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Whither Moral Courage?

By **SALMAN RUSHDIE**

WE find it easier, in these confused times, to admire physical bravery than moral courage — the courage of the life of the mind, or of public figures. A man in a cowboy hat vaults a fence to help Boston bomb victims while others flee the scene: we salute his bravery, as we do that of servicemen returning from the battlefield, or men and women struggling to overcome debilitating illnesses or injuries.

It's harder for us to see politicians, with the exception of Nelson Mandela and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, as courageous these days. Perhaps we have seen too much, grown too cynical about the inevitable compromises of power. There are no Gandhis, no Lincolns anymore. One man's hero (Hugo Chávez, Fidel Castro) is another's villain. We no longer easily agree on what it means to be good, or principled, or brave. When political leaders do take courageous steps — as France's Nicolas Sarkozy, then president, did in Libya by intervening militarily to support the uprising against Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi — there are as many who doubt as approve. Political courage, nowadays, is almost always ambiguous.

Even more strangely, we have become suspicious of those who take a stand against the abuses of power or dogma.

It was not always so. The writers and intellectuals who opposed Communism, Solzhenitsyn, Sakharov and the rest, were widely esteemed for their stand. The poet Osip Mandelstam was much admired for his "[Stalin Epigram](#)" of 1933, in which he described the fearsome leader in fearless terms — "the huge laughing cockroaches on his top lip" — not least because the poem led to his arrest and eventual death in a Soviet labor camp.

As recently as 1989, the image of a man carrying two shopping bags and defying the tanks of Tiananmen Square became, almost at once, a global symbol of courage.

Then, it seems, things changed. The "Tank Man" has been largely forgotten in China, while the pro-democracy protesters, including those who died in the massacre of June 3 and 4, have been successfully redescribed by the Chinese authorities as counterrevolutionaries. The battle for redescription continues, obscuring or at least confusing our understanding of how "courageous" people should be judged. This is how the Chinese authorities are treating their best known critics: the use of "subversion" charges against Liu Xiaobo, and of alleged tax crimes against Ai Weiwei, is a deliberate attempt to blind people to their courage, and paint them, instead, as criminals.

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Such is the influence of the [Russian Orthodox Church](#) that the jailed members of the Pussy Riot collective are widely perceived, inside Russia, as immoral troublemakers because they staged their famous protest on church property. Their point — that the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church is too close to President Vladimir V. Putin for comfort — has been lost on their many detractors, and their act is not seen as brave, but improper.

Two years ago in Pakistan, the former governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer, defended a Christian woman, Asia Bibi, wrongly sentenced to death under the country's draconian blasphemy law; for this he was murdered by one of his own security guards. The guard, Mumtaz Qadri, was widely praised and showered with rose petals when he appeared in court. The dead Mr. Taseer was widely criticized, and public opinion turned against him. His courage was obliterated by religious passions. The murderer was called a hero.

In February 2012, a Saudi poet and journalist, Hamza Kashgari, published three tweets about the Prophet Muhammad:

“On your birthday, I will say that I have loved the rebel in you, that you've always been a source of inspiration to me, and that I do not like the halos of divinity around you. I shall not pray for you.”

“On your birthday, I find you wherever I turn. I will say that I have loved aspects of you, hated others, and could not understand many more.” “On your birthday, I shall not bow to you. I shall not kiss your hand. Rather, I shall shake it as equals do, and smile at you as you smile at me. I shall speak to you as a friend, no more.”

He claimed afterward that he was “demanding his right” to freedom of expression and thought. He found little public support, was condemned as an apostate, and there were many calls for his execution. He remains in jail.

The writers and intellectuals of the French Enlightenment also challenged the religious orthodoxy of their time, and so created the modern concept of free thought. We think of Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau and the rest as intellectual heroes. Sadly, very few people in the Muslim world would say the same of Hamza Kashgari.

THIS new idea — that writers, scholars and artists who stand against orthodoxy or bigotry are to blame for upsetting people — is spreading fast, even to countries like India that once prided themselves on their freedoms.

In recent years, the grand old man of Indian painting, Maqbool Fida Husain, was hounded into exile in Dubai and London, where he died, because he painted the Hindu goddess Saraswati in the nude (even though the most cursory examination of ancient Hindu sculptures of Saraswati shows that while she is often adorned with jewels and ornaments, she is equally often undressed).

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Rohinton Mistry's celebrated novel "Such a Long Journey" was pulled off the syllabus of Mumbai University because local extremists objected to its content. The scholar Ashis Nandy was attacked for expressing unorthodox views on lower-caste corruption. And in all these cases the official view — with which many commentators and a substantial slice of public opinion seemed to agree — was, essentially, that the artists and scholars had brought the trouble on themselves. Those who might, in other eras, have been celebrated for their originality and independence of mind, are increasingly being told, "Sit down, you're rocking the boat."

America isn't immune from this trend. The young activists of the Occupy movement have been much maligned (though, after their highly effective relief work in the wake of [Hurricane Sandy](#), those criticisms have become a little muted). Out-of-step intellectuals like Noam Chomsky and the deceased Edward Said have often been dismissed as crazy extremists, "anti-American," and in Mr. Said's case even, absurdly, as apologists for [Palestinian](#) "terrorism." (One may disagree with Mr. Chomsky's critiques of America but it ought still to be possible to recognize the courage it takes to stand up and bellow them into the face of American power. One may not be pro-Palestinian, but one should be able to see that Mr. Said stood up against Yasir Arafat as eloquently as he criticized the United States.)

It's a vexing time for those of us who believe in the right of artists, intellectuals and ordinary, affronted citizens to push boundaries and take risks and so, at times, to change the way we see the world. There's nothing to be done but to go on restating the importance of this kind of courage, and to try to make sure that these oppressed individuals — Ai Weiwei, the members of Pussy Riot, Hamza Kashgari — are seen for what they are: men and women standing on the front line of liberty. How to do this? Sign the petitions against their treatment, join the protests. Speak up. Every little bit counts.

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