



## Is Salman Rushdie a Victim of “Cancel Culture”?

Rebecca Watson

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Last week, the award-winning writer Salman Rushdie was viciously attacked while on stage at an event in Western New York. His attacker was a 24-year old man from New Jersey, a Muslim who traveled to Lebanon a few years ago and, according to his mother, returned to the US moody and introverted, as well as more religious and angry at her for not raising him in a stricter Muslim way.

Rushdie was gravely injured, requiring an airlift to a hospital where he was treated for multiple stab wounds to his neck and stomach, and as of this recording it looks like he's going to pull through but may end up losing sight in one eye from a puncture wound.

This was, sadly, not super surprising. Rushdie has been living under the very real threat of violence since at least 1989, when Iranian leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued a fatwa calling for any Muslim to assassinate not just Rushdie, but anyone involved in the publication of his recently-published book “The Satanic Verses.” They were offended because the book was a fictional account inspired by the prophet Muhammad and referred to verses in the Quran about pagan goddesses.

The reaction to the fatwa was so severe that in 1990, Rushdie issued a statement saying he had renewed his lapsed Muslim faith and that he repudiated the actions of the characters in his book. It was a lie and it didn't help.

In 1991, the Japanese translator of the book was stabbed to death and the Italian translator was stabbed multiple times but lived; in 1993, the Norwegian publisher was shot three times but lived and the Turkish translator was targeted by a mob of arsonists and lived, but the mob murdered 37 other people. After a decade in hiding, Rushdie announced that he was done being scared. He moved to the US in 2000 and went back to doing public events, including frequently appearing on TV and in movies.

I actually got to see Rushdie at the New Humanism conference in 2007, where he did a reading and then a lecture and panel discussion on a humanistic Islam. I remember being completely blown away by how fearless he was, considering that Islamic terrorists had only become more prominent in our country over the previous 20 years. Like, he did loads of events that weekend

and it would have been impossible to ensure that there wasn't an armed fanatic in the audience at some point. But, I figured, I guess after a few decades you just decide to live your life. And, a few years later I would experience a tiny fraction of that myself: after a few years of being pretty freaked out by men threatening to kill me for my views, at some point I decided that if it's going to happen, so be it. At some point your brain just gives in and says "fuck it," I guess.

So it took 30 years, but an extremist finally managed to draw blood. Luckily he didn't succeed at actually assassinating Rushdie, but it's still a horrific blow to free speech and religious freedom: it's another incident that will make someone think twice in the future before they publish that novel, that cartoon, or that Tweet that is critical of Islam. And that is FUCKED.

And by the way, Iran is still being a bunch of dicks about this entire thing. Way back in the late '90s they claimed they WOULD rescind the fatwa but they can't because a fatwa can only really be reversed by the person who made it, and that asshole died from 5 heart attacks a few months after issuing it. You know, some superstitious people would consider that a sign, but whatever.

But Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman said about the stabbing, "We do not consider anyone other than (Rushdie) and his supporters worth of blame and even condemnation." Eat a bag of dicks, Iran.

Anyway, all of this is horrible, but I also wanted to take a moment to talk about cancel culture, and how it is obviously to blame for this attack. Yes, you see, I am a gigantic dumbass who can't tell the difference between words and physical violence, so to me, a person who makes money by having smart takes online, Salman Rushdie being threatened with assassination for 30 years and then being stabbed to the brink of death is equivalent to, say, a drink company dropping a Real Housewife as their spokesperson after she tweeted that COVID-19 was "God's way of thinning the herd." By the way, I got that on a list of famous "cancellations" where she is listed immediately after Samuel Paty, who showed college students satirical images of Muhammad and was "canceled" by being beheaded.

All of which brings me to the TERFs. Trans-exclusionary radical feminists never miss an opportunity to make a situation about themselves, as I've learned thanks to situations like this one from last month when a TERF replied to my video about microscopic algae by insisting that puberty blockers are unsafe. Like, Jesus Christ, get a second hobby.

Cathy Young is one such person: she's a TERFy libertarian with the Koch-funded CATO institute who recently barfed this out on Twitter:

"Can't wait to hear from the likes of Michael Hobbes about how the Rushdie stabbing is just "consequence culture" and the real tragedy is the harm he caused to marginalized people"

Hobbes is an investigative journalist who has been critical of the idea that "cancel culture" is a real problem when it comes to things like, people tweeting mean things at Jordan Peterson. Hobbes's position, and the position of most reasonable progressives, as best I can tell, is that

people should not be subjected to physical violence for their speech; at the same time, there are examples of speech that exist along a spectrum in which they encourage physical violence, or directly contribute to violence against certain people, or indirectly contribute to the continued marginalization of certain people, etc. etc. And there is an equal spectrum of reactions people can have to those forms of speech, using their OWN free speech: calling for a boycott, peacefully protesting, sending mean Tweets to Jordan Peterson, etc. etc.

And this is all incredibly obvious when you think of the extreme examples: that fatwa was just “words,” but they were words that directly called for violence. Iran pointing out the fatwa was technically still in place was just words, but words that indirectly called for violence. Protocols of the Elders of Zion are just words, but they’re words that directly contribute to the continued marginalization of and violence against Jewish people.

Cathy Young went on to point out that Rushdie himself was critical of writers who objected to PEN giving their 2015 Freedom of Expression Courage award to Charlie Hebdo after the French satirical magazine was attacked by Islamic extremists who murdered 12 people. She, and Rushdie it seems, likened those authors’ expression of free speech to being anti-free speech and pro-violence. But those authors specifically pointed out that they abhorred what was obviously a “hideous crime” on the part of the extremists, and that they could defend Charlie Hebdo’s right to publish hate speech without celebrating and awarding that hate speech.

Young then points out that Rushdie signed the 2020 Harper’s letter, which whined that social media mobs were restricting the free speech of people like JK Rowling, which Michael Hobbes rightly pointed out was a completely silly and baseless moral panic. Young wants us to believe that because we consider Salman Rushdie an intellectual, and because he has been the victim of abhorrent censorship on the part of religious extremists and world governments, whatever letter he puts his name on must have merit. By the same measure, we should all agree with this letter he signed in 2009, which called for the immediate release of Roman Polanski, who had been arrested by Swiss authorities for “a case of morals.” The moral issue in question is that in 1978, when Polanski was 43 years old, he drugged a 13-year old girl with alcohol and Quaaludes and then raped her as she cried “no.” To avoid scarring the girl further with a long court case, authorities agreed to let Polanski plead guilty to “engaging in unlawful sexual intercourse with a minor.” After he pled guilty he was allowed to go free before sentencing, and so he fled to Europe, hiding out in France for 30-odd years. He was caught when he traveled to Switzerland to receive an award for being such a great director. This, I suppose, is what qualifies as a great threat to freedom of speech for Rushdie and others.

It’s telling that Young, Rushdie, and others who are terrified of “cancel culture” are the ones who are actually doing what they accuse others of and confusing free speech with violence. The Harper’s letter didn’t mention any specific examples but it did call out things like “editors are fired for running controversial pieces,” which was likely an allusion to the New York Times firing James Bennet after Black staff objected to his approval of an opinion piece (which he admitted to not having read before approving it) by Tom Cotton that called for the US military to suppress Black Lives Matter protests. Should we shame those Black New York Times staffers for exercising their free speech? Did their speech cause “violence” to Bennet? Did his boss stab

him multiple times, or did he simply fire him? Is there a difference between those two results? I think so, but it seems like a lot of “free speech” absolutists do not.

So no, it's not somehow hypocritical to decry the use of actual violence, or government censorship, while at the same time upholding people's right to meet speech they do not like with more speech, whether that be by expressing outrage, sending mean tweets, or threatening a walkout. Trust me when I say that I know how upsetting an online mob can be when they're trying to “cancel” you: I had one directed at me for several years, and they were successful at getting me deplatformed from atheist and skeptic conferences, causing me to reduce the amount of time I spend on social media, and directly leading me to seek psychiatric help (for which I'm actually thankful...actually all three of those things have made me a better, happier person). But despite those things costing me money and time and stress, all of those things are on a different level from the threats of violence I've received, and even those threats are on a different level from the actual physical violence visited upon Rushdie, or the staff of Charlie Hebdo, or others who have been gravely wounded and murdered for their speech.

I wish Rushdie the speediest of recoveries, and I hope that this heinous attack serves as a reminder that religious intolerance is alive and well. We must continue to protect the ability of people worldwide to say what they wish without violence, especially when it's considered blasphemy.