



## Taylor and Dummett on the Rushdie Affair

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### Abstract

The famous twentieth-century philosophers Charles Taylor and Michael Dummett have both commented on the Rushdie Affair. This article analyzes their criticism of the British author Salman Rushdie and tries to demonstrate the relevance of this criticism against the backdrop of the massacre in the editorial offices of *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris on January 7, 2015. Unfortunately, two great philosophers of our time do not give us guidance here. The world is confused, our political leaders are confused, and great political philosophers are confused. This is important, because if freedom of expression, thought, and religion are to survive in this world, it is necessary to defend these freedoms.

Keywords: free speech, Charles Taylor, Michael Dummett, Charlie Hebdo, Salman Rushdie, Satanic Verses

### Introduction

After the January 7, 2015, killing of cartoonists of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, forty heads of state protested in the streets of Paris to demonstrate solidarity with the French. As philosopher Bernard Henri-Lévy observed, this protest represented one fourth of the United Nations (91-96). Although a momentous upsurge in favor of free speech and the importance of religious criticism arose after the attack, the debate soon continued along the lines we have become accustomed to in similar cases. In the Rushdie Affair (1989), the Danish Cartoon Affair (2005), the debate on the film *Innocence of Muslims* (2012),<sup>1</sup> and similar

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<sup>1</sup> *Innocence of Muslims* is the title attributed to a controversial movie trailer produced and written by someone operating under many nicknames, Nakoula Basseley Nakoula being the most well-known. The clip sparked an enormous reaction on the Internet and the Obama administration blamed the film for the massacre in

incidents, commentators who disparaged or relativized the advocacy of free speech and other liberal values quickly came to the fore (for a notorious example after the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre, see Todd). These values were considered typically Western by some commentators; others claimed people like Rushdie were “provocative”; and yet others claimed that Rushdie or *Charlie Hebdo* were dishonestly motivated in their actions or arrogantly disrespectful of what is holy to defenseless religious minorities (see Bawer).

The aim of this article is to engage in an analysis of what two of the most distinguished philosophers of the twentieth century, Charles Taylor and Michael Dummett, said about the Rushdie Affair. The claim of this essay is that Taylor and Dummett did not support Rushdie’s position in a controversy that would have far-reaching consequences for free speech and religious criticism. Taylor and Dummett are well-known philosophers; their arguments are worth serious consideration. What are those arguments? Do they hold water? Is there some deeper philosophy that bolsters their criticism of Rushdie’s stance? What is there to say after twenty-five years of experience with the Rushdie Affair (and similar controversies, like the *Charlie Hebdo* affair)? Do we still struggle with the same questions or have we come closer to consensus about what is to be done with these controversies?

The central claim of this article is that the critics of Rushdie and of others who incurred the wrath of what can be called “theoterrorists” are motivated by a worldview that may be (in a sense that I hope to explain in this article) characterized as multiculturalist and cultural relativist. I argue that history has not corroborated the views of Taylor or Dummett. On the contrary, subsequent events in the Cartoon Affairs, in both Denmark and France (culminating in the massacre of the cartoonists of *Charlie Hebdo*), have proved that the theoterrorist assault on free speech has to be stopped, and it will not be stopped by giving in to the demands of the terrorists.

### Charles Taylor

Charles Taylor (*b.* 1931) is an important figure in the discussion over the Rushdie Affair for several reasons, but two in particular. First, his seminal essay, “The politics of recognition” (1994: 25-75), makes him, in a sense, the founding father of multiculturalism, although he is not uncritical of some varieties of this way of thinking (other proponents are Kymlicka; Walzer; critics include Waldron 1992; Hasan; Barry; Gellner). Taylor was not the first to write from a multiculturalist perspective, but he was certainly the most impressive representative among the great philosophers to do so, and he gave the concept a philosophical underpinning and prestige it did not have before.

Second, Taylor is interesting because he wrote about the Rushdie Affair in its early stages (1989), and in 1994 and 2011. He even commented in 2015 on the murder of the cartoonists of *Charlie Hebdo* (Swan). Many other incidents occurred (or a pattern developed) over these years, and it is interesting to see whether we can discern any development of his ideas on this great controversy.

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Benghazi, which cost the American Ambassador, Chris Stevens (1960-2012), his life (see Herrenberg; Spencer: 260; Kuhnenn).

Admittedly, Taylor does not support the fatwa of Khomeini. In 1994 he wrote, “There will be variations when it comes to applying the schedule of rights, but not where incitement to assassination is concerned” (62). However, I hope to demonstrate in this essay that his defense of the universal value of free speech is so lukewarm and partly contradictory that his opposition to theoterrorism, and that of those who share his approach, is very weak indeed.

In his early essay on the Rushdie Affair, Taylor writes, “In the West we have developed explorations on the meaning of the life, of the ultimate questions, which involve rejecting religion” (1989: 118). Rushdie’s book, he says, seems a potent example of this type of religious criticism.<sup>2</sup>

Taylor discerns three features in *The Satanic Verses* that make it offensive for people with a firm religious conviction. These features are:

One, defiant unbelief, affirming the dignity of humans alone in the universe; two, courage before a universe which is in itself meaningless; and three, an acceptance of human limitation, of the irremediable unspirituality of human beings, or of the weakness, sensuality, self-referentiality of everything they call “spiritual,” not seeing this as “fallenness” anymore (1989: 119).

All three critiques appear in Rushdie’s work, Taylor says, and that upsets many people outside the Western world.

As a description of the situation, this may not strike us as particularly controversial. The only problem seems to be that Taylor makes some sweeping generalizations about “people outside the Western world” that will upset a considerable number of liberals, supporters of human rights, and advocates of Enlightenment outside the Western world (see Whitaker; Badawi). But then Taylor shifts from the descriptive to the normative or to the evaluative dimension of the matter, which is where his argument takes an interesting turn. Taylor makes a plea for “some degree of understanding,” not for Rushdie, but for Rushdie’s critics. Taylor indicts *The Satanic Verses* for being “an anti-paradigm of what we need.” He says, “The problem with this literature, as it has developed in a relatively self-satisfied Western world, is that it has lost touch altogether with the possibility that religious symbols, stories, dogmas, might mean something very different to those who espouse them than they do to the rejecters” (1989: 122). In the final sentences of his essay on the Rushdie Affair, Taylor even makes a comparison between Rushdie’s book, which he characterizes as “comforting to the Western liberal mind,” and Ayatollah Khomeini’s *fatwa*, on which Taylor has remarkably little to say. What they both have in common is “that there is nothing outside their world-view which needs deeper understanding, just a perverse reflection of the obviously right” (1989: 122).

This comparison between a murderer and his victim is clearly insinuating with regard to Rushdie (one could also call it insulting, were it not that this word is a little overused nowadays). The brunt of Taylor’s criticism in this essay seems directed not at the religious

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<sup>2</sup> This is also contended by Bradley and Tate (82-105), who picture McEwan, Amis, Pullman, and Rushdie as the artistic spokesmen of the New Atheism; Schweizer (193-213) does something similar (see also Freitas and King).

fanatic, but at the secular writer who shows insufficient concern for the sensibilities of the cleric. This does not mean, of course, that Taylor has not commented on the phenomenon of religious violence; he does so in many of his writings (see 2011; 2007: 646-710). To Taylor, apparently, the fatwa is not a “bribed assassination scheme,” or “arrogant state-sponsored homicide,” as Christopher Hitchens (28) famously characterized Khomeini’s actions, but he thinks we have to understand this against the background of what he sees as derisive speech towards religious groups.<sup>3</sup> Multiculturalists tend to show great understanding of the harm they think religious criticism inflicts on religious groups. The Western liberal mind, as Taylor calls it, will have to learn to “reach out more” and to be less “self-satisfied” (1989: 122).

Now, if Taylor takes this position with regard to *The Satanic Verses*, one does not have to ask what his position would be with regard to Theo van Gogh’s and Hirsi Ali’s film *Submission* or Terence McNally’s (b. 1938) play *Corpus Christi*, which caused havoc first among Catholics and later among Muslims, or the Danish cartoons republished in *Charlie Hebdo* (*Agence France-Presse*). Are these not all manifestations of unwillingness “to reach out more”?

Taylor’s first article was written in the year of the fatwa, the early days of the controversy. At that moment in time, not many people were successful in presenting the right diagnosis. But Taylor also commented on the matter in the later stages of the debate (1994 and 2011). What were his later views on the controversy? Did he change his position?

Taylor’s views did not change much over time (see Maclure and Taylor 2011).<sup>4</sup> In 2011, Taylor also claimed that the relationship “between religious and nonreligious people is often characterized by incomprehension, distrust, and sometimes intolerance” (2011: 106). On the normative level, Taylor and his co-author Maclure write: “Atheists and agnostics have difficulty conceiving why, in the twenty-first century, individuals adhere to religious beliefs whose truth cannot be established through the scientific approach” (2011: 106).

The question is whether *this* is the problem. It would be more accurate to say that atheists like Dawkins, Hitchens, Dennett, and also Rushdie, *know perfectly well why* some people adhere to a religious worldview, but that they simply do not agree. And *expressing* that disagreement, in the case of Rushdie, puts him into a situation in which he can be killed. Under those circumstances, it is strange to recommend “an ethics of dialogue” that is “respectful of different metaphysical and moral perspectives,” as Taylor does (Maclure and

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<sup>3</sup> I formulate this the way I do because, from Rushdie’s perspective, derision of religious groups is not the purpose of his novel. His novel criticizes religious icons, religious dogmas, sacred history, but the purpose is not to criticize a religious group. But this crucial distinction is conflated throughout in Taylor’s writings on this subject.

<sup>4</sup> In my view this is not so much a book on secularism as it is a book on multiculturalism. Taylor uses the word “secularism,” but it is certainly not secularism in the usual sense of the word. One has the impression that Taylor and Maclure try to redefine secularism in such a way that it harmonizes with their multiculturalist convictions, something that does not clarify the issue but confuses us more, in my view. Multiculturalists also sometimes use the tendentious vocabulary of “open” and “closed” secularism, which is not very helpful either (although highly suggestive), because who wants to be a defender of a “closed” position? So-called “open” secularism is not some sort of higher Hegelian synthesis, but an attack on secularism tout court. It would be more “open” to state this clearly.

Taylor 2011: 107). This is not about metaphysical perspectives, but about life and death. This is about a dictator who wants to kill a novelist for no other reason than that the novelist has published a book. Occasionally, Taylor intersperses his argument with what seem to be concessions to Rushdie's point of view. He writes that there is no incompatibility between promoting "an ethics of dialogue" and affirming the value of free speech and the evil of violence. As Taylor and Maclure write, "Just as freedom of religion does not include the right not to be exposed to religious symbols, the price to be paid for living in a society that protects that exercise of freedom of conscience and expression is the understanding we will be exposed to beliefs and practices we judge false, ridiculous, or hurtful" (2011: 109).

Now that sounds very promising, as does Taylor and Maclure's statement that they would not like to live "in a society where Salman Rushdie and Richard Dawkins would be censored" (2011: 109). But immediately after this passage comes a "with that said" and the authors again appeal to responsibility and understanding. And again, not understanding from the side of the religious fanatics who issue death threats, but from the side of the critics of religion, the satirists, and the proponents of free speech. Taylor does not seem to understand that the most effective weapon against censorship is defending the right to free speech in the face of the imminent danger that religious fanatics reintroduce by a sort of informal inquisition and vigilante justice. As the British author Douglas Murray reacted to the call for dialogue: "And might that dialogue start with a cartoon, maybe? Or a film? Or a bit of satire?" It is difficult to have a true dialogue when the other side threatens to kill you if they do not like what you say.

#### *What Multiculturalism Has to Do With It*

In 2011, like in 1989 and 1994, Taylor seems to develop his views under the guidance of a certain ideology or philosophy, *viz.* multiculturalism. The mistake of multiculturalism (or Taylor's interpretation of it)<sup>5</sup> seems to be this: both in 1989 and in 2011, Taylor seems to think that his position expresses "respect for Muslims." But that interpretation of events may be challenged. If you uphold freedom of speech to criticize religion or religious icons, or even to make satirical comments about holy figures (see Dworkin), that is certainly not identical with disrespect for Muslims. On the contrary, by not making an exception for Islam when it comes to criticism you express the greatest respect for Muslims *as persons* (see Rachels: 130-41). You treat them as equals. Nevertheless, conflating religion with religious believers is a fatal misunderstanding that haunts this whole discussion. Arguably, what Taylor missed both in 1989 and in 2011 is that this is not about pro or contra Muslims or pro or contra minorities, but about pro or contra religious fanaticism, religious fundamentalism, and religiously motivated terrorism (see Kepel 2004a, 2004b).

As I have shown before, Taylor also claims that he is against religious fanaticism, religious fundamentalism, and religiously motivated terrorism, but the problem is that he

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<sup>5</sup> Needless to say, what is "multiculturalism" and what is not is always a semantic discussion. In the Canadian context "multiculturalism" is a hurrah word. "Multiculturalism" is something to celebrate. Every negative association connected to the word is experienced as not belonging to the core of the concept. For a more critical analysis see Baber; Bissoondath.

only *says this*, and then when a novelist is hit by the most effective attempt to silence him,<sup>6</sup> Taylor responds with elaborate comments on what is wrong with the novelist's tone, with religious satire, and with what he calls the "liberal mind."

The dilemma seems to be this. If religious satire is confronted with the daunting challenge it now faces, there are only two possible options: (i) you defend religious satire, or (ii) you do not. And the problem is, Taylor does not. The tragedy is that he does this based on a misguided diagnosis of the situation that he thinks is in the interest of Muslims as a group. But that claim may be challenged. This is basically consigning Islam (and Muslims) to the most radical and fanatic interpretation of that religion. All good intentions notwithstanding, this attempt to safeguard Islam or Islamic holy symbols and icons from satire is a dangerous strategy.

#### *The West and the Rest*

Despite all indications to the contrary, Taylor starts from a false antithesis between the West (in favor of liberal principles such as free speech and the separation of church and state)<sup>7</sup> and Islam, which lacks all this, in his opinion. This is problematic, to say the least. There are many liberal voices within Islamic culture that support the idea that Islam can be criticized like every other religion (as is the case with Rushdie's non-Western supporters; see Abdallah).

There is one thing that hampers our attempt to understand what Taylor means. A considerable problem in interpreting Taylor's stance is that he does not seem to take one consistent position either way, but constantly vacillates from one position to another. The general tenor, though, is dismissive of Rushdie, dismissive of "the Western liberal mind" (whatever that may be), and dismissive of those who advocate the primacy of individual human rights (see O'Neill: 219-50). The problem is this is something we simply cannot afford when freedom of speech is so effectively attacked by the theoterrorists.

That Taylor is fully aware of the context of the discussion in 2011 appears from the passage in which he refers to offensive artistic creations like Rushdie's book, the caricatures of Mohammed, and the films about Christ by Martin Scorsese and Mel Gibson. Taylor states that he does not believe that we have to limit the freedom of expression "in the name of respect," but having said that, he goes on: "except in flagrant cases of defamation or incitement to hatred" (Maclure and Taylor 2011: 108).

What strikes the eye is that Taylor leaves out "incitement to violence" as a possible limitation of free speech, although this is the most obvious limitation (see Mill: 5-115;

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<sup>6</sup> Perhaps there is also a difference of opinion between the two camps in this discussion in the sense that the advocates of moderation and understanding do not think the theoterrorists are winning this controversy. They argue that Rushdie is still alive. That is true, but he would never consider writing *The Satanic Verses*, Part II. And the plight of the Danish cartoonists (all hidden, except one: Kurt Westergaard) and the French cartoonists (killed on January 7, 2015) proves that the amount of pressure exerted on those who uphold the principle of religious satire and religious criticism is enormous.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. Taylor 1994: 62: "For mainstream Islam, there is no question of separating politics and religion the way we have come to expect in Western liberal society." Authors like Bassam Tibi (2008, 2013) would qualify this statement as a caricature of Islam.

Rabban: 158; Hume). Instead of referring to incitement to physical violence, Taylor refers to “defamation,” one of the terms used recently by members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to suffocate free speech within the Human Rights Council of the United Nations (see Cherry and Brown; Ibn and Weiss: 1-6). Should we conclude from this that Taylor wants to advocate that religious symbols should not be “defamed”? But what is wrong with defaming symbols?

The problem with Taylor’s views is that it is quite difficult to establish what his position really comprises. Once he has stated his views, this is usually followed by statements that seem to take back what he defended in previous sentences. This is probably considered by some to be a manifestation of his sophistication, but others may less generously view it as vagueness or imprecision. For instance, having made the remarks about “defamation,” Taylor also says he would not like to live in a society “where Salman Rushdie or Richard Dawkins would be censored” (Maclure and Taylor 2011: 109). The tragedy is that Taylor is totally sincere; he does not like censorship. But by advocating an ethics of dialogue in a situation where the violent forces gain the upper hand, he accomplishes the exact opposite of what he wishes. The word “tragedy” seems entirely appropriate here. Why does Taylor not present a more straightforward rejection of the fatwa?<sup>8</sup> Is not issuing a fatwa to kill critics the introduction of the most efficient system of censorship imaginable? What is the meaning of rejecting censorship if you condone violence towards authors who are targeted by criminals and terrorists? *Nota bene*: not condoning by saying “I think violence is justified” (which Taylor never does, of course), but condoning by repeatedly addressing the wrong issues, *viz.* “respect,” or “harm done to religious groups,” when the real issue is that terrorists are becoming pretty successful in stifling free speech.

#### *The Exceptio Artis*

Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* causes problems for many readers because it is literature. Hard core Islamists tend to portray Rushdie’s book as some sort of pornography or insignificant propaganda,<sup>9</sup> but for Western multiculturalist critics this was more difficult. Whether you like it or not, Rushdie is a qualified literary writer.

At the end of their book, Taylor and Maclure appear to make a distinction between the Danish and French caricatures on the one hand and Rushdie’s book on the other. Rushdie’s mockery, says Taylor, “was situated within a work that offers a compelling portrait of the human condition in the era of globalization” (2011: 110). This is no small compliment. But this cannot be said of the caricatures, he adds.

Here, again, we may ask whether the two things are comparable. Of course, a cartoon does not create a “compelling portrait of the human condition in the era of globalization” or anything complex of that sort. How could a cartoon or caricature ever do that? That would

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<sup>8</sup> Taylor adds that, although he rejects censorship, one might say it is not “wise” or “desirable” to exert the type of criticism that Rushdie presented.

<sup>9</sup> “Rushdie’s enemies claim that *The Satanic Verses* and similar writings fall into exactly the category of pornography, and they think that it is not a particularly serious matter (it may even be a good thing) if writing of this kind is chilled or deterred. This is the case that must be answered if the cosmopolitan vision is to be sustained” (Waldon 1992: 766).

be an impossible task for a cartoon. What those who commissioned the cartoons in 2005 tried to establish is whether free speech was still guaranteed in the Western world after the murder of the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh on November 2, 2004 (Eyerman 2008 and 2011; Llosa). What they devised was some sort of experiment (Caldwell: 167-71; Rose: 2; Klausen: 4). They invited cartoonists to draw Mohammed “as they see him” (Klausen: 7). The rest is history.

In the meantime (between 1989 and 2011, when Taylor is writing) one could say that much new material has been produced that proved that the commissioner of the cartoons, Flemming Rose, the editor in chief of the culture section of the Danish newspaper *Jyllands Posten*, was not entirely mistaken about his concern in 2005, but what does Taylor say about that? He makes the same controversial contentions he made in his earlier contributions to the discussion on the Rushdie fatwa; in other words, he totally misinterprets the intentions of those who publish and republish cartoons that are deemed so offensive to those prepared to use gross violence. In this case it is about the reprinting of those cartoons in the satirical French magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. This republication, Taylor asserts, “served only to fan the conflict and to shore up the newspaper staff’s sense of self-importance” (Maclure and Taylor 2011: 110; for a defense of *Charlie Hebdo*, see Val 2015; 2008; Fourest).

Taylor simply undervalues the moral and political justification of satire as being a literary genre. Characteristic of satire is not just irony, but sarcasm too. The *Oxford Dictionary* defines “satire” as “The use of humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people’s stupidity or vices, particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues.” And *Wordweb* delineates satire as “Witty language used to convey insults or scorn, esp. saying one thing but implying the opposite.” Two things stand out here: (i) satire can convey scorn and insults; and (ii) satire is not *only* meant for amusement, but it has a political and moral function: people’s stupidity and vices are subjected to criticism.

Both elements seem to have little significance for Taylor. He fails to see that the publication of the caricatures in 2005 and their republication in *Charlie Hebdo* had the motive *to defend free speech* (Huffington Post; Swan; Fourest; Val 2015), which is something entirely different from shoring up your self-importance. According to the editors of *Charlie Hebdo* (and they have good arguments here), it makes no sense to say, “I am in favor of free speech, but under the circumstances I consider it wise not to republish the cartoons the terrorists want to force us not to publish.” Under the circumstances indicated, the only credible way to uphold free speech is not to give in to the terrorists. It is like saying, “I very much like satire; I just don’t like sarcasm, irony, insults, and scorn.” If you really do not like those things, you should better say you do not like satire.

In Taylor’s remarks about the Rushdie Affair, and its offshoots in the cartoon affairs, there does not seem to be any understanding of the high-minded motivations of both Rushdie and the cartoonists. They took great risks, and some of them even died for their convictions, like Stéphane Charbonnier (1967–2015), the editor in chief of *Charlie Hebdo* who declared that he would rather die standing upright than continue to live on his knees: “Je préfère mourir debout que vivre à genoux” (quoted in Laes: 15; see also Bougrab: 194 ff).

Since January 7, 2015, we know that the security measures for the French cartoonists were taken in vain, because nearly the entire editorial board was gunned down by the

Kouachi brothers (Claudel; Laes). So far the Danish cartoonist Kurt Westergaard has survived all murder attempts, but the way Taylor and Maclure slur the cartoonists by accusing them of shoring up their sense of self-importance is manifestly in contradiction with what the people who defended the right to satire have explained about their motives. Perhaps Taylor does not believe them. But in that case, it would do more justice to them to explain why they, Taylor and Maclure, think they have more reliable information about the motives of those who took the decision to publish and republish the caricatures than the persons themselves.

Subsequently, Taylor praises Western media outlets that refused to republish the caricatures. He claims this attested to “wise judgment,” but he fails to explain why he thinks this is the case; in particular, he does not explain why this was not the same as capitulating in the face of terror. If a mobster puts a gun to your head and commands you to give him your money, it may also be “wise” to comply, but this wisdom has a sinister undertone, does it not? And every loving father of a cartoonist would argue with his son if he were considering trying his artistic talent on the prophet of Islam. But that does not imply this has anything to do with “dialogue,” and it only testifies to “wise judgment” in a very specific sense.

At the end of his analysis Taylor also confuses the matter discussed (i.e., what to do with religiously motivated violence?) with the question of whether religion can be a basis for morals. This is, of course, an entirely different subject. He praises Rawls and Habermas (“who once defended more restrictive views”<sup>10</sup>) and arrives at the conclusion “that religious perspectives are important sources of ethics that can contribute significantly toward furthering democratic culture” (Maclure and Taylor 2011: 110).

The problem is this is a totally different subject. That religion is a source of ethics is something nobody can deny (see Nowell-Smith 1966; 1967; and especially in 1999: 403-12). Khomeini’s fatwa was undoubtedly connected with his religious views. But this example also makes it abundantly clear that religious perspectives do not always put us on the track of responsible moral judgment. Mixing up the subject of the supposed religious basis of morals with the subject of the limitations of free speech is not very helpful.

Daniel Dennett once coined the concept “believer in belief” (200; see also Dawkins: 20) and Kitcher speaks of a “fan of faith.” Some people, even people without clear religious beliefs, are convinced that somehow religion serves a useful purpose, or even that it is necessary to uphold morals. Now what the new atheists (a current that Rushdie is closely connected to) do (Stenger; Amarasingam) and what other atheists have done (Femen), as far as that was possible without losing their lives (see Bury; Robertson 1936), is raise consciousness and critically discuss religious belief (this is also missed by Dalrymple). The problem is that Taylor and many commentators who think along the same lines reiterate that they have a problem with “mockery” and “satire.” But that would imply that, together with *The Satanic Verses*, they have to reject a whole corpus of great literature, including Aristophanes, Horace, Juvenal to Rabelais, Molière, Voltaire, Jonathan Swift, and countless others. What is unclear is whether those critics are against (i) *every* form of satire (so also

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<sup>10</sup> The word “restrictive” is important to highlight here. Apparently, the view that morals are not necessarily based on religion is called “restrictive” by Taylor.

satire with regard to e.g. liberalism, socialism, the monarchy, and free thought), (ii) satire of *religion* in general (so making religion something special because people suffer great harm when their most holy convictions are involved), or (iii) satire when it comes to *violent religious radicals* (considering it “wise judgment” not to poke the bear).

### Michael Dummett and the Cause of Anti-Racism

That brings me to the second great philosopher, Michael Dummett, I want to focus on as representative for the multiculturalist response to the Rushdie Affair. Dummett’s criticism is similar to that of Taylor. He is not primarily concerned with the exertion of violence from the side of the theoterrorists, but with the “pain” Rushdie caused by publishing his book, pain that was inflicted on what Dummett calls “immigrant communities.” Dummett introduces a new notion to the discussion, that is, the notion of *race*. Dummett, apparently, thinks that criticizing someone’s religious beliefs makes that critic, wittingly or unwittingly, a “racist.” This is a serious affair, because once you start to stigmatize criticism of religion as some form of racism, every reasonable discussion becomes virtually impossible. Nevertheless, this is the fateful turn this whole discussion had taken (see Finkelkraut 2015).

But before I venture to criticize Dummett’s ideas, let me start with a short introduction. Michael Dummett (1925–2011), like Charles Taylor, is a very prominent philosopher of our time. He was Wykeham Professor of Logic at Oxford. He is noted for his great contributions to the philosophy of language, logic, and mathematics (Hondereich: 208). Dummett held teaching posts at Birmingham University, the University of California at Berkeley, Stanford University, Princeton University, and Harvard University. He is the winner of many prizes for excellent philosophical work. He is known particularly for his clear exposition of the work of the logician Gottlob Frege.

After Dummett died in 2011, *The New York Times* invited colleagues and pupils of the great philosopher to testify about the extent of his knowledge and his influence on contemporary philosophy. This shows us a great personality, beloved by all, and also universally admired. “Michael was exemplary, not just as a thinker, but as a human being,” his colleague Hilary Putnam writes. He was lavishly praised for his generosity and tolerance. “Not once did Dummett attempt to proselytize,” one of his former students remarks (Green).

Apart from sophisticated philosophical analyses in the field of logic and the philosophy of language, there are two other dimensions to his work, and they require our attention for a proper understanding of his stance in the Rushdie Affair. First is his commitment to Roman Catholicism. He was received in the Catholic Church in 1944 and he remained a practicing Catholic his entire life. He also engaged in heated debates about theological matters, such as the Eucharist. An important contribution he wrote in 1987 sparked considerable controversy among Catholics because he castigated those who diverged from orthodox Catholicism. After Dummett’s death, one of his Italian pupils wrote in 2011 that on Good Friday, “when there was the traditional ‘veneration’ (kissing) of the cross, Dummett would take off his shoes before joining the procession” (Crane). Another pupil wrote: “Sir Michael was a profoundly religious person and found it hard to understand the preconceived hostility of many Italian intellectuals towards the Catholic Church” (Picardi).

Second, we have to mention Dummett's commitment to anti-racism. Dummett tried to influence civil rights movements in what he took to be the interest of minorities. This resulted in his book *On Immigration and Refugees* (2001) in which he defended the position that opposition to immigration was founded on racism. One of his former students writes about the book: "It is a stunning account of the historic failures of the British government to address questions of racism and protect refugees and an elegant philosophical argument for an immigration policy broadly based on natural law that would not respect national frontiers" (Critchley).

One may consider "not respecting national frontiers" to be a bit unrealistic, especially in these times of mass migration. One may also think that developing an immigration policy based on natural law is wildly utopian. But, having said all this, one might still be impressed by many aspects of Dummett's book – a book that is, ironically, similar to many of Rushdie's ideas, as expressed in his essays (2010).

#### *Dummett on Rushdie*

I think these two elements are helpful to understand Dummett's stance in the Rushdie Affair, although, as I hope to make clear, in the end Dummett does not prove to be a better guide on the matter than Taylor.

A good start is to highlight Dummett's great political commitment. According to many of his pupils, Dummett had a great sensitivity for injustice. He separated himself from the other giants of the philosophical profession "through his enduring commitment to eradicating injustices wherever he found them," one of his pupils writes in his testimony on the great philosopher (Lepore). "He was also hugely generous to people whose lives were threatened by racism," another testimonial indicates (Isaacson). But if someone's life was threatened by the dictates of a violent theocrat (Khomeini), this was not one of the causes Dummett would take interest in.

This is remarkable, because Dummett was a socially committed author. And when Dummett took up a political cause, he did it with total commitment. This was also the case when he jumped into the discussion on the Khomeini fatwa. He wrote an article in *The Independent* on February 11, 1990, in the form of an open letter to Salman Rushdie (see also Wheatcroft).

The author begins with the statement that he was extremely glad that the first Muslim responses, published in the newspaper in reaction to Rushdie's "In good faith,"<sup>11</sup> had been so generous. And then he continues, "My own reaction, I am sorry to say, is less generous. After a year in which to reflect upon it, is that all that you could manage to say?"

The first thing that is remarkable in this statement, is that one would think if the first Muslim reactions were so generous, why not be very happy indeed? Do not stir the pot, one would be inclined to say. And do not try to continue a conflict that everyone would be more

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<sup>11</sup> This is an article in which Rushdie clarifies his position. It is an apology that is not an excuse. Like his great predecessor, Socrates, who was also accused of blasphemy, Rushdie cautiously and rationally explains his motives in writing the book and why he wrote it "in good faith" (see Rushdie 2010: 393-414; for Socrates, see Plato; Bury 1964: 75-90).

than happy to leave behind. If the first Muslims reacted in such a positive way, why not Dummett? But that is not Dummett's reaction. He wants to provide us with reasons to be "less generous."

What is also remarkable is that the year Rushdie had to spend in captivity to escape from his potential murderers is characterized by Dummett as a year in which he could "reflect" upon the matter, as if he were some sort of naughty boy who might be brought to repentance by thinking over his immoral deeds ("you sit there for a while, young man, and think on what you've done!").

Dummett starts by informing his readers of the "untold damage" the Rushdie Affair did in his view. Not to Rushdie himself, it soon turns out. That becomes clear when Dummett refers to the "intensified alienation of Muslims here and in other Western countries from the society around them." Dummett speaks of "racist hostility." He also mentions the "wretched hostages" who experienced a "far more severe imprisonment" than that of Rushdie.<sup>12</sup> Rushdie is also castigated for not having mentioned an imam in Belgium who spoke out against Khomeini and who was assassinated.

One would have thought that this was all ample evidence of the fact that it was the fatwa by Khomeini at the bottom of all this, but that is, apparently, not the way Dummett sees it. No book, no fatwa, seems to be the elementary "logic" of Dummett.

Now, what leaves the reader puzzled is that we are not talking about a person totally inexperienced in abstract thought, someone who engages in metaphysical speculations and, understandably, makes some elementary mistakes, but about one of the best trained philosophers in the twentieth century, respected and revered by all. Dummett is a logician. But would it not be crystal clear to every reader of *The Independent*, in which Dummett published his diatribe, that in Dummett's particular establishment of causal relations, one ought to reproach the *victim* of the robbery that he was walking in the street (had he not been there, he would not have been robbed). Or one should reproach the man whose car was stolen for having had a car in his possession in the first place. The reason that cars are stolen is *not* that there are thieves, but that there are cars.

Now the problem is that the notion of causality is very complicated. And not many analytical philosophers can claim to be in a better position to shed light on the issue than Michael Dummett, who is rightly famous for untangling the most difficult of philosophical knots.

What is the cause of all the trouble? Is the "cause" that Rushdie published the book? That Khomeini issued the fatwa? That many people are so sensitive when their religion is criticized? That Rushdie lost his faith? That his parents had sent him to a school in England

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<sup>12</sup> Dummett tacitly refers to Terry Waite, who was held hostage in Lebanon from 1987 to 1991, while trying to get other hostages free. Among the other hostages was John Patrick McCarthy, a British journalist and broadcaster. McCarthy was held in Lebanon for more than five years. Dummett's remarks about the other hostages being in a far more serious predicament proved wrong. This cannot be held as an argument against him, because no one can predict the future, although some commentators already foretold that Rushdie's predicament would last his whole life, if he survived (see Waldron 1993).

(instead of India)? The list of “causes” is endless, of course. And the trouble with Dummett, as with Taylor, is he only focuses on the publication of the book and not on the fatwa.

*The Tragedy of Being an Honorary White*

Another curious preoccupation of Dummett’s is his concern about Rushdie’s reputation among ethnic communities. During a television broadcast, Rushdie had denounced “British racism,” Dummett tells us. And precisely that status as a hero within ethnic communities made Rushdie’s book “appear so great a betrayal,” according to Dummett. The tragedy for Rushdie, according to Dummett, was this: “Much as you might want to, you can never again play that role: you can never again credibly assume the stance of denouncer of white prejudice.”

But how is it possible that Dummett is concerned about these things while Rushdie’s *life* was at stake? Rushdie’s primary concern was to stay alive, to reach the next day unharmed, every sensible reader of *The Independent* must have thought after reading these lines. It is nothing short of hilarious that Dummett thinks Rushdie’s greatest concern should be: Oh gosh, unfortunately the fatwa precludes me from acting as a denouncer of white prejudice. What a tragedy! Is not this very silly? Dummett reproaches Rushdie: “Now you are one of us. You have become an honorary white: merely an honorary white intellectual, it is true, but an honorary white all the same.”

But Rushdie thought that, at that moment in time, addressing Islamic fundamentalism was more important than talking about white racism. In fact, maybe he even thought that talking about Islam was so important that it was worth giving up the credit he had to talk about racism. Apparently Dummett is so concerned about racism that that it does not even occur to him that white racism might not always be the biggest problem in the room.

According to Dummett, being a white intellectual seems to be one of the most terrible things that can happen to a person. And the greatest status a person can aspire to is to develop into a “denouncer of white prejudice.” “If you really did not grasp the offense you would give to believing Muslims, you were not qualified to write upon the subject you choose,” he writes. Like Taylor, Dummett seems to think there are no, or hardly any, Muslims who support free speech, freedom of religion, freedom of thought, and other universal human rights (in contrast to believing Muslims who support free speech, such as Manji 2003, 2011; Tibi 2008, 2013). In fact, such a claim is much more offensive to Muslims than to treat them as ordinary human beings who, like other believers, are perfectly able to accept some criticism of their religion.

This is somewhat surprising for a philosopher to maintain. Is not the history of philosophy full of offensive ideas? That is precisely the point of being a philosopher: thinking something most people do *not* think. And to express these thoughts, despite the unintended consequence that other people will complain of being offended.<sup>13</sup> One may think

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<sup>13</sup> Therefore, the history of philosophy overlaps with the history of free thought (see Bury; Robertson 1957).

that the cartoonists deliberately made the cartoons to “shock, offend or disturb,”<sup>14</sup> but the answer is they did not. What they wanted is to make a point about the precarious position of free speech nowadays, a position that is only further jeopardized by the creeping concessions being made to the violent theocrats.

*Having Foreseen the Consequences*

Dummett also reproaches Rushdie for not having foreseen the consequences. But is that reasonable? No one could have predicted the Rushdie Affair (though Lewis comes the closest). Likewise, relatively few scholars predicted the fall of the Berlin wall or the outbreak of the French Revolution. If history teaches us anything, it is that the most important social revolutions were unforeseen. If failing to predict such occurrences deprived someone of his qualifications to write about these subjects, there would not be many people left at the universities. But apart from that, is it relevant that Rushdie should have known the consequences? Suppose he had, what does that imply? Suppose Galileo could have predicted the trouble he would get into with the Inquisition? Or that Giordano Bruno had known that he could end up at the stake? Does that make them in any way culpable or responsible for what happened? Perhaps they simply thought it was their duty to come forward with the information that was so unwelcome to the Vatican.

And then Dummett takes an equally debatable step by saying, “No one escapes responsibility for the consequences of a bad action by having failed to foresee them.” But what does that mean exactly? Would it not be more reasonable to proclaim that one cannot bear responsibility for what one cannot foresee?

How can Dummett deny this? Only God could have foreseen the fatwa. And further, publishing a novel *was not a bad action* (whatever Khomeini’s ideas may have been). The action was completely legitimate according to the legal system of the country in which Rushdie was living at that time. Does Dummett want to suggest that there is an official legal system, the British system, and a kind of informal legal order that Rushdie was supposed to have known because of his special knowledge of Islam? But that would mean a kind of sharia law (Zee 2014, 2015; Johnson) with international legal validity, also when it contrasts with national legal systems. The acceptance of this would gravely undermine the ideal of legal certainty in the national legal order. And would it not mean that we are all now in complete ignorance about what disasters are lying in wait, although we assume we have faithfully respected the law of the country in which we are living?<sup>15</sup>

What would the principles of the new, till that moment unknown, legal order be? One candidate seems to be that we all have to know that, in Dummett’s words, “it is a disgusting thing to defile what other men regard as holy.” But men regard many things as holy. Usually philosophers are not intimidated by that. Socrates was not impressed by that, nor was

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<sup>14</sup> According to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, in the case *Handyside v. United Kingdom of 1976*, freedom of speech is also applicable to expressions that “shock, disturb and offend” (see Cherry and Brown: 5).

<sup>15</sup> Legal scholars call this the principle of legality: *nullum crimen sine lege* (see Krey). Lon Fuller writes: “The desideratum of clarity represents one of the most essential ingredients of legality” (63).

Spinoza or Descartes, or Kant or Nietzsche. Is not the mark of a great philosopher precisely that he does *not* respect those taboos? Dummett holds things sacred which Rushdie does not and *vice versa*.

Philosophers let every idea present its claims before the tribunal of reason and respect only reasonable constraints on free speech and free inquiry. A reasonable constraint seems to be that one may not incite to physical violence.<sup>16</sup> But trying to establish sacredness as a criterion for limiting free speech is highly questionable. For a Christian, claiming that Christ is the son of God is sacred, for a Jew or a Muslim this is the greatest abomination, a blasphemous claim. The consequence of all this is that sacredness is unsuited as a moral or legal criterion for limiting free speech. Demanding to reestablish sacredness in that role (which it had in premodern societies) violates the principles of modern tolerance (which basically means the acceptance that what is sacred to Jovi is not sacred to Bovi). Sacredness does not play a role in any modern constitution, nor in the *European Human Rights Charter* (1950), *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948), or in *The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (1966).

### Conclusion

Both Taylor and Dummett seem to be heavily influenced by a Catholic worldview. Usually these things are not explicitly revealed as relevant in analytical philosophy that is dominant in the Anglo-Saxon world, but one may speculate that this is unsatisfying. And it is not the case in some French handbooks of philosophy. Évelyne Pisier writes that in the 1980s, the Catholic philosophy of Thomas Aquinas gained a new topical interest in the United States (13). Thinkers such as Alasdair MacIntyre and the Canadian Charles Taylor “opposed the modern theories starting with Descartes and the philosophy of the Enlightenment” to defend the notion that rationality is not an abstract capacity but has to be construed as linked to tradition. As MacIntyre claims in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality* (1988), it is impossible to uphold a morality based upon individualism. He advocates a “back to Aristotle” movement in contrast to the “back to Kant” movement derived from the work of, among others, Jürgen Habermas, Pisier observes (13).

Although an adherent of Anglo-Saxon analytical philosophy, and therefore departing from different philosophical assumptions than Taylor and MacIntyre, Michael Dummett seems to share some of their religious convictions. *En passant*, Dummett formulates some other matters he would like to see criminalized: not only defiling holy things and incitement to hatred, but also incitement to “contempt” and pornography.<sup>17</sup>

The problem is that what Dummett will qualify as “contempt” is to other people a natural expression of their humanist convictions. From an orthodox perspective, Erasmus’s

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<sup>16</sup> I want to emphasize “physical.” There is a tendency to interpret J. S. Mill’s norm that one may not “harm” someone in an extended sense. You also “harm” someone by attacking the ideas or symbols he or she considers sacred. From there it seems a small step to protect people from ideas, books, and debates that might upset them. Hume warns us against a creeping culture of conformism and You-Can’t-Say-That that undermines critical thinking at university campuses in the USA nowadays.

<sup>17</sup> This is a not-so-liberal idea we also find with MacKinnon, whose work apparently but surprisingly influenced Waldron (2009-2010; 2012). For a more realistic treatment of the subject, see Monroe.

*The Praise of Folly* (1509) is nothing other than disrespect, contempt, scorn, or an insult, while from another perspective it is the expression of a humanist way of life. The same can be said about Voltaire's *Candide* (1759). And what Dummett will experience as "pornography," for other people consists of stimulating and creative ideas about what you can do with your love partner to make life more pleasant (on pornography, see Post; Rushdie 2004; Monroe).

The impression one gets from Taylor's and Dummett's commentaries on the Rushdie Affair is that they project *their own discontent* with modernity onto the Muslim community.<sup>18</sup> But as has been said before, liberal Muslims like Bassam Tibi, Maajid Nawaz, and Irshad Manji have no difficulties with freedom of expression, freedom of religion (including the freedom to apostatize), and religious criticism.

Let me try to conclude. In this essay I have criticized the reactions of two of the most important philosophers of our time to an important event: the assault on free speech as a principle. It is significant that the two philosophers analyzed in this article have failed to identify the relevant issue as such. They have elaborated on an ethics of dialogue, offensive speech, religious minorities (in the case of Taylor), and on racism (in the case of Dummett). Unfortunately, these are not the relevant questions. And not only is the way Taylor and Dummett approach the issue irrelevant, it is harmful. It distracts our attention from the real issue that is at stake. The real issue is that freedom of speech is in decline under the influence of religious terrorism. This religious terrorism manifested itself for the first time in the Rushdie Affair (1989), but soon developed further in the Danish (2005) and French (2015) cartoon affairs. The tragic death of the cartoonists of *Charlie Hebdo* on January 7, 2015, makes this clear.

Unfortunately, two great philosophers of our time do not give us guidance here. The world is confused, our political leaders are confused, and great political philosophers are confused. This is important, because if freedom of expression, freedom of thought, and freedom of religion are to survive in this world, it is necessary to defend these freedoms. Part of that defense is a clear exposition of the ideas behind the cartoons, Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, or similar works. But the hardest part is perhaps to contradict the many commentators who accuse the cartoonists of willfully offending others or trampling on others' most sacred convictions.

Whether freedom of speech, including the freedom of religious criticism, is to survive in the modern world has become a serious question. We should not forget that the massacre in the headquarters of *Charlie Hebdo* on January 7, 2015, was, from a terrorist perspective, a huge success. The terrorists have succeeded in sending a clear signal to everyone who dares to defy their demands. We should never forget that Rushdie never wrote another book similar to *The Satanic Verses*. Kurt Westergaard never drew another cartoon like the one he made in 2005 (and for which he has to live the rest of his life inside a prison of security guards). Theo van Gogh was murdered in 2004, like Charbonnier and other cartoonists and editors of *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015. Many people who feel connected with their ideas simply do not want to tread in their footsteps.

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<sup>18</sup> Although Taylor (1991) claims that he strikes some sort of balance between modernity and premodern ways of thinking.

The most haunting specter is not that people write religious satire (as has been done, against all odds, throughout European history), but that many people will stop doing so because they feel unsupported by their government, which is unable to guarantee their safety, and because their intentions are mischaracterized by the greatest intellectuals of our time, who pontificate about “respect,” “dialogue,” and “wise judgment,” but in fact play into the hands of the terrorists. The real tragedy is that the Kouachi brothers really believe in the principles they fight for, and are prepared to die for those principles. And the real malaise of modernity, to be distinguished from what Taylor identifies (1991), is that *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* is there, on paper, but the finest thinkers of our time do not support its principles.

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