

Cash Out



Credit: Nicolas Economou/NurPhoto via AP Images

by Theodore Dalrymple

My relatively scant hair having grown into a porcupine-type mess and having both a video podcast and a dinner party to attend on the same day, I went to my barber to smarten myself up a little.

His is still a cash-only business. No doubt such businesses will soon disappear altogether and a few years later young people will wonder what on earth cash ever was, it having long since gone the way of telegrams and postage stamps (and what counts as long since gets shorter and shorter).

I cannot say that I look forward greatly to the time when every purchase we make is traceable by *them*, which is to say the authorities, who will make use of the information in any way *they* please. Among other things, *they* will be able to

compare our expenditure with our income, and since *they* think that all money really belongs to them, and any left to us is by their grace and favor, *they* will be able to tighten their control over us. In addition, *they* will be able to estimate our ideological position from the purchases we make and penalize us for them whenever *they* deem it necessary or convenient. Good records make for efficient persecution.

But, for the moment, my barber was cash-only; but all the cash I had was a 50 euro note. I was his first customer of the day and he had no change. He said I could pay him when I had the change later in the day.

I found this little act of trust very reassuring. In the cashless society, of course, such an act would be neither possible nor necessary, except when someone has left his telephone or credit card behind. (The same day, I received the following text message: "Mum, I'm out shopping and brought the wrong card with me. Can you please send me 240, I will pay you back when you get home. Account number..." Fraud will always find a way. Sent electronically a million times, I assume this message works on, say, ten occasions.)

I went out in search of change. First I tried a newspaper kiosk and bought a newspaper, but the man in the kiosk didn't have change either, so I had to pay for the newspaper with a credit card. Then I went to the baker: same result. There was nothing for it but to buy a book, which in any case is something that I am rarely reluctant to do. This time, I had a perfect excuse ready for my wife: I was trying to make change to pay the barber.

The barber charges 10 euros for a haircut, and I give him 2.50 as a tip. Therefore, I searched for a book that cost 12.50 euros, to give me the change I needed. This, no doubt, is a rather odd way of choosing a book, perhaps it is even a first, but I soon found one, a slim volume with the title *Treatise on Intolerance* by Richard Malka, a lawyer and novelist, and

author of another slim volume, *The Right to Piss God Off*. (This title offended my inner pedant, all the more so as the author was a lawyer and therefore supposedly precise in his language. Surely it was the right to piss off believers in God that he claimed rather than the right to piss off God Himself? If God did not exist, He could not be pissed off; if He did, no such right could possibly exist.)

The book, easily read in an hour or two, is a polemic in favor of the right to freedom of religious expression, particularly in the context of Islamic extremism. I am in favor of the right to such freedom, of course, albeit that I am not in favor of giving gratuitous offense, which is to say the giving of offense for offense's sake; though neither should one shrink away from giving it when to do so is necessary or salutary.

There is nothing like a polemic for setting off my inner pedant, however. The author states early on in his little book that his target is religion; not a religion, or a *form of religion*, but religion as such. Religion, he says, is my accused, and cites at length (with good reason) the atrocities committed in the name of Allah; but he then goes on to allude to forms of Islam that have been tolerant, albeit that they are now in retreat in the face of intolerant forms. It follows from this that religion *as such* is not his accused, but only certain forms of religion.

Is this distinction important? I think it is.

The author states, again correctly, that the knowledge of Islam of some of the terrorists who have committed atrocities in France could hardly be more superficial, garnered from a few videos on YouTube. They sometimes convert to an extreme form of Islamism in a matter of days. Irrespective of whether this is correct or not, it ought to raise in the author's mind the question of how so superficial a mental event could have such profound and indeed dire consequences—surely it must

point to a fertile soil? But what exactly is that fertile soil, how has it developed? To quote Hamlet, adapting his words slightly, something must be rotten in the state of Denmark. What is it?

I cannot claim to have the complete or indubitable answer. I suspect that it consists of a steamy compost of ideas about social injustice peddled relentlessly in the media, personal resentments, hopes and expectations unfulfilled, and a longing for a simple explanation of why life should be so hard and disappointing. The illumination is sudden though false.

I returned to the barber with what I owed him. We had talked of politics while he cut my hair. He said that the present situation could not continue, there was too much discontent with the yawning, and growing, gap between the fabulously rich and the increasingly pressurized masses. Moving in circles between these two extremes, I do not experience either the gap or the discontent; the barber probably is a better guide in these matters than I.

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