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Trends. Salman Rushdie and Taslima Nasrin: Terrorists?

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Many mass media sources have noted that fatwas--edicts from an Islamic religious authority calling for someone's death--have been issued against the United Kingdom's Salman Rushdie and Bangladesh's Taslima Nasrin. The fatwas have been issued for similar reasons according to these media sources. Rushdie and Nasrin are accused of employing words judged by religious authorities to be offensive, profane, and irreverent. The common media storyline is that people should be free to communicate their opinion with words. Those who seek to stop the expression of opinion through violence or its threat--to maintain or avoid the recreation of the world--are terrorists.

This storyline is an easy, even glib, take on a more complex situation. Another take is that the words of Rushdie and Nasrin are weapons attacking not just isolated individuals but whole segments of populations. (A counter on this take is that by going after Rushdie or Nasrin, one threatens to go after all the others who might follow their lead.) These weapons have violent consequences among some of their targets because they cause pain and anguish. These weapons can induce behaviors in loved ones that--according to religious precept--may lead to eternal pain and anguish. These words challenge and mock the very powers of the universe. The intent of these words is not to maintain but to recreate the world--the mother of all political intents. And these words are intended to continue until this recreation occurs.

So, who are the real terrorists? And is it politically viable to even pose the question? (See Bearak, B. (October 28, 1998). Defiant author, dying mother and wrath of Islam. The New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com; Castellano-Maury, E. (1996). Le "politically correct:" terreur et tabou? Revue Francaise de Psychanalyse, 60, 1577-1580; Cooper, B. (1997). "It's going to be a rough ride, buddy!": An analysis of the collision between "hate speech" and free expression in the Khalid Abdul Muhammad controversy. Howard Journal of Communications, 8, 15-39; Watts, W.A., & Whittaker, D. (1966). Free speech advocates at Berkeley. Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 2, 41-62.)