

OFFENCE: THE MUSLIM CASE

by Kamila Shamsie
Seagull Books, 82 pages, \$20

OFFENCE: THE HINDU CASE

by Salil Tripathi
Seagull Books, 102 pages, \$20

OFFENCE: THE JEWISH CASE

by Brian Klug
Seagull Books, 102 pages, \$20

OFFENCE: THE CHRISTIAN CASE

by Irena Maryniak
Seagull Books, 112 pages, \$20

TAKING OFFENCE

by Casper Melville
Seagull Books, 112 pages, \$20

GIVING OFFENCE

by Martin Rowson
Seagull Books, 112 pages \$20

Reviewed by BEN FRUMIN

MORE THAN TWO decades ago, Muslims around the world took offense at Salman Rushdie's fourth novel, *The Satanic Verses*, its cutting portrayal of the prophet Muhammad and his wives and its implications that the Quran is fallible. In response to the outcry, India banned the book barely a week after it was published. Several Muslim-majority countries followed. Tens of thousands protested. Iran's supreme leader issued a fatwa against Mr. Rushdie and called for the British-Indian author's execution. The book's Japanese translator was stabbed to death outside his university office. The novel's Italian translator was also stabbed and the Norwegian publisher shot, though both survived. Mr. Rushdie went into hiding for several years.

Mr. Rushdie's troubling story plays a prominent role in this excellent new six-essay series on religion and offense, and how our relatively recent recognition of

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the rights and respect due to religious groups ought to be balanced with the almost-as-recent acknowledgement of the right of anyone to say what they please, regardless of who it hurts. As the Indian author Salil Tripathi writes in *Offence: The Hindu Case*, "One of the more curious outcomes of the Salmon Rushdie affair has been the idea that, in the name of multiculturalism, society should not only accommodate the offended but also impose some curbs on free speech for fear of offending minorities." And once that right to be offended was established, the result was that communities used claims of offense "to demand bans on what they did not like."

Even if one thinks we should indeed protect people from being offended—and that is quite a presumption—several knotty questions linger. Who may claim offense, and why? Is violence ever an appropriate riposte for the offended? Should givers of offense be censored or punished? If so, who selects and imposes those restrictions and penalties—the offended?

The *Offence* essays—which are a part of the freedom-promoting group Index on Censorship's ongoing *Manifestos for the 21st Century* series—stake out a clear and unsurprising position on such questions: Ensuring and accepting a person's right to offend is important, we should all be a little less touchy about taking offense, and we ought not allow the offended en masse to silence offenders, violently or otherwise.

It is, of course, a little more nuanced than that. British satirical cartoonist and serial offender Martin Rowson, who authored the series' smart and provocative *Giving Offence* essay, points out that the power dynamic between vocal offender and outraged offended is critical. "If I draw rude pictures of people less powerful than myself, what I do ceases to be satire, and creeps into one of the wider spheres

of aggressive, bullying humour and into areas I consider offensive,” Mr. Rowson writes. “This is because the urge to mock our social or political betters is something else hardwired into us, to stop us going mad at the injustice of their being held to be superior to us in the first place.”

In India today, it is members of the country’s religious majority whose claims of offense are least defensible and typically come at the expense of minority members ill-equipped to defend themselves. Inspired by “a militant brand of Hinduism,” some Hindus—easily the largest and most powerful religious group in an incredibly diverse, multicultural democracy—have argued that “the government’s secular policies were an excuse to appease minorities and that Hindu identity was being insulted,” Mr. Tripathi writes.

Indian-Muslim artist Maqbool Fida Husain, for instance, lives in exile because Hindu nationalists, who were offended by his paintings of nude Hindu deities, have ransacked and protested galleries showing his work. “The police immediately decided to arrest Husain for disturbing communal harmony,” Mr. Tripathi writes. Claiming to be victims of a sort of reverse discrimination, fringe members of the majority respond to these supposed slights with repression, intimidation and the disproportionate giving of offense. “They are acting as Hinduism’s moral Taliban,” Mr. Tripathi writes.

While that overstates the case (as does Mr. Tripathi’s equating of Hindu nationalists with Nazis), the question remains: How, in a democracy, does this happen? Mr. Tripathi blames India’s weak-willed government and flawed constitution, which allows the government to restrict free expression to maintain order. Fur-

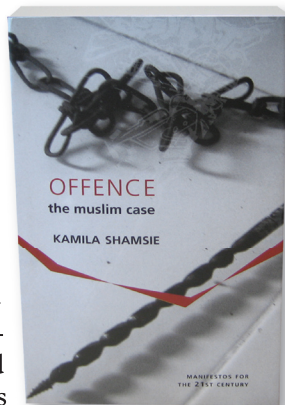
ther, India’s penal code makes it illegal to “outrage religious feelings” with malicious intent or to promote, among other things, “enmity between different groups on grounds of religion.” Well-meaning laws, maybe, but enforcing them with anything approaching fairness is nearly impossible.

However, the apparent consensus among *Offence* authors is that it is Muslims, not Hindus, who are the central actors in the recent world drama of taking religious offense. And this has only been thrown into sharper, more divisive relief since Sept. 11, 2001. The relatively new pattern of Muslims taking offense and reacting violently was most notoriously demonstrated in 2005 when the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* printed several editorial cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad—something Islam forbids. “Just as it is impossible to step out from under the weight of 9/11 when discussing global terrorism, the Danish cartoons have come to dominate and stand for the contemporary debate around

free speech and offence,” writes Caspar Melville in *Taking Offence*.

Despite the frighteningly violent demonstrations against the cartoons across the Muslim world (more than 100 died and a number of Danish embassies were attacked), the original sin, Mr. Rowson argues, may very well have been the newspaper’s: “In this infamous affair, it’s clear that *Jyllands-Posten* set out deliberately to offend, as part of the newspaper’s long-standing campaign against immigrants, recruiting the voodoo powers of the medium to damage, or at least discomfort, a group of isolated, beleaguered, powerless and poor people in Danish society.”

As for the widely held presumption



that Muslims are somehow more prone to taking offense and retaliating violently than members of other religious groups, several *Offence* authors argue, essentially, that it is the East vs. West, clash of the civilizations mindset—feverishly popular in some circles—that created this perception from whole cloth. Followers of Islam are so segmented among themselves that the very idea of “the Muslim Monolith, Enraged and Out of Control,” as the Pakistani writer Kamila Shamsie puts it in *Offence: The Muslim Case*, is something of a false construct.

So what can be done? Mr. Melville suggests that “we all just grow up.” This is one area where easily offended members of all religious groups can surely improve, particularly in the West, where we have nurtured what Mr. Melville sharply calls “a hyper-individualized, thin-skinned culture of victimhood.” But this rather glib casting of the offended as fragile infants ready to launch into a violent tantrum at the smallest provocation does little to understand or repair the many instances of people justifiably affronted by attacks, verbal or otherwise, on their beliefs.

Where is the middle ground between exercising and protecting the right to blaspheme and showing some measure of sensitivity for those the blasphemy may injure? Perhaps it lies in the place where the offended learn to ignore hurtful words and images, comfortable enough with their beliefs to smirk away critiques, even when the thing being pilloried is that which they cherish most. “For while offence may be in the eye of the beholder,” Mr. Rowson writes, “you must never rule out the option of simply blinking and looking away.”

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