

(a) Chalice: Salman Rushdie - who unwittingly & unwillingly became a hero  
- screech: but I hope he's laughing  
~~Alice Bullen story~~ From all that dumb #13

(c) Alice Bullen story (d) Hum B... Yale #52

PRAIRIE SOCIETY, Oct. 29, 1989

"THE DEVIL IS THE SPIRIT OF GRAVITY ---- THROUGH HIM ALL THINGS FALL"

(1) Friedrich Nietzsche is my favorite 19th c. philosopher. There is much in his philosophy to disagree with. He was clearly opposed to democracy, to human equality. He tended to devalue anything like Christian charity. The notion of the will to power is central to his thought, and along with it went praise of war and of obedience. The notion of eternal recurrence is central to his philosophy, and I find it impossible to take that notion at all seriously. And Nietzsche often enough comes across as a male chauvinist pig, even if he's often rather witty about it. He began one of his books like this:

Supposing that Truth is a woman - what then? Is there not ground for suspecting that all philosophers, in so far as they have been dogmatists, have failed to understand women - that the terrible seriousness and clumsy importunity with which they have usually paid their addresses to Truth, have been unskilled and unseemly methods for winning a woman? Certainly she has never allowed herself to be won.... (ML, p. 377)

I like him because he's funny, something rare among philosophers, and the humor is really part of his philosophy. Also central is his hostility to dogmatism, his stress on not only the possibility but the necessity of being creative in moral concerns.

(2) He could be funny in writing about god and the devil. The title of the program today comes from the following passage,

John H. 103

Reading (A) - P, p. 153

Perhaps his best known line is "God is dead." He had some different scenarios about the death of the gods.

Nicholas S.

Reading (B) (P), p. 294

Alice Bullen

Reading (C) (P), p. 202

He often wrote in an aphoristic manner, like the following:

Love to one only is a barbarity, for it is exercised at the expense of all others. Love to God also! (ML, p. 451)

He makes a case for atheism by inverting one common proof for the existence of God. Theists sometimes argue, with more or less sophistication, that there MUST be a God, because without a God the world would be meaningless, and with a God the world has a meaning that we know it has. His inversion is that

...IF there were gods, how could I endure not to be a god! THEREFORE, there are no gods. . . . Creation -- that is the great redemption from suffering and life's growing light. . . . what could one create if gods existed? (P), pp. 198f

(2)

(3) Nietzsche titled his first great book "Thus Spake Zarathustra." He felt that Zarathustra, Zoroaster, first developed the idea that the universe was divided between the forces of absolute good and absolute evil, existing from the beginning and in constant struggle with one another. He has Zarathustra come back to earth to overcome this absolute distinction. Thus far,

We are presented with grave words and values almost from the cradle: 'good' and 'evil' this gift is called. For its sake we are forgiven for living.

And therefore one suffers little children to come unto one --- in order to forbid them betimes to love themselves: thus the spirit of gravity orders it. (P), p. 305

But

...men gave themselves all their good and evil...they did not take it, they did not find it, nor did it come to them as a voice from heaven. Only man placed values in things to preserve himself --- he alone created a meaning for things, a human meaning....Change of value --- that is a change of creators. Whoever must be a creator always annihilates. p. 170

But the good and the just create harm.

Ann 4.

Reading (D) (P), p. 324

(4) Salman Rushdie took Nietzsche's advice and set out to slay the spirit of gravity with laughter, not with wrath. But ~~before turning to his effort, let's give you all a chance to tell some religious jokes, as I promised you could. We'll have more time at the close of the program.~~

(A)

following

(5) Salman Rushdie grew up as a Muslim in India, and he knows the stories about the origins of Islam better than most of us know the Jesus story. About 75 pages of THE SATANIC VERSES are devoted to these stories about the prophet Mohammed, who is called Mahound in the book. After I read the novel I went back and checked the histories of Islam. Rushdie is quite accurate, quoting the Koran, except when he adds his own obvious inventions. His book is a good introduction to the history of early Islam; it's certainly easier to remember than the histories.

Let me set the context of the novel before going into the Satanic verses. The two protagonists are Indians from the Bombay area, Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha, Gibreel, who was brought up a

who meet on a hijacked airliner.

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(2a)

Friedrich Nietzsche devoted most of his attacks on religion to Judaism and especially Christianity. He preferred the religion of the ancient Greeks. But in some ways Islam better typifies the religion he opposed. For Muslims, there is one god, Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet --- his LAST prophet. There were earlier prophets that Muslims recognize, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. But there can be no later prophets. In really orthodox Islam, there is no room for creativity in religion or morals.

Shiite Islam also exemplifies another theme in Nietzsche's analysis of religion that I haven't had time to go into, resentment, and the slave morality of which resentment is a part. Shiites are followers of Ali, the martyred nephew of Mohammed. For most of Islamic history the Shiites have been a repressed minority, unable to publicly express their distinctive beliefs. And in that repression, resentment could flourish, resentment against the powerful and wealthy. God will damn them all in hell. Resentment in religion gives imaginary promises of vengeance.

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(3)

Muslim, has become a famous film star in Bombay. He has these terrible dreams in which he is the angel Gabriel giving the messages from Allah to the prophet Mohammed. After the airliner crashes, Gibreel becomes a kind of godlike figure, complete with halo, who struggles with Saladin, who becomes a satanic figure, complete with horns, on the streets of London.

(6) In the early 7th c., the Arabs around Mecca were a stateless people worshipping some 300 different gods and goddesses. In sociological terms, they were overdue for a state and for monotheism. The Meccans were getting rich, and social classes were developing that created rifts in the tribal clans. The Byzantine Empire in the Northwest, and the Zoroastrian Sassanid Empire in the Northeast, were coming down on them. The Arabs got monotheism and a state simultaneously from Mohammed.

In the first dream, Mohammed is introduced, Rushdie calls him Mahound. He was a businessman, quite successful after marrying his first wife, Khadija, a widow who inherited her previous husband's business. Mohammed meditated on Mount Cone. The first order given him by the angel Gibreel was to "Recite." Recite what? He was frightened but recited verses in praise of the creator god, Allah.

Islam inherited from the polytheistic Arabs the belief that they were descended from the prophet Abraham, Ibrahim. They also inherited the practice of worshipping god at the Kaaba, the stone in Mecca. That worship is related to the following myth, also found in our book of Genesis, which Malcolm will read.

R-1, p. 95.

(7) Mohammed's first convert was his wife Khadija. He gradually collected a following, and as they grew more numerous they began to be persecuted by the powerful persons in Mecca, but as is common, the persecution attracted still more followers. The novel gets its title from an event actually recorded in the Koran, The Satanic Verses. The powers in Mecca offered Mohammed a deal. They would suppress the worship of almost all the gods, and give Mohammed to tolerate Mohammed and his followers, and even give Mohammed a role in governing the city, if only he would permit the continued worship of three goddesses. At first he agreed. But when he saw the negative effects of this on his movement, he heard from god again, and denounced his earlier acceptance of the deal as verses inspired not by God but by Satan.

(4)

After his renunciation of the deal, the Muslims were forced to leave Mecca, and they went to Medina, or Yathrib as it was called then and is called in the novel. The next dream gives an idea of what went on in Medina.

R-2, pp. 363f.

(8) Mohammed had various scribes who transcribed his revelations. In the novel one of them is called, not coincidentally, Salman, a Persian. In the next dream, Salman tells how he got disillusioned with Mohammed. Salman has fled Medina for Mecca. He's telling the story to another character in the dreams, one Baal. Baal was a poet who was paid to write scurrilous verses about Mohammed in his early days in Mecca. Something like this really happened. Historical records show that Mohammed sent assassins from Medina to Mecca to assassinate an offensive poet.

R-3, pp. 367f.

(9) You can understand how this stuff offended the Ayatollah Khomeini and other Muslims. It gets worse. In Medina Mohammed had a revelation that would allow Muslim men up to four wives. He had another revelation allowing himself to have 12 wives. All but one of these wives were widows, and the marriages served to link Mohammed with powerful tribes and personages. The exception was his favorite, Ayesha, who he married when she was only 9 years old.

In the novel, after Mohammed returns from Medina to Mecca in triumph, the poet Baal hides out in a brothel. There he comes upon the neat idea of having each of the 12 prostitutes in the brothel play the role of one of the prophet's wives. It really turns the customers on. (pp. 379f.)

In the next passage, Salman tells Baal some of the problems Mohammed had with Ayesha.

R-4, pp. 386f

(10) But it couldn't last. The brothel is closed, the prostitutes executed, Baal is captured and makes a confession. His confession greatly amuses the bystanders, but not the prophet.

R-5, p. 392.

Then the prophet dies, and the character Gibreel Farishta has no more of those terrible dreams.

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(5)

(11) This is blasphemy, no doubt about it, and one can understand why the Ayatollah Khomeini put a price on Rushdie's head. I found ~~xxxxxxx~~ ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ that the novel helped me empathise with the early Muslims, to appreciate the story as a human story. But it certainly wouldn't make one a believer. I suspect, or at least hope, that the novel will become a hot underground seller in the Muslim world, and that it will help to slay the spirit of gravity.

(12) More jokes

(17) Unrest, #

- Aileen Nettleton