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Transcendental Commentary on the Issues of the Day

Terror From The Year Zero

by Suhotra Swami

The year 1986 is proving to be a strange and terrifying year, especially for Americans living in Europe. The fear of terrorist reprisals against U.S. citizens in the wake of President Reagan's air attack on Libya is palpable. Here in Heidelberg, where I spend much of my time, the once-easygoing American military off-base housing installations have been sealed off from the surrounding German neighborhoods by roadblocks manned by armed soldiers in full combat gear. AFN, the U.S. Armed Forces Radio Network, recently aired a half-hour program instructing its listeners on what to do if, while seated peacefully in one's airline seat and quietly anticipating a happy landing in some exotic tourist mecca, "a wild-eyed kid suddenly shoves an AK-47 in your ribs."

It got so bad that American travelers began avoiding Western Europe like the plague, with Hollywood luminaries like Steven Spielberg canceling trips to the Cannes Film Festival. Despite America's recently rediscovered celluloid jingoism, swaggering body-sculpted clones of Rambo were nowhere to be seen in the traditional vacation haunts of London, Paris, and Rome. Instead, globe-trotters from the land of the free and the home of the brave were opting for more somber destinations in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Unfortunately, the Chernobyl reactor began spewing deadly isotopes all over the map. The harried leader of a group of thirty-one tourists from Long Island told *Newsweek* after the group's hasty exit from Kiev, "We came to the Soviet Union because there is no terrorism. And here we were, suddenly in the middle of a major catastrophe."

Though an American by birth, I have an entirely different point of view on all this. I'm a member of the Hare Krsna movement and have accepted the teachings of *Bhagavad-gita*, which many Americans might feel presents a too-pessimistic outlook on life. In a sense, that's true—this ancient book of knowledge does describe this material world as *duhkhalayam asvatam*, "a temporary, miserable place." However, in my understanding, recent events have only confirmed these wise words. Having no illusions about what to expect from this present plane of existence on which we're all situated, I'm engaged in elevating myself to the ever-blissful spiritual realm of Krsna consciousness. That I am doing mainly by preaching Krsna consciousness to others, which is the reason I live in Europe.

I'll admit to the possibility of my being too simplistic, but it seems to me that Americans have an unlimited capacity for self-delusion. Despite the shocks to our national consciousness that have been summarily delivered with pitiless regularity in Beirut, on board the *Achille Lauro*, and elsewhere, we are not learning the real lesson. It is not a question of a recently increasing trend of terror—the trend was firmly established way back in the year zero. Be it by bullet, bomb, or Alzheimer's disease, everybody's going to be killed by material nature.

Despite their growing sense of unease about the state of the world, Americans have not yet recognized the extent of the danger. While agonizing over the possibilities of long-awaited pleasure tours exploding in our faces, why not just admit from the outset that there is no real pleasure to be had in this tour from birth to death we call life? Let's finally recognize the simple fact that there's no security from death in this material world, wherever we may go. And let's get on with the *real* business of life: breaking our attachments to falsehood, and rising to meet God face to face.