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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Religion and responsibility in international relations: Thatcher, Mahathir, and *The Satanic Verses*

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Abstract

The crisis over Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* exposed the contrasting ways Western and Muslim actors understand the place of religion in international order and the responsibilities of states in religious controversies. No other Muslim national leader supported Ayatollah Khomeini's call for Rushdie's death in 1989, but many Muslims expressed anger and disbelief that Britain and Western powers could not restrict a book that caused so much international disturbance. This paper seeks to understand this discord through the overlapping but conflicted language games of Western and Muslim national leaders. It analyses a previously unreported exchange of letters between British prime minister Margaret Thatcher and Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad, along with other recently released archival material from the diplomatic crisis. These letters reflected different unwritten rules informing the actors' understandings and practices of international order, despite their shared acceptance of the sovereignty of national states. For Mahathir, the Western world was itself a religious identity, and its collective propagation of *The Satanic Verses* compounded a religious insult to the Muslim world. But Thatcher and other British actors did not see religious identities, especially their own, as basic elements of international relations, instead reasserting the secular primacy of national states.

Keywords: Britain; international order; Islam; language games; Malaysia; religion

Introduction

Background: 'The strangest and rarest crisis in history'

On 14 February 1989, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini pronounced a transnational death sentence on British writer Salman Rushdie and the publishers of his novel *The Satanic Verses*.[1] Muslim groups in Britain had held protests over the book two months earlier, angered by its seemingly insulting depictions of the Prophet Muhammad, his wives, and his companions.[2] Further protests followed in India and Pakistan (whose governments had banned the book), and on 12 February six demonstrators died in Pakistan during clashes with police. Khomeini issued his

[1] Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the Speaker of Iran's Majlis, described the *Satanic Verses* crisis as 'the strangest and rarest crisis in history' in March 1989. Associated Press, 'Burn Rushdie book, Iran says', *New York Times* (11 March 1989), p. 28.

[2] For explanations of why many Muslims felt offended by *The Satanic Verses*, see Ali A. Mazrui, 'The *Satanic Verses* or a Satanic novel? Moral dilemmas of the Rushdie affair', *Alternatives*, 15 (1990), pp. 97–121; Shabbir Akhtar, *Be Careful with Muhammad! The Salman Rushdie Affair* (London: Bellew Publishing Company, 1989); Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies, *Distorted Imagination: Lessons from the Rushdie Affair* (London: Grey Seal, 1990).

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death sentence on Rushdie two days later, urging 'all zealous Muslims' to carry it out.[3] Rushdie was forced into hiding under police protection, which would last for a decade, and Iran and Britain severed diplomatic relations, which would not be fully restored until 1998.[4] All members of the European Community joined Britain in withdrawing their diplomats from Tehran during the first half of 1989. The British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) lobbied nearly every country in the world to oppose, or at least not support, Khomeini, with a concentrated lobbying effort in Muslim-majority countries.[5] Khomeini's death from multiple heart attacks four months after his pronouncement did not lift the death sentence, because only Khomeini as a religious authority could have reversed his own judgement on Rushdie. However, the 1989 meeting of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) declined an Iranian resolution calling for Rushdie's death, instead issuing a Saudi-written joint declaration condemning the book and calling on Muslim nations to prohibit both the book and its author from their territories.[6]

Khomeini's sentence not only threatened (and still threatens) Rushdie's life; it challenged two principles of Western-led international order. First, it violated the mutual recognition of exclusive national sovereignty by asserting the right to execute a foreign national, in his own country, without any recourse to that country's legal system.[7] Second, it presented Khomeini as acting under religious authority, as a self-appointed leader of a transnational religious community, transcending the boundaries of national secular authority.[8] Other Iranian state actors insisted that Khomeini's religious authority was separate even from that of the Iranian state, which was one of the reasons the state had no power to lift Khomeini's sentence after his death.[9] While the first challenge to the principle of sovereignty provided the British government with a focal point for mobilising an international response against Iran, the second was more complex and had ramifications far beyond Britain's relations with Iran. No other government of a Muslim-majority country supported Khomeini's death sentence or his claims to international Islamic leadership,[10] but many Muslims globally shared a sense of religious injury over *The Satanic*

[3] A translation of the text of Khomeini's death sentence is as follows:

> In the name of God Almighty; there is only one God, to whom we shall all return; I would like to inform all the intrepid Muslims in the world that the author of the book entitled *The Satanic Verses* which has been compiled, printed and published in opposition to Islam, the Prophet and the Koran, as well as those publishers who were aware of its contents, have been sentenced to death. I call on all zealous Muslims to execute them quickly, wherever they find them, so that no one will dare to insult the Islamic sanctions. Whoever is killed on this path will be regarded as a martyr, God willing. In addition, anyone who has access to the author of the book, but does not possess the power to execute him, should refer him to the people so that he may be punished for his actions. May God's blessing be on you all.

In Mehdi Mozaffari, 'The Rushdie affair: Blasphemy as a new form of international conflict and crisis', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2 (1990), pp. 415–41 (pp. 416–17).

[4] Bernd Kaussler, 'British–Iranian relations, the *Satanic Verses* and the Fatwa: A case of two-level game diplomacy', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 38 (2011), pp. 203–25.

[5] This effort has not been previously documented, as archival material on Britain's diplomacy around the *Satanic Verses* crisis has only recently become available in The National Archives (hereafter TNA). This study is based on the author's research into UK FCO and Home Office files related to the crisis from 1989, accessed in TNA from 2019–23.

[6] Piscatori notes that banning Rushdie from Muslim-majority countries effectively precluded the possibility of putting him on trial, which most Muslim jurists saw as a prerequisite for imposing the death penalty for apostasy. James P. Piscatori, 'The Rushdie affair and the politics of ambiguity', *International Affairs*, 66 (1990), pp. 767–89.

[7] As some Muslim commentators pointed out, leaders of governments ordering assassinations outside their own territories was not unusual. Khomeini's innovation was broadcasting his orders rather than denying them and urging Muslims worldwide to carry them out. See Mazrui, '*Satanic Verses* or Satanic novel?'.

[8] On the secularist assumptions underpinning Western understandings of international relations, see Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Daniel Philpott, 'The challenge of September 11 to secularism in international relations', *World Politics*, 55 (2002), pp. 66–95.

[9] TNA FCO8/7419, N. Browne, telegram to G. Howe, 46, 17 February 1989; TNA FCO8/7401, Middle East Research Department, Iran Report No. 27, 75, 14 June 1989.

[10] Mozaffari writes that the Iranian delegate to the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) who sought the organisation's endorsement of Khomeini's death sentence 'was supported by the Libyan delegate' (Mozaffari, 'Rushdie affair', p. 432).

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Verses, including in Britain. This sense of injury, reflected in protests around the world, was compounded by a perception that Western powers were complicit in it, choosing to allow the propagation of *The Satanic Verses* despite the offence it caused.[11] The 'Muslim world' was far from united during the crisis, but the crisis exposed significant differences in understanding between Muslim and Western actors over the nature of international order and responsibility, despite the shared practices of Westphalian international relations that they generally followed. British leaders could not overcome those differences with either expressions of sympathy for religious sensitivities or appeals to notions of sovereignty. Understanding why is the aim of this paper.

Theoretical and methodological approach: language games in international order

There is increasing attention in International Relations to non-Western conceptions and practices of world order, and the possibilities of multiple 'civilisational' world orders existing together.[12] How do actors committed to Western conceptions of international order respond to challenges presented by different, coexisting conceptions of world order? The *Satanic Verses* crisis provides an opportunity for analysis of a conceptual challenge to elements of Western-led international order, particularly secularism, by non-Western political actors. It was a crisis in which actors openly expressed and debated conflicting ideas about culture and religion, even religious truth, that are usually kept off the table of Westphalian international relations.[13] The crisis has often been claimed as evidence of a clash of civilisations between Islam and the West, by commentators emphasising incommensurable religious and secular worldviews as a source of conflict.[14] In the 1990 essay that introduced the term 'clash of civilisations', Bernard Lewis claimed many Muslims were returning to a Classical Islamic conception of the world as divided into a struggle between the House of Islam and the House of Unbelief. He cited protests over *The Satanic Verses* in Pakistan, targeting American institutions that had nothing to do with the book, as evidence of how Muslim revivalists saw Western states less as sovereign, territorial actors than as representatives of civilisational grievances.[15]

This paper takes a different approach, focusing instead on the response to the *Satanic Verses* crisis by most Muslim national leaders, exemplified by Malaysia's prime minister Mahathir Mohamad, who affirmed the rules of Westphalian international order while also challenging

However, no Libyan official made any public comment supporting Khomeini's death sentence. Before the conference, the head of the Libyan People's Bureau told a British diplomat in Portugal that Libya had requested the inclusion of the Rushdie transgression on the agenda (which the Iranians also wanted), but he insisted that it was 'wrong for the Ayatollah to have called for action which was against the laws and customs of another country'. TNA FCO8/7422, M. K. Simpson-Orlebar, teleletter to J. R. Young, 241c, 24 February 1989.

[11] Piscatori, 'Rushdie affair'; Mozaffari, 'Rushdie affair'; Mazrui, '*Satanic Verses* or Satanic novel?'.

[12] See e.g. Robert W. Cox, 'Thinking about civilizations', *Review of International Studies*, 26 (2000), pp. 217–34; Mehdi Mozaffari (ed.), *Globalization and Civilizations* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Ahmet Davutoğlu, Cemil Aydın, Chris Brown, et al. (eds), *Civilizations and World Order: Geopolitics and Cultural Difference* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014); Fabio Petito, 'Dialogue of civilizations in a multipolar world: Toward a multicivilizational-multiplex world order', *International Studies Review*, 18 (2016), pp. 78–91; Elena Chebankova and Piotr Dutkiewicz (eds), *Civilizations and World Order* (New York: Routledge, 2021); Barry Buzan and Amitav Acharya, *Re-imagining International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

[13] To refer to this as 'Westphalian' discourse is not to accept the simplifying narrative that the Westphalia treaties of 1648 represented a decisive moment of creation of the international system, but rather to recognise the power of this discourse, which, among other things, celebrates Westphalia as a moment of the triumph of the secular authority of the territorial state over extra-national, religious sources of authority. See Andreas Osiander, 'Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Westphalian myth', *International Organization*, 55 (2001), pp. 251–87.

[14] For examples, see Kenan Malik, *From Fatwa to Jihad: How the World Changed. The Satanic Verses to Charlie Hebdo* (London: Atlantic Books, 2012), chapter 1. Malik himself rejects the clash of civilisations interpretation.

[15] Bernard Lewis, 'The roots of Muslim rage', *The Atlantic Monthly*, 266 (1990), pp. 47–60. Lewis had long argued that foreign policy was 'foreign to Islam' because of its extraterritorial conception of world order. See James P. Piscatori, *Islam in a World of Nation-States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 42–5.

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Western understandings of those rules.[16] Rather than seeing 'the West' and 'the Muslim world' as monolithic blocs defined by mutually inaccessible worldviews, this paper takes them to be identities whose meaning and power in international relations come from their place in the shared language games of diplomatic practice.[17] Western and Muslim actors may have very different worldviews, but they inhabit the same physical world that they must negotiate politically. This negotiation depends on shared political language and concepts, such as respect for national sovereignty and religious difference, that allow different actors to make mutually intelligible claims within a framework of internationally accepted rules. The terms 'Western world' and 'Muslim world' are part of this shared vocabulary. Frost and Lechner describe international society as 'a realm of action as well as a realm of shared meanings that can be interpreted, understood, and, of course, misunderstood'.[18]

To use terms like 'games' and 'misunderstanding' is not to downplay the seriousness of the conflict in the *Satanic Verses* crisis. Wittgenstein's metaphor of the 'game' refers to the necessity of shared rules for allowing meaningful interaction (such as language) between actors, rules that actors routinely follow rather than consciously choose. Words cannot mean whatever actors want them to mean because there are rules, mostly unwritten, about what they can mean and how they can be used. However, the 'game' metaphor also illustrates that rules are not fixed essences, but things that change from context to context.[19] The impossibility of identifying a single thing that all 'games' have in common – not all games even have rules – leaves us without a universal rule for defining games, but with 'a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing', or a 'family resemblance' that supplies our understandings of what games are in different contexts.[20]

'Misunderstanding' is often used to describe trivial differences between actors that can be overcome by clearer communication or shared information. But 'misunderstandings' are more difficult to overcome when they involve different actors bringing conflicting contextual rules to the same shared concepts (such as 'sovereignty', 'religion', 'Western', or 'Muslim'), contextual rules that are tied to their different social and political identities. 'Understanding' other actors by using concepts according to the same unwritten rules they use might involve not just a process of learning, but significant political concessions or acceptance of cultural hegemony. Diplomacy between international actors depends on large overlaps between the different ways these actors understand the shared concepts that constitute the rules of the international system. But some cases, such as the *Satanic Verses* crisis, expose serious conflicts in overlapping understandings.

This paper illustrates the overlapping but conflicted language games at play in the *Satanic Verses* crisis through a discourse analysis of two letters exchanged between national leaders at the height of the crisis.[21] One month after Khomeini's pronouncement, Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad gave British prime minister Margaret Thatcher a personal letter expressing his opinions

[16]This response was typified by the OIC Joint Resolution, mentioned above, which relied on Westphalian territorial sovereignty (i.e. urging all Muslim countries to ban the book and its author from crossing their boundaries) while also calling on all other countries to ban the book out of sensitivity to Islam, regardless of the religious composition of those countries.

[17]On this Wittgensteinian approach to International Relations practice, see Karin M. Fierke and Michael Nicholson, 'Divided by a common language: Formal and constructivist approaches to games', *Global Society*, 15 (2001), pp. 7–25; Karin M. Fierke, 'Links across the abyss: Language and logic in International Relations', *International Studies Quarterly*, 46 (2002), pp. 331–54; Iver B. Neumann, 'Returning practice to the linguistic turn: The case of diplomacy', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 31 (2002), pp. 627–51; Mervyn Frost and Silviya Lechner, 'Two conceptions of international practice: Aristotelian praxis or Wittgensteinian language-games?', *Review of International Studies*, 42 (2016), pp. 334–50; Andreas Grimmel and Gunther Hellmann, 'Theory must not go on holiday: Wittgenstein, the pragmatists, and the idea of social science', *International Political Sociology*, 13 (2019), pp. 198–214.

[18]Frost and Lechner, 'Two conceptions of international practice', p. 349.

[19]Fierke and Nicholson, 'Divided by a common language', p. 12.

[20]Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953 [2001]), paragraphs 66–7.

[21]This discourse analysis follows the Wittgensteinian programme of looking for 'meaning in use' of language. Fierke, Frost, Lechner, and others have suggested this kind of discourse analysis should focus on how practitioners of international relations constitute, observe, and break rules of international practice through their language games and the grammars that underwrite them. Grimmel and Hellman summarise this program thus: 'Familiarizing ourselves with the polysemy of language games of diverse sets of "international" practitioners will enable us to better understand the multiple meanings of "international"

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on the *Satanic Verses* controversy, a letter which has never been published, publicised or excerpted. Thatcher replied shortly afterwards with a personal letter that has also remained unpublished.[22] Of the many diplomatic exchanges throughout the crisis, this one was chosen because it is a direct and clear argument over the basic premises of the crisis between a prominent Muslim national leader and a Western national leader. As Mahathir was a fluent English speaker who was used to conducting diplomacy in English, there are no problems of translation to deal with. Mahathir's letter (see Appendix A) and Thatcher's response to it (see Appendix B) present two very different interpretations of the crisis underpinned by different descriptions of international order. Where Thatcher describes a world made up of formally equal nation-states with obligations to respect each other's sovereignty, Mahathir writes of a continuation of colonial domination through Western monopolies over cultural representation. This difference helps explain why the seemingly minor issue of a sacrilegious novel escalated into such a significant crisis.

Both Mahathir and Thatcher understood Islam and the West as coherent and separate worlds. But while Thatcher depicted the West as a world that had separated itself from religious authority, Mahathir characterised it as an essentially Christian world, even if Christianity was decaying within it. Mahathir's assessment of the comparative states of Islam and Christianity – Islam as relatively young, vigorous, and modern, Christianity as enfeebled and burdened by its own history – was surprisingly forthright even by the standards of Mahathir, who wrote many published letters to Western leaders defending Islam from negative perceptions.[23] Though Thatcher professed to seek 'understanding' between Islam and the West, in Mahathir's view such understanding was impossible while the West allowed the denigration of Islam and Muslims. The 'Western (Christian) nations' had not muddled into a cultural misunderstanding with the Islamic world, according to Mahathir; they understood what was at stake in the *Satanic Verses* controversy and had consciously chosen to take the side of one novelist over a billion Muslims.

Secularism, religion, and responsibility in international relations

This exchange has continuing importance for understanding the roles of religion and secularism in international relations. British government officials insisted they bore no responsibility for *The Satanic Verses* and had no power to ban it because Rushdie and his publishers had a right to free expression and had broken no British law. Britain's blasphemy laws only applied to the defamation of Christianity, and in any case those laws had not been used in a public prosecution since 1921.[24] They were frustrated that many Muslims believed the British government was responsible for the book because it did not legally stop its publication.[25] Mahathir and numerous other Muslim actors wanted Britain to ban the book to maintain good relations with the global Islamic community. They were dissatisfied by what the British and other Western governments saw as the natural solution

practices' (Grimmel and Hellmann, 'Theory must not go on holiday', p. 211). It also follows Neumann's prescription that text-based analysis should be complemented by different kinds of contextual data that 'may illuminate how foreign policy and global politics are experienced as lived practices' (Neumann, 'Returning practice', p. 628). In this case, a close reading of two diplomatic letters exchanged between heads of government is accompanied by the contextual data of departmental memos, letters, telegrams, memoirs, and other material to aid understanding of how the letters would have been written and understood by the actors involved.

[22]Because both letters referred to this as a 'personal' (not 'private') exchange between Mahathir and Thatcher in their capacities as prime ministers, throughout this paper I refer to Mahathir and Thatcher as the authors of the letters even though Thatcher's letter was not drafted by her and I have no information about the drafting of Mahathir's letter.

[23]See Abdullah Ahmad (ed.), *Dr. Mahathir's Selected Letters to World Leaders Volume 1* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2015); Abdullah Ahmad (ed.), *Dr. Mahathir's Selected Letters to World Leaders Volume 2* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2015).

[24]There had, however, been a successful private prosecution for blasphemous libel in 1977, initiated by Christian activist Mary Whitehouse over a poem published in *Gay News*. See Michael Tracey and David Morrison, *Whitehouse* (London: Macmillan, 1979).

[25]TNA FCO8/7423, A. G. Munro, letter to J. R. Young, 286h, 27 February 1989.

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to the problem, which was that each sovereign state should ban or allow the book according to its own domestic circumstances.

This dissatisfaction, and the difficulty Western and Muslim actors had in understanding each other's positions, reflects different ontologies of international relations within a shared vocabulary. When British and other Western actors talked about 'the West' and 'the Muslim world', they spoke of entities that were constituted by sovereign nation-states and the relationships between them, reflecting the primacy of the state over all other forms of identity in Westphalian international relations discourse. But when Muslim actors talked about these same entities, they were speaking of collective religious identities that have a life and power beyond the sovereign nation-state, reflecting a version of Westphalian discourse in which sovereign states were the most powerful actors but were not the only important entities involved.[26] From this viewpoint, Western actors were refusing to acknowledge the cultural power imbalance wrought by colonialism, and they elided the religious sources of their own values while denigrating those of Muslims.

Secularism aspires to religious neutrality, but it is not a religiously neutral viewpoint. The British and American variants of secularism that Elizabeth Shakman Hurd calls 'Judaeo-Christian secularism' are informed by the experiences and metaphysics of Christian Europe. Secular-minded actors in these countries draw on a narrative in which the division of political and religious authority ended centuries of religious war and persecution between different Christian sects. Because of those experiences, Christianity (especially Protestant Christianity) accepts the subordination of its own authority to the secular state, which creates peace between different religious factions while allowing a place for religion in public life.[27] In many ways, the British response to *The Satanic Verses* exemplified the kind of secular tolerance that is expected when it comes to religious matters in liberal democracies. In regimes of secular tolerance, even states that have an established religion should avoid the substance of religious disputes while defending the ground rules that ensure such disputes do not erupt into violence.

Within Judaeo-Christian secularism, the non-compulsion of religion works analogously between the domestic and international levels of politics. Just as each person's religious beliefs are determined by their individual conscience, so each sovereign state, as Thatcher's letter insisted, manages religious controversy within its own borders. Territorial sovereignty in secular discourse allows religious tolerance writ large, the removal of religious authority as a source of international conflict. But tolerance, as Wendy Brown has shown, is a discourse of depoliticisation, and depoliticisation is itself a political move.[28] It may make sense to secular-minded actors, informed by Christian historical experience, that religious questions should not be political questions, but this is not a universally shared understanding of the rules of international society. In Mahathir's understanding, the unmatched cultural power of Western actors to broadcast insults to Islam across any national border was unavoidably political and had to be addressed in the realm of international politics. What appeared to British government officials as the appropriate solution to a sensitive crisis – to defend Rushdie's rights without taking responsibility for his writing – appeared to Mahathir and many others as a display of imperial arrogance and domination, the assertion that the West's contingent, culturally specific values constituted a higher ethical order than those of Muslims.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. The second section examines the letters and explains the specific circumstances of how they were exchanged and authored. The third section analyses Mahathir's letter, comparing it to existing scholarship about Mahathir's distinctive understanding of Islam and showing how it fit with recurring practices in Malaysian foreign policy. The fourth

[26] Piscatori shows that despite the universalistic theology of Islam in which states are absent, and the classical distinction between the House of Islam and the House of Unbelief, diplomatic practice in the Muslim world has long accommodated Westphalian conceptions of world order. Muslim rulers engaged in extensive interstate diplomacy with Western powers from the seventeenth century onwards, ending previous juristic debates over whether treaties with non-Muslims could be more than temporary. Today, the OIC reflects both the norms of territorial state sovereignty and a conception of Islam as a transnational actor. Piscatori, *Islam*, pp. 62–73.

[27] Hurd, *Politics of Secularism*, pp. 37–44 and p. 92.

[28] Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

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section examines Thatcher's response and how it related to other features of the British response to the *Satanic Verses* crisis, particularly the government's insistence that it had no power over the publication of the book. The final section concludes with a discussion of the broader implications for international relations. Complete transcriptions of both letters are available in Appendices A and B.

Both Mahathir and Thatcher frequently referred to 'the West' and to 'Islam' as coherent entities in international relations. As such, my discourse analysis also uses these terms, but with the awareness that these are not fixed or natural categories. The concept of 'the West' was historically dependent on a concept of its 'Oriental' other, and the discursive boundaries of 'the West' have constantly shifted.[29] Cemil Aydin has shown that the modern idea of the 'Muslim world', encompassing the vast diversity of the world's Muslim peoples in a single category, arose from 19th-century imperial competition. It was deployed both by Muslims seeking to overcome racial hierarchy in European empires and by Europeans seeking Muslim allies in their imperial struggles. The 'Muslim world' idea receded after the Second World War in the face of nationalist decolonisation movements but was widely asserted again by various actors following the Iranian Revolution.[30] The *Satanic Verses* controversy was a significant moment in the late 20th-century co-production of the 'Muslim world' idea between Muslim and Western actors, and the Mahathir–Thatcher exchange is a revealing contribution to it.

The exchange of letters

Mahathir and Thatcher met at the Malaysian Embassy in London on 15 March 1989, during one of Mahathir's scheduled visits to the UK.[31] The agenda was dominated by trade and investment, and the tone of the meeting, according to Thatcher's private secretary Charles Powell, was friendly. It remained so when the discussion moved from arms deals and airport privatisation to the *Satanic Verses* controversy. Thatcher thanked Mahathir for Malaysia's 'moderate' stance on the issue, explaining that while she could understand the offence the book had given to Muslims, the 'great religions' could withstand such attacks. Mahathir reassured Thatcher that there were only minor demonstrations against the novel in Muslim-majority Malaysia, and his government would take no further action beyond banning the book. He said he had set out his personal views on the affair in a letter which he handed to Thatcher, and the meeting concluded. That afternoon Powell opened and read the letter, which was typed on paper with a Malaysian prime ministerial letterhead. He found it was 'cast in exceptionally strong language that was not reflected in Dr Mahathir's demeanour at the meeting itself'.[32]

Mahathir's letter condemned not just *The Satanic Verses* and its author, but also the 'patronising, arrogant and insensitive' attitude of the '"Western Democracies"'. He explained that Muslims, unlike many Christians, were angered by insults to their religion because Islam was a younger religion, only 1,400 years old and still full of 'fervour'. But the behaviour of Muslims was far more tolerant and civilised than that of Christian fanatics when Christianity was the same age during the 15th century. Muslims did not engage in inquisitions and pogroms of dissident sects and did not torture heretics or burn them at the stake. 'Are you', Mahathir asked, 'conferred a divine right to determine how the human race of whatever religion or stage of development should behave?' The West's current 'obsession' with freedom of expression was, for Mahathir, nothing more than an excuse to abuse the rest of the world for not obeying its most recently invented code of values. The West controlled world media, denying others access to it and using it to depict Muslims as

[29] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978).

[30] Cemil Aydin, *The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

[31] The Riyadh OIC meeting, involving the foreign ministers of Muslim-majority countries, ran from 13–16 March 1989. This meeting between Mahathir and Thatcher took place while it was still in progress, and before its Joint Declaration was released.

[32] TNA FCO8/7427, C. Powell, letter to R. Pierce, 556j, 15 March 1989.

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'cruel brutes given to all kinds of savagery'. Unlike Christians, who had engaged in far more violence than Muslims during the 20th century, Muslims were always held collectively responsible for violent acts of individuals.

Muslims had no power to defend themselves against this kind of misrepresentation, and *The Satanic Verses* was 'the last straw'. 'You probably think', Mahathir wrote, 'that it is noble and worth the souring of relations with 1 billion Muslims to defend a principle that you believe in.' In that case, he reasoned, the West could hardly blame Muslims for defending their own principles. In the Muslim value system, freedom of expression did not extend to blasphemy and insulting others, and transgressors should be punished according to the circumstances. In this case, 'the circumstances are aggravated because the Western (Christian) nations choose to protect the culprit so strongly – preferring to break diplomatic relations rather than withdraw and ban the offending book'. Given the West's continuing preference for the freedom 'of one disillusioned and misguided man' over relations with a billion Muslims, Mahathir saw little hope for closer relations between Christians and Muslims. 'Prime Minister', he concluded, 'I am much saddened.'[33]

So great was the contrast between the tone of the letter and the tone of the meeting that British officials wondered whether the letter really reflected Mahathir's personal views, or if it was written for the public record. The next day Powell spoke to one of Mahathir's advisers, Datuk Arumugam, who told him that Mahathir had very much enjoyed the meeting with the prime minister. When Powell remarked that British officials had been 'rather rocked by the severity' of Mahathir's letter, Arumugam claimed Mahathir had written it as a 'sop' to the youth organisation of his party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). It reflected their views, and nothing more than a protocol reply would be needed.[34] But FCO officials doubted Arumugam's claim, seeing it as typical of the post hoc rationalisations of Mahathir's advisers. David Gillmore, a deputy under-secretary for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, described Mahathir's similarity to an earlier generation of post-colonial leaders. Mahathir's worldview, according to Gillmore, bore a strong 'North/South imprint', and he frequently berated the West for the immorality of the culture it sought to impose on the Third World. He blamed most of Malaysia's ills on the 'irresponsibility and/or exploitative attitude of the former colonial power'.[35] Given the presence of those elements in Mahathir's letter, it probably represented his own views, and Gillmore urged the FCO to prepare a careful and reasoned response on Thatcher's behalf, warning that a protocol reply would sound condescending and supercilious if it failed to answer Mahathir's points.[36]

Foreign secretary Geoffrey Howe reasoned that if Mahathir had indeed written the letter to appease UMNO, it was bound to leak, and the government should have a response ready.[37] The letter did not leak, and no part of it has appeared publicly since. But in any case, Thatcher requested a 'reasoned response' after she saw the letter. The FCO's South-East Asia Department (SEAD) asked for a draft from the Middle East Department (MED), which had been handling most of the diplomatic fallout from the *Satanic Verses* controversy. P. K. C. Thomas of SEAD warned that the reply would not be easy, because 'Mahathir's letter bristles with ex-colonial and other resentments'.[38] J. Robertson Young, the head of MED, had responsibility for drafting a reply on Thatcher's behalf.[39] It cannot be determined from the archives whether Young or someone else at MED wrote this reply, written in Thatcher's first-person voice, and there is no copy of the final letter to Mahathir signed by Thatcher. Undated, the draft reply appeared on either 20 or 21 March, and the letter began by explaining that Thatcher had taken some time to consider Mahathir's points carefully.

[33] Ibid.

[34] TNA FCO8/7428, C. Powell, letter to R. Pierce, 568e, 16 March 1989.

[35] TNA FCO8/7428, D. Gillmore, letter to P. K. C. Thomas, 580b, 17 March 1989.

[36] Ibid.

[37] TNA FCO8/7428, R. Pierce, letter to D. Colvin, 586, 20 March 1989.

[38] TNA FCO8/7428, P.K.C. Thomas, letter to J.R. Young, 568f, 16 March 1989.

[39] TNA FCO8/7428, C. Powell, letter to R. Pierce, 568e, 16 March 1989. A handwritten note to Young on this letter says 'you are acting on the Mahathir letter'.

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Her reply expressed regret at Mahathir's letter. It reiterated that Thatcher understood the distress the book had caused to Muslims, and the British government did not 'in any way condone or endorse Mr Rushdie or the content of this book'. But Rushdie was free to express himself within the boundaries of British law, and Britain did not seek to impose the book or an alien system of values on the Muslim world or any other country. Britain respected the rights of other countries to ban the book as they wished, but it could not tolerate Khomeini's claim to be able to sentence a British citizen or a citizen of any other country to death. This affair was not about relations between Christians and Muslims or the West imposing itself on the Islamic world: 'It is a simple matter of respect for international law, and national sovereignty.' She noted that Mahathir's government was among the many 'Islamic governments' that had refused to endorse Khomeini's death threats.

Thatcher was, according to her reply, 'especially saddened' by Mahathir's claims that Western-controlled media was targeting Muslims, and she could not agree that was the case. The letter extolled the growing understanding between different cultures and religions in the 20th century, the British government's deep respect for Islam and its contributions to civilisation, and its friendship with Islamic countries including Malaysia. Islam, like Christianity, was a religion of tolerance, and 'this sad affair' must not be allowed to impair understanding between the Islamic world and the West. 'I hope that you and I, Prime Minister', the letter concluded, 'can through our personal exchanges achieve a clear perspective on this issue and to contribute to calming the feelings it has aroused worldwide.'[40]

There is no record of any further correspondence on this issue. In the introduction to his selected letters to world leaders (which does not contain this letter), Mahathir writes that he had a good working relationship with Thatcher, 'a realist with regard to Malaysia' who visited the country three times, unlike any of her predecessors or successors.[41] In her memoir *The Downing Street Years*, Thatcher writes that she got on well with Mahathir and describes her 'increasing respect' for him.[42] Neither mentions the *Satanic Verses* controversy. The anger visible in Mahathir's letter, while addressed to Thatcher, was directed at much larger structures in international relations.

Mahathir, Malaysia, and Islam

One of the striking features of Mahathir's letter is that it did not mention either Malaysia or Britain, or any other country individually. It referred instead to 'Western (Christian) countries' and to the West, Christians, and Muslims collectively. The 'you' of the letter referred to the West as a whole, while 'we' referred to the world's one billion Muslims. This is a departure from the norms of official correspondence between national leaders, who usually speak on behalf of their own countries. It helps explain why Mahathir did not find it 'opportune' to say these things to his counterpart in an official meeting between heads of government. The protocols of such meetings reflect the formal equality of nation-states and their leaders, allowing them to transact with and make requests of each other. Mahathir's personal letter made no requests and suggested no actions. He attributed responsibility for the *Satanic Verses* controversy – the publication of Rushdie's work and the protection afforded to its author – to Western nations collectively. Rather than something that leaders of countries could negotiate over, he saw it as a manifestation of the Western project of imposing its values on the rest of the world, enabled by its dominance of the world's media and monopoly on cultural representation. The West's collective but hypocritical commitment to freedom of expression allowed the West to 'flay the rest of the world', while not allowing Muslims to use free speech to defend themselves from being depicted as 'cruel brutes' in the Western media.

First clarifying that he did not think of himself as a 'Muslim fanatic', Mahathir offered an unconventional defence of Islam against its Western attackers. The age difference of 600 years

[40] TNA, FCO8/7428, Unsigned, letter to C. Powell enclosing draft reply from Thatcher to Mahathir, 587, undated March 1989.

[41] Ahmad (ed.), *Mahathir Letters Vol. 1*.

[42] Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 692.

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between Christianity and Islam explained why Muslims were still angered by insults to Islam while Christians were not similarly angered by insults to Christianity. 'The faith and fervour of the Muslims', wrote Mahathir, 'are as strong as the faith and fanaticism of the Christians of the fifteenth century.' This was a rebuke to arguments, widely made during the *Satanic Verses* controversy, that Muslims needed to be more like Christians when confronted with insults to their religion. Thatcher's comment to Mahathir that 'the great religions' could withstand such attacks can be read as a compliment to Islam, but also as a suggestion that resilience to insults was what qualified a religion as 'great'. The Home Office minister of state John Patten would later tell British Muslim leaders in an open letter that Christians no longer relied on antiquated blasphemy laws, instead recognising that 'the strength of their own beliefs is the best armour' against mockery.[43] Some FCO officials noted to audiences in Muslim-majority countries that there had been no move in Britain to ban the film *The Last Temptation of Christ* despite the offence it gave to many Christians.[44] A strong implication of these arguments, however benevolently framed, was that Islam lacked maturity and needed to catch up with Christianity. Mahathir's age metaphor inverted that implication, suggesting that Christianity's acceptance of insults was a sign of enfeeblement, while Islam's refusal to tolerate them was a mark of vigour.

The Western discourse of Islamic immaturity during the *Satanic Verses* crisis fit a narrative of secularist modernisation based on the Western understanding of its own experience.[45] In this self-understanding, the need to overcome religious bloodshed between Christians in Europe had led to the achievement of secularism, which separated temporal and religious authority and elevated the former over the latter. Bernard Lewis argued this development had ultimately given the West huge advantages over the Islamic world, which had never been through such a developmental stage. This, according to Lewis, was the source of Muslim resentment and jealousy of the West.[46] The subsequent argument that 'Islam needs a reformation', a development patterned on the Christian experience that would result in a Western-style understanding of the proper relationship between religion and politics, has long been a popular claim in Western literature critical of Islam.[47] But the *Satanic Verses* controversy, for many Muslims, reinforced the danger that Islam could go through the same capitulation to secular culture as Christianity, surrendering its ability to defend the sacred.[48]

Mahathir's letter used the language of 'different stages of development' for Islam and the West, but throughout his political career he had posited that Islam was an alternative path to modernity, not an obstacle to it.[49] His letter emphasised that Muslim behaviour is 'influenced by the mores of the time', in contrast to the medieval intolerance of 15th-century Christians. The Muslim reaction to *The Satanic Verses* was 'civilised', not a throwback to an earlier stage of Christian barbarism. This is consistent with Mahathir's documented views of Islam generally, although nowhere else did he express them in quite this way.

Mahathir saw Islam as a modernising force that was necessary to the development of his country and of his ethnic Malay plurality within it. As he engaged in the 'Islamisation' of Malaysia from the 1980s onwards, he held Islam as the key to the economic development of Malays. Mahathir often referred to 'properly understood' Islam, which for him meant an emphasis on worldly knowledge

[43]TNA FCO8/7431, J. Patten, letter to British Muslim leaders, 672, 4 July 1989.

[44]TNA FCO8/7420, J. Adams, telegram to Priority FCO, 91a, 19 February 1989; TNA FCO8/7425, J. Adams, telegram to Priority FCO, 384, 4 March 1989; TNA FCO8/7431, J. Jenkins, letter to A. J. Sparkes, 671, 26 June 1989.

[45]See Talal Asad, 'Ethnography, literature, and politics: Some readings and uses of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*', *Cultural Anthropology*, 5 (1990), pp. 239–69.

[46]Lewis, 'Roots of Muslim rage'.

[47]Saba Mahmood, 'Secularism, hermeneutics, and empire: The politics of Islamic reformation', *Public Culture*, 18 (2006), pp. 323–47.

[48]See e.g. TNA FCO8/7431, P. R. C. Storr, record of meeting between Douglas Hurd and members of Union of Muslim Organisations, 671a, 26 June 1989; Akhtar, *Be Careful with Muhammad!*, p, 102.

[49]Sven Schottmann, *Mahathir's Islam: Mahathir Mohamad on Religion and Modernity in Malaysia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2018).

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and action towards communal prosperity.[50] Islam would provide a spiritual basis for capitalist discipline, while state-backed Islamic banking and financial institutions would attract investment from the oil-rich Gulf states.[51] Embracing Islam was politically valuable to Mahathir, allowing him to co-opt and 'out-Islam' his Islamist opponents and consolidate new powers he accrued to the state.[52] But however instrumental Islam was for Mahathir, both for political manoeuvring and as a 'nationalist-capitalist modernization project',[53] this personal letter showed the depth of his identification with Muslims as a people worldwide.

Mahathir could identify with the global Islamic community even while writing as the leader of a multiethnic Westphalian state, and as one Commonwealth prime minister to another.[54] This reflects not just Mahathir's approach to foreign policy, but also Malay practices of sovereignty that pre-date European colonialism. Rulers of premodern Malay polities participated simultaneously in multiple world orders, from the Persian cosmopolis to the Chinese tributary system.[55] By the 15th century, these rulers had adopted Islam to the extent they could enter the 'Muslim galaxy' of trade that prevailed over the Indian Ocean, while maintaining traditional political structures at odds with Islamic orthodoxy.[56] Negotiating their political survival with multiple power centres while maintaining their prestige as rulers required international relations skills and ideas that are still relevant to the circumstances Malaysian leaders face.[57]

Malaysia's leaders, including Mahathir, have unashamedly characterised Malaysia as a 'small power'.[58] This is consistent with the traditional practice of Malay rulers acknowledging their material inferiority in hierarchical systems and paying tribute to larger powers. However, this deference does not undermine their cultural, symbolic, and moral equality with other rulers.[59] Maintaining personal relationships in diplomatic communication with more powerful rulers is a way of asserting this equality and enhancing the prestige of the less powerful.[60] This was a practice that featured throughout Mahathir's prime ministership, including in this exchange with Thatcher, where Mahathir used a personal form of communication to raise complaints about cultural insults that he felt 'inopportune' to raise in an official meeting about British investments in Malaysia.

Malaysian leaders since independence, all from UMNO, had sought to improve the position of the Malay Muslim plurality of the country while maintaining domestic peace and legitimacy with the Chinese and Indian minorities. Mahathir had to manage the electoral threat of Islamist

[50]Ibid., chapter 4.

[51]Diane K. Mauzy and R. Stephen Milne, 'The Mahathir administration in Malaysia: Discipline through Islam', *Pacific Affairs*, 56 (1983), pp. 617–48; Boo Teik Khoo, *Paradoxes of Mahathirism: An Intellectual Biography of Mahathir Mohamad* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Lily Zubaidah Rahim, 'The crisis of state-led Islamization and communal governance in Malaysia', in L. Z. Rahim (ed.), *Muslim Secular Democracy: Voices from Within* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 165–90; Schottmann, *Mahathir's Islam*.

[52]Mauzy and Milne, 'Mahathir administration'; Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *Islamic Leviathan: Islam and the Making of State Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Kee Beng Ooi, 'Mahathir as Muslim leader', *Southeast Asian Affairs* (2006), pp. 172–80; Rahim, 'Crisis of state-led Islamization'.

[53]Schottmann, *Mahathir's Islam*, p. 174.

[54]Malaysia hosted the next Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) later in 1989. In her memoir, Thatcher recounted that Mahathir was originally highly critical of the Commonwealth, 'seeing it as a kind of post-colonial institution'. But she claimed she 'made a convert' of Mahathir to the Commonwealth after persuading him to attend a CHOGM, and that the 1989 CHOGM he hosted was 'the best organised I ever attended'. Thatcher, *Downing Street Years*, p. 692.

[55]Manjeet S. Pardesi, 'Decentering hegemony and "open" orders: Fifteenth-century Melaka in a world of orders', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 2 (2022), pp. 1–13.

[56]Anthony C. Milner, 'Islam and Malay kingship', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 113 (1981), pp. 46–70.

[57]Sharifah Munirah Alatas, 'A Malaysian perspective on foreign policy and geopolitics: Rethinking West-centric International Relations theory', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 1 (2021), pp. 1–11; Alan Chong, 'Premodern Southeast Asia as a guide to international relations between peoples: Prowess and prestige in "intersocietal relations" in the Sejarah Melayu', *Alternatives*, 37 (2012), pp. 87–105; Anthony Milner and Siti Munirah Kasim, 'Beyond sovereignty: Non-Western international relations in Malaysia's foreign relations', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 40 (2018), pp. 371–96; Pardesi, 'Decentering hegemony'.

[58]Milner and Kasim, 'Beyond sovereignty'.

[59]Chong, 'Premodern Southeast Asia as a guide to international relations'.

[60]Alatas, 'Malaysian perspective'.

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opposition, sometimes co-opting Islamism and at other times declaring it unsuited to Malaysian society.[61] The use and misuse of religious language had become a potent source of conflict by the 1980s. Four Malaysian states passed laws banning non-Muslims from using certain Islamic terms in 1988, and Mahathir had warned that 'illusions, distortions and misinterpretations' of Islam made possible by language threatened Malay 'survival itself'.[62] In 1989, the Islamist Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) supported Khomeini's death sentence on Rushdie and orchestrated demonstrations outside the British and American embassies, a stance at odds with Mahathir's statecraft. UMNO leaders rebuked PAS in Westphalian terms, emphasising the need to respect the views of other states, and highlighting the actions Malaysia had taken to ban the book and support the OIC's resolutions condemning it. They did not allow parliamentary discussion of the issue, and education minister Anwar Ibrahim said Muslim intellectuals should not 'toss up ideas' that could affect the harmony of Malaysia's multiracial society.[63]

It is not uncommon for leaders to use inflammatory nationalist and religious rhetoric to appeal to domestic audiences while reassuring their international counterparts with more moderate language – this was the 'sop' strategy posited by Datuk Arumugam. But Mahathir seems to have done the opposite. For him, *The Satanic Verses* was not just an insult to Muslim Malays, it was a potential threat to Malaysia's internal peace and his political standing. Along with banning the book, the latter threats had to be dealt with by publicly asserting Malaysia's commitments to pluralism and Westphalian norms to suppress the issue as quickly as possible. It was only in personal communication with Thatcher that Mahathir could deal with the insult to Islam, which may account for the 'severity of the tone' that so disconcerted British officials.

Thatcher's responses

Thatcher's response to Mahathir, drafted in the Middle East Department of the FCO, refocused on national governments as the only legitimate actors in the *Satanic Verses* crisis. It reiterated that the British government did not endorse the book but could not tolerate Khomeini's pronouncement of a death sentence on one of its citizens within its own borders. It noted the refusal of Mahathir's own government to endorse Khomeini's death threat. This emphasis on the 'simple matter' of national sovereignty was consistent with the British government's diplomatic approach throughout the crisis in 1989. Nonetheless, this response to Mahathir had to include an answer to his arguments about the West's cultural domination of Muslims to avoid seeming 'condescending and supercilious', as David Gillmore had warned. That answer was mostly confined to the final paragraph, which explicitly disagreed with Mahathir's claim that Western-controlled media targeted Muslims for denigration. The counter-argument was vague and broad: 'I believe that this century has seen a growing understanding between the nations, cultures and religions of the world. We must continue to work to improve that understanding.' The final sentences reiterated the need for understanding and the hope that they could work towards it together.

This emphasis on 'understanding', with its connotations of mutuality and dialogue as means of overcoming disagreement, attempted to circumvent Mahathir's complaints about the West abusing its overwhelming control of cultural resources. It consigned religious conflict to the past, reducing religion to one source of identity among several ('nations, cultures and religions of the world') that were equally ripe for reconciliation through improved understanding. There was an important asymmetry in how Mahathir and Thatcher presented the concepts of 'Islam' and 'the West'. For both, Islam was synonymous with the countries in which it was the majority religion. Mahathir wrote about 'Muslim countries', and Thatcher referred to 'Islamic governments'. But Mahathir also coded

[61] David Camroux, 'State responses to Islamic resurgence in Malaysia: Accommodation, co-option, and confrontation', *Asian Survey*, 36 (1996), pp. 852–68.

[62] Michael G. Peletz, 'Sacred texts and dangerous words: The politics of law and cultural rationalization in Malaysia', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 35 (1993), pp. 66–109.

[63] Shanti Nair, *Islam in Malaysian Foreign Policy* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 148–9.

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the West as Christian; his formulation of 'Western (Christian) nations' suggested he was reminding the West of a religious identity which was rarely talked about in the West itself. In Thatcher's letter, the association between Christianity and the West was indeed much looser, though still visible.

The third paragraph of Thatcher's letter declared: 'This has nothing to do with relations between Christians and Muslims, or with the West trying to impose its thinking on the Islamic world.' Similarly, the final paragraph mentioned that 'Islam, like Christianity, is a religion of tolerance. This sad affair must not be allowed to impair all our efforts to improve understanding between the Islamic world and the West.' In both sentences, the verbal pairing of religious identities (Islam and Christianity) was separated from the later pairing of international relations entities ('the Islamic world' and 'the West'), although the proximity of the statements and the correspondence of 'Christian' to 'West' in the sentence order indicated the concepts were related. The British letter, then, alluded to the Christian identity of the West while also creating a separation between them, at the same time maintaining the complete identification of Islam with the Islamic world. The semantic separation between Christianity and the West, which Thatcher made but Mahathir pointedly did not, reflected a difference in perception at the heart of the *Satanic Verses* crisis.

For the British government, religious controversy was not a matter for the state. The religious offence caused by *The Satanic Verses* was unfortunate, but something to be remedied through a gradual improvement of 'understanding' on all sides, not resolved with government action such as prohibiting the book. This liberal posture obscured the Christian character of the British state, which was starkly visible to many Muslims even if it was increasingly invisible to secular-minded functionaries of that state.[64] It was not just the ceremonial, 'stately' elements of the British state that were imbued with Christianity, such as the fact that the head of state also heads the Church of England.[65] Despite the government's insistence that Christians no longer needed blasphemy laws, under English common law the offence of blasphemy still existed and only applied to the defamation of Christianity. When Muslims sought a public or private prosecution of Rushdie for *The Satanic Verses*, the government ruled out any possibility of statutorily expanding blasphemy laws to protect all religious groups. In 1985, a Law Commission tasked with examining the offence of blasphemy had been inconclusive, divided between a majority position of abolishing it and a minority position of expanding it beyond Christianity.[66] In the absence of any agreement about reforming the law, senior government figures explained, there would be no basis for any legislative proposal to do so.[67]

At least some in the FCO did contemplate the possibility that an expanded definition of blasphemy, linked to a civil action against Rushdie by Muslims in Britain, could provide a bloodless resolution to the *Satanic Verses* controversy.[68] When the governor of Pakistan's Sindh Province suggested to a visiting former British foreign secretary in April 1989 that colonial-era Indian law could provide a model, the South Asia Department (SAD) asked the British Library to find the statute he was talking about. They found it in Section 298 of Act XLV of 1860, establishing a Penal Code for Britain's Indian colonies (and forming the basis of section 295A of India's contemporary criminal code):

> Whoever, with the deliberate intentions of wounding the religious feelings of any person, utters any word or makes any sound in the hearing of that person, or makes any gesture in the sight of that person, or places any object in the sight of that person, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to one year, or with fine, or with both.

[64]See Asad, 'Ethnography, literature and politics'.

[65]On the political importance of 'stately' symbolism, see Clifford Geertz, *Negara* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 121–36.

[66]TNA FCO8/7427, F. D. Berman, memo to J. R. Young, 527i, 10 March 1989.

[67]TNA FCO8/7431, P. R. C. Storr, record of meeting between Hurd and Union of Muslim Organisation members, 671a, 16 June 1989; TNA FCO8/7428, D. J. Plumbly, letter to S. Egerton, 580j, 18 March 1989.

[68]TNA FCO8/7423, A. G. Munro, letter to J. R. Young, 286h, 27 February 1989.

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There is a handwritten note on the photocopy SAD obtained saying 'I presume Satanic Verses would constitute a "sight"'.[69] Ultimately, though, these FCO officials had no input into discussions about domestic British law. Inclusive understandings of blasphemy belonged to a period of colonial administration when Britain ruled a multireligious empire containing 40 per cent of the world's Muslims,[70] not to a post-colonial world in which Britain saw itself as a discrete nation-state hosting a Muslim population that had to learn to adapt to British ways.[71]

Mahathir's letter is one of many archival documents expressing disbelief from Muslims at the British government's insistence there was nothing it could do about *The Satanic Verses*.[72] The archives show that British government officials sincerely believed that the final decisions about publishing future editions of the book belonged to Rushdie and his publisher alone. However, behind the scenes the FCO tried to influence Rushdie and Penguin to take actions that would mitigate international outrage over the book, while warning that any decisions the publisher made could not be seen as linked to the government.[73] And while Thatcher's response to Mahathir professed that 'this has nothing to do with relations between Christians and Muslims', during the *Satanic Verses* controversy the FCO used high-profile Church of England figures as intermediaries, solicited intervention from the pope, and sought out religious authorities across the Muslim world who could provide rulings that contradicted Khomeini. In all cases, again, they were careful to distance the British government from any appearance of involvement in these efforts.[74] This does not contradict the fact that British officials really believed their scope of action around the controversy was very limited, tightly circumscribed by both principle and law, even if diplomacy sometimes allowed expedient, unofficial compromises. But it is also easy to see why actors who did not share the language games and conceptual world of the British government would see hypocrisy and domination.

[69]TNA FCO8/7431, N. Barrington, telegram to Priority FCO, 640a, 5 April 1989; TNA FCO8/7431, D. Reddaway, letter to D. Fitton, 640a, 11 April 1989.

[70]Aydin, *Idea of the Muslim World*, p. 63.

[71]Talal Asad, 'Multiculturalism and British identity in the wake of the Rushdie affair', *Politics & Society*, 18 (1990), pp. 455–80; see e.g. TNA FCO8/7421, D. Hurd, speech at Birmingham Mosque, 187e, 26 February 1989.

[72]The British government's injunction against the book *Spycatcher* was a widely cited example by media in Muslim-majority countries and diplomatic representatives of those countries of the British government's scope to ban books. See TNA FCO8/7419, K. Niazi, memo addressed to American Centre, Islamabad, 4b, 14 February 1989; TNA FCO8/7424, N. Barrington, telegram to Immediate FCO detailing press coverage in Pakistan, 364, 3 March 1989; TNA FCO8/7425, J. Adams, telegram to Immediate FCO 396, 6 March 1989; TNA FCO8/7425, *Tehran Times* article 'Act against Rushdie before it is too late', 420, 7 March 1989; TNA FCO8/7427, J. Beavan, telegram to Immediate FCO, 558, 14 March 1989.

[73]These measures included discouraging Rushdie from making a television appearance and conversations with James Joll, group finance director of Pearson Longman (Penguin's parent company) about the government's views and concerns, including passing on suggestions from Prince Saud about how Rushdie could make an effective apology to Muslims. TNA FCO8/7424, A. G. Munro, letter to A. F. Green, 360c, 2 March 1989; TNA FCO8/7424, A. F. Green, letter to A. G. Munro, 360d, 2 March 1989; TNA FCO8/7424, C. J. Walters, letter to P. Mawer, 360h, 2 March 1989; TNA FCO8/7425, R. A. Burns, letter to A. G. Munro, 378a, 3 March 1989; TNA FCO8/7425, A. G. Munro, letter to A. F. Green, 378k, 3 March 1989; TNA FCO8/7425, P. Wright, letter to J. R. Young, 413h, 6 March 1989; TNA FCO8/7421, D. Gore-Booth, letter to A. G. Munro, 156i, 21 February 1989; TNA FCO8/7428, J. R. Young, letter to D. Gore-Booth, 589a, 21 March 1989; TNA FCO8/7432, D. Gore-Booth, letter to J. R. Young, 687, 25 September 1989.

[74]TNA FCO8/7431, S. Lamport, letter to J. R. Young, 649, 23 May 1989; TNA FCO8/7431, J. Lyttle, letter to Archbishop of Canterbury, 665a, 19 June 1989; TNA FCO8/7432, D. Gore-Booth, letter to S. Lamport, 674a, 12 July 1989; TNA FCO8/7432, J. Lyttle, draft letter to Archbishop of Canterbury, 690, 3 October 1989; TNA FCO8/7420, G. Howe, telegram to J. Broadley, 112, 20 February 1989; TNA FCO8/7420, J. Broadley, telegram to G. Howe, 150, 21 February 1989; TNA FCO8/7422, J. Broadley, telegram to G. Howe, 235, 24 February 1989; TNA FCO8/7425, J. Broadley, telegram to Deskby FCO, 397, 6 March 1989; TNA FCO8/7420, J. Adams, telegram to G. Howe, 138, 21 February 1989; TNA FCO8/7425, G. Howe, telegram to OIC posts, 413, 6 March 1989; TNA FCO8/7422, B. Barder, telegram to G. Howe, 247, 25 February 1989.

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Conclusion

In their 2021 book *Re-imagining International Relations*, Buzan and Acharya argue that 'the international system/society is now rapidly moving into a structure of *deep pluralism*'.[75] Within a globally shared capitalist modernity, there is growing cultural and political differentiation, leading to multiple modernities underpinned by different civilisational experiences and understandings. Islamic modernity, itself characterised by multiplicity, is among the most prominent of those multiple modernities. 'Clash of civilisations' discourse, both before and after the September 11 attacks, depicted classical Islamic conceptions of world order as presenting an inevitable challenge to modern Western world order. Islamic actors who refused to recognise the legitimacy of either Muslim or non-Muslim sovereign nation-states would seek to replace the existing world order with a universal Islamic community that was perpetually at war with the 'House of Unbelief'. As Piscatori noted in 1986, fantasies of war between the West and nationless Islam were popular both with Islamic revivalists and Western analysts who conceived of Islam in increasingly confrontational terms.[76]

Khomeini's pronouncement of a transnational death sentence on Salman Rushdie may seem to fit this confrontational picture, though his motives almost certainly included domestic political calculations that fit the logic of a modern sovereign nation-state and his leadership of it.[77] But the Islamic modernity represented by Mahathir, with his embrace of national sovereignty and his insistence on the worldliness and developmental power of Islam, is a far more likely version of the conceptual challenges that Muslim actors might pose to Western conceptions of international order. Mahathir consistently distanced himself from the radical Muslim regimes of Libya, Syria, and especially Iran.[78] Like nearly all other Muslim national leaders, Mahathir was a 'conformist', in Piscatori's terms, to the prevailing international political order based on national states.[79] He challenged Western understandings of that order not by seeking to replace it, but by accusing the West collectively of a hypocritical lack of respect for it, seeking to impose colonial-style domination on the rest of the world under the cover of liberal social and economic ideas.[80]

British leaders effectively claimed that there was no decision for them to make about the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, for which Rushdie and his publishers were solely responsible providing they stayed within British law. Following Karin Fierke's definition of 'grammar' as 'the range of possible expressions relating to a practice', the British grammar of sovereignty in international relations did not encompass the possibility of sovereign intervention in an artistic religious controversy, which was the domain of domestic law. Many Muslim actors, including Mahathir, saw this claim as an evasion of responsibility. For Mahathir, the British and other Western governments *decided* to side with Rushdie over the Muslims he had offended, and their denial of responsibility deepened the hurt between the Muslim and Western worlds. Ironically, it did not seem to Rushdie himself

[75] Buzan and Acharya, *Re-imagining International Relations*, p. 4.

[76] Piscatori, *Islam*, pp. 38–9.

[77] On Khomeini's domestic political motives for the death sentence, see Mozaffari, 'Rushdie affair'; Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: Routledge, 2017), p. xxii; Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar, *Religious Statecraft: The Politics of Islam in Iran* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), pp. 193–5. On Khomeini's modernity, see Piscatori, *Islam*, pp. 111–12; Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[78] Camroux, 'State responses to Islamic resurgence'.

[79] Piscatori, *Islam*, p. 84.

[80] For examples of this beyond the *Satanic Verses* crisis, see L. H. M. Ling, 'Cultural chauvinism and the liberal international order: "West vs. rest" in Asia's financial crisis', in G. Chowdhry and S. Nair (eds), *Power, Postcolonialism and International Relations* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 115–40; Carol Johnson, 'Analysing the politics of same-sex issues in a comparative perspective', *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context*, 14 (2006), pp. 1–17.

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as if British government officials were siding with him, even as they protected him, because their denial of responsibility for his art involved implicit and explicit denigration of it.[81]

Mahathir's grammar of sovereignty included a much greater scope of possibility for the state in suppressing religious controversy. This was not, as the 'clash of civilisations' discourse might suggest, simply because Muslim polities are more authoritarian than Western polities. Malaysia's Sedition Act of 1948, which prohibits promotion of 'feelings of ill-will and hostility between different races', was originally a creation of British colonial administrators, much like the expansive anti-blasphemy laws of India and Pakistan (see 'Thatcher's responses', above). The Muslim grammar of the relationship between religion and the state, at least in polities that used to be British colonies, was informed partly by British practices of managing religious diversity within its empire. The first-generation migrants to Britain from India and Pakistan who were among the original protesters against *The Satanic Verses* would have grown up with an understanding of blasphemy that owed as much to British colonial law as to Islamic law.[82]

FCO officials were genuinely unaware of their own government's historical role in making the blasphemy laws of large parts of the Muslim world.[83] As the previous section shows, they had to ask the British Library to find the colonial-era blasphemy laws of India after being told about them by a Pakistani provincial governor. This loss of historical memory accords with a post-imperial self-understanding of Britain as a territorial sovereign state within Europe, unmoored from the practices of its colonial past or responsibility for them. But for Mahathir, the colonial past was continued by other means, including cultural means. Britain and other Western powers could not retreat into the limits of territorial sovereignty during this crisis when the cultural power they exercised respected no borders.

Video Abstract. To view the online video abstract, please visit: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210524000676.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Prime Minister Mahathir's letter to Prime Minister Thatcher. TNA FCO8/7427, 556j, 3 March 1989

Dear Prime Minister,

Although I shall be meeting you in London, I think it will not be opportune for me to speak on this subject. Besides I do not think I will have time to say all the things I wish to say. So I am preparing this letter so that the opportunity will not just pass by.

I do not think I am a Muslim fanatic. Yet I find I cannot condone the writings of Salman Rushdie in his book, 'The Satanic Verses'. And I find the attitude of the 'Western Democracies' most patronising, arrogant and insensitive.

I know how much you value human rights and the freedom of expression. But does freedom of expression confers the right to insult with impunity? What Rushdie has done is to insult 1 billion people about a matter most sensitive and close to their hearts, their religion.

The attachment of the Muslims to their religion is not the same as that of the average modern Christian to his. Not all Christians are angered by insults to Christianity.

But it is well to remember that Islam has been around only 1400 years. The faith and fervour of the Muslims are as strong as the faith and fanaticism of the Christians of the fifteenth century. Of course, our behaviour is also influenced by the mores of the time. We are more tolerant than the fifteenth century Christians. We do not have inquisitions, we do not burn heretics

[81] See Salman Rushdie, *Joseph Anton* (London: Random House, 2012), pp. 152–3.

[82] 'Blasphemy' is a Judaeo-Christian term meaning derision of God, and no exact translation of or analogue to it exists in Islam. The closest equivalent offences in Islamic law are apostasy and infidelity, for which the Koran does not specify a punishment and on which competing legal schools have very different views. Mozaffari, 'Rushdie affair', pp. 420–2.

[83] On this historical legacy, see J. Barton Scott, *Slandering the Sacred: Blasphemy Law and Religious Affect in Colonial India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023).

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at the stake, we do not torture those who blaspheme, we do not hound the new Muslim sects as you did the Protestants, and we do not indulge in pogroms. Our behaviour is more civilised than Christians when Christianity was 1400 years old.

But are Muslims expected to accept every system of values that you invent for yourself? Are we expected to discard our codes in favour of every new idea that you determine to espouse? Are you conferred a divine right to determine how the human race of whatever religion or stage of development should behave?

To return to the freedom of expression which is supposedly such an obsession with the West. If you look at the facts you will realise that your espousal of it is because you are in a position to flay the rest of the world for not practising your code in accordance with your current judgement.

The West controls the world media and denies others access to it. Everyday the Western-controlled media becomes bigger and more powerful. The power is, of course, abused. Slanted reporting, absolute lies, sensationalism, exposures, etc. create havoc with the image of particular countries or people. The Muslims are a particular target. They are made out to be cruel brutes given to all kinds of savagery. But compare this to the cruelty of Christians – 50 million killed in the last war including some 8 million Jews. For these you blame particular individuals, not the whole race.

Against this abuse of the freedom of the expression the Muslims have no real answer. They cannot use freedom of expression to defend themselves. They have to put up with the scurrilous misrepresentation of themselves. But the book 'The Satanic Verses' by Salman Rushdie is the last straw.

Your belief in this so-called 'freedom of expression' for one disillusioned and misguided man is stronger than your belief in the value of good relations with 1 billion souls. You probably think that it is noble and worth the souring of relations with 1 billion Muslims to defend a principle that you believe in.

Well, if you believe that this one man's freedom of expression is so important, then you cannot blame Muslims if their reaction is based on their faith, the basis of their value system. After all there have been others who, out of political revenge only, have crossed boundaries in order to assassinate or kidnap. The West did not look unkindly towards these breaches.

In our value system, which we think is no inferior to yours, freedom of expression does not include blasphemy and insulting others. If anyone transgresses then he must be punished. What punishment and how it will be meted out depends on the circumstances. And the circumstances are aggravated because the Western (Christian) nations choose to protect the culprit so strongly – preferring to break diplomatic relations rather than withdraw and ban the offending book. If you think your principle is sacrosanct, then Muslims must consider the injunctions of their religion even more inviolable.

At the UN I appealed for much closer relations between Jews, Muslims and Christians. But your freedom of expression continuously prevents this. The denigration of Islam and Muslims goes on and on and prevents any understanding. And now there is this book by Salman Rushdie, which you must publish and sell to uphold a principle even if it perpetuates the enmity between states and between peoples.

Many countries have banned this book, not all of them Muslim countries. But Christians cannot find it in their hearts to save their relationship with 1 billion people.

Prime Minister, I am much saddened.

Appendix B: Draft reply from Prime Minister Thatcher to Prime Minister Mahathir, Drafted in the Middle East Department of the FCO under the direction of J. Robertson Young, Head of Department. TNA FCO8/7428, 587, undated (around 20 March 1989)

At our meeting on 15 March, you handed me a personal letter on the subject of the author Salman Rushdie and his book The Satanic Verses. It is clear that this is a matter of great personal importance to you, and I have examined the points you raise very carefully.

I very much regret that you have taken exception to the attitude of the Western democracies on this affair. I must emphasise that the British Government do not in any way condone or endorse Mr Rushdie or the content of this book. I am well aware of the distress it has caused to you and to many in the Islamic world.

Freedom of expression in this country, within the bounds of British law, is a fundamental right to which we do indeed attach major importance. However, I assure you we are not seeking to impose alien systems of values on the Muslim world. We do not seek to force other countries to publish The Satanic Verses. We understand and respect the right of any country to approach it within the framework of their own laws and customs. However, we absolutely reject Ayatollah Khomeini's claim to be able to sentence a British citizen, or a citizen of any other country, to death. This has nothing to do with relations between Christians and Muslims, or with the West trying to impose its thinking on the Islamic world. It is a simple matter of respect for international law, and national sovereignty. Nothing can justify incitement to murder. I know that many Islamic governments, including your own, have refused to endorse Ayatollah Khomeini's threats.

I was especially saddened to hear you suggest that the Western-controlled media made a particular target of the Muslim world. I cannot agree that this is the case. I believe that this century has seen a growing understanding between the nations, cultures and religions of the world. We must continue to work to improve that understanding. The British Government and people have a deep respect for the Islamic faith, for its lasting contribution to world civilisation and for the role it plays in the

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world today. We count many Islamic countries, especially your own, among our very good friends. Islam, like Christianity, is a religion of tolerance. This sad affair must not be allowed to impair all our efforts to improve understanding between the Islamic world and the West. I hope that you and I, Prime Minister, can through our personal exchanges achieve a clear perspective on this issue and to contribute to calming the feelings it has aroused worldwide.

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