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When Modernity Helps Fuel Fundamentalism

By Mohammad Alami Musa

Synopsis

There is a link between modernity, fundamentalism and violence. It can help to explain why more perpetrators of terror attacks are successful, modern citizens of rich countries.

Commentary

THE CONNECTION between modernity, fundamentalism and violence can help us better understand why an increasing number of individuals from the privileged class are involved in terrorism. The detention of educated Singaporeans who hold good jobs in a First World country, and who embrace modernity, is a case in point.

It no longer holds true that actors of terrorism are the “down and out” who are disenfranchised or deprived of life’s opportunities and who live in under-developed parts of the world. A surreal but true fact is that fundamentalism is born out of the womb of modernity.

Anxiety, Uncertainty and Disillusionment

This statement may appear contradictory because the modern individual is expected to respect diversity, be open-minded and balanced in managing his or her life. However, the modern person can also, paradoxically embrace traits which are diametrically opposite and engendered in fundamentalism, such as intolerance to diversity, close-mindedness and extremism in conduct as well as thinking.

A discussion on how modernity has paradoxically contributed to fundamentalism, notwithstanding its role in giving birth to contemporary civilisation, is necessary to understand the involvement of the privileged class in acts of terror.

Modernity empowered humankind with the power of reason, freedom in thinking and critical thought. The right to freedom and to think, even critically, brought about a phenomenal increase in diversity and pluralism that the world had never experienced before. In short, modernity driven by rationality (through science and technology) and freedom (through secular democracy) generated mind-boggling changes due to the onslaught of differences and diversity.

This is aggravated by the devaluation of the absolute truth or big picture thinking in preference of a multiplicity of “truths” based on each individual’s perspective, in what has been popularly termed today as the “post-truth world”. Such a world, also known as the perspectival world, will further increase diversity and intensify pluralism exponentially.

The moderate response is to embrace change that diversity brings about, while maintaining a judicious balance between what should be changed and what should be retained, such as principles and values. This balanced approach will provide society with the moral ballast to ensure its well-being as it encounters increasing diversity brought about by modernity.

Change and Certainty in an Uncertain World

But the extreme way of responding to increasing diversity is to keep on changing. This is happening. Nothing escapes change and there is no notion of permanence. Everything will be relativised and principles and values that make society safe, secure and peaceful are discarded.

Relativism does not give due regard to the conception of what is good and bad, thus weakening the anchors that provide stability to society. This will eventually lead to moral nihilism – that nothing is intrinsically moral or immoral. This will create a lot of imbalance, disequilibrium in society and hence uncertainty. The uncertainty causes great anxiety.

As a result, some modern and successful individuals will respond by going back to a notion of faith that provides certainty in a world that is otherwise uncertain. This is what fundamentalism is. It is a return to an extremely old interpretation of religion that is protected from the preserve of reason or scientific critique.

Fundamentalism, as so defined, is intended to provide a quick and easy way to overcome problems in society today due to uncertainties in life. To do so, the fundamentalist will export the early or historical religious experiences embedded in sacred text and traditions to apply them to present times.

Perceived War of Good Versus Evil

A serious problem arises when fundamentalism is embraced by individuals who have the propensity to commit acts of extremist violence or terror. They believe that their encounters with the problems of modern society today, due to moral nihilism and moral relativism, are an imagined war between the forces of good and evil.

They view this as a repeat of the war between good and evil that happened in the religion's historical past. This comes as no surprise as the early history of religion is many times marked with conflicts, wars and bloodshed.

According to Robert Bellah, a global sociologist of religion, founders of religions emerged in history when the ruling elites and ways of life in society were mired in immorality, conflict and violence. The religious interpretations of the past, relevant to those early days but no longer valid today, provide the inspiration for fundamentalists who are prone to violence. They make believe that a situation of war exists today, and that they are thus justified to annihilate the evils of modern society.

They feel obligated to carry out this war because they believe that it is their "do or die" mission to restore what they define to be a moral and good society. Religious fundamentalism is today the popular source to provide perpetrators of violence with the impulses and motivations for acts of terrorism.

Fundamentalists believe they have the monopoly of truthful interpretation of texts which render everybody else's interpretation as impure. Those with this puritanical attitude position themselves as the only saviours of the society they live in. No other interpretation is valid and those who propagate contrary views can be killed even if they belong to the same faith as they are labelled as apostates.

The war-like orientation of these fundamentalists, self-justified by sacred content selectively interpreted from within the religion, causes them to go down the slippery slope of waging war against the enemies of God (primarily from the West) who caused the uncertainty and immorality in society.

Not All Fundamentalism Lead to Violence

Nevertheless, there is a qualifier. Not all fundamentalism lead to violence. There are fundamentalists who reject acts of violence.

The discussion on the link between modernity, fundamentalism and violence is aptly summarised by global scholar on religion, Julius Lipner. Recognising that fundamentalism exists in modern society, he cautioned about the danger that it can lead to, when that society becomes perspectival and accords less importance to the use of universal reason. This is because the resulting trajectory is unpredictable and it often leads to violence.

Already, we can see this happening in our world. An increasing number of individuals involved in terror attacks are modern, global and successful, but disillusioned with the secular forces of modern society that give rise to evils and immoralities. Their perspectives shaped by religious fundamentalism motivate them to commit acts of violence or terror in their struggle to actualise a good and moral society. The nexus between modernity, fundamentalism and violence implies that global terrorism will continue to be a threat for a long time.

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