

# 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 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 and the Philippines have been as violent as most acts committed by Muslim fanatics. Jewish settlers, for example, have committed crimes against unarmed Palestinian farmers and children; they have also developed racist ideologies to exclude Arabs and justify the elimination of non-Jews in 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 and its 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 the proper historical and global contexts. A phenomenon of this size 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 deep and confusing change and transformation.

Religious fundamentalism is an international phenomenon with roots in every society; but while some societies have experienced radicalism frequently in the distant past, others have experienced it only recently. And despite its many causes and manifestations, it is largely a product of an era that may be best described as an 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 ideas 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 other parts of the world. And while the American crisis was primarily political in nature, the European crisis was economic as most European economies began to stagnate, causing unemployment to rise and remain high for decades. 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 implications began to influence people's thinking, remold their worldviews, and transform the masses' 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, Third World socialism, and state capitalism. 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 decline. By the mid-1980s, particularly in the wake of the Third World debt crisis and the collapse of the prices of oil and 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 most sociopolitical and socioeconomic developments worldwide.

The exposure of the limits of the world's leading powers and ideologies was expressed in economic recessions, military defeats, social decay, political and economic corruption, and military upheavals. Consequently, 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 traditional value systems where religious fundamentalism and sociocultural conservatism were waiting to reclaim the future, almost everywhere, and assume global leadership without much challenge.

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 its moral values become a major source of individual solace and communal inspiration. Social conservatism, meanwhile, becomes a collective 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 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 their beliefs and personal security ahead of economic opportunity. And as people turn to conservatism, 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 everywhere, have always resorted to traditional religion and social institutions, and invoked cultural values and conservative views as means to preserve their national and communal identities in the face of socioeconomic disorientation and political uncertainty. Yet, they are values, institutions, and ideologies whose time had come and gone, and whose limits had long been exposed and acknowledged. Because of this, resorting to traditional religions and invoking traditional values have come 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 diminishing expectations era advanced, social conservatism, cultural traditionalism, and religious fundamentalism were able to convince their adherents to place communal allegiance and personal and financial security ahead of national loyalty and economic opportunity. And this in turn, made people less optimistic regarding the future, expecting less from it and willing to accept the 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 is expected to come” had finally arrived. And due to its ideological roots and conservative sociocultural 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, political plurality, a free press, and protection of individual rights. As a consequence, socioeconomic and sociopolitical conservatism were able to mount a come back in the early 1980s and to subsequently dominate the West's economic thinking and political organization and sociocultural attitudes. Since the financial crisis of 2008, the consequences of this development have been seen in economic recessions, high rates of unemployment, and the revival of racism in Europe and America, and the spread of poverty and homelessness in many parts of the world. And while enabling the conservatives to control the White House and the US congress during President Trump era, such developments allowed political and economic corruption and intellectual sterility to dominate society everywhere. Sociocultural conservatism was also responsible for reviving and invigorating social and racial discrimination in almost all 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 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. And 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 decades without much challenge. Liberal forces opposed to conservatism were unable to understand the nature of the transformation that was taking place and therefore could not rise to the challenge, particularly after the collapse of communism and the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

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 and 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 failure to understand the nature of 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 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 majority dictatorships to exclude and discriminate against the other, particularly the religious and cultural minorities.

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 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 problems facing them with confidence. The transitional period between two stages of societal development or civilizations, of which the mood of diminishing expectations is only one facet, has rendered all traditional tools of economic management, political control, and social and cultural analysis largely irrelevant. Meanwhile, globalization and life complexity have rendered the nation state, regardless of its size, power, and wealth, too small to deal with most international issues, and too large to deal with most domestic concerns. A rupture in the historical process has occurred, causing the past to become of little help to 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 a discarded past and an unknown future, going through an identity crisis of its own that encompasses all aspects of life. And while the future remains uncharted, it appears to have lost its connection to the past and the present. Today, for example, choices of future careers are based more on expectations of future developments in the evolving fields of technology, communications, and artificial intelligence than on rewarding present careers and highly recognized past professions.

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 are going through a transitional period that is transforming our societies, cultures, and economies from the industrial and pre-industrial ages and into a new age that I call the knowledge age. Our current experience is similar to that of a driver driving along an uncharted winding road. As he makes a sharp curve on the 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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