Navigating Ideological Crossroads: Utopianism, Religious Fundamentalism, and its Threats to Democracy

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Introduction

This essay is a larger enquiry into the utopianism of religious fundamentalism and its ability to threaten democracy as a form of government. It is important to systematically unravel the threads of this dysfunctional relationship on both religious and structural levels. These often feed into each other resulting in feedback loops. The prevailing geopolitical hostility over West Asia, and the revamp of radical terror outfits in Central Asia, are an outcome of a utopian thought being injected into religious philosophy and preachings, thereby giving rise to fundamentalist groups. This article uses the term 'utopianism' in a way that reflects the essential ambiguity of Thomas More's (1516) neologism (utopia is a good place that is no-place). They articulate what Ruth Levitas calls a desire for a better way of being, opposite to that referenced by 'dystopia.'

Parallel Foundations of Fundamentalism and Utopianism

On the other hand, fundamentalism refers to the strict adherence to the orthodox beliefs and principles of any faith. Fundamentalist groups across religions aim at preserving the core dogma of their belief systems, presumed to be under some threat from the external world. This divorce of the realistic world from an ideal one (described by Lyman Tower Sargent as an outcome of social dreaming) leads to the idea of a "pure" religious space, meant only for the people of one particular religion or faith system. The notion of a pure theocracy does not stem from a sacred religious text (except for Islam, wherein categorisation of the world is ordained by the Qur'an [10.25] and [6.127] into Dar Al-Islam, Dar Al-Harb, and Dar Al-Aman), but rather from a myopic interpretation of the same. The conflicting doctrines of Gush Emunim and Neturei Karta are a suitable example of this textual fallacy. The ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine, as an outcome of the terror events of October 7th, 2023, can be understood only by carefully unveiling the layers of the contesting ideologies at play.

Gush Emunim was an Israeli ultranationalist orthodox movement that translated into a formal organisation in 1974, after the Yom Kippur war. Founded by Rabbi Abraham Kook, the movement advocated for the creation of a Jewish homeland (Eretz Israel) and to expel the impure elements (Islamic) from it. In the name of the Torah, the leaders of the group bolstered the belief that the

settlement of the Jews in the land of Israel would bring redemption upon Earth and the beginning of the Messianic era. Through its strong influence in the political circles, the group was successful in establishing several Jewish settlements in the territories captured in the 1967 "Six-Day War", especially Judea and Samaria. In stark contrast to this, Neturei Karta, another orthodox Jewish group, rejected Zionism and believed the creation of the state of Israel to be against the will of God. It was against the settlement of Jews on the land of Israel before the arrival of the Messiah. Both the groups believe to be following the real word of the Torah, however a discrepancy in its interpretation leads to two opposing radical religious thoughts. On the other end of the spectrum is Hamas, a Palestinian Islamist group that believes in the complete annihilation of Israel. It was formed in the initial years of the first Intifada (1987) by members of Muslim Brotherhood and a few religious factions of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). Hamas considers the ancient land of Palestine to be Islamic Waqf and the establishment of an Islamic homeland a prerogative of the Palestinian muslims. The Hamas Covenant, 1988 explicitly eliminates any scope of a peaceful compromise and solidifies the utopian vision of a liberated Palestine (from land to sea) under the sovereignty of Islam.

The Interwoven Matrix and Shared Beliefs

The relationship between fundamentalism and utopianism occurs at several structural levels. Religious fundamentalism contains utopias, and stems out of discontent and abomination for the present. It involves a complex interplay of critique and desire, and often looks backwards, utopianism of a golden age, which fundamentalists seek to revive. Fundamentalist groups are often driven by the idea that their 'purity' is in danger. They work towards setting up boundaries to physically isolate the pure elements (people, beliefs, space et cetera) from the dangerous outside world. An outcome of this communal isolationism is distortion of perspective (as discussed above), because in addition to people, even information is screened and censored by these boundaries. The members of these groups are cut off from the wider social norms and values and the difference between the outside world and the inner group is seen as a manifestation of evil. A suitable example to understand this is Bin Laden's 1996 'Declaration of Jihad' against the west, and the subsequent attacks of 9/11. Through his recruitment videos, Bin Laden characterised the deployment of American and non-muslim troops in Saudi Arabia post 1991 Gulf War, as a blasphemous act and an affront to the sanctity of Islam. He called for 'Defensive Jihad' against the perceived aggression of what he believed to be 'the nexus of Jews, Christians, and their agents', voicing Samuel Huntington's theory on the clash of civilizations. Bin Laden's utopia meant the creation of an Islamic Caliphate, a Muslim brotherhood for only muslims, governed by Sharia and Islamic principles of finance and social conduct. For those outside this corporation, there was nothing but enmity and contempt.

Tug of Ideals – Religious Fundamentalism Versus Democratic Values

Religious fundamentalism is antithetical to liberal politics, as Lucy Sargisson has rightly remarked in her paper, "Religious fundamentalism and utopianism in the 21st century". Democratic principles, as suggested by Robert A. Dahl in his classic book, 'Polyarchy', stand at contradiction with the fundamentalist values. Dahl provides a framework for conversion to a democracy through eight institutional guarantees: 1) freedom of expression; 2) freedom to form and to join organisations; 3) the right to vote; 4) eligibility for public office; 5) alternative sources of information; 6) the right of political leaders to compete for support and votes; 7) free and fair elections; 8) institutions for drafting government policies depend on votes and other expressions of preference. The concept of "Twin Tolerations" given by Alfred Stepan underscores the pragmatic relationship between religious and political authorities in a society. It emphasises the idea that the state and religious groups must have mutual tolerance for a democracy to prosper and function effectively. Fundamentalist groups seek to control political systems, impose their beliefs on the state, and slowly erode the principles of secular democracy. This can upset the delicate balance advocated by Stepan, and can strain the coexistence of religious and political authorities in a liberal democracy.

Conclusion

The prevailing religious instability throughout the globe calls for a thorough understanding of how rising fundamentalism threatens democracies, and democratic values beyond that of political ploys. The ideology of fundamentalism knows no bounds and has taken over both the developed and underdeveloped world of today, unleashing horror stories. From 9/11 to 26/11, terror attacks like these have given rise to the politics of viscerality, emotion, and physical force, accompanied with the loss of massive innocent lives. Many have argued that the recent surge of fundamentalism is out of movements and modernity and not perhaps a precondition of it. As written by Bassam Tibi, "The fundamentalists are modernists, not traditionalists; they return to tradition for a modern agenda, selectively picking elements to create a political order." Hence, liberal democracy and fundamentalism have become contending ideologies of today. Perhaps the question we must all seek to answer is how can we create a world of peaceful co-existence off these clashing ideologies?

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