

Renan Revisited

by Theodore Dalrymple (June 2016)



My wife and I were browsing in a bookshop at Charles De Gaulle airport in Paris recently when she called out to me ‘Here’s the Islam section.’ Actually, it was the Islamic terrorism section, and very extensive it was too, at least for the size of the shop. There were whole shelves of books on the subject. Islamic terrorism has taken over from the Occupation as the favoured theme of non-fiction in France. I am a good customer for such books, even if I can never quite remember the names of the individual terrorists or of the various terrorist groupuscules that they have joined. Publishers can’t go too far wrong, it seems, with books about Hitler or the Occupation, and these days with books about Islamic terrorism.

The fact that terrorism ought not to be a suitable subject for reading matter in an airport on a passenger aircraft suggests, however, that in our hearts most of us believe that we are statistically not very likely to be victims of it, and that Islamic terrorism is a vile and stupid nuisance rather than the existential threat to our civilisation as some have claimed it to be. The main danger is from our reaction to it, enfeebled or destructive of our civil liberties (or both) as the case might be.

I picked a book suitable for my short flight: *Un Silence religieux: La gauche face au djihadisme*, (A Religious Silence: the Left in the face of Jihadism), by Jean Birnbaum, literary editor of *Le Monde* newspaper. The latter is itself left-inclining, but only in a thoroughly bourgeois intellectual way.

The main drift of the book is that the left in particular (though not only the left) has denied the religious dimension of the current wave of terrorism in France and other places. It does not take seriously the claims of those who commit acts of terrorism to be motivated by their religious beliefs. It analyses terrorism as a response to social or economic conditions; those who commit it are the victims of discrimination or poverty driven to despair, even if they are not conscious of it themselves and believe that they are religiously inspired.

The problem with this kind of analysis, says Birnbaum, is that it ignores the variety of people who have claimed to be religiously-inspired. It is true that many have been the product of broken homes and terrible schools in areas of very high unemployment where the main economic activity is trafficking; but others have been university graduates with seemingly bright, or bright enough, futures before them. Some have been the sons or daughters of successful and rich businessmen, spoilt in their youth rather than deprived. What they all claim, regardless of social background, is that they are acting in accordance with the dictates of God, as they interpret them. Plenty of people have been the product of broken homes and terrible schools without having become suicide-bombers; plenty of children have been spoiled without having gone to Syria to fight for ISIS. Moreover, although Birnbaum does not make this point, to deny that the young terrorists (for terrorism is a young person's game, at least at the ground or practical level) are *really* actuated by their religious ideas is to deny them all knowledge or understanding of why they do things: and this denial dehumanises them. In other words, we know why we do things, but they do not. They belong, therefore, to a different – and lower – breed, almost inanimate.

The left, says Birnbaum, is so now thoroughly secular in its outlook that it can no longer take religion or religious ideas seriously as a possible motive for human action. For most of the left religious belief is a mere illusion, a hangover from the past, an irrational refusal to face reality or a fig-leaf for personal interest. Therefore, when someone says 'I did this for God's sake,' he is mistaking his own motivation. *Really* he was furious at his conditions of life, or he had a personal problem to resolve, or he was acting in a way that he supposed to be the political interest of people like himself. What by definition he does *not* do is actually act for God's sake: for you cannot, on the left's view, do something for the sake of a non-existent being.

This, of course, does not follow in the least. People may go into the Tasmanian bush, and indeed have done so, to search for the Tasmanian tiger convinced that it still exists when in fact it went extinct about three quarters of a century ago. The things that people are prepared to do for the sake of a belief have no bearing on the truth or otherwise of that belief.

As an illustration – and a very telling one – of the left's blindness to religious motivation, Birnbaum cites the Algerian war of independence against France. Leftist French intellectuals, though not necessarily leftist French

politicians when actually in power, supported the National Liberation Front without reserve or hesitation, believing it to be a wholly secular movement whose aims could have been supported by the Jacobins. In this they were duped by the Algerians, whose war against the French was at least as much religious as it was political. They espoused the secular ideals of the French left in their public pronouncements – those pronouncements in French, at any rate – precisely in order to divide their enemy and gain the support of an important element of the French political and intellectual class, thus preventing France from prosecuting the war without internal opposition to weaken its effort. But internally the Algerians were not secularists at all, and were much more respectful of Islam, even of the most retrograde aspects that would have horrified the French left, than they ever let on.

Indeed, had the FLN pursued wholly secular goals inside the country it would hardly have secured any support from the population, which was still profoundly religious in its sentiment. Ben Bella, the leader of the revolution who was himself overthrown shortly after independence, but who was regarded for a time as the great hope of the secularist third-worldist left, said in an interview with *Le Monde* in 1980, 'The hard kernel of what we are, the irreducible kernel, Islam, has held well, and nothing until now, not even our own backsliding, has been able to damage it in the slightest.' Of course by the time of Ben Bella gave his interview time might have skewed his recollection of his previous opinions; but Birnbaum provides other evidence that Islam was vastly more important in the Algerian revolution than the French left believed – or believes to this day. Failure to respect Ramadan, for example, was immediately punishable; Islam was declared at once to be the state religion. That the state should itself have been itself challenged by an Islamist movement was hardly surprising: for where Islam is the state religion, it can always be challenged as not being Islamic enough. In the modern world, he who lives by Islam dies by Islam.

To this day, according to Birnbaum, the French left has not acknowledged fully the Islamic aspect of the Algerian revolution: of the hundreds or thousands of books on the subject, only a tiny handful even so much as mention it (and almost all serious books on the subject are written from the left). In like fashion, the left today is reluctant or unable to recognise that religious roots of Islamic terrorism.

Birnbaum is anxious not to equate Islam with terrorism by, for example, claiming that the religion is inherently terroristic. But he does say that the refusal to acknowledge the religious roots of the terrorism is harming the efforts of moderate Moslems to demonstrate to their co-religionists that their interpretation of the religion is wrong and that Islam is perfectly compatible with, and perhaps even requires, such values as non-violence and religious and social tolerance. For them, whom Birnbaum concedes to be in the minority, secularism and Islam are not in conflict; but if, as the left maintains, Islamic terrorism has *nothing whatever* to do with the religion, then efforts to reform it and combat the false interpretation of it that leads to terrorism are misconceived, unnecessary and beside the point. The left thereby undermines the moderates.

This may be right in the abstract, but it seems to me to miss an important point. The moderates want, in effect, to reduce Islam to a private confession whose ethical standards are more or less those of, say, a fairly liberal Canadian. In other words, they want to preserve Islam in the modern world by liberalising it and making it compatible with Twenty-First century values. From my personal standpoint, this is laudable and even brave in the circumstances; but there is one enormous flaw in the whole scheme. If the ethics of Islam become those of any reasonably decent person in a liberal democracy, what need of Islam at all? It will become merely a collection of rituals whose irrationality and therefore needlessness will soon become clear under the withering fire of rationalist criticism. Its holy book will be shown to be a literary artefact, a compilation, like any other such book (and by no means the best of the genre, either). Soon nothing of Islam will remain.

In this sense, the extremists seem to me to have the better of the argument. They have understood that, where the survival of their religion is concerned, it is all or none. They have seen what happened to religious faith in England and France once such faith was treated as a merely private matter, freely subject to criticism either serious or mocking. And since they are instilled with the notion that there is in Islam an essence that is uniquely precious, they cannot accede to the scheme of the moderates, which will lead to its *de facto* extinction. The extremists, then, are more consistent, far-seeing and realistic than the moderates, though morally grossly their inferiors.

Islam is uniquely precious to them because they have nothing else to be proud of

or to hang on to. Whatever its glorious past, Islam has had a bad past few centuries; it has contributed nothing to the stock of universal advancement. This would not matter but for its claims to unique truth. How is it that a doctrine, or family of doctrines, claiming all-sufficiency, has actually been so barren of contribution to progress? It is Islam, then, or nothing.

Moderate Moslems and moderate leftists share a similar problem. Both believe that their world outlook has something uniquely precious about it, but perceive that in fact the world can get on perfectly well without it. What, then, remains of the precious contribution of their worldview? It is not uncommon in France to see articles about the future of the left now that radically egalitarian transformation of society has been ruled out. What can it argue for now? Recognition of polygamy, incestuous marriage or the rights of necrophiliacs? Whatever it is, it will not be sufficient to justify or support a whole worldview; rather, the left will be reduced to a state of permanent querulousness about this or that supposed injustice, one succeeding another. For underlying the self-conceit of the left is a belief in oppositionism as such: and as it is more blessed to give than to receive, so it is more blessed to oppose what exists than to support or sustain it. The left starts out from a belief in original virtue, especially its own; therefore it must preserve itself and its world outlook, however difficult this may be.

In like fashion, the sophisticated Moslems whom I have met, however decent, civilised and tolerant, believe something similar of Islam, that at its core it has unique value, notwithstanding the chronic backwardness and chaos of most of the Moslem world, what Ernest Renan called a century and a quarter ago 'the decadence of states governed by Islam, the intellectual sterility of races that derive their culture and education from that religion alone'. No one gives up his basic world outlook lightly or easily, and if there is one thing in which Islam has been brilliantly successful it has been in its instillation in countless generations of people of presuppositions and a world outlook that are difficult for them to abandon later in life.

Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is [here](#).

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