

EDITORIAL

THIS FAR AND NO FARTHER



"They came first for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time, there was no left to speak up."

Martin Niemoller

Thousands of miles from here, a political and religious leader has ordered a man killed. The Ayatollah Khomeini is offended by a book Salman Rushdie has written; therefore, he has decided this author must die. So what? Executions are ordered all the time in this world. The man who signed this order doesn't interest me. Neither does the book. It's all happening in another country. It has nothing to do with me.

But I am offended too—offended by the thought that one man can interfere with another's right to write what he pleases and with the rights of others to print, publish and distribute that work to those who wish to see it. As a publisher, I am offended that someone, for whatever reason, has attacked one of the foundation stones of a civilized society, the idea of research, inquiry and the free exchange of ideas.

Randall Publishing is a tiny enterprise compared with Viking Press, Mr. Rushdie's American publisher. We don't publish fiction, either tame or controversial. The idea of someone getting so worked up about an article in GEAR TECHNOLOGY that he or she would threaten me or the author seems patently absurd. At first glance, the whole Rushdie affair appears to be taking place on another plane. It appears that it has nothing to do with the business of researching and building gears or of publishing the results of that research.

But it does. Every publisher is in the business of ideas. Our job is to make ideas available to those who are interested in them. A threat to one of us becomes a threat to all of us. My name and

the names of my colleagues go on the masthead. Every article is signed. If Mr. Rushdie is threatened into silence; if Viking Press can be threatened into not publishing a book; if bookstores can be threatened into removing certain books from their shelves, then none of us is safe.

All civilized society is based on the creative tension between the needs of the many and the needs of the few; between individual liberties and societal regulations. It consists of drawing a series of lines about certain behaviors and saying, "You can go this far and no farther," and then debating the placement of that line. On some issues, the line is very fine and flexible. We can afford to bend a little or a lot in either direction. On other issues, the line must be broad and immovable. The right to the free exchange of ideas is one of those issues.

The broad, immovable line on this issue seems to be drawn here: Any idea has the right to be made public where people can see it and evaluate it. There it will die or survive on its own merits. No one, but NO ONE, has the right to pre-censor an idea and decide for others whether it can be made public.

This is a difficult line to live with. It means, among other things, that we have to allow all the bad, false, stupid, demeaning, offensive and just plain silly ideas to stand right up there with the beautiful, the brilliant and the sublime. It means allowing ideas we find offensive to be published. It may mean defending people or ideas we personally find reprehensible.

There is no question that millions of people find Mr. Rushdie's book offensive. That is regrettable. But hundreds of thousands of books, pamphlets, periodicals and papers contain ideas offensive to someone. Must these all be withdrawn and their authors executed as well?

We cannot argue that because what is being offended are people's deepest personal religious sensibilities, a different set of rules must apply. The broad line does not bear tinkering with. If this week we can censor works of fiction, what is to prevent



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the censorship of political books next week and scientific books the week after that?

Nor does it do to brush off the whole Rushdie affair as being the result of a different cultural understanding or a different world view. The temptation to play Thought Police is not unique to cultures on the other side of the world. One of the most celebrated censorship cases in history did not involve a novelist or a political writer, but a scientist. It was Galileo, one of the finest scientific minds of the generation immediately following Leonardo's, that found himself in serious trouble with the law for publishing "offensive" scientific truth. Closer to our own time and our own culture, it is the scientific theories of Darwin that are among the most popular targets of those who would decide for all of us what is appropriate to read and think.

Dr. Samuel Johnson once said, "When a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully." In that sense, the death threat against Salman Rushdie has probably been a good thing for those of us in the business of disseminating ideas. Used to the polite legal dance in which censorship forces in the U.S. engage, we tend to forget exactly the kind of stakes we are playing for. The Rushdie affair has reminded us.

Whether we are writing and publishing innocuous gearing journals or controversial books on the cutting edge of research and thought, trading in ideas can be a dangerous business. Ideas can change the world. They can also kill people. Yet it is this trade in ideas that makes progress of all kinds possible.

In the West, developing custom over the past centuries has taught us to be a bit careless of the grounding of this free exchange. We have come to take it for granted. It's not that censorship does not exist here, but rather that its enforcement tends to be selective, limited by legal constraints and softened by custom. Now the Ayatollah has cut through all that to the heart of the matter. He has reminded us again that the foundation stones on which the idea of free inquiry is based are fragile. It takes only one man or one terrorist act to threaten the rules by which we all play.

The right of free expression is one which applies either to everyone or to no one. The threat to limit that right for anyone, no matter how far removed from our own field of interest or how objectionable his ideas, is, ultimately, a threat to all of us. If we value the principles of free inquiry and the free exchange of ideas, we must say at this time, over this book, regardless of its literary, political or religious merit, "If this author is silenced, we are all silenced. Here is where we draw the line."

Michael Goldstein
Michael Goldstein, Editor/Publisher