

Conservatism and religious Fundamentalism

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Much has been said and written about the revival of religious fundamentalism; its causes, motives and perceived social and political implications. Islamic fundamentalism in particular has attracted tremendous attention in the West because of its tendency to resort to violence to achieve objectives deemed important by its leaders. In contrast, radicalism among followers of other religions has not attracted as much attention, though some acts committed by Hindu radicals in India and Jewish settlers in Palestine and extremists Christians in former Yugoslavia have been as violent as most acts committed by Muslim fanatics. Jewish settlers, for example, have not only committed crimes against unarmed Palestinian farmers and innocent children; they have also developed racist ideologies to exclude Arabs and justify the elimination of non-Jews in Israel and Palestine. The Israeli state, in fact, insists that it is the state of the Jewish people and therefore, rejects the notion of being a state for its Jewish and non-Jewish citizens.

Despite the countless books and studies that tried to explain the roots of fundamentalism, its true causes and sociopolitical and sociocultural impact on the lives of billions of people, our understanding of religious radicalism has remained deficient. This deficiency is due primarily to our failure to place religious fundamentalism and cultural conservatism in their proper historical and global contexts. A phenomenon of this size, depth and impact cannot be understood by looking at its claims and acts only; it has to be studied as a historical development and a sociocultural facet of life in an age of tumultuous change.

Religious fundamentalism is an international phenomenon with roots in every society; but while some societies have witnessed radicalism frequently or regularly, others have experienced it only recently and not so frequently. A despite its many causes and manifestations, it is largely a product and a major characteristic of an era that may be best described as the era of “diminishing expectations;” it is an era that emerged in the 1970s as a consequence of the many failures experienced by the world’s then predominant socioeconomic and sociopolitical ideologies. The failures of those ideologies caused the limits of capitalism, socialism, nationalism and Third World state capitalism to be fully exposed, while producing no alternatives or promising ideologies to take their place.

In the West, the era of diminishing expectations began in the early 1970s due to the American military failure in Vietnam and the first energy crisis of 1973. While the Vietnam defeat had exposed the limits of the American military power, the energy crisis proved that the West, despite its tremendous wealth and advanced technology and military might was vulnerable to disruptions of oil supplies and political instability in many parts of the world, particularly the oil producing ones. And while the American crisis was primarily political in nature, the European crisis was mainly economic as most European economies began to stagnate, causing unemployment to rise and remain high for more than 20 years. By the end of the 1970s the era of diminishing expectations had arrived in the United States and Western Europe; and consequently, its logic and sociocultural implications began to influence people’s thinking, remold their worldviews and attitudes, and transform the masses’ social behavior.

In most other parts of the world, the era of diminishing expectations had begun to emerge in the mid-1970s due to the economic and political failures of Marxism and Third World socialism, state capitalism and nationalism. Dictatorship, lack of freedom, and widespread corruption made failure of those systems inevitable, causing people to feel depressed and unconsciously driven to seek alternative ideas and

ideologies. Failures were expressed in the systems' inability to live up to promises they had made to their followers who believed in them, dashing peoples' hopes and causing their expectations to decrease. By the mid-1980s, particularly in the wake of the Third World debt crisis and the collapse of the oil prices and the prices of other commodities on the one hand, and the failure of the Soviet military to tame Afghanistan on the other, the era of diminishing expectations began to impose its logic on peoples' lives and influence all political and socioeconomic developments worldwide.

The exposure of the limits of the world's leading socioeconomic and sociopolitical ideologies was expressed in economic recessions, military defeats, social decay, political corruption and military upheavals. As a consequence, the then prevailing ideologies began to lose their claim on the future as ordinary people began to feel insecure and lose their sense of direction. As a result, the largely despaired and lost segments of every society began to seek refuge in traditional loyalties and old values and systems where religious fundamentalism and sociocultural conservatism were waiting to reclaim the future and assume societal leadership.

In times of national and personal stress and loss of direction, traditional ways of thinking and age-old institutions are usually revived and empowered to assume a leading role in debating the present and shaping the future. Religion and the moral values it espouses become a major source of individual solace and communal inspiration. Social conservatism, meanwhile, becomes a collective sociopolitical ideology aimed at building a new future based more on a vision of a revered past than on a troubled present or an unknown future. And in so doing, sociocultural conservatism and religious fundamentalism encourage people to resort to old ways of thinking and modify their attitudes and behavioral patterns as dictated by outdated traditions, mostly dysfunctional institutions, and old, largely irrelevant value systems. In fact, social conservatism, cultural traditionalism and religious fundamentalism have always encouraged the masses to place belief and personal security ahead of economic opportunity. And as people turn to conservatism and traditionalism and fundamentalism, they usually become less optimistic, having little trust in the present and no particular expectation of the future.

Oppressed nations and discriminated against minorities, have always resorted to traditional religion and social institutions, and invoked cultural values and conservative views as means to preserve national and communal identities in the face of socioeconomic disorientation and political uncertainty. Yet, they are values, institutions and sociocultural ideologies whose time had come gone, and whose limits had long been exposed and acknowledged. Because of this, resorting to traditional religions and invoking traditional values have become a demonstration to express frustration and protest the inadequacy of the existing systems rather than a rational decision to change the present and shape the future; a convenient way to escape reality and postpone facing the inevitable.

As the era of diminishing expectations advanced, social conservatism, cultural traditionalism, and religious fundamentalism were able to convince people to place ethnic allegiance and personal security, particularly financial security ahead of national loyalty, public obligations and economic opportunity. And this in turn, made people less optimistic regarding the future, expecting less from it and willing to accept less than the present had to offer. Thus a new historical era characterized by "a general human presentment that the future does not promise as much as the past did, and a resigned acceptance of the less that was expected to come" had finally arrived. And due to its traditional ideological roots and conservative sociocultural and sociopolitical outlook, the era of diminishing expectations has become a powerful force influencing both the present and the future.

In the West, the mood of the new era expressed itself more in socioeconomic and cultural conservatism and less in religious fundamentalism. This development was primarily due to the separation of state and

religion, the existence of political pluralism and a free press, and protection of individual rights. As a consequence, socioeconomic and sociopolitical conservatism were able to mount a great come back in the early 1980s and to subsequently dominate the West's economic thinking and political organization and sociocultural attitudes. A decade later, the consequences of this development could be seen in economic recessions and high unemployment rates and the revival of racism in Europe, and in widespread poverty and homelessness and in the United States. And while enabling conservatives to control the US congress, such developments allowed political corruption and intellectual sterility to dominate society everywhere. Moreover, sociocultural conservatism was also responsible for reviving and invigorating social and racial discrimination in several western nations after decades of decline; it also added intellectual and economic discrimination as a means to distinguish the self and define the other, particularly in countries and among populations characterized by racial diversity and lack of cultural homogeneity.

The era of diminishing expectation did not last long in the West due to its early arrival and the West's strong inclination toward rational thinking and practical ways to dealing with problems; it nevertheless left a distinct taste of its mood and logic on the politics and economics of all western states. This can be seen in pushing the economies of most European states away from socialism and closer to capitalism. In fact, due to the mood of the era of diminishing expectations, political and economic conservatives were able to dominate the American and British and German states for a decade without much challenge. Liberal forces opposed to conservatism were unable to understand the nature of the sociocultural transformation that was taking place and could not therefore rise to the challenge, particularly after the collapse of communism and the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1990.

In the Third World in general and the Muslim states in particular, the reaction to the failure of state capitalism and socialism, nationalism and political authoritarianism was expressed in more religious fundamentalism and cultural particularism and less in political and economic conservatism. This was primarily due to the fact that most Third World nations had remained basically traditional in their behavior and outlook, and because they lacked political plurality, freedom of speech and an active civil society. As a result, the primary change experienced by most nations was in areas related to their belief systems anchored in religion, and to the political system anchored in traditionalism. Since the age of diminishing expectations arrived late in those countries, religious fundamentalism and narrow nationalism were able to last longer than in the western states, and thus to cause substantial political damage and great human tragedies. Nonetheless, the era of diminishing expectations must be viewed as a transitional stage of political upheavals, severe economic dislocations and deep ideological and intellectual disorientation dictated by global change.

On the other hand, the collapse of communism and the end of the Cold War have caused all previously Marxist states to move toward a combination of economic capitalism and western democracy on the one hand, and nationalism and cultural particularism on the other, with some states emphasizing the first, and others emphasizing the second. It is a combination that allowed extremism and racism in some states to be expressed freely, employing democracy as a tool to create and maintain majority dictatorships to exclude and discriminate against the other, particularly against religious and cultural and ethnic minorities.

In fact, a careful look at the political map of the world will reveal that almost every country, with only a few exceptions, faces a major political or economic or social and/or cultural problem. At the same time, there are no countries, including the richest and most powerful and scientifically advanced states, are able to deal with the problems they are facing with confidence. The transitional stage, of which the mood of diminishing expectations is only one facet, has rendered all traditional tools of economic planning and management, political control and legitimacy, and social and cultural analysis totally or largely irrelevant.

Meanwhile, globalization and life complexity have rendered the nation state, regardless of its size and power and wealth, too small to deal with most international issues, and too large to deal effectively with most domestic concerns. A rupture in the historical process has occurred, causing the past to become of little help to instruct the future, while making the future less certain as judged by both the past and the present.

The past, with all its myths, facts, fantasies and distortions is largely finished as a tool to understand the present, let alone predict or shape the future. The present, meanwhile, seems to have been lost between the past and the future, going through an identity crisis of its own that encompasses all aspects of societal life. And while the future remains uncharted, it appears to have lost the previously claimed connection to the past and the present. Today, for example, choices of future careers are based more on expectations of future developments in science and technology and communications than on rewarding present careers and highly recognized past professions.

Since economic and political conservatism and religious fundamentalism are based on assumptions of long passed and invalidated life conditions, they are destined to fail and reach a dead end in two to three decades. The failure, however, is expected to cause great damage to all existing economic and political and sociocultural structures and relation, forcing governments and intellectuals to seek creative ideas and new ways to restructure their fractured societal systems.

As nations and states, we have entered a new era in our human development that is much different from everything we experienced in the past; and as a consequence, we have no tools to help us understand what is going on now or guide us toward a more stable and promising future. We have entered a transitional stage that seems to transform our societies and cultures from the industrial and pre-industrial ages and into a new age that might be best described as the knowledge age. Our current experience is similar to that of a driver driving along an uncharted road. As he makes a sharp curve on the winding road, he loses sight of the landscape he left behind and the vision to see what lies ahead. As a consequence, his speed and control of the vehicle have become subject to the nature of the terrain; and his expectations subject to the road's ups and downs. We in fact are experiencing a historical discontinuity that requires new thinking and new national and international arrangements to make the future more predictable and manageable and promising. Otherwise, our future will be left to the outdated ideas and largely irrational social forces that seem to know with certainty what they stand against but lack the vision to know what they stand for.

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