
THE FUNDAMENTALIST CHALLENGE

BY AMITAV GHOSH



Traditional Islam bore no enmity toward the literary artist. To the contrary, the writer was a respected figure. This illustration from an early-17th-century Mughal manuscript shows a scribe at work.

With the benefit of hindsight, I am ever more astonished by the degree to which, over the course of this century, religion has been reinvented as its own antithesis. At much the same time that one stream within modernism created a straw version of religion as a cloak of benighted ignorance that had to be destroyed with the weapons of literary, artistic, and scientific progressivism, another stream within this same movement created a no less fantastic version of religion as a bulwark against the dehumanization of contemporary life.

To a greater or lesser degree, most of us have felt the tug of both these currents. Indeed, it is hard to think of any contemporary, modern, or even not so modern thinker, writer, or artist who has not. Karl Marx, for instance, while writing his much-quoted sentence about religion being the opiate of the masses (itself not as dismissive as some of his followers have assumed), also wrote a less known passage describing religion as the heart of a heartless world.

These are commonplaces, of course. We all know the stories of modernist figures who have swum from one of these currents into the other: a narrative best exemplified

by the career of W. H. Auden. At the heart of these stories is a moment, often an extended moment, of conversion, and it is this moment that puzzles me now—with the benefit of hindsight, as I said. It puzzles me because it seems to me increasingly that the intellectual pedigrees of most versions of religious extremism around the world today can be traced to similar moments of conversion.

Let me cite a few examples: Swami Vivekananda, the late-19th-century thinker who is today claimed by Hindu extremists as a founding father, was famously a rationalist in the best positivist tradition, until he underwent a dramatic conversion. Or consider the Anagarika Dharmapala, who laid the foundations of Buddhist revivalism in Sri Lanka at the turn of the century. The Anagarika Dharmapala's early education was in Christian schools, and he is said to have learned the Bible by heart at an early age. He was reconverted to Buddhism by the American theosophist Henry Steel Olcott, who arrived in Sri Lanka in 1880. As with so many such figures, the first popular movement the Anagarika Dharmapala led was social rather than religious in nature—a temperance campaign.

In Iran, the figure who is thought to have played the most important part in the radicalization of Shiite youth in the recent past was neither a mullah nor an ayatollah but rather a Sorbonne-trained sociologist, Ali Shari'ati. In Shari'ati's writings, religion often assumes the aspect of a sociological instrument, a means to resist the versions of modernity he had witnessed in France.

Similarly the intellectual progenitors of religious extremism in Egypt, Hasan al-

Banna and al-Sayyid Qutb, were not educated in traditional religious institutions. Both were graduates of the Dar al-Uluum, or House of Sciences, in Cairo, an institution that has been described as a "modernist teacher training institute." Al-Sayyid Qutb first made his name as a literary figure, a writer of fiction and critic who was actively involved in debates centered on questions of literary modernism in the Cairo of the 1930s and '40s. Like the Anagarika Dharmapala in Sri Lanka before him, he began his career in the educational bureaucracy. His bosses in Egypt's Ministry of Public Instruction sent him to America in 1948, apparently in the hope that he would be won over by American ways. His discovery of his religious mission is said to have occurred as he stood on the deck of the liner that was carrying him to New York. I have cited figures from Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam; many similar figures could be cited from the Jewish and Christian traditions.

What do these moments of conversion signify? In trying to answer that question, we find ourselves reaching reflexively for the terms that float by on one or the other side of the modernist stream. On the one shore we find terms or phrases such as "atavism," "medievalism," "fear of uncertainty" coming all too readily to hand; on the other, our hands close upon "resistance," "alternative," "search for community," "thirst for meaning."

To a greater or lesser degree, moments of conversion such as those I have referred to are all of these things, but they are also something else: they also mark a crossing from one current of modernism to another. It is all too easy to forget that these reinvented forms of religion are not a re-

Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta, India, and was raised in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), Sri Lanka, Iran, and India. He is the author of two novels, The Circle of Reason (1986) and The Shadow Lines (1988), and a work of nonfiction, In an Antique Land (1992). Copyright © 1995 by Amitav Ghosh.



Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz, despite threats of Muslim militants, lived a public life in his Cairo neighborhood until he was assaulted in the street last October by a knife-wielding assailant.

pudiation of, but a means of laying claim to, the modern world. That is why the advance-guard of these ideologies are never traditional religious specialists but rather young college graduates or engineering students—products, in other words, of secularly oriented, modernist institutions. It is for this reason that we find the same things valued on both shores but in diametrically opposed ways. Literature and art, for example, being regarded as the ultimate repository of value on one side, come to be excoriated on the other, in exact and equal measure, so that their destruction becomes a prime article of faith.

Where else are we to look for the sources of this antagonism except within the whirlpools that mark the meeting of these two currents? Certainly the conflict cannot be ascribed to religion in the

broadest sense. For most of human history, religion and literature have been virtually inseparable, everywhere. I can think of nonreligious ideologies that have thought of literature as an enemy; I know of no religion that has historically held that position. That is why we must be rigorous and unrelenting in our rejection of the claims of those religious extremists who try to invoke historical and religious precedents for their attacks on writers. These claims are offered in bad faith. In fact, the roots of this hostility lie in the eminently modern pedigree of their own moments of conversion. The religions they invoke do not begin with a positive content of faith; they have their beginnings in acts of negation.

I have been using the phrase “religious extremism” with what may appear to be a reckless disregard for differences among the

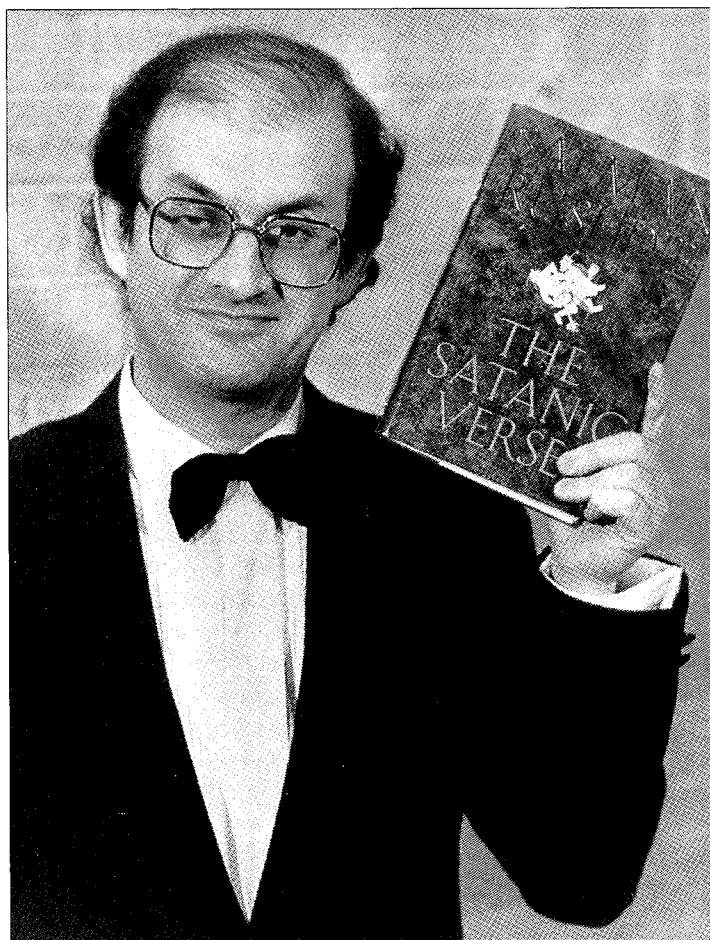
world's major religions. I do not do so unadvisedly. I do believe that the content of these ideologies is startlingly similar, across continents and cultures.

Consider, for example, that the rhetoric of religious extremism is everywhere centered on issues that would have been regarded as profane, or worldly, or largely secular a few generations ago: issues of state power, control of the bureaucracy, school curricula, the army, the law courts, banks, and other such institutions. Consider also that religious extremists are everywhere hostile to mainstream traditions of dissent within whatever religion they claim to be speaking for. Muslim ex-

tremists in the Middle East are contemptuous of the traditional Sufi tariqas that have so long been a mainstay within popular Islam; the political leadership of the Hindu extremist movement treats traditional mendicants and ascetics as a source of embarrassment. In both instances, this hostility has its roots in peculiarly bourgeois anxieties about respectability and rationality.

There is also much evidence to show that as the concerns of the major religions have grown more and more sociological, their doctrines and institutions have also increasingly converged. Yet while we speak of doctrine, we are still within a do-

main that is recognizably religious. But the truth is that in those areas of the world that are currently beset by religious turmoil, one very rarely hears anyone speak of doctrine or faith. In many of these areas, by a curious inversion, the language of religious hatred is not a religious language at all. The voices that spew hate invariably draw on more incendiary sources. One of these is the language of quantity, of number—statistics, in other words, that famous syntax of falsehood. Such and such a group is growing too fast, they declare, its birthrate is so and so; it will soon become a majority, overtake another group that has nowhere else to go; that group will then be swamped, washed into the sea by the rising tide of enemies within. Equally, these voices borrow the language of academic historiography. They produce ar-



Salman Rushdie brandishes a copy of the book that provoked Islamic mullahs in Iran to impose the death sentence on him. Rushdie remains in hiding.

chaeological data to prove that such and such a group has no right to be here, that they are invaders who arrived later than some other, more authentically located peoples, whose claim to the land is therefore greater.

One of the more curious elements of these bizarre but all too real discourses is what might be called the logic of competitive victimhood. Group X, incontestably a majority in its own area, will declare itself to be the real minority because it is outnumbered if the surrounding regions are taken into account. Its ideologues will cite this as the reason why, to preserve itself, it must drive members of Group Y off its territory: Group Y, which appears to be a minority, is actually a majority; the members of Group X are the real victims. And so on.

Most of these ideologies share similar discourses on women: what women should wear, how they should comport themselves, when and if they should reproduce. And all this, we are told, because scripture or custom has ordained it so. I remember very well an incident that dates back some 14 years, to a time when I was living in a village in Egypt. One day a schoolboy of 15—one of the brightest and most likable in the village—said to me: "Do you know what I did today? I gave my mother and the womenfolk of my house a stern talking-to. I told them they could not go to the burial ground any more to pray at our family's tombs."

I was taken aback by this. So far as I knew, the custom of visiting tombs was a very old one, and it served the additional function of providing women with a place to meet their kinfolk and friends. "Why?" I asked the boy. "What made you do this?"

"Because it is against our religion, of course," he said. "Visiting a grave is nothing but irrational superstition."

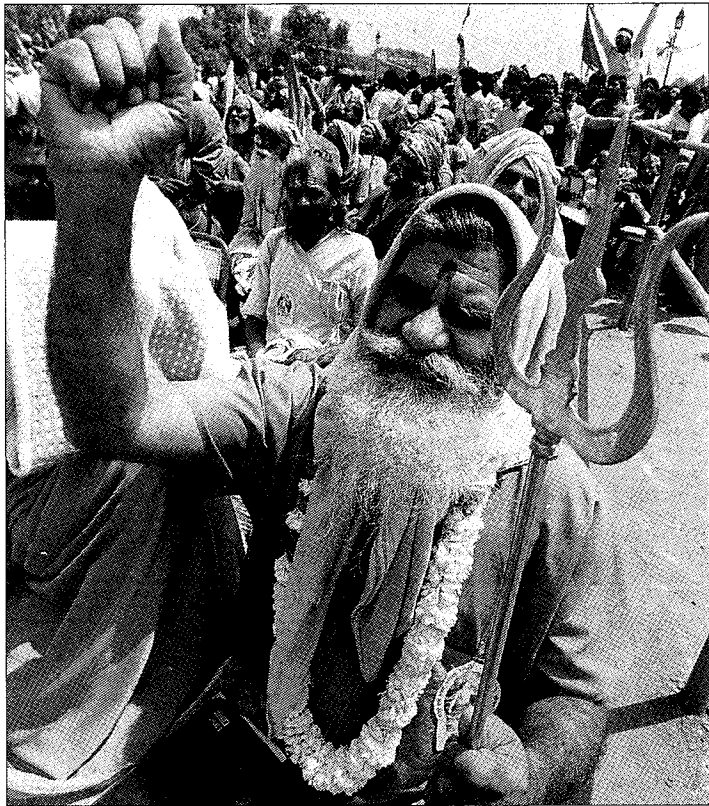
It turned out, I later learned, that a

schoolteacher with fundamentalist leanings had preached a fiery sermon in the mosque, urging the men of the village to put an end to this custom.

The image of that adolescent schoolboy lecturing his mother on what she could and could not do stayed with me for a long time. Where did he find that authority at the age of 15? Why did she allow him to speak to her like that? But wasn't he also right to do what he did? After all, is it not perhaps irrational to visit graves? But still, did she resent having to renounce her trips to the graveyard? I don't know. The outcome in any case was that she stayed at home. That is how religious extremism seems to work.

The issues around which these fundamentalist discourses are configured are not, of course, exclusively the concern of religious extremists. On the contrary, the concerns are precisely the same as those that animate certain kinds of conflict that have no religious referents at all: language conflicts, for example, or ethnic and tribal conflicts. In a sense, this is the most revealing aspect of these movements: that they all have recourse to the same language of difference—a language that is entirely profane, entirely devoid of faith or belief.

This was brought home to me very forcefully a couple of years ago when I was traveling in Cambodia. It so happened that the United Nations was then conducting a large-scale peace-keeping operation, and some 20,000 peace-keeping personnel from all over the globe had been deployed throughout the country. The principal obstacle to the peace was the Khmer Rouge, whose ideology had by that time been reduced to a nationalistic form of racism, directed at the Vietnamese and particularly the Vietnamese-speaking minority in Cambodia. A defector who had surrendered to UN officials



Hindu fundamentalists at a political rally in India in 1991.

a few months before the elections described his political training with the Khmer Rouge:

As far as the Vietnamese are concerned, whenever we meet them we must kill them, whether they are militaries or civilians, because they are not ordinary civilians but soldiers disguised as civilians. We must kill them, whether they are men, women, or children, there is no distinction, they are enemies. Children are not militaries, but if they are born or grow up in Cambodia, when they will be adult, they will consider Cambodian land as theirs. So we make no distinction. As to women, they give birth to Vietnamese children.

The Khmer Rouge carried out several massacres of civilians during the peace-

keeping process, most of them directed against small Vietnamese fishing communities.

I arrived in Cambodia in January 1993, just six or seven weeks after my own country, India, had faced what was perhaps its most serious political crisis since it gained independence in 1947. The crisis was precipitated by the demolition of a mosque in the city of Ayodhya by Hindu extremists. The demolition of the mosque was followed by a wave of murderous attacks upon Muslim-minority communities in India. In a series of pogroms in various Indian cities, thousands of Muslims were systematically murdered, raped, and brutalized by Hindu extremists. In many respects, the language of the

Hindu extremists, with the appropriate substitutions, was identical to that of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia.

It was against the background of these tragic events that I found myself one day in Siem Reap, in northwestern Cambodia. In this town, famous for its proximity to the glorious temple complexes of Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom, I came upon a group of Indian doctors who were running a small field hospital for the UN. By virtue of the camaraderie that links compatriots in a faraway place, I was invited to join them for a meal at their hospital. The doctors received me with the greatest cordiality in their prefabricated dining room. But no sooner had I sat down than they turned to me, smiling cordially across the rice and daal, and one of them said: "Mr. Ghosh, can you think of a good

reason why we Hindus should not demolish every mosque in India? After all, we are the majority. Why should we allow minorities to dictate what is right for us?" I had not noticed until then that my hosts were all Hindus, from various parts of India.

Their line of reasoning was, of course, far from unfamiliar to me: it was the standard majoritarian argument trotted out by Hindu extremists in India. But here, in this context, with the gunshots of the Khmer Rouge occasionally audible in the distance, it provoked an extra dimension of outrage. In the first place, these doctors were not extremists, in any ordinary meaning of the term. On the contrary, they were the personification of middle-class normality. Second, they were probably not religious in any but the most private sense. For them, most likely, religion was no more than a mark of distinction, defining the borders of what they believed to be a majority. In the course of the furious argument that followed, I was amazed to discover—though perhaps I should not have been—that these doctors actually harbored a lurking admiration for the Khmer Rouge, an admiration that was in no way diminished by the fact that we were then under Khmer Rouge fire.

I was amazed because I could not immediately understand why extremist Hindu beliefs should translate so fluently into sympathy for a group that had no religious affiliations at all, a group whose ideological genealogy ought to have inspired revulsion in these middle-class professional men. It only became obvious to me later, reading reports from Bosnia, Croatia, Sudan, Algeria, Sri Lanka, and other strife-torn lands, that for this species of thinking, religion, race, ethnicity, and language have no real content at all. Their only significance lies in the lines of distinction they provide. The actual content of the ideology, whether it manifests itself in its religious avatar or its linguistic or ethnic one, is actually the same in every

case, although articulated through different symbols. In several instances—Sri Lanka, for example—extremist movements have seamlessly shifted their focus from language to religion.

What then is this ideology that can travel so indifferently among such disparate political groups? I believe that it is an incarnation of a demon that has stalked liberal democracy everywhere throughout this century: an ideology that, for want of a better word, I shall call supremacism. It consists essentially in the belief that a group cannot ensure its continuity except by exerting absolute cultural and demographic control over a particular stretch of geography. The fascist antecedents of this ideology are clear and obvious. Some would go further and argue that nationalism of every kind must also be regarded as a variant of supremacism. This is often but not necessarily true. The nonsectarian, anti-imperialist nationalism of a Gandhi or a Saad Zaghloul was founded on a belief in the possibility of relative autonomy for heterogeneous populations and had nothing to do with asserting supremacy.

To return to where I began: it is my belief that extremist religious movements, whether in India or Israel or Egypt or the United States, are often supremacist movements, whatever their rhetoric. The movements that fit the pattern least perhaps are radical Muslim movements. Of all the world's religions, Islam remains today the least territorial, the least, as it were, nationalized. Yet it cannot be a coincidence that despite the critique of nationalism that is inherent in some branches of radical Islam, these movements have everywhere lapsed into patterns that are contained within the current framework of nation-states. Nor can it be a coincidence that in the Islamic world, as elsewhere, religious movements are at their most extreme in countries with large minority popula-

tions—Sudan and Egypt, for example. Indeed, such is the peculiar power of supremacist movements that they have actually conjured minorities into being where none actively existed before. Thus, in Algeria, Muslim extremists must now contend with an increasingly assertive minority Berber population.

In principle, it is not unreasonable that a population should have the right to live under religious law, with the proper democratic safeguards. But in practice, in contemporary societies, when such laws are instituted they almost invariably become instruments of majoritarian domination. Consider, for example, the blasphemy laws enacted in Pakistan in the 1980s. A recently published Amnesty International report tells us that “at present several dozen people are charged with blasphemy in Pakistan.” The majority of these belong to the minority Ahmadiyya community. This sect, which considers itself Muslim, was declared heretical by the country’s legislature, and its members were forbidden to profess, practice, or propagate their faith. According to Pakistani human rights activists, in a period of five years 108 Ahmadis were charged with blasphemy for practicing their faith. Over the last three years, according to the report, members of the Christian minority in Pakistan have also increasingly been charged with blasphemy. But here again, the meaning of blasphemy itself has changed. When a law such as this is available, it is unrealistic to expect that people will not use it in ways other than was intended. I quote from the report:

In a number of cases, personal grudges against Christian neighbors seem to have led people to settle their disputes by bringing blasphemy charges. Anwar Masih, a Christian in Samundri in Faisalabad district, had a quarrel with the local Muslim shopkeeper over a small debt and was subsequently

charged with blasphemy. . . . A 13-year-old Christian boy in Punjab was reported to have said that he had had a fight with the eight-year-old son of a Muslim neighbor. ‘It all started with some pigeons. The boys caught my pigeons and they didn’t want to give them back to me. . . . The little boy with whom I had a fight said he saw me write [blasphemous words] on the mosque. . . .’ [The boy], who has never learned to read or write, and two adult Christians were charged with blasphemy in May 1993.

How far we are here from a reverence for the spirit of scripture!

I would like to turn now to a novel which, more than anything I have read recently, has forced me to confront the questions that contemporary religious extremism raises for writers. This is the Bengali novel *Lojja* (Shame), by the Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasrin. I believe that this book, deeply flawed in many respects, is nonetheless a very important novel and a work of considerable insight. It is also a work that is literally much misunderstood, because at the moment it is available to most of the world in an English translation that can only be described as appalling. As a result the book has received many slighting and dismissive notices in America and Europe, probably because reviewers have assumed uncritically that the translation provides an accurate indication of the book’s quality. It happens that although I write in English, my own native language is Bengali, and having read the book in the original I know this assumption to be untrue. It seems more and more unlikely now that the book will ever get a fair reading, partly because it has become a pawn within the religious conflicts of the Indian subcontinent, and partly because Taslima Nasrin is herself now a global “cause” for reasons that have little to do with her writing.



Charged with offending religious sentiments in Bangladesh, Taslima Nasrin now resides in Sweden.

Lojja was apparently written at great speed, being completed in a couple of months. The book was later revised, but even in its revised version it remains a short novel—the new Bengali edition numbers 150 pages. The narrative is simple: through its protagonist, Suranjan Datta, it follows the fortunes of a Hindu family that finds itself engulfed in a wave of violence directed against the minority Hindu community in Bangladesh. The events it describes occur in the aftermath of the demolition of a mosque in Ayodhya on December 6, 1992. The narrative is punctuated throughout with paraphrased news reports, items from the files of human rights organizations, and other accounts detailing actual instances of violence. In particular it is a severe, because factual, indictment of certain groups of religious extremists in Bangladesh.

As is well known, the book caused an

uproar when it was published in Bangladesh in 1993. It also became an instant best seller on both sides of the border: that is, in Bangladesh as well as in the Bengali-speaking parts of India. A few months after its publication the government of Bangladesh, in response to the demands of religious extremists, declared a ban on the book and had it removed from circulation. Shortly thereafter, an extremist Muslim leader declared Taslima Nasrin an apostate and issued a death warrant against her. The warrant carried a large bounty. A few months later, in response to certain remarks Taslima Nasrin was alleged to have made in a newspaper interview in Calcutta, the government of Bangladesh charged her officially with the crime of offending religious sentiments and began criminal proceedings. Taslima Nasrin then went into hiding for a period of two months. Thanks to the international outcry that followed, she was al-

lowed to leave Bangladesh in August 1994. She is currently living in Sweden. In her short career in exile she has continued to rock governments. Last October the French foreign ministry refused her a visa, a gesture that created such an outburst of public indignation that the ministry was soon forced to reverse its decision. What I have sketched here is perhaps only the beginning of Taslima Nasrin's story. Even as I write, a government prosecutor in Bangladesh is appearing before a court to demand that she be sentenced in absentia for the crime of blasphemy.

However, religious extremists were not the only people in Bangladesh who objected to *Lojja* when it first appeared. Many nonsectarian, liberal voices were also fiercely critical of the book. Their objections were important ones and must be taken into account because—and I cannot repeat this strongly enough—nonsectarian, broadly secularist voices do not by any means represent a weak or isolated strand of opinion in that country. Bangladeshi culture in particular, like Bengali culture in general, has a long and very powerful tradition of secularist thought; Taslima Nasrin is herself a product of this tradition. For all their visibility, the religious extremists represent a tiny minority of the population of Bangladesh. At present, for example, they control no more than two percent of the country's legislature.

Of the criticisms directed at *Lojja* by liberal, nonsectarian Bangladeshis and Indians, perhaps the most important is the charge that the novel, by limiting its focus to Bangladesh, profoundly distorts the context of the violence it depicts. Taken literally, this is, I think, true. By concentrating on the events in Dhaka the book does indeed, by omission, distort the setting and causes of those events.

What then was this context? I shall try to sketch the chain of events as I see them, very briefly.

On December 6, 1992, several thousand Hindu supremacists tore down a 400-year-old mosque in Ayodhya, claiming that the structure was built upon the birthplace of their mythical hero Sri Rama. The Indian government, despite ample warning, was culpably negligent in not taking action to prevent the demolition. Thus, through CNN, the whole world witnessed the destructive frenzy of a mob of Hindu fanatics attacking an archaeological site, in the service of an utter delusion. (After all, a legendary world-bestriding hero can only be diminished if his birthplace comes to be confined to a circumscribed geographical location.)

The destruction of the mosque was followed by tension and general unrest, in Pakistan and Bangladesh as well as India. In India this quickly escalated into violence directed against Muslims by well-organized mobs of Hindus. Riots broke out in several major cities, and within two days 400 people had died. The overwhelming majority of the dead, as always in these situations in India, were Muslim. There is evidence that in many parts of the country the police cooperated with and even directed Hindu mobs. Within six days, according to the official reckoning, about 1,200 people had died. Reports from all over the country attest to the unprecedented brutality, the unspeakable savagery, of the violence that was directed against innocent Muslims by Hindu supremacists. A month later, there was a second wave of anti-Muslim violence centered primarily in Bombay and Surat. The violence now assumed the aspect of systematic pogroms, with crowds hunting out Muslims from door to door in particular neighborhoods. I quote here a report from Surat, written by a Dutch observer:

In a refugee camp which I visited a small boy, hardly six years of age, sits all alone in a corner staring in front of him. Before his eyes he has seen first his father and mother murdered by the mob, then his grandfather and grandmother, and in the end three of his brothers. He is still alive but bodily not unscathed with 16 stitches in his head and burns on his back. The men who did it thought he was dead when they had finished with him. . . . Page after page of my diary is filled with this sort of atrocity. Women between seven and 70 were up for grabs by male gangs roaming around the localities. . . . People were also thrown into the flames and roasted alive. A high-ranking official told me how he had seen furniture coming down over the balcony from the opposite multistoried apartment building: mattresses, chairs, and then to his horror small children as well.

Such was the nature of the horror that visited India in the winter of 1992, in the name of religion.

In Bangladesh and Pakistan, the destruction of the Ayodhya mosque also led to violence. Temples were attacked and destroyed in both countries. In Bangladesh, which has a substantial Hindu population, a great many Hindu shrines were destroyed and desecrated; Hindu-owned businesses were attacked and looted; many Hindu families were driven from their homes. Yet it must also be noted that despite all that happened in Bangladesh, there was no actual loss of life so far as I know. If accounts could be kept of such events, it would have to be said that the scale of violence in Bangladesh was small compared to what occurred in India.

But here we have to ask whether events such as these can be weighed at all on a scale of comparative horrors. For a minority family that is being harassed in Dhaka (or wherever), the horror of the situation is not mitigated by the knowl-

edge that they are situated in the wings of the stage of violence, as it were, that far worse crimes are being visited upon minority groups in India. Equally, the terror of a middle-class Muslim family caught in a riot in Bombay is in no way lessened by the knowledge that there is greater violence still in Bosnia. To the Bosnian Serbs, in turn, the accounting of violence stretches back to the 14th century. To tinker with this calculus is really to enter into what I have called the logic of competitive victimhood: a discourse that ultimately serves only to fuel supremacism.

In inadvertently spotlighting events that were happening in the wings rather than center stage, *Lojja* inevitably presents a partial view. As it happened, Hindu supremacists in India seized upon *Lojja* with undisguised glee. Pirated editions were quickly printed and the book was even distributed free by Hindu activists in an attempt to whip up anti-Muslim feeling. This in turn led to accusations that Taslima Nasrin was a willing dupe of Hindu supremacists in India, that she was in the pay of a Calcutta publishing house, and so on.

In fact, *Lojja* is unequivocal in its condemnation of Hindu supremacists. It simply does not give them as much space as it does their Muslim counterparts in Bangladesh, which is unavoidable given the book's setting. Just as important, Taslima Nasrin can hardly be held responsible for the uses to which her book is put. In passing into the public domain, a book also passes beyond its author's control. I know of no way that an author can protect his or her text against abuse of this kind. The only option really is not to write about such matters at all.

We who write fiction, even when we deal with matters of public significance, have no choice, no matter how lush or extravagant our fictions, but to represent events as they are refracted through our

characters. Our point of entry into even the largest of events is inevitably local, situated in and focused on details and particulars. To write of any event in this way is necessarily to neglect its political contexts. Consider by way of example a relatively simple kind of event: a mugging, let us say, in the streets of New York. If we write of the mugging of a white man by a black man, do we not in some way distort the context of the event if we do not accommodate the collective histories which form its background? Conversely, if, in defiance of stereotypes, we were to make our mugger a white female bank executive, would we not distort an equally important context? But where would our search for contexts end? And would we not fatally disfigure the fictional texture of our work if we were to render all those broader contexts?

What then are the contexts that we, as writers of fiction, can properly supply? It seems to me that they must lie in the event itself, the scene, if you like: the aggressor's fear of his prey, the street lamps above, the paper clip that drops from the victim's pocket as he reaches for his money. It must be in some part the reader's responsibility to situate the event within broader contexts, to populate the scene with the products of his or her experience and learning. A reader who reads the scene literally or mean-spiritedly must surely bear some part of the blame for that reading.

Read by a responsible reader, *Lojja* succeeds magnificently. Through a richness of detail it creates a circumstance that is its own context, and in this sense is imaginatively available far beyond the boundaries of its location. I, for one, read *Lojja* not as a book about Hindus in Bangladesh but rather as a book about Muslims in India. It helped me feel on my own fingertips the texture of the fears that have prompted

Muslim friends of mine to rent houses under false pretenses or to buy train tickets under Hindu names. In short, it has helped me understand what it means to live under the threat of supremacist terror.

Lojja can be read in this way because it is founded on a very important insight, one which directly illustrates my main point. Almost despite herself, Taslima Nasrin recognizes that religious extremism today has very little to do with matters of doctrine and faith, that its real texts are borrowed from sociology, demography, political science, and so on. For a book that is said to be blasphemous, *Lojja* surprisingly contains no scriptural or religious references at all. Even words such as "Hindu" and "Muslim" figure in it but rarely. The words Taslima Nasrin uses are rather "minority" and "majority." There is nothing in *Lojja* that the most fastidiously devout reader could possibly object to, from a theological point of view. That it succeeded nonetheless in enraging extremist religious opinion in Bangladesh, and bolstering opinion within the opposite religious camp in India, is a sign that it cut through to an altogether different kind of reality. Yet it is a fact that, despite their outrage, the extremists could find no passage in it that could be indicted as blasphemous. That was why, perhaps, they later fell so gratefully on her throwaway remarks of doubtful provenance.

Iwould like to return now to some of the considerations with which I started. In particular I would like to go back to one of the images I offered at the beginning of this essay: that of W. H. Auden, breasting the modernist flow and crossing between currents. In offering this example I did not mean to suggest that Auden can in any way be associated with religious extremism as we know it today. To make such a suggestion would be plainly ludicrous. If there is an analogy here, it is a very limited one and

it consists only in this: that a conversion such as Auden's to Christianity was—among many other things—also an act of dissent, an opting out of what might be regarded as the mainstream of modernist consciousness.

It is finally undeniable, I think, that some kinds of contemporary religious extremism also represent a generalized, nebulous consciousness of dissent, an inarticulate, perhaps inexpressible critique of the political and moral economy of today's world. But the question remains, even if this is true: why are these movements so easily pushed over the edge, why are they so violent, so destructive, and why is their thinking so filled with intolerance and hate?

Today, for the first time in history, a single ideal commands something close to absolute hegemony in the world: the notion that human existence must be permanently and irredeemably subordinated to the functioning of the impersonal mechanisms of a global marketplace. Realized in varying degrees in various parts of the world, this ideal enjoys the vigorous support of universities, banks, vast international corporations, and an increasingly interconnected global communications network. However, the market ideal as a cultural absolute, untempered by any other ethical, political, or spiritual ideals, is often so inhuman and predatory in its effects that it cannot but generate dissent. It is simply not conceivable that the major-

ity of human beings will ever willingly give their assent to the idea that the search for profit should be the sole or central organizing principle of society.

By a curious paradox, the room for dissent has shrunk as the world has grown more free, and today, in this diminished space, every utterance begins to turn in on itself. This, I believe, is why we need to recreate, expand, and reimagine the space for articulate, humane, and creative dissent. In the absence of that space, the misdirected and ugly energies of religious extremism will only continue to flourish and grow.

What then, finally, of religion itself? Must we resign ourselves to the possibility that religious belief has everywhere been irreversibly cannibalized by this plethora of political, sociological, and, in the end, profane ideas? It is tempting to say no, that "real" Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, Jews, and Muslims continue to hold on to other values. Yet if it appears that the majority of the followers of a religion now profess ideas that are, as I have said, essentially political or sociological, then we must be prepared to accept that this is in fact what religion signifies in our time.

Still I, for one, have swum too long in pre-postmodernist currents to accept that some part of the effort that human culture has so long invested in matters of the spirit will not, somehow, survive.