Why I Have Embraced Islam

A man's spiritual choices are a matter of conscience, arrived at after deep reflection and in the privacy of his heart. They are not easy matters to speak of publicly. I should like, however, to say something about my decision to affirm the two central tenets of Islam—the oneness of God and the genuineness of the prophecy of the Prophet Muhammad—and thus to enter into the body of Islam after a lifetime spent outside it.

Although I come from a Muslim family background, I was never brought up as a believer, and was raised in an atmosphere of what is broadly known as secular humanism. (I should mention that most Indian Muslims affirm the value of the secular principle, seeing it as their best safeguard as a minority group in a predominantly non-Muslim country.) I still have the deepest respect for these principles. However, as I think anyone who studies my work will accept, I have been engaging more and more with religious belief, its importance and power, ever since my first novel used the Sufi poem Conference of the Birds by Farid ud-din Attar as a model. The Satanic Verses itself, with its portrait of the conflicts between the material and spiritual worlds, is a mirror of the conflict within myself.

In short, I have been finding my own way towards an intellectual understanding of religion, and religion for me has always meant Islam. That journey is by no means over. I am certainly not a good Muslim. But I am able now to say that I am Muslim; in fact it is a source of happiness to say that I am now inside, and a part of, the community whose values have always been closest to my heart. I have in the past described the furor over The Satanic Verses as a family quarrel. Well, I'm now inside the family, and now Muslims can talk to Muslims and continue the process of reconciliation that began with my Christmas Eve meeting with six Muslim scholars.

This meeting, described in some sections of the Western press as a defeat, was in fact a victory for compassion, understanding and tolerance. For over two years I have been trying to explain that The Satanic Verses was never intended as an insult; that the story of Gibreel is a parable of how a man can be destroyed by the loss of faith; that the dreams in which all the so-called 'insults' occur are portraits of his disintegration, and explicitly referred to in the novel as punishments and retributions; and that the dream figures who torment him with their assaults on religion are representative of this process of ruination, and not representative of the point of view of the author. This is not a disavowal of my work, but the simple truth, and to my great pleasure it was accepted as such.

The six scholars and I agreed that the controversy over The Satanic Verses was based on a tragic misunderstanding, and we must all now work to explain to Muslims everywhere that neither I nor my work have ever been inimical to Islam. They agreed that over the last fifteen years I have in fact shown myself to be an ally of Muslims, whether in Kashmir, or the rest of India, or Palestine or in Britain, where I have frequently written and broadcast against all forms of discrimination.

'We want to reclaim you for ourselves,' one of the scholars said, and I replied that I, too, wished to reclaim them. The mood of the meeting was generous and even affectionate, and it moved me greatly. I am told that already, in many Muslim countries and communities around the world, that mood of affection has begun to replace anger. Goodwill is replacing ill-will. That is cause for celebration.

As a contribution to that new atmosphere of goodwill, I have agreed not to permit new translations of The Satanic Verses, nor to publish an English-language paperback edition, while any risk of further offence remains. This is because the process of peace will take time. The crisis has been long, bitter and deep. Reconciliation after such a crisis takes time. I have sought to create the atmosphere for that reconciliation.

As to the question of total withdrawal of the book, I would say this. In spite of everything, The Satanic Verses is a novel that many of its readers have found to be of value. I
WHY I HAVE EMBRACED ISLAM

cannot betray them. Even more important is the recognition of Muslim scholars that the book is not a deliberate insult. Had they felt otherwise, I might well have thought again. As it is, I believe the book must continue to be available, so that it can gradually be seen for what it is. I will discuss with Penguin Books the possibility of adding to the existing hardback editions a statement declaring that it is not intended as an attack on Islam.

I said on 24 December that I felt a good deal safer in the aftermath of my meeting with the scholars than I had the day before. That is still true, although I obviously regret the renewed threats from Tehran and cannot help wondering why the British government seems no longer to feel any need to respond to such threats. My real safety, I have long believed, lies in the attitudes of the Muslim community at large. My meeting with the scholars, at which they declared themselves satisfied with the sincerity of my position, is the traditional Islamic way of resolving an issue of alleged offence against Muslim sanctities.

I know that most Muslims will be content with what has been achieved, and will now wish this matter to be laid to rest. I appeal to all Muslims, and to Muslim organizations and governments everywhere, to join in the process of healing that we have begun. What I know of Islam is that tolerance, compassion and love are at its very heart. I believe that in the weeks and months to come the language of enmity will be replaced by the language of love.

1990