So what then is the ‘lesson’ the circumspect should learn from this Tale of the Novelist and the Imam? (The Western circumspect that is, since it is arrogant to speak for others.)

Most obviously, the events consequent upon the publication of *The Satanic Verses* have little to do with Rushdie and his book, or even Khomeini and his ‘opinion’. What the *fatwa* did by its startling unexpectedness was throw into relief how indulgent and comfortable was the argument which allowed for Western self-criticism of fundamental rights. It highlighted the shortsighted nature of the implicit assumption that the world was safe enough to allow this critique. It cruelly exposed how debilitated the West had become in defence of its own understanding of liberty. The *fatwa* thus marked a moment far more important than merely a row, however vicious, about one supposedly blasphemous novel and there is more than one lesson to be drawn from that.

First, and perhaps most momentously, is that toleration must be intolerant of intolerance. As Walt Whitman said: ‘Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes)’ (1855: 67). The complexity of human affairs requires complex responses and these, it should be acknowledged without embarrassment, might well necessarily involve some measure of inconsistency.

Second is that rising sensitivity can go too far. An ‘offence principle’ (Feinberg, 1985) should not be substituted for the harm principle, and non-externally verifiable hurt should not be considered as worthy of redress. ‘It does me no injury for my neighbour to say there are twenty gods, or no gods. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.’ Certainly whatever my neighbour says about the sacred or the secular, unless it causes verifiable damage, should not be thought an excuse, much less a warrant, for illegal actions.
Third: the circumspect will not expect, nor countenance others expecting, that every public upsetment, disagreement or discombobulation shall be remedied and removed. Life, after all, ‘is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury’; which is why the circumspect will approach its inconveniences and bigotries, its stupidities and irrationalities with a ‘little forbearance’. Self-attested harm, *prima facie*, should be actionable only in extremely restricted circumstances.

Fourth: the rule of law cannot be suspended to allow protests to exceed its bounds. Social peace cannot be maintained at the cost of allowing a ‘hecklers’ veto’. This applies to religious protests as much as to any other. (If the policing imposed on, say, protesting students is deemed lawful, it ought also to apply to rioting book burners.)

Fifth: reaction to provocation must be commensurate and public expression of it must conform to the rule of law. ‘Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them’ (Matthew 7:12). Inchoate, untargeted general protest is not commensurate with an ordered society.

Sixth: the circumspect should consider the cost of ‘neutrality’ in debates interrogating human rights. They should have the courage of their convictions and not dilute them in the name of sensitivity or glib assumptions about cultural imperialism, etc. or for any other reason. They will agree that freedom of expression is the capstone right by which all other freedoms are guaranteed and without which all other freedoms can be undercut. ‘Then they came for me – and there was no one left to speak for me’ (Martin Neimöller). Setting limiting precedents in matters of principle such as rights requires constraint. However compelling the reason for abandoning, undercutting or threatening a right in any instance, it should be resisted.

Seventh: claims of divine instruction as a basis of abridging rights is incompatible with democracy. The circumspect will remember that the watchword of the West is the Kantian ‘*Sapere aude!* / Dare to know! Have the courage to use your own understanding’ (Kant, 1996 [1784]: 58). There is no reason to abandon this in the face of authority, even Western authority – never mind the authority of others. But, concomitantly, this imperative enjoins the most meticulous and painstaking search to acquire information and (real) understanding.

Eighth: the circumspect will understand that the hegemonic meaning of texts is never unambiguous. It depends on reception. Offence is in the mind of the reader as much as it is on the page, in the gallery or on the stage or the screen.

Ninth: texts – perhaps especially ancient texts – say contradictory things and can be used to support contradictory opinions and actions.