

# RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM AND CHAUVINISM

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The history of the late twentieth century and early twenty first centuries ... will inevitably have to be written as the history of a world which can no longer be contained within the limits of 'nations' and 'nation states' as these used to be defined either politically, or economically, or culturally, or even linguistically. It will see 'nation states' and nations or ethnic linguistic groups primarily as retreating before, resisting, adapting to, being absorbed or dislocated by the new supranational restructuring of the globe. Nations and nationalism will be present in this history but in subordinate, and often rather minor roles.. E.J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, (1990)

One of the most conspicuous and significant facts concerning our contemporary world is that while the sociologists secularization thesis is all in all valid, one major part of the world remains resolutely secularization resistant: the world of Islam". E. Gellner, "The Civil and the Sacred, in *Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, (1991)

Large generalizations about religious fundamentalism and nationalism, even by distinguished scholars as those quoted above, tend to obscure the complex reality of societies caught up in the cross-currents of political, economic and social change across the globe. Nationalism which gave birth to nation states in Europe in the nineteenth century and following the first world war was not the nationalism which fuelled the drive to decolonization which surged ahead in the period following the second world war.

These in turn are to be distinguished from the nationalism which expressed itself in demands for separate statehood in multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious states, unsuccessfully in Biafra and Northern Ireland, but successfully in Bangladesh, despite powerful opposition from an international system committed to preserving the *status quo*; also distinct is the orgy of nationalist assertion which has surfaced in the former Soviet Union, in Yugoslavia and in other societies where the international system appears no longer interested in preserving the present configuration of state boundaries.

The role of religion in different societies, and indeed, of the religion of Islam, has evoked special attention. The militant version, described as fundamentalism, which brought about the dramatic destruction of the apparently indestructible Shah of Iran has prompted a plethora of analyses and prognoses, all of which readily falls into the error of generalization. They fail to note the essential difference

between the powerful appeal of religion and its revolutionary potential to confront and overthrow authoritarian regimes as in Iran, and its instrumental use by military dictators like Nimery in Sudan, Ziaul Huq in Pakistan or Ershad in Bangladesh in order to gain legitimacy for their illegitimate regimes.

As we seek to explore the role of religious fundamentalism and nationalism or its extreme manifestation, chauvinism, in the contemporary world and their future directions, I am reminded of a conversation in 1974 with Andre Malraux at his home in Paris. The conversation turned to scenarios of the future. I asked him, given his experience of having lived through historical turning points in Europe and Asia, for his predictions for the last quarter of this century. He paused and said: 'Experience has taught me this. It is difficult to make predictions beyond five years. It is foolhardy to look beyond that. There are too many unpredictable variables'.

## Differing Contexts

With this cautionary note, we may attempt to speculate on how religious fundamentalism and chauvinism are likely to affect developments in different societies around the world as we approach the year 2000. I believe it would be useful to analyze the differing contexts in which these forces have played their respective roles. This might provide insights into their future roles.

Historically, nationalism has inspired movements for unification and expansion. It had thus contributed to bring together Germans, Italians, and Greeks into nation states. This might suggest that the international system was built around nation states which derived their legitimacy from a single language or ethnic identity. But then, the oldest and most unquestioned nation states, for example Britain, France and Spain were states which embraced multi-ethnicity, multi-nationality and multi-linguality. The nationalism which fuelled the movements for national independence and liberation from colonial rule grew within the confines of colonial boundaries and was shared by peoples having different languages and cultures as well as religious and ethnic identities. This would be true of Indian or Indonesian nationalism or the nationalism which gave birth to post-colonial nation-states in Africa.

Intellectual enquiry thus began to concentrate on formulating criteria for potential or actual nationhood. The question was posed as to "which of the numerous European populations classifiable as a 'nationality' on one ground or another would acquire a state (or some lesser form of separate political or

administrative recognition), and which of the numerous existing states would be imbued with the character of 'nation'<sup>1</sup> Renan's famous question "Why is Holland a nation, while Hanover and the Grand Duchy of Parma are not?"<sup>2</sup> raised important issues. John Stuart Mill had, in arguing that the establishment of a nation state had to be feasible and to be desired by the nationality itself, raised other important issues. Thus the evolving criteria gave weight to the wishes of the people, that is, the subjective element, as well as to objective considerations of size, resource endowments and thus of "feasibility" in terms of ability to meet legitimate expectations of the people. Thus the concept of a "threshold" became relevant for determining whether a claim for separate statehood could be regarded as legitimate; this concept gained heightened relevance after the Second World War when claims for national self-determination had to be evaluated by the international community within the framework of the United Nations Charter.

Once the decolonization process had been more or less completed, the international order as it emerged under the United Nations Charter sought to underwrite and preserve the existing configuration of states. The Organization of African Unity was committed to uphold the sanctity of the boundaries within which post-colonial states had been created. The assertion of claims to separate statehood by the component units of the former Soviet Union after its dissolution and recent developments in Eastern Europe and Yugoslavia are realities to be reckoned with. The dynamics of these developments and their implications for a new world order are yet to be fully understood; this task becomes even more difficult in a context where the economic authority of the nation state and its ability to protect its citizens and promote development has been greatly weakened by the growing global integration of economic activities and the dominance of a group of economically powerful nations over flows of international trade<sup>3</sup>.

## Nationalism as Chauvinism

However, in spite of these limitations, nationalism verging on chauvinism continues to manifest itself, among the Quebecois in Canada, the Basque in Spain, the Armenians and Central Asian Republics of the former Soviet Union, the Kurds in Iraq and in scores of other ethnic groups around the world. In a number of cases, the tendency appears to be reinforced by group-specific religious faiths, as among the Armenians opposing Muslim Azeri Turks, the Serbs in conflict with Bosnians or the Sikhs in India. This has led to a perceptive observation: "It seems probable that the visiting extraterrestrial would see ethnic exclusiveness and conflict, xenophobia and fundamentalism as aspects of the same general phenomenon".<sup>4</sup>

"Religious fundamentalism" is used loosely and imprecisely to describe a wide variety of movements which have a revivalist element and involve the use of religion in politics. A view of religious fundamentalism in Islamic societies as a defensive response to Western intrusion and dominance has been

explained thus in an illuminating lecture by Bernard Lewis:<sup>5</sup>

It is easy to understand the rage of the traditional Muslim, confronted with the modern world, schooled in a religious culture in which from the beginning, rightness has meant supremacy. He has seen that supremacy lost in the world to Western power, lost in his own country to foreign intruders, with their foreign ways and their westernized proteges, lost in his own home to emancipated women and rebellious children. Brought up in a complex but functioning system of social loyalties and responsibilities, he finds those loyalties, defined by faith and kin, denounced as sectarian and nepotistic, and those responsibilities derided and abandoned in favour of capitalist acquisitiveness or socialist expropriations. Impoverished by real economic and demographic problems, aggravated by mismanagement and misgovernment, he is made painfully aware, by the now ubiquitous mass media, of the discrepancies between rich and poor, now richer and poorer, and more visibly so than ever before in history. And he does not fail to notice that the way of life of the rich and tyrannical - their homes, their clothing, their style, their food, their amusements - are modeled, at least in appearance, on those of the infidel West. The Westerner may think, sometimes dare to say, that these resemblances are in fact no more than appearance, and that the underlying reality, though it has ceased to be Islamic in any meaningful sense, has not become European. Traditional Muslims who up until now have had little opportunity to observe European realities, could hardly be expected to accept such fine distinctions, and it is not surprising that so many of them have found in the idea of resurgent Islam a new identity and dignity and an ideology for the critique of old and the devising of new regimes.

An explanation along the above lines may be valid with regard to the rise of fundamentalism in Iran, in Afghanistan and in Algeria, but would be inappropriate to explain attempts to impose Islamic constitutions or to decree the creation of Islamic states in Sudan, Pakistan or Bangladesh. In the latter cases, religion has been used by authoritarian regimes in an attempt to legitimize themselves and in support of a policy of divide and rule. Such abuse of religion for political purposes was identified in the statement issued by an Asian colloquium on the Challenge of Fundamentalism in Asia in the following terms:<sup>6</sup>

The phenomena of fundamentalism are many fold (sic), though there are a number of features which are found in common in the countries represented at the Colloquium:

- a. Sometimes the major religious groups fight each other, at other times the main quarrel is between sects or ethnic groups within the same religion. Sometimes purely political ambitions have been given a totally misleading religious colour so as maintain the traditional power elites, be they feudal, military or a combination of these;
- b. In multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-lingual

states, there is reluctance to share power. The dominant group tends to merge its nationalistic rallying cry with racial, religious and or linguistic overtones that excludes other groups;

c. An alliance of military and clergy power has become a common feature to stifle freedom of expression and human rights;

d. In previously secular nations, religion has been artificially made an issue by dictatorships or authoritarian governments in order to legitimize themselves as well as to enforce suppressive laws;

e. Religious fundamentalism thus becomes a threat to the people's struggle for justice and liberation. The laws and social customs which deny equal rights to women continue to function with religious sanctions espoused by the religious groups. In these societies religious fundamentalism regards pluralism as a liability rather than as an asset.

The global trend towards pluralism thus finds fundamentalists presenting obstacles which lead to social tensions and generate controversy and violent confrontations.

## Anachronisms

**R**eligious fundamentalism and chauvinism are anachronisms where expanding global population and the growing integration of the global economy project an emerging objective reality, described as follows:

The world's population is now growing by about 1.7 percent a year. Although the rate is down from its peak of 2.1 percent in the late 1960s, absolute growth - almost 100 million a year - has never been higher. During the period 1990-2030, the world's population is likely to grow by 3.7 billion - an increase much greater than in previous generation and probably much greater than in any succeeding one. Ninety percent of this increase will occur in developing countries ... the sheer density of population will pose challenges for environmental management. Today, for example, apart from the small islands and city states, only Bangladesh, the Republic of Korea, the Netherlands, and the island of Java, Indonesia, have densities exceeding 400 per square kilometers. By the middle of the next century, however, one third of the world's population will probably live in countries with these population densities.

A remarkable globalization of the world economy has

taken place in the past few decades. While world output tripled, world trade quadrupled. World commercial bank lending has also grown rapidly-twice as fast as world trade.

Many of the global movements today are information based-through ever expanding networks of cables and satellites. The world capital markets transmit more than \$300 billion a day through international data networks, and TV networks roam the globe collecting and transmitting information on world events as they happen.

Today more than ever, a new global culture is emerging. From music to movies to books, international ideas and values are being mixed with, and superimposed on, national identities. Such common information flows are an achievement, but they carry a risk - the loss of cultural identity and diversity. But they also allow the world to face up - as a community-to issues of common concern and common survival<sup>77</sup>.

The current assertions of chauvinistic claims to separate statehood and manifestations of religious fundamentalism should thus be viewed as products of subjective responses to past injustices or perceived threats. In most cases these responses are at odds with objective conditions within these societies which call for greater integration, secularization and shared effort to meet the challenges of the future. They are also at odds with global trends towards an integrated global economy which calls not for further fragmentation but for greater cooperation within regional arrangements and in a global framework. It is therefore reasonable to expect that subjective tendencies would in time yield to the imperatives of the objective realities - to the imperatives of survival. ■

## References

1. E.J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1870*, 1990, p.23.
2. E. Renan, "What is a Nation", in A. Zimmern (ed.) *Modern Political Doctrines*, 1939, p. 192.
3. *The Human Development Report* (UNDP), p. 74.
4. E. J. Hobsbawm, op cit., p. 168.
5. Bernard Lewis, 'Europe and Islam', *Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, Vol. XII, 1991, p. 134.
6. *The Challenge of Fundamentalism*, Report published by the Asian Cultural Forum on Development, 1990, p. 6-7, 9.
7. *The World Development Report* (World Bank), 1992, p. 7; *The Human Development Report* (UNDP), 1992, p. 74.

Dr. Kamal Hossain, a prominent human rights activist in Bangladesh, is leading the team of lawyers defending Taslima Nasrin against charges of blasphemy brought against her book, *Lajja*.