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## Book Review: Terrorism and Pornography under Secularism

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## Book Review:

### Terrorism and Pornography under Secularism

*The Unnamable Present*, by Roberto Calasso (Trans. Richard Dixon), New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2019, 208 pages, 0374279470, \$14.39.

Peter Y. Paik, Yonsei University

It seems that intellectuals in the West have largely given up on asking what the motives for radical Islamist terror might be. If there was initially a tremendous amount of bafflement and confusion in the immediate aftermath of 9-11, as even the view that the foreign policy of the US had provoked the attack did not come across as proportionate to the deaths of thousands of civilians in the collapse of the World Trade Center, the ongoing conflicts and insurgencies in the Middle East now supply a surplus of reasons for the murderous rage that seeks collective revenge. But in his latest book, *The Unnamable Present*, Roberto Calasso examines this topic with his hallmark combination of rigor and grace. The links he draws between terrorism and other social phenomenon are all the arresting and profound, because they are ones that radical Islamists would understand more easily than the Western liberals whose thinking on this most urgent of questions is undermined by their eagerness to demonstrate that they are more stricken by guilt committed by their societies in the past than they are fearful of the prospect of sudden and violent death overtaking them or their loved ones.

Calasso, who works in six languages and has written over a dozen books ranging over such topics as the Vedic scriptures, the anarchistic philosophy of Max Stirner, the fiction of Franz Kafka, Hindu mythology, and the gods of ancient Greece, brings his formidable erudition and penetrating analytical powers to bear on the question of what makes terrorism a modern phenomenon. His answer can be compressed in a formula as unsettling as it is elegant: in a society where casual sex is common, so casual killing will be also. Islamic terrorism emerges in response to a world where “irresistible” temptation, exemplified by the ubiquity of online pornography, rules alongside the pervasive sense that human life should lack “substance,” which in the West is taken as the infallible sign of individual freedom. But if the rage, fury, and fanaticism of the terrorist who blows himself up at concerts, or drives a truck through a crowd, are all-too identifiable, the contours of the secular society condemned by terrorism are not known to secular men and women themselves. *Homo saecularis* does not know, nor does not allow himself to know, why the society from which he emerges arouses such hatred and fury— he himself feels wholly innocent and only wishes good upon the world, and so it is clear that his ancestors must be the guilty ones.

The account given by Calasso of what sets modern secular society apart from practically every other type of civilization will be familiar to readers of such thinkers as Tocqueville and Santayana, as well as Christopher Lasch, Philip Rieff, and Pierre Manent. Secular society is the first in history to reject the idea that there is an outside to which it must relate. This “outside” is typified by the belief in the existence of realms beyond the world of physical reality. Modern civilization, whether socialist or capitalist or democratic or dictatorial, has not been successful

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in fulfilling the void hollowed out by the dominant philosophical materialism, in part because it cannot recognize the nature of this void. Rather, modern societies place their trust in procedures that enable human beings to experiment with their lives, the aims of which they presume not to judge, so long as they do not conflict with the aims of others.

An experimental society may provide relief to those who chafed under the restrictions of tradition and the forced unanimity which made social cohesion possible, but it leaves the individual radically adrift. Even as democracy seeks to uphold equality, it cannot overcome the irony that only a miniscule number of people will feel fulfilled by the thought of their equality with others. Here, Calasso calls on the authority of the arch-liberal John Stuart Mill, who fell into a prolonged state of despair upon realizing that the fulfillment of all his hopes for social change and political reform would not serve to make him happy. Indeed, the majority of people in a democracy will be prey to shifting “feelings of puzzlement, confusion, transient enthusiasm, or deep depression.”

The most common way of dealing with the volatile and unpredictable fluctuation of such emotional states is to adopt an attitude of determined superficiality. For the secular individual, freedom is the paramount value, for the sake of which he is willing to sacrifice everything else, including love, truth, and meaning. The term that Calasso gives to such a human type, who either lacks a core or seeks to divest himself of it, is the “tourist.” The secular individual is one who never stops being a tourist, of ascribing continually the values he extinguishes to others, even at home, in his own element. His perpetual flight from meaning is the inversion of the aggressive drive to acquire meaning in the terrorist, who recognizes that the only means to secure it involves sacrifice.

*The Unnamable Present* is the ninth in a series of books dealing with the essential questions of civilization. Calasso takes an approach that shifts from sustained and rigorous arguments to meandering anecdotes. It is refreshing that he writes as an independent scholar, rather than as the opposite. The second part of the book, which is composed of brief if harrowing sketches drawn from the Second World War, is intriguing but does not make as strong a connection as one might expect with the penetrating critique of secularism he carries off in the first half. Indeed, the link between depravity and the lack of substance is more forcefully made by one of the authors he cites, Curzio Malaparte, in his novel about the liberation of Italy by Allied forces. One does not come away from this book feeling as though the mysteries it explores have been fully illuminated. This lack may arise from a sense of discretion or a desire to leave open what he has not yet thought out fully. But the ground he does break outdoes practically everything else that is being published currently by recognized scholars, for whom discretion is often an effect of retreating from harsh and fascinating realities.

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