was awarded both the Booker Prize and the "Booker of Bookers," as the best novel to have won the Booker Prize in its first 25 years. His other accolades include the Whitbread Novel Award, the Prix du Meilleur Livre Etranger, the James Tait Black Memorial Prize and the Austrian State Prize for European Literature. He was awarded a knighthood for services to literature in the Queen's Birthday Honours on June 16, 2007.



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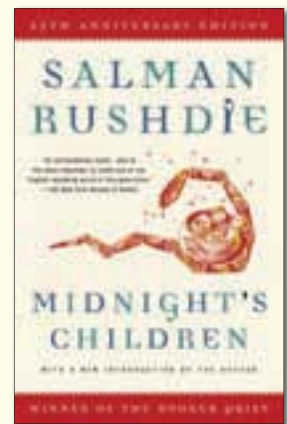
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