

Such a fuss over a bad book

My favorite cynic, Ambrose Bierce, defined the term "miscrant" as being "a person of the highest degree of unworth." Salman Rushdie, the notorious author, seems to fit this definition nicely.

Save a few savages in Papua, everyone in the world is by now aware of the firestorm of Moslem anger ignited by Rushdie's book. I don't doubt that Rushdie, who was born a Moslem but converted to become a born-again English leftist, knew that his otherwise ordinary work would kick up a hornet's nest—producing the kind of best-seller the French call a *succes de scandale*.

But no one expected Iran's 88-year old Imam Khomeini to issue a *fatwa* (a sort of Moslem papal bull) sentencing the miscrant Rushdie to death for blasphemy. Angry Moslems are waving their scimitars, yelling for Rushdie's head. Outraged westerners are hollering "terrorism" and vowing to defend Rushdie's right of free speech.

In short, a crisis of utter cultural incomprehension, as *The Economist* noted, and a pretty silly to-do.

More thoughts on this troubling matter. First, Imam Khomeini is a truly amazing politician. By seizing on the Rushdie book, Khomeini managed the brilliant political feat of forcing the Moslem world—Shia and Sunni alike—to rally behind him. Iran suddenly went from forlorn—outcast to robust defender of the faith. The loss of the Gulf War was forgotten. Even better, Iran gave a big scare to the western powers who had ganged up against it in the Gulf War. Score 10 for Khomeini.

His coup was a replay of the same successful political theatre performed by Ronald Reagan in recent years. Reagan raised the phony spectre of terrorism, cast Libya's Khadafy as arch terrorist and gained enormous popularity by trumpeting, "Get Khadafy." Replace Rea-

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gan with Khomeini and Khadafy with Rushdie and—voilà! The same old sure-fire formula.

American bombers went off to kill Khadafy in his tent. "Death to terrorists!" roared the approving West. Now vengeful assassins may be stalking Rushdie as the Moslem world cries, "Death to Blasphemers."

That's the entertaining political level. Now for the personal. I hate censorship. I don't think anything should be censored. Period. Censorship is like taxes; once started it grows without relent.

Rushdie has the right to write and say whatever he wants. Our duty is to protect his right. Yet while we loudly defend the sanctity of Rushdie's rights, we calmly allow censorship to go on here. Pictures of nude people having sex are censored. Books on health have been banned by the government. Tracts deemed anti-Semitic have been banned under Ontario's hate laws—which, as I read them, should also have banned Rushdie's book and Leon Uris' arrantly racist book, *The Haj*.

Ernst Zundel, a Nazi, was condemned as a heretic. To the outraged Jewish community, Zundel's absurd claim that the Holocaust never occurred was blasphemy of the highest order. Most people agreed. But when Moslems get outraged by Rushdie's comparison of the Prophet

Mohammed's wives to prostitutes, we dismiss them as fanatics.

Interestingly, one of Israel's two chief rabbis and the chief rabbi of England agreed with the Moslems who called for a ban on the book. Message: Don't fool around with Jews and Moslems. They take religion seriously. Nice to see a bit of Semitic brotherhood for a change.

England and Iran have broken diplomatic ties and the international rumpus goes on. This past week the Islamic Conference met in Saudi Arabia. King Fahd, who is also defender of Islam, sensibly called for a peaceful end to the controversy that did not include Rushdie's head.

Not all Moslems agree with Khomeini, a man whose mind and faith are rooted in medievalism. Those who don't, should speak up. Islam, above all, is a religion of tolerance. That's why it is the world's fastest-growing faith. Decapitating heretics is not what Islam is about, any more than hanging scores of prostitutes, as Iran shamefully did in recent weeks.

Imam Khomeini has scored a political triumph. But his actions have injured the Moslem world and made it look foolish. The West has reacted only a little better, allowing hysteria and Islamophobia to replace sober thought. Listening to this ridiculous squabble, you'd think the Saracens were about to fight it out with the Crusaders in London's Hyde Park.

Westerners, calm down, take a Valium and go buy a new book. Moslems, take two Valium. Yours is a faith of desert warriors. Do you think it has grown so feeble that the droolings of an Indian miscrant could threaten the might or right of Islam? If he were alive, the Prophet, blessings be on him, would have laughed pitifully at Rushdie and walked away.