Newsday

Assault on Salman Rushdie is a moment of moral clarity in the free speech debate

By Cathy Young

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The shocking attack on writer Salman Rushdie, who was repeatedly stabbed and severely injured during a lecture last week in Chautauqua, New York, has brought the issues of religious fanaticism and freedom of speech back into the spotlight. While the attempted assassination of the 75-year-old Indian-born British American novelist has been roundly deplored, this horrific episode also serves as a reminder that progressive sensitivities can become an excuse for condoning violent intolerance.

There is little doubt that the assailant, 24-year-old New Jersey resident Hadi Matar, saw himself as enforcing a fatwa — death decree — issued in 1989 by the late Iranian leader, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, in response to Rushdie's "blasphemous" book "The Satanic Verses." The surrealist novel includes a section that re-imagines the life of Muhammad through a schizophrenic character's dreams. Rushdie spent a decade in hiding; two of the book's translators were attacked, one fatally. While the government of Iran sometimes struck a more moderate note following Khomeini's death, the fatwa was never revoked, and the bounty offered by a quasi-official religious foundation was increased to $3 million.

From the start, the persecution of Rushdie was an atrocious attack on freedom of thought and speech. Yet, remarkably, some prominent voices in democratic countries, including former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, chose to condemn Rushdie along with his persecutors, denouncing his work as an insult to Muslims.

Since then, the view that blasphemy against Islam should be regarded as a form of "hate" has become much more common on the progressive left, where arguments for free speech are often regarded with suspicion as a defense of the right of the "privileged" to harm the powerless — including Muslim minorities in the West. Never mind that vast numbers of Muslims, in the West and in majority-Muslim countries, don't share authoritarian Islamist orthodoxy and are its foremost victims. (While critiques of militant Islamism have sometimes been used as a pretext for anti-Muslim bigotry, the two are not identical.)

The progressive defection from free speech was evident in 2015 after 12 staffers of the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo were killed in a terror attack in response to the publication of Muhammad cartoons. A number of left-of-center pundits, from Vox writer Max Fisher to cartoonist Gary Trudeau, essentially blamed the victims, asserting that the magazine's mockery of Islamic militancy (along with other forms of religious zealotry) amounted to "punching down" at marginalized people. When the PEN American Center gave its annual Freedom of Expression Courage Award to Charlie Hebdo, a number of writers withdrew from the PEN gala for similar reasons. Rushdie harshly mocked them on Twitter and praised PEN for "holding firm."
Today, PEN has also raised its voice for Rushdie; on Friday, it will hold a reading from his works on the steps of the New York Public Library. But other progressive organizations with a free-speech cachet, notably the American Civil Liberties Union, have been quiet — and Amnesty International took several days to condemn the attack. Is it "problematic" to be too outspoken on behalf of an author who has affirmed the right to offend, even when the offended count as oppressed in the progressive ranking of identities?

Over the years, Rushdie has been an admirable voice for freedom, opposing all forms of authoritarianism but never lending support to bigotry. In the muddle of the culture wars, his attempted murder should be a moment of moral clarity: You are either for free speech or against it.

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