

Two Decades of the Rushdie Rules

How an edict that once outraged the world
became the new normal

By Daniel Pipes

FROM A NOVEL by Salman Rushdie published in 1989 to an American civil protest called “Everyone Draw Muhammad Day” in 2010, a familiar pattern has evolved. It begins when Westerners say or do something critical of Islam. Islamists respond with name-calling and outrage, demands for retraction, threats of lawsuits and violence, and actual violence. In turn, Westerners hem and haw, prevaricate, and finally

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fold. Along the way, each controversy prompts a debate focusing on the issue of free speech.

I shall argue two points about this sequence. First, that the right of Westerners to discuss, criticize, and even ridicule Islam and Muslims has eroded over the years. Second, that free speech is a minor part of the problem; at stake is something much deeper—indeed, a defining question of our time: will Westerners maintain their own historic civilization in the face of assault by Islamists, or will they cede to Islamic culture and law and submit to a form of second-class citizenship?

The era of Islamist uproar began abruptly on February 14, 1989, when Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Iran’s supreme leader, watched on television as Pakistanis responded with violence to a new novel by Salman Rushdie, the famous writer of South Asian

Muslim origins. His book's very title, *The Satanic Verses*, refers to the Koran and poses a direct challenge to Islamic sensibilities; its contents further exacerbate the problem. Outraged by what he considered Rushdie's blasphemous portrait of Islam, Khomeini issued an edict whose continued impact makes it worthy of quotation at length:

I inform all zealous Muslims of the world that the author of the book entitled *The Satanic Verses*—which has been compiled, printed, and published in opposition to Islam, the Prophet, and the Koran—and all those involved in the publication who were aware of its contents are sentenced to death.

I call upon all zealous Muslims to execute them quickly, wherever they may be found, so that no one else will dare to insult the Muslim sanctities. God willing, whoever is killed on this path is a martyr.

In addition, anyone who has access to the author of this book but does not possess the power to execute him should report him to the people so that he may be punished for his actions.

This unprecedented edict—no head of government had ever called for the execution of a novelist living in another country—came out of the blue and surprised everyone, from Iranian government officials to Rushdie himself. No one had imagined that a magical-realist novel, replete with people falling out of the sky and animals that talk, might incur the wrath of the ruler of Iran, a country to which Rushdie had few connections.

The edict led to physical attacks on bookstores in Italy, Norway, and the United States and on translators of *The Satanic Verses* in Norway, Japan, and Turkey; in the last case, the translator and 36 others perished in an arson attack on a hotel. Other violence in Muslim-majority countries led to more than 20 fatalities, mostly in South Asia. Then, just as the furor wound down, in June 1989, Khomeini died; his death made the edict, sometimes inaccurately called a fatwa, immutable.

The edict contains four important elements. First, by noting “opposition to Islam, the Prophet, and the Koran,” Khomeini delineated the wide range of sacred topics that may not be treated disrespectfully without invoking a death sentence.

Second, by targeting “all those involved in the publication who were aware of its contents,” he de-

clared war not just on the artist but also on an entire cultural infrastructure—including the thousands of employees of publishing houses, advertisers, distribution companies, and bookstores.

Third, by ordering Rushdie's execution “so that no one else will dare to insult the Muslim sanctities,” Khomeini made clear his purpose not only to punish one writer but also to prevent further instances of ridicule.

Finally, by demanding that those unable to execute Rushdie “report him,” Khomeini called on every Muslim worldwide to become part of an informal intelligence network dedicated to upholding Islamic sanctities.

These four features together constitute what I call the Rushdie Rules. Two decades later, they remain very much in place.

THE EDICT set several precedents in the West. A foreign political leader successfully ignored conventional limits on state powers. A religious leader at will intervened directly, with little cost or resistance, in Western cultural affairs. And a Muslim leader established the precedent of applying an aspect of Islamic law, the Sharia, in an overwhelmingly non-Muslim country. On this last point: Western states have, at times, served as Khomeini's effective agents. The government of Austria imposed a suspended prison sentence on a person who defied the Rushdie Rules, while the governments of France and Australia brought charges that could have meant jail time. Most strikingly, authorities in Canada, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Finland, and Israel actually jailed Rushdie Rule trespassers. It takes effort to recall the innocent days before 1989, when Westerners freely spoke and wrote about Islam and related subjects.

The Rushdie Rules had an immediate impact on Muslims living in the West, whose outbursts of insults and violence generated a newfound sense of power. From Sweden to New Zealand, Islamists responded with joy that after centuries on the defensive, Muslims had found their voice and from the belly of the beast could challenge the West. Most of the violence that followed was of the indiscriminate sort, on the model of 9/11, Bali, Madrid, Beslan, and London, in which jihadists killed whoever happened to cross their paths. TheReligionOfPeace.com website documents, on average, five indiscriminate Islamist terrorist attacks per day around the world.

Less common but more intimidating is the violence that targets those who defy the Rushdie Rules. Let us limit examples of this phenomenon to one country, Denmark. In October 2004, an instructor at

the Carsten Niebuhr Institute at the University of Copenhagen was kicked and hit by several strangers as he left the university. They informed him that he had read from the Koran, which as an infidel (*kafir*) he had no right to do. In October 2005, *Jyllands-Posten* editor Flemming Rose was threatened for having commissioned cartoons depicting Muhammad. Two of the cartoonists had to go into hiding. One of them, Kurt

but as one book's title puts it, "be careful with Muhammad!"

This segues to the second goal—Muslim supremacy and Western inferiority. Islamists routinely say and do things more offensive to Westerners than anything Westerners do vis-à-vis Muslims. They openly despise Western culture; in the words of an Algerian Islamist, it's not a civilization but a "syphilization." Their mainstream media publishes coarser, viler, and more violent cartoons than anything commissioned by Flemming Rose. They freely insult Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism. They murder Jews just for being Jews, like Daniel Pearl in Pakistan, Sébastien Sellam and Ilan Halimi in France, and Pamela Waechter and Ariel Sellouk

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Westergaard, subsequently narrowly escaped physical attack inside his home. In March 2006, Naser Khader, an anti-Islamist politician, was threatened by an Islamist who warned that if Khader became a government minister, he and his ministry would be blown up.

The Danish experience is typical. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, "Across Europe, dozens of people are now in hiding or under police protection because of threats from Muslim extremists." Even Pope Benedict XVI received a flurry of threats in the aftermath of his quoting a Byzantine emperor on the subject of Islam. In the Netherlands alone, politicians have reported 121 death threats against them in just one year. The November 2004 execution on an Amsterdam street of Theo van Gogh—a well-known libertarian, filmmaker, talk-show host, newspaper columnist, and mischief maker who had ridiculed Islam—traumatized his country and led to a brief state of insurrection.

in the United States. Whether because of fear or inattention, Westerners assent to an imbalance whereby Muslims may offend and attack while they themselves are shielded from any such indignities or pains.

Should Westerners accept this imbalance, the dhimmi status will follow. This Islamic concept permits "people of the book," monotheists such as Christians and Jews, to continue to practice their religion under Muslim rule, subject to many restrictions. For its time, the dhimmi status offered certain benefits (until as recently as 1945, Jews generally had better lives in Islamdom than in Christendom), but it is intended to insult and humiliate non-Muslims, even as it exalts Muslim superiority. Dhimmi pay additional taxes, may not join the military or the government, and suffer from encompassing legal disabilities. In some times and places, dhimmis could ride on a donkey but not on a horse, wore distinctive clothing, and an elderly dhimmi on the street was required to jump out of the way of a Muslim child. Elements of the dhimmi status have recently been applied in such varied places as Gaza, the West Bank, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Clearly, Londonistan and beyond are also in their sights.

WESTERNERS generally perceive this violence as a challenge to their right to self-expression. But if freedom of speech is the battlefield, the greater war concerns the foundational principles of Western civilization. The recurrent pattern of Islamist uproar exists to achieve three goals—not always articulated—that go well beyond prohibiting criticism of Islam.

The first goal consists of establishing a superior status for Islam. Khomeini's demands for the sacred trinity of "Islam, the Prophet, and the Koran" imply special privileges for one religion, an exclusion from the hurly-burly of the marketplace of ideas. Islam would benefit from unique rules unavailable to other religions. Jesus may be sacrilegiously lampooned in Monty Python's *Life of Brian* or Terry McNally's *Corpus Christi*,

In turn, re-establishing the dhimmi status is one step toward the Islamists' third and ultimate ambition, applying full Sharia law. Closing down discussion of Islam paves the way toward this end. Conversely, retaining free speech about Islam represents a critical defense against the imposition of an Islamic order. Keeping our civilization requires open discussion of Islam.

The Sharia regulates both private and public life. The private dimension includes such intensely personal matters as bodily cleanliness, sexuality, child-

bearing, family relations, clothing, and diet. In the public realm, the Sharia regulates social relations, commercial transactions, criminal penalties, the status of women and minorities, slavery, the identity of the ruler, the judiciary, taxation, and warfare. In brief, Islamic law includes everything from toilet etiquette to the conduct of warfare.

Yet the Sharia contradicts the deepest premises of Western civilization. The unequal relations of male and female, of Muslim and *kafir*, of owner and slave, cannot be reconciled with equality of rights. The harem cannot be reconciled with a monogamous order. Islamic supremacism contradicts freedom of religion. A sovereign God cannot allow democracy.

Islamists all concur on the goal of applying Islamic law globally. But they differ on whether to achieve this through violence (the preference of bin Laden), totalitarian rule (Khomeini), or by politically gaming the system (the Swiss intellectual Tariq Ramadan). However done, were Islamists to achieve a Sharia order, they would effectively replace Western civilization with Islamic civilization. In American terms, allowing the Koran to trump the Constitution ends the United States as it has existed for more than two centuries.

ACCEPTING the Rushdie Rules, in other words, implies a process that culminates in full application of the Sharia. Were Khomeini to have his way, those of us who value Western civilization could not argue against the Sharia. To understand the consequences of closing the debate about Islam, note what appears to be an innocuous report published in 2007 by the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), a leading Islamist institution in the United Kingdom. Titled *Towards Greater Understanding*, it advises British authorities on how to deal with Muslim students in taxpayer-funded schools.

The MCB seeks to create an environment in schools in which Muslim children do not make “inappropriate assumptions” that “to progress in society they will have to compromise or give up aspects of who they are, and their religious beliefs and values.” Toward this end, the MCB proposes a jaw-dropping list of changes that would fundamentally alter the nature of British schools, transforming them, in effect, into Saudi-like institutions. Some of its suggestions:

Prayers: Provide (1) extra “water cans or bottles” for washing before the prayers and (2) prayer facilities,

ideally separate ones for boys and girls. Schools should also make available “a suitable external visitor, a teacher or an older pupil” to lead the communal Friday prayers and give the sermon.

Toilets: Water available in water cans or bottles for cleansing purposes.

Social customs: No pressure to shake hands with members of the opposite sex, whether students or teachers.

Scheduling: Vacation days for all on the two major Muslim holidays, the Eids.

Holiday celebrations: Involve non-Muslim students and their parents in Islamic holiday rituals. During Ramadan, for instance, all children, not just Muslim ones, should celebrate “the spirit and values of Ramadan through collective worship or assembly themes and communal Iftar (the breaking of the fast).”

Ramadan: (1) No examinations during this month, “since the combination of preparing for exams and fasting may prove challenging for some pupils” and (2) no sex education, to respect strictures against sex during that month.

Food: Provide halal meals. Permit students to eat with their right hands.

Clothing: Accede to the wearing of hijabs and even jilbabs (a long outer garment down to the ankles). In swimming pools, Muslim children should wear modest swimwear (e.g., for girls, full leotards and leggings). Islamic amulets must be permitted.

Beards: A right for male students.

Sports: Sex-segregation where there is physical contact with other team players, as in basketball and football, or when exposed, as in swimming.

Shower rooms: Separate stalls needed, so Mus-

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lims are not subject to the “profound indignity” of seeing or being seen in the nude.

Music: Should be limited to “the human voice and non-tuneable percussion instruments such as drums.”

Dancing: Excluded, unless it is done in a single-sex environment and does not “involve sexual connotations and messages.”

Teacher and administrator training: Staff should undergo Islamic “awareness training” so that schools are “better informed and have greater and more accurate appreciation of their Muslim pupils’ needs.”

Art: Exempt Muslim pupils from producing “three dimensional figurative imagery of humans.”

Religious instruction: Pictures of any prophets (including Jesus) prohibited.

Language instruction: Arabic should be made available to all Muslim students.

Islamic civilization: (1) Study the contribution of Muslims to Europe in history, art, mathematics, and science classes and (2) emphasize common aspects of European and Islamic heritage.

The imposition, explicit or implicit, of Rushdie Rules would render impossible any criticism of a program such as the MCB’s. I could not write this article, COMMENTARY could not publish it, and you could not read it.

Overhauling schools is just one of a myriad of planned changes. Step by step, piece by piece, Islamists wish to trump the premises of Western life by infusing its education, cultural life, and institutions with a concurrent Islamic system that in time overrides secular institutions, until an Islamic order comes operationally into being. Some changes are already in place and extend to many aspects of life. A few pungent examples:

Polygamous marriages are valid under certain circumstances in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, Australia, and the Canadian province of Ontario. Muslim women-only swimming sessions exist in municipal pools in Washington State. Women-only classes are being offered at Virginia Tech,

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a taxpayer-supported university. Women can have their driver’s license photographs taken wearing hijabs in three U.S. states. If they work at IKEA or for the London police, women can wear branded hijabs provided by their employers.

Piggybanks have been banned as a symbol of saving at two major British banks. “Any matter containing religious materials contrary to Islamic faith” may not

be sent via the U.S. postal system to soldiers serving in the Middle East. Medical personnel may not eat or drink in the presence of Muslim patients or colleagues during the month of Ramadan in a Scottish hospital. The City of Boston sold public land at a discount price to build an Islamic institution.

These steps, large and small, toward Islamization undermine Western values and mores. They are unacceptable: Muslims are entitled to equal rights and responsibilities but not to special privileges. They must fit into the existing order, not remake Western societies in the Islamist mold. Increasing freedom is welcome; regressing to the medieval norms of the Sharia is not.

IN RETROSPECT, responses to the Rushdie edict among intellectuals and politicians in 1989 were noteworthy for the support for the imperiled novelist, especially on the left. Leftist intellectuals were more likely to stand by him (Susan Sontag: “our integrity as a nation is as endangered by an attack on a writer as on an oil tanker”) than were those on the right (Patrick Buchanan: “we should shove his blasphemous little novel out into the cold”). But times have changed: Paul Berman recently published a book, *The Flight of the Intellectuals*, that excoriates his fellow liberals for (as the dust jacket puts it) having “fumbled badly in their effort to grapple with Islamist ideas and violence.”

At the time, François Mitterrand, the socialist president of France, called the threat to Rushdie an “absolute evil.” The Green Party in Germany sought to break all economic agreements with Iran. Hans-Dietrich Genscher, the German foreign minister, endorsed a European Union resolution supporting Rushdie as “a signal to assure the preservation of civilization and human values.” The U.S. Senate unanimously passed a resolution that declared its commitment “to protect the right of any person to write, publish, sell, buy, and read books without fear of intimidation and violence” and condemned Khomeini’s threat as “state-sponsored terrorism.” Such governmental responses are inconceivable in 2010.

For every exercise in free speech since 1989, such as the Danish Muhammad cartoons or the no-holds-barred studies of Islam published by Prometheus Books, uncountable legions of writers, publishers, and illustrators have shied away from expressing themselves. Two examples: Paramount Pictures replaced the Hamas-like terrorists of Tom Clancy’s novel *The Sum of All Fears* with European neo-Nazis in its movie version of the story. And Yale University Press published a book on the Danish

cartoon crisis without permitting the cartoons to be reproduced in the study.

The reasoning of those who capitulate is as unexceptional as it is dismal: “This decision was based solely on concern for public safety”; “the safety and security of our customers and employees is a top priority”; “I feel real fear that someone will slit my throat”; “If I would have said what I actually think about Islam, I wouldn’t be in this world for long”; and “If this goes down badly, I’m writing my own death warrant.”

Changes since 1989 result mainly from the growth of three *isms*: multiculturalism, left-fascism, and Islamism. The multicultural impulse regards no way of life, belief system, or political philosophy better or worse than any other. Just as Italian and Japanese food are both delicious and filling, so environmentalism or Wicca offer equally valid alternatives to Judeo-Christian civilization. Why fight for one’s way of life when it has no claim to superiority over any other?

But perhaps one way is worse: if Western imperialism and the white race pollute the world, who wants Western civilization? A sizable movement of left-

fascists, led by Hugo Chávez, sees Western power, which they call “Empire,” as the world’s main threat, with the United States and Israel viewed as the chief offenders.

Islamism has grown spectacularly since 1989, becoming the most powerful form of radical utopianism, forming an alliance with the left, dominating civil societies, challenging many governments and taking over others, establishing a beachhead in the West,

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and smartly advancing its agenda in international institutions.

The yin of Western weakness, in short, has met with the yang of Islamist assertion. Defenders of Western civilization must fight not just Islamists but also the multiculturalists who enable them and the leftists who ally with them. 🐉