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FREE SPEECH, SALMAN RUSHDIE AND RESEARCH LIBRARIES

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The following is a presentation given as part of a panel discussion at the Rutgers University Libraries on March 2, 1989. The event, entitled "Free Speech and Salman Rushdie," was sponsored by the Libraries and held in the Pané Room of the Alexander Library.

THE first thing that needs to be said about the issue of free speech in connection with Salman Rushdie is that the issue is not as simple as it may at first appear. Standing up for freedom of speech never is, for the serious assertion of this right always involves collision with a strong interest.

At first, the conflict appears clear-cut. On one side, we have the author of a book. The book is fiction, and for the moment we may leave to others just what interpretations one may draw from it. It is an imaginative work, and no doubt it expresses a point of view. If it is any good at all as an imaginative work that point of view will be complex, contradictory in parts, subtle sometimes and direct at others, and difficult for anyone, including the author, to summarize.

On the other side, we have the national leader of another state—not the author's—expressing his disagreement with the author. This national leader has disagreed so violently that, with all the power of an organized religion as well as that of the state, he has called for the death of the author. It is not a rhetorical gesture, for he has encouraged his followers to kill the author and has asserted that both spiritual and monetary rewards will accrue to the killers.

It seems easy to say that this case is as stark an attack on freedom of speech as has ever been. There are no ambiguities, no hidden threats, no subtleties; an entire apparatus of state and religious power is arrayed against a defenseless individual who has simply spoken his mind. We may say—if we will not stand up to defend freedom of speech in this case, then we are frail reeds indeed when more complex cases are considered such as those involving libel, pornography, and political opposition. If we won't stand up on this one, what will we stand up for? If not now, when?

To take this view is to misunderstand the peculiar nature of free speech: that it is only kept alive by its assertion against important views that are sincerely held. The resultant paradox of free speech is that it must be absolute against absolutism.

First, let us remember that Islam is a major religion. This is to state the obvious, but we need to be reminded of it. There are perhaps a billion followers of Islam in the world, and it is an ancient and honorable religion sharing much with the Judaism and Christianity of the West. It is spread broadly across the world from the Pacific to the west of Africa, with adherents in every major country, and has affected history for well over a thousand years. It is the Muslim tradition of scholarship which we have to thank for the preservation of many classical Greek manuscripts, and for such concepts as algorithms and algebra.

Second, let me remind most of this audience of our complete unfamiliarity with Islam. This too may be so obvious that it needs stating for our awareness. But the result, such is human nature, is that we discount the importance of what we know nothing about. It is this ignorance which can lead us to see the free speech issues as simply drawn.

Let us take a quite different case in which free speech issues are important, and with which many will be familiar: the case of pornography and its degradation of women. There is no question for most of us that pornography does indeed degrade women: it at least objectifies them, and commonly it encourages the most demeaning attitudes toward them. Some suggest that the reading of pornography can lead directly toward violence to women. One point of view, held among others by a group called Women Against Pornography, is that pornography should be censored—if not in all forms, at least in some. And at least for some people. And certainly in the case of child pornography.

Most of us will realize that complex issues of free speech are raised by this line of argument, for two values of importance are placed in contrast with each other: the rights of an exploited group and the rights of expression. If Women Against Pornography have their way, what could happen to such works as Nabokov's *Lolita*? But if they don't have their way, we

can continue to expect to see pubescent children forced to degrading acts to further the sale of photographs. The resolution of this complex issue will not come soon and it is not today's topic. The point is that the complexity arises out of our familiarity with the issues, and out of our understanding that both of the values involved are important.

We are told that Muslims find Salman Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses* to be offensive. Apparently it can be viewed as blasphemous, and has been, particularly in relation to their religion's founder.* Thus, for those who know a great deal about the issue—the issue of Islam and of one's Islamic faith—serious issues are apparently raised by the views expressed in the book.

We need to be reminded that the religious views of others are important, and that simply flinging the free speech gauntlet at those whose religion is an enigma to us will gain neither us nor the principle any ground. It may be helpful to remind ourselves that Christian fundamentalism, with which we are more familiar, is not a vanished phenomenon and that violence on its behalf is well within our memory. Larry Flynt, a magazine publisher, and the Jewish radio broadcaster killed in the Southwest, were each shot within the past decade for reasons related to religion. Let us not forget that the Pilgrim fathers who came to this country for their own freedom banished and hanged others who disagreed with them, and were accomplished censors of books. John Milton was a Puritan forefather whose ringing defense of freedom of the press in *Areopagitica* we should recall; we should recall that in the same work he also said it shouldn't apply to Catholics, for since Catholics seek to extirpate other religions we should ourselves seek to extirpate Catholicism. I much prefer the tolerant, if arm's-length, view put forth in the 109th Sura of the Koran:

O unbelievers, I will not worship that which ye worship; nor will ye worship that which I worship. . . . Ye have your religion, and I my religion.**

When we consider the substance of the Muslim case against the book we realize that freedom of speech is not a natural right. It does not exist free-floating in the human environment, self-evident to all if they would

* Notice that I am being circumspect in my attributing to the book these qualities. This is because I have not read it, nor, I suspect, have most of the people here today. Parenthetically, it is quite a different matter to attack a book one hasn't read than to defend the right of a book to exist that one hasn't read.

** I am aware that to paraphrase or even translate the Koran borders on the sacrilegious for those to whom it is sacred; I hope my attempt at understanding will mitigate any offense that might here be given.

only see. It is a right that must be asserted not only in a vacuum, but against the views of others that may be strongly held. It is a right that can only survive if it is asserted time and time again. Thus some of us may become disturbed when neo-Nazis assert their right to march to Skokie, or (as the day before this talk) when the ACLU asserts the rights of under-18-year-olds facing a possible nighttime curfew in Washington, D.C. But the right of each of us to speak our minds—to the tenuous extent that we have that right—is the result of individual and collective struggles over centuries, and it will die if it is not spoken for time and time again.***

Let me make one other preliminary point: it is a mistake in understanding and in politics to write off the Ayatollah Khomeini as an aberrant phenomenon. This man is an Imam, a spiritual leader of about 50 million Iranians and some number of other Shi'ite Muslims. He is also the unchallenged head of a consequential nation. To write off the Ayatollah is to write off the millions of people who are happy to have him represent them, and that is always a mistake. Khomeini represents an important political as well as spiritual tendency in the world, and he and his followers must be taken seriously and at face value if we are to understand what is going on (and therefore hope to change it).

All this by way of prelude. After all this, it must be said: the government of Iran, speaking through the Ayatollah Khomeini and its other officials, has committed a grievous and vicious crime that is an affront to free people everywhere. It is particularly unconscionable with respect to its intended target, even if the threat never takes its effect, for the author now must know for life that he is a marked man.

It may be asked how I can speak so definitively of crime and affront after having argued for understanding of Muslim views. It is because we believe in the paradox that values must be asserted, yet are not absolute. A Muslim may assert the truth and value of his religion, and we support his right to do so. We can understand how the book may have been offensive to Muslim readers; and we categorically assert the right of Muslims to protest the views expressed in the book, to demonstrate peacefully against them, and to argue with them.

Our defense of this right arises out of our assertion that the Western values of individualism are important, and that the value of individual

*** As we go to press, the Supreme Court decision on the burning of the American flag as free expression has excited national discussion. Those who support Rushdie's right to speak contrary to Islamic orthodoxy but who wish to prosecute flag-burners have the burden of showing how the cases are different.

expression is crucial to the survival of a society as free. Further, we assert that a free society is valuable. We hold these truths to be self-evident—but they are not, and they need to be argued and asserted. We have many reasons for understanding the importance of individual liberty. They include historical experience of oppression arising out of absolutism in religion or politics, a pragmatic understanding of the virtues of competition in ideas, and the universal vested interest in protecting oneself against external power such as the state's. The fact remains that, in spite of Thomas Jefferson, there is no natural law that says we have the right to defend individual liberties against the power of the state or of organized religion. But we believe in that right, and we know that the only way to reify our view of the world is to assert our view against threats such as today's. If we only assume our world view passively, it will disappear.

The state of Iran is dangerously and criminally wrong to urge the death of an individual for expressing his views. To say this is of course not to quarrel with the Islamic faith, but it is definitely to quarrel with an absolutist interpretation of that faith. What we cannot agree with is the idea that *only* the Muslim view of the world is correct, for we have too often seen mistakes made by Muslims, by Christians, by Marxists—by anyone trying to live by absolute ideals—and by ourselves. Nor can we agree with the desire to silence the author by force, for this deals not with the idea but only with the human and vulnerable person. In any case we know that once uttered, ideas live beyond their authors. What we also know is that once a power suppresses views by force, no one is safe from that power, not even those who believe they wield it. From our historical experience, we know this will be the case even within Iran.

Iran's crime is also to have transmitted insecurity to millions throughout the world. Iran as a state has threatened an individual in another country with which it is not at war, and without any provision for due process within either country. We must regret that it is this aspect of the issue only that the British government and our own President have chosen to criticize, leaving the issues of free speech unaddressed. Even so it remains a serious issue; and when the United States does this in Nicaragua, or the Soviet Union in Hungary, it is called state terrorism. What Iran has done in this case is state terrorism.

It has had a terrorist effect on free speech in at least two ways. First, it is apparent that throughout the world authors, publishers, booksellers and libraries are becoming much more cautious about writings on topics related to Islam. This is referred to as the chilling of free expression. It is not acceptable in a free world, and will only be overcome by authors,

publishers, booksellers and librarians taking chances, asserting their right to deal with this topic, and successfully doing so with the support of their readers and governments. (If you did not know yet, this is why we are gathered for this meeting today.)

The most evident chill in this country has been the miserable performance of the major chain booksellers: Barnes & Noble, B. Dalton, and Waldenbooks. Years ago when the major chains were growing, the remarks were made that such stores wouldn't take chances, wouldn't support works of minority interest, would only pay attention to fiscal issues and not to aesthetic or cultural issues, would avoid controversy, and would drive the small bookseller out of business. The reading desires of Americans and the stamina of many small bookstores let this prediction fall out of our minds, but the present cave-in of the book chains—and their recanting in terms that do not give us confidence in the future—has brought it back to us. In fact, we heard of very little evidence that there were threats against the chains; apparently they needed only the threat to the author to cut their ties completely.

The question naturally arises: were a group opposed to abortion to threaten one of these chains with violence if certain books were not removed from its shelves, would it do so? Were a left-wing group similarly to threaten a chain if an Oliver North book were not removed, would it do so? I don't have confidence in the answer.

The chains have forgotten what the book trade is fundamentally about—the transmission of ideas—and many of us, in turn, will not forget their performance for a long time.

The second state terrorist constraint on free speech has been with respect to Iran itself. The *New York Times* had the nerve to call its February 22, 1989 editorial on the topic “On Second Thought, Courage”—after eight days of utter silence while the world stood in consternation at the Ayatollah's threat. Yet the *Times* had a point: where was our leadership? President Bush only spoke on Feb. 21, and the European leaders let a week go by before they spoke out. Press commentators at first in this country left the topic—and Iran—alone for days after Khomeini's threat. Writers and authors, librarians and booksellers all stood mute for a brief time. In part, everyone wanted leadership. In part, everyone was terrorized.

Speaking for myself, I know I experienced several feelings at once when I first read of Khomeini's threat to Salman Rushdie. Among them were surprise and pity. I also felt directly attacked. I also felt the reality of events I had previously only read about: the suppression of books and

people in Nazi Germany, South Africa and the Soviet Union; and the cold war hysteria of America in the 1950s. It was happening to me, and to us; I think we all felt that *frisson*.

There have been threats against the publishers of the book. I have heard people in this country on the radio speak coolly of their desire to kill Rushdie. Firebombings of American bookstores have been reported. Meetings on this issue in New York City and at the University of Michigan have had to be held in conditions of high security. I can tell you that I am not only offended by the potential violence in Khomeini's threat, I am angry that in preparing for this discussion I have had to consider even briefly the measuring of my words and the safety of you who meet in this room. That is the chilling of expression through force, and no one has the right to do that to anyone. By your presence here—and we are all grateful to each other for this collegial gesture—you have rejected that chill; you have asserted a freedom you value.

Let me recapitulate where we've been, and close with a remark about the role of libraries. I began with some comments about the importance of Islam to its followers, in part to ensure that we acknowledge this importance and in part to emphasize that free speech is only challenged when serious views are strongly held. Then I developed the thought that free speech—the right of each of us to speak and write our views uninhibited by others—does not come naturally. Our ability to exercise free speech in the future will come from our willingness to attack infringements on free speech as they arise. The paradox of our absolutism that each of us must be able to express our views is that we cannot then let ourselves be absolute about any other view. If we are absolute about any other values, we will destroy free speech for others and create the opportunity for others to destroy free speech for ourselves. Iran and the Ayatollah have attempted to do this, and it is the right and duty of free people to challenge their absolutism. We urge them to recognize the value of free expression not only for others but for themselves, if not now perhaps at another time more difficult for them. We also urge them to recognize that by this absolutism Iran and Islam gain no support, only hostility, from those not already firmly persuaded of their views.

It is significant that we meet here in a modern research library. The research library stands as a monument to free speech, for it includes within its holdings all that can reasonably be gathered of the intellectual history of the world. Within our walls and accessible through our staff and computers are opinions of every kind on every topic: religious, philosophical, literary, scientific, political. It is the nature of a research li-

brary to serve up the human record for current intellectual inquiry. Our goal to be comprehensive is the rational, acquisitive corollary to the spontaneous, expressive imperative of free speech.

As librarians, we know that when free speech is curtailed, a library is constrained and our professional abilities are diminished. The converse is also true: when a librarian is kept from collecting through prejudice or fiat, the community's intellectual discourse is lessened and inhibited. We also know that our libraries may remain simply monuments to free speech of the past unless we as librarians act to keep them alive to current intellectual activity. Without librarians, libraries are only stacks of books. We act fully as librarians when we assert the value of free speech, for then we are assuring the creation of the full human record that we have committed ourselves to preserving and providing.