

# Salman Rushdie: Newsmaker of the year

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Newness always poses a threat. Whereas the old and familiar is reassuring and offers at least the semblance of personal control, the new is unpredictable. The shepherds knew of the possibility of a messiah, but they certainly didn't anticipate God's arrival in the form of a baby in a cave. Travelers from the east who brought gifts for a king could not have known that their moment of epiphany would involve a small child born to humble parents in a little-noticed corner of the world.

The fear of change was surely behind much of the violence and political furor that followed the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* early in 1989. Because of the impact this novel has had on the Muslim world, because of the issues it raises about the place of Islam and other religions in a pluralistic society, and because of the way Rushdie in his work embodies elements of a postmodern worldview, the Century has picked Rushdie as the newsmaker of the year in religion.

When Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini condemned Rushdie's novel as blasphemous for the way it treated the prophet Muhammad, he acted as fundamentalist authoritarians always do—to protect the faithful from a threatening opinion. When the ayatollah issued a death sentence against Rushdie, he elevated literary criticism to an international holy war.

The Iranian ruler died a few months after issuing the edict, but the death sentence is still in effect. At least one Iranian Muslim leader has suggested lifting the edict, in part, no doubt, because a death decree of this sort is contrary to Muslim law, but also because he wants Iran to overcome the stigma of Khomeini's style of governance.

Media coverage of the Rushdie affair focused on the ayatollah and on Rushdie's fear that one of Khomeini's fanatical followers would carry out the sentence. The world's literary community was outraged at censorship by intimidation. These responses

obscured, however, the important moral and artistic contribution of *The Satanic Verses*. (*Newsweek* called it perhaps "the least-read book ever to provoke an international controversy.") Using evocative metaphors, a multilayered plot and a blend of realism and fantasy, Rushdie offers a harbinger of what critic Mark Edmundson terms "a new, positive postmodernism."

Writing in a recent issue of *Harper's*, Edmundson notes that Rushdie is asking the question, "How does newness come into the world?" It certainly does not come with the cooperation of tyrants of either the religious or the political variety. Edmundson praises *The Satanic Verses* for the manner in which it is "enthralled with the theme of creative and salutary transformation." To his question of how newness comes into being, Rushdie adds, "How is it born? Of what fusions, translations, conjoining is it made? How does it survive, extreme and dangerous as it is?" The ayatollah, like the cardinals who brought Galileo before the Inquisition or the Nazi leaders who condemned Freud for his "Jewish science," was fearful of, in Edmundson's words, "ideas with the power to provoke major transformations."

Khomeini is far from being the only religionist to resist newness. Christian fundamentalists have recently grown in institutional strength and political influence, and Jewish fundamentalists in Israel are demanding that the Zionist dream be realized within a narrow understanding of what constitutes Judaism. Fundamentalist responses to Rushdie's novel constitute only the tip of a very large iceberg.

Ironically, however, fundamentalists' practice of insisting on absolute truth is itself more of a product of modernity than they realize. Modernity arose from the Enlightenment, which brought with it a confidence in logical, rational language and in the measurability of reality. With the arrival of this paradigm, religious communities had to develop ways of talking about God and personal behavior that were acceptable to rational thought. This new paradigm put Christianity, Judaism and Islam at a temporary disadvantage, since each rests upon some form of revelation, an invasion of the logical, rational realm by a transcendent God. In various ways these religions adapted to modernity, shaping traditional beliefs to fit contemporary forms of speech and thought.

But something has happened in recent decades. We are no longer so confident that rational language has the last word, or that our scientific methods are the only measure of truth. We can see now that modernity, in undermining old religious absolutes, offered us another version of the absolute truth in the form of scientific

rationality. It is this realization that has ushered in the postmodern era—an era that leaves room, in Edmundson's view, for people "to invent themselves anew and for cultures to become more diverse, tolerant and vital."

Philosopher Richard Rorty, a major articulator of this postmodern viewpoint, says that with this insight we can refuse to be dictated by past patterns or to "accept somebody else's description" of ourselves. Rorty would have us learn to tell a story about ourselves and our situation "in a new language." Rorty suggests that we all become poets, by which he means not writers of poetry but people who are open to new ways of describing the world and new patterns of personal and social life.

Confronting the "false" absolutes that modernity has substituted for the transcendent God, Rorty proposes that we embrace the contrasting cultures alive in the world today in search of that solidarity that constitutes the real joy and mystery of existence. And a major thesis of *The Satanic Verses* is that we "make" our own truth by opening ourselves to others, moving beyond the "us" against "them" view that characterizes the modern rationalistic mind-set. For Rushdie, it is obvious that the "making" of truth involves a highly personal engagement with his own religious tradition, Islam, as well as with the tenets of the modern West.

Edmundson concludes his praise for Rushdie's novel by quoting the novelist's strong endorsement of the spirit of postmodernity, which is willing "to name the unnameable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world, and stop it from going to sleep." It is in this spirit that Rushdie creates one of the more compelling moments in his novel, a scene in which a man who has become a "goatman" is confined in a London hospital ward with other people whose humanity is equally deformed. The reader realizes that each patient there has come from elsewhere. They are immigrants, largely from Islamic countries—outsiders, both in their cultures of origin and in the West. The horror of this condition is described not to denigrate Islam but to underline the alienation of those whose identity has been imposed on them.

Because his own background is Muslim, Rushdie attacks the authoritarianism of that faith. But his point is not confined to Islam. He is not, Edmundson argues, "anti-Islamic" but antiauthoritarian, opposed to those forces that demand rigid adherence to a definition of self that is imposed by a hierarchical structure. He is resisting the fundamentalism that refuses to let the individual engage with others in a pluralistic world and forge one's own identity. Muhammad's insights into the human condition

have been distorted, Rushdie believes, to accommodate those in authority rather than to assist the individual in the lifelong quest for authenticity.

The jury is still out on what place religion has in the postmodern world reflected in Rushdie's work. Philosophers like Rorty would reject religion as a crutch that denies new ways of defining self and society. Rushdie is not so hostile as this—except toward a religion that is captive to tradition. In any case, his work and the international fracas it created have served as a dramatic call for a creative engagement with the world's cultural and religious pluralism, in a quest for new possibilities of human community.