

Opinion

Roots of Religious Fundamentalism

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They (the so-called fundamentalist) belong to differing, often contrasting religious systems—Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Yet their ideas and behaviour patterns bear remarkable similarities. In India they have burnt down churches and destroyed a historic mosque. In Palestine they describe themselves as ‘pioneers’, desecrate mosques and churches, and with state support dispossess the Muslim and Christian inhabitants of the ancient land. In Algeria they are engaged in savage warfare with a praetorian government. In Serbia, they attempted genocide and ran rape camps. In Pakistan, they have hit Christians, Ahmedis and Shi’a Muslims and also each other.

They wage holy wars, and commit atrocities sanctimoniously, yet nothing is truly sacred to them. They spill blood in bazaars, in homes and in courts, mosques and churches. They believe themselves to be God’s warriors, above man-made laws and the judgement of mankind.

They are the so-called ‘fundamentalists’, an epithet reserved by the western media for the Muslim variety who are invariably referred to as ‘Islamic fundamentalists’. Others of the ilk are assigned more neutral nouns. The Jewish zealots in Palestine are called ‘settlers’ and, occasionally, ‘extremists’. The Hindu militant is described as ‘nationalist’, and the Christian is labelled ‘right-wing’ or ‘messianic’. The bias in the use of language obscures an important reality: They are reflections of a common problem, with shared roots and similar patterns of expression. Here we briefly review first the environment, which gives birth to these political and religious movements, then the commonality of their style and outlook.

The mistakenly called ‘fundamentalists’ are a modern phenomenon, a response to the crises of modernity and identity. Modernity is a historical process. It refers to the development of societies from one mode of production to another, in our age from an agrarian/pastoral mode to the capitalist/industrial mode of production. The shift from one to another mode of production invariably brings revolutionary changes in society. It compels a new logic of social and economic life, threatens inherited styles of life, and forces transformations in the relationship of land, labour and capital. As such, it requires adaptations to new ways of being and doing, and demands drastic changes in human values and in the relations of sexes, classes, individuals, families and communities. It transforms the co-relation and arrangement of living spaces, requires changed in how the workplace is organized, how new skills are gathered and distributed, and how people are governed.

When this process of change sets in, older values and ways of life become outdated and dysfunctional much faster than newer, more appropriate values and ways of life strike roots. The resulting social and cultural mutations are experienced by people both as threat and loss. For millennia, humanity had experienced this unsettling process, for example, when it moved from the stone age to the age of iron, or when it discovered fire and shifted from hunting and gathering to agriculture. But, never had this process been more intense and more revolutionary than it became with the rise of capitalism and the industrial mode of production. This latter development has been more revolutionary in its impact on societies than any other event in history.

The industrial mode threatened nearly all values and institutions by which people had lived in the agrarian order. It induced large-scale migration from villages to cities, shifted the locus of labour from farm to factory and the unit of production from the family/community to the individual, forced increasing numbers of women into the labour market, shifted the focus of social regulation from customs to laws, re-ordered the structure of governance from the empire to the nation, obliterated distances to permit the penetration of markets, and transformed the focus of economic life from subsistence toward production en masse and consumerism.

A transformation so systemic was bound to threaten old ways of life. It destroyed the autonomy of rural life lived for millennia, shrank the distances that had separated communities from each other, forced diverse peoples and individuals to live in urban proximity and compete with each other, undermined the structures and values of patriarchy as it had prevailed for centuries, and threw millions of people into the uncertain world of transition between tradition and modernity. In brief, the phenomenon puts into question, and increasingly renders dysfunctional, traditional values and ways of life. Yet, cultures tend to change more slowly than economic and political realities. All societies caught in this process undergo a period of painful passage. How peacefully and democratically society makes this journey depends on its historical circumstances, the engagement of its intelligentsia, the outlook of its leaders and governments and the ideological choices they make.

The capitalist and industrial revolution started from Europe. European responses to its dislocating effects offer meaningful variations which scholars have not yet examined with sufficient rigour. The western and non-western experiences are, nevertheless, comparable in that they reveal that when faced with a crisis so systemic, people have tended to respond in four ways. We might call these restorationist, reformist, existential, and revolutionary responses. The restorationist wants to return somehow to an old way of life, re-impose the laws or customs that were, recapture lost virtues, rehabilitate old certainties, and restore what he believes to have been the golden past—Hindutva and Ramraj, Eretz Israel, Nizam-e-Mustafa. Restorationism invariably entails rejection of the Other—e.g. Muslim, Arab, Hindu, Christian, Ahmadi—and what are construed to be the Other's ways which can range from woman's dress and man's beard to song, dance and such symbols of modern life as the television and radio.

The restorationist ideology and programme can range from relatively moderate to totally extremist. Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee offers a 'moderate' example of Hindu restorationism, Mr. Bal Thackeray is an extremist, and Lal Krishna Advani falls somewhere in between. Similarly, the Jamaat-i-Islami's Amir Qazi Hussain Ahmed may be viewed as a moderate Islamist while Mulla Omar, the Taliban leader, occupies the extreme end.

The reformists are of modernist disposition, men and women who care deeply about preserving the best and most meaningful in their religious tradition while adapting them to the requirements of modern life. The obverse is also true: they seek to integrate modern forms and values into inherited cultures and beliefs. An early reformist in India was Raja Ram Mohan Roy, founder of the Brahmo Samaj movement. The first great Indian Muslim reformist was Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, and the last to be so regarded is Mohammed Iqbal whose “Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam” is a quintessential example of reformism in modern Islam. In the Arab world, the al-Manar group led by Mufti Mohammed Abduh, and in the Maghreb Shaykh Ben Badis, Tahir al-Haddad and Abdel Aziz Taalbi were influential reformists. Like the restorationist, the reformist trend emerged as a response to the perceived decline of Muslim power and encounter with the colonizing western powers. From the second half of the 19th century it gained hegemony in the Muslim world, but stagnated in the post-colonial period.

Reformism suffered an initial setback in the Ottoman Empire where successive attempts at reform failed, mainly because they were feebly attempted. The Turks’ revolutionary turn was premised on the failure of Ottoman reforms. Mustapha Kemal’s was the first revolutionary response in Muslim world. He abolished the Caliphate, established an uncompromisingly secular republic, suppressed many religious institutions, proscribed the veil, prohibited polygamy, and enacted secular laws regulating property rights and women’s rights on the basis of equality. No other Muslim country has so far equalled Ataturk’s radical break from tradition and from the association of Islam with state power. Yet, in the 1980s and 1990s Turkey did not escape the resurgence of Islamism.

In Iran, the ulema legitimized the constitution of 1906 of which the promise and premises were secular. Shaykh Mohammed Husayn Naini (1860-1936) delineated the doctrinal justification for the ulema’s support for constitutional government, a position later affirmed by the Ayatullah-e-Uzma Husayn Burudjirdi (1875-1962) who was the sole marja of his time and remains a figure of great authority among contemporary Shi’a clerics. But the coup d’etat led first by Reza Shah Pahlevi and another engineered by the American CIA in 1953 put an end to what might have been the most successful experiment in democratic reformism in the Muslim world. Under partial reformist influence, the nationalist regimes in a number of states —Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Indonesia, and Malaysia among others—instituted secular constitutions without effecting a radical break from the tradition of associating religion and power. Many of these secular authoritarian regimes are now being challenged by Islamist movements.

With Pakistan’s exception, the secular alternative has been favoured in post-colonial South Asia. Under Jawaharlal Nehru’s leadership India adopted a secular constitution so that lawmaking in India is not required to conform to religious beliefs. However, as the official restoration of the Somnath temple indicated soon after independence, India’s Congress Party governments evinced a special sensitivity towards the feelings of the majority population, a fact widely criticized by left-leaning Indians. In recent years, the rise of the Hindu nationalists to power in several provinces and recently in the federation has greatly undermined the secular character of the Indian republic, a problem to which I shall return later. In Pakistan, on the other hand, the issue of the relationship between religion and the state has remained a source of confusion, instability and misuse of Islam in politics, a phenomenon which contributed greatly to the violent separation of East Pakistan in 1971.

The dominant feature of the post-colonial period has been the existential style of deploying religion whenever it suits the political convenience of those in power, and of ignoring the challenge of defining the relationship of religion and politics when governments and the ruling elites feel secure and contented. This posture came under assault with the rise of Islamic militancy in the eighties and nineties, a period that witnessed accelerated globalization of the world economy. The Islamists were further propelled by the Iranian revolution (February 1979), and more importantly by the Afghan jihad, which, thanks to the generosity of the United States, became a transnational project. Ironically, the pro-US governments of Egypt and Algeria later became the prime targets of the Afghanistan trained Mujahideen.

The resurgence of right-wing religious movements in the eighties and nineties was worldwide. They have a particularly violent role in Israel where the state-armed Zionist zealots became especially oppressive towards the Arabs of Palestine. In India, the Hindu movement launched a campaign against the Babri mosque as part of its effort at mobilizing mass support. It ended in the destruction of the 16th century mosque, widespread communal violence, and the rise of the BJP to national power. After the Russians withdrew, the victorious and faction-ridden Mujahideen of Afghanistan tore the country apart. In Sudan, an Islamic government imposed a reign of terror, and mismanagement, which has yielded a horrific famine. Christian 'fundamentalism' linked with Serb nationalism and Milosevic's diabolic opportunism had aided a reign of terror and ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, Herzegovina, and now it battles on in Kosovo.

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A decade ago, I spent a couple of hours with Morarji Desai, a well-known politician and one-term Prime Minister of India. I was researching the campaign by Hindu religious parties to build a shrine of Lord Rama on the spot where then stood the 16th century Babri mosque. They claimed that the site was the birthplace of Rama, an avatar who lived, according to traditional Hindu belief, sometime in the years 3000 BC.

During an earlier visit to Prime Minister, Desai in 1977, I had been impressed by his traditional style and his devotion to Hinduism. So I thought he will be a good man to interview on the subject of Hindu 'fundamentalism'.

Mr. Desai was critical of the BJP and its allies. He worried that they would inflict damage to India's fragile unity and its secular dispensation. As he fulminated in particular against the RSS, Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Shiv Sena, I was startled at one point when he said: "They are distorting Hinduism out of shape. In effect, they are un-circumcised Mussalman fanatics." What do you mean? I asked, and he proceeded to talk about the 'imitation of monotheism in their singular focus on Rama, their cult of violence, and their mobilization of a virtual Jihad over 'Ram Janam Bhoomi' as un-Hindu attitudes and activities.

At the time I had felt uncomfortable with this remark as it smacked of a communal outlook. Later, as I continued to research the Ram Janam Bhoomi movement, I appreciated his comparison between contemporary Muslim and Hindu militancy. But Morarji Desai was wrong in one respect. The similarities were not an outcome of the parivar imitating their Muslim counterparts. Rather,

the distortion of a given religious tradition and other shared patterns of attitude, behaviour and style are products of common roots in the modern times and its unique tensions. I have argued this point in an earlier essay. Here I discuss how these so-called fundamentalists, in particular the Islamist variety, relate to the religious tradition they claim to cherish and represent.

The religious idiom is greatly favoured in their discourse, its symbols are deployed and rituals are observed. Yet no religio-political movement or party has to my knowledge incorporated in a comprehensive fashion the values or traditions of Islam, Christianity, Judaism and Hinduism in their programmes and activities, nor have they set examples of lives lived, individually or collectively, in accordance with the cherished values of the belief system they invoke. What they do is to pick out whatever suits their political purposes, cast these in sacred terms, and invest them with religious legitimacy. This is a deforming though easy thing to do.

All religious systems are made up of discourses, which are, more often than not, dialectically linked, to each other as in light and darkness, peace and war, evil and goodness. Hence, it is possible to detach and expropriate a part from the whole, divest it of its original context and purpose, and put it to political uses. Such an instrumentalist approach is nearly always absolutist; that is, it entails an absolute assertion of one, generally de-contextualized, aspect of religion and a total disregard of another. The phenomenon distorts religion, debases tradition, and twists the political process wherever it unfolds. The idea of Jihad is a case in point.

It is an Islamic precept with multiple meanings, which include engagement in warfare, social service, humanitarian work, intellectual effort, or spiritual striving. The world is formed from an Arabic root *jihad*, which denotes an intense effort to achieve a positive goal. Jihad entails then a striving to promote the good and overcome the bad, to bring light where there is darkness, prosperity where there is poverty, remedy where there is sickness, knowledge where there is ignorance, clarity where there is confusion. Thus *mujahada* (as also *jihad*) in early Islamic usage was an engagement with oneself for the achievement of moral and spiritual perfection. A *mujtahid* is a religious scholar who does *ijtihad*, i.e., strives to interpret religious texts in the light of new challenges and circumstances.

In early Islamic history when the need to defend and also enlarge the community of believers was deemed paramount, Jihad became widely associated with engagement in warfare. Following a prophetic tradition, some early theologians divided Jihad in two categories: The ‘physical jihad’- participation in religious wars of which the rules and conditions were strictly laid down- was assigned the “Lesser Jihad” category. Its premises were strictly defined.

As Muslim power and numbers increased and pluralistic patterns of life and outlook emerged, there were clashes between points of view no less than personal ambitions. Similarly, wars and dynastic conflicts frequently involved convergences of interests and alliances between Muslims and non-Muslims, and battles were fought. Traditionally, these were described variously as *harb*, *Jang*, *qital* or *muqatala* but not as Jihad, a tradition that has been all but jettisoned by contemporary Islamists.

The Greater Jihad was that which one undertook within the self and society- to conquer greed and malice, hates and anger, ego and hubris, above all to achieve piety, moral integrity, and spiritual

perfection. The great sufis invested in the concept an even deeper meaning of striving to subjugate the Self (jihad bi nafsih) to the service of the creator and His creation. Many of them dedicated their lives to the service of the weak and needy, by their example attracted millions to embrace Islam, and in such places as India continue to be revered by Muslims and Hindus alike.

It is a rare Islamist party today that devotes itself meaningfully to the mission of helping peoples and communities. To the contrary contemporary Islamists view with disfavour those who would follow the example of the sufi saints who in their time had waged the Greater Jihad. Two such figures in Pakistan today are Dr. Akhtar Hamid Khan and Maulana Abdul Sattar Edhi. Both are deeply influenced by the Sufi tradition, both are continuing to build social institutions that assist millions of people, and both have been persecuted by those who claim to be champions of Islam.

Without a hint of doubt, contemporary Muslim ideologues and militants have reduced the rich associations of jihad to the single meaning of engagement in warfare, entirely divested of its conditions and rules. Thus the war against a Marxist government in Afghanistan and its Soviet ally became the most famous jihad of the 20th century even though it was armed and financed by the United States, a non-Muslim superpower. Today, such activities as terrorism, sectarian strife, and the killings of innocent people are claimed as holy warfare. This reductionism is by no means unique to the Muslim world.

Next-door in India, Hindu militancy is doing much the same despite their very different religious tradition. They have cast Hinduism as a religion of violence, warfare and force. There are of course elements of violence in the Hindu tradition. Mahatma Gandhi was a reformer who recognized that violence had a part in India's religious and cultural tradition but also viewed *ahimsa* as the essence of Hinduism. In his study on Gandhi, Rajmohan Gandhi mentions that when his friend C.F. Andrews observed that "Indians had rejected 'bloodlust' in times past and non-violence had become an unconscious instinct with them, Gandhi reminded Andrews that 'incarnations' in Indian legends were 'bloodthirsty, revengeful and merciless to the enemy'." (The Good Boatman. p.35)

But Gandhi was a humane and imaginative leader. So he understood the essential lesson of the Mahabharat, which ends in a handful of survivors, differently that "violence was a delusion and a folly." By contrast, in the discourse of militant Hindu parties one scarcely finds a mention of ahimsa as a Hindu value while the emphasis abound on violence, force and power. The same obsessions occupy the Jewish and Christian variants of religious-political movements. Not long ago, a ranking rabbi of Israel ruled that in the cause of expanding Israeli settlements in Palestine the killing of Arabs was religiously ordained.

In the Islamist discourse I am unable to recognize the Islamic religion, society, culture, history, or politics as lived and experienced by Muslims through the ages. The Islamic has been in most respects a pluralistic civilization marked with remarkable degrees of diversity and patterns of antagonism and collaboration. The cultural life of the traditional Muslim was formed by at least four sets of intellectual legacies. Theology was but one such legacy. The others were philosophy and science, aesthetics, and mysticism.

Contemporary Islamists seek to suppress all but a narrow view of the theological legacy. Professor Fazlur Rahman was arguably the most eminent scholar of Islamic philosophy in our time. I knew him to be a devout Muslim who was more knowledgeable about classical Arabic, Persian and Ottoman Turkish than any Islamist scholar I have known. When Mohammed Ayub Khan proposed to establish an Institute of Islamic Studies in Pakistan, he resigned his position at McGill University to lead this institution and make it into a world class academy. A few years later, a sustained campaign was launched against him and he was forced to leave the country.

Religious scholars, artists, poets and novelists, including Noble Laureate Mahfouz, have suffered persecution and assault at the hands of self-appointed champions of Islam. Complexity and pluralism threaten most-hopefully not all- contemporary Islamists, because they seek an Islamic order reduced to a penal code, stripped of its humanism, aesthetics, intellectual quests, and spiritual devotion. Their agenda is simple, therefore very reassuring to the men and women who are stranded in the middle of the ford, between the deep waters of tradition and modernity.

Neither Muslims nor Jews nor Hindus are unique in this respect. All variants of contemporary 'fundamentalism' reduce complex religious systems and civilizations to one or another version of modern fascism. They are concerned with power not with the soul, with the mobilization of people for political purposes rather than with sharing or alleviating their sufferings and aspirations. Theirs is a very limited and time bound political agenda.

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