

The Spiritual Basis of The Struggle for Alternative Societies

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ABSTRACT—There has never been a situation where humankind as a whole is faced with a multitude of challenges all at the same time in different spheres of life. This is partly because we are all being drawn — whatever our cultures and ideologies — into the same pattern of modernization which is supposed to signify progress. There are, in fact, two processes at work in this transformation of the entire globe into a certain pattern of existence. At the deeper level, there is a definite notion of the individual, the community, nature, and technology, which is embodied in that worldview associated with development and modernization. A spiritual vision of the human being and humanity is vital for the struggle of the alternatives as a whole. Alternative advocates also believe that it is only in small and medium-sized communities that the human being will be in a position to shape his destiny. This paper discusses the basis of this struggle for alternative societies to save humankind.

Introduction

More than at any other time in human history, there is today tremendous uncertainty about tomorrow. Humankind is faced with the real possibility of total annihilation. This, in a sense, is a unique possibility. As Arthur Koestler put it, “From the dawn of consciousness until 6 August 1945, the man had to live with the prospect of his death as an individual. Since the day when the first atomic bomb outshone the sun over Hiroshima, mankind

as a whole has had to live with the prospect of its extinction as a species.”¹ It is only too true that the logical outcome of the arms race is the end of the human race.

While the nuclear threat is perhaps the most serious crisis confronting man, there are other challenges, which have contributed to the despair that marks our era in history. These challenges vary from the First World to the Second World to the Third World. They are conditioned by ideology, the nature of industrialization, the level of economic development, history, and culture. Broadly speaking, they range from over-consumption and environmental degradation; to poverty and exploitation; to growing authoritarianism and deteriorating ethnic relations; to dehumanizing lifestyles and spiritual alienation. It is this state of affairs that prompted the Iranian thinker, Ali Shariati to remark, “Humanity is a species in decline; it is undergoing a metamorphosis and, just like a pupating butterfly, is in danger because of its own ingenuity and labours.

Indeed, this decline of humanity is almost unparalleled. There has never been a situation where humankind as a whole is faced with a multitude of challenges all at the same time in different spheres of life. This is partly because we are all being drawn — whatever our cultures and ideologies — into the same pattern of modernization which is supposed to signify progress. The media, technology, transnational corporations (TNCs), the state, and imperialism have been responsible for this.

There are, in fact, two processes at work in this transformation of the entire globe into a certain pattern of existence. At the deeper level, there is a definite notion of the individual, the community, nature, and technology which is embodied in that worldview associated with development and modernization. It is a vision of the human being, as an individual, or as part of a larger collectivity, striving to improve and enhance his material position through the control and conquest of nature with the help of more and more efficient technologies. The belief is that this must lead

1 Quoted in Sean McBride ‘The Role of the Mass Media in the Search for Peace’ in *Armaments, Arms Control and Disarmament*. A UNESCO reader for disarmament education, Marck Thee (ed) (1982).

inevitably to the well-being, the happiness of humankind. Within the liberal-capitalist tradition, this happiness, brought about by greater material comfort, is supposed to manifest itself in the expansion of individual freedom. Within the socialist tradition, happiness, which is also a product of greater material welfare (as against material comfort), is expected to express itself through social equality and social solidarity.

While happiness undoubtedly has a great deal to do with material progress and prosperity, it is obvious to most of us now that there is no one-to-one equation between the two. Human happiness is dependent on many other forces which taken together tend to diminish the significance of unlimited material development per se. The many serious shortcomings in the political, economic, and cultural life of the materially successful societies of our time bear testimony to this truth. In the liberal-capitalist societies, for instance, their much-eulogized freedom, we are now painfully aware, is more apparent than real. The mass consumer society is no less a threat to individual freedom and autonomy, in certain respects at least, than an authoritarian elite ruling through decrees. Similarly in the socialist states, equality is not just a mirage, especially in the political, intellectual, and cultural sense; what is worse, equality sometimes becomes a convenient slogan for the imposition of the most ruthless forms of inequality. Third World Societies in pursuit of these two grand paradigms of development and modernization spawned in the West have in turn produced distorted, contorted versions which are sometimes more terrible in their consequences for the ordinary human being.

If anything, the transnationalization of this idea of development and modernization through the powerful medium of the TNC has aggravated the situation considerably. As far as this is concerned, it is the emergence of a global capitalist system, shaped by the TNCs and the capitalist high commands of North America, Western Europe, and Japan that is the root of the problem. This is the second process at work that was referred to earlier. So while the first is civilizational, the second is clearly ideological. The transnationalization process has created a world that is highly

conducive to the success of the TNCs. The values and lifestyles propagated around the globe stimulate the type of consumption which the TNCs — and perhaps only the TNCs—can take care of. This ranges from food and clothes to leisure and entertainment. As a result, a massive transfer of tastes and fads from the capitalist centers to their peripheries has been taking place, in the last two decades in particular. So massive is this transfer, which operates at the level of heart and mind, that there is today a real danger of a uniform, monotonous cultural pattern taking hold of humankind, snuffing out the variety and diversity of past civilizational settings. In this, the communication system which again reflects TNC power has played a very significant role. It is mainly responsible for “the cultural penetration of the human being, to condition him or her to accept the political, economic and cultural values of the transnational power structure”.

There is no need to emphasize that transnationalization is closely linked to every one of the challenges that have contributed to the crisis of our age. The continued poverty of so much of the Third World, for instance, is directly related to TNC dominance. The exploitation of our industrial workers, the expulsion of our rural farmers from their land, the expropriation of our mineral wealth, the destruction of our forests, the pollution of our seas, the control of our commerce and finance, and indeed the crippling of our entire economic, cultural and intellectual development should be viewed in terms of the power and influence of the TNCs. Equally important, the wrong sort of consumption, that characterizes almost everything that we consume from the houses we live in to the education we provide our children, can be attributed, to some extent, to the way in which TNCs have moulded the values and structures pertinent to the development process. Indeed, indirectly, even some of the other problems we noted earlier on, like ‘growing authoritarianism’, ‘deteriorating ethnic relations’, ‘dehumanizing lifestyles’ and ‘spiritual alienation’ are the consequences of a type of development, of which TNCs have been prime movers.

It has to be reiterated at this point (lest a wrong impression

is created) that over and above TNC power is, of course, that worldview associated with development and modernization which is, in a sense at the very core of the contemporary crisis confronting humankind. It is because the crisis is total in every way, that the solution required is also total. This again makes our position in history unique. For in the past, in the shift from one religious civilization to another, or in the substitution of one ideology for another, what took place was a partial transformation of values and accompanying structures. The situation today, however, demands a holistic transformation of values and structures—of the human being itself — if we are to continue to survive on this planet.

Alternative movements are responses to various dimensions of the crisis facing humanity. The quest for an alternative lifestyle is the search for sanity in an insane world.

Alternatives and Spiritual Values

The International Movement for a Just World (JUST)², the social movement I am associated with, has always argued that a spiritual vision of the human being and humanity is vital for the struggle of the alternatives as a whole. For many of the concerns of alternative groups everywhere — including those that are undoubtedly ‘secular’ — have deep roots within various spiritual traditions. In the case of the consumer movement, for instance, some of the issues it has articulated, from its promotion of breastfeeding to its opposition to uncontrolled chemicalization of foods, would win the applause of all the major spiritual philosophies. Similarly, its plea for moderation in consumption, for simple lifestyles, has been the cherished ideal of religion through the ages.

By the same token, environmentalists should not fail to realize how close they are to fundamental spiritual values when they ask for the preservation of forests, clean air and water, and for the judicious use of scarce resources. Where but in religion is

² JUST’s beliefs and activities are discussed in JUST 20 International Movement for a Just World (JUST) Kuala Lumpur, 2012

there a lucid enunciation of man's sacred relationship with nature?

It is equally important to observe that the struggle of alternative groups to ensure that science remains ethical, that technology does not overwhelm the human being, that man does not lose his humanity in the process of accumulating knowledge about the mysteries of the universe, are perfectly legitimate concerns in any of the great spiritual perspectives.

Even the noble quest to give a place of dignity to women, to emancipate them from the bondage of discriminatory structures and attitudes, to ensure that they are treated as equal partners of the human family, would be in accordance with the essence of most of the major spiritual traditions. Of course, in reality, religious laws and social practices have often conspired to degrade women. But it cannot be denied that as far as the question of their common humanity is concerned, no spiritual tradition has sought to differentiate women from men.

It can perhaps be stated even more emphatically that in their commitment to the disadvantaged, spiritual traditions share common sentiments with crusaders for an alternative order. For in at least two major religions, it is an irrefutable truth that the preference in their scriptures is for the poor and oppressed.³

Alternative advocates also believe that it is only in small and medium-sized communities that the human being will be in a position to shape his destiny. In this respect too, there is a great deal of affinity with the spiritual standpoint. Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity can provide ample evidence of small, cohesive, egalitarian communities that existed at some point or other in their histories — communities that demonstrated the finest ideals of their respective religions.

An even more powerful current within alternative move-

³ This is true of both Islam and Christianity. For arguments along these lines, in Islam see Ashgar Ali Engineer *Islam & Its Relevance to Our Age* (Institute of Islamic Studies, Bombay, 1984). For Christianity see Gustavo Gutierrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, Matthew J.C. Connell (tr) [Claretian Publications, Quezon City 1983].

ments, which manifests some of the deepest urges within our spiritual traditions, is the quest for peace. All religions abhor violence. Peace is perhaps the ultimate purpose of man's spiritual journey. It is the goal of both his inward development and his outward commitment.

Finally, alternative movements have always maintained that bringing forth humanity in every one of us is their real goal. This is why they have often criticized capitalist societies for subordinating man to profits, and socialist states for reducing the human being to a digit within a rigid bureaucratic machine. For the religious traditions too, it is the human being and the development of his humanity — which is his spirituality — that is the true object of existence.

It is only too apparent that almost every important group in the quest for alternatives — from consumer advocates to peace marchers — reflects concerns that are clearly spiritual. This is why alternative groups should be bold enough and brave enough to regard their struggles as spiritual struggles. They should anchor their struggles to a spiritual worldview; they should regard the spiritual basis as the bedrock of their endeavour.

This does not mean attaching oneself to any particular religion. Neither does it mean becoming 'religious' in the conventional sense. What it does mean is that the spiritual conception of the human being, his purpose and his destiny, and the spiritual values that should guide him in his journey on earth, should be absorbed into our alternatives.

Despite all this, it is quite likely that in the Third World as elsewhere, alternative movements as a whole will not cease to grow. Authoritarianism, especially if it is backed domestically by a ruthless military elite, and abroad by arrogant imperialist forces, could well produce the sort of reaction that favours alternative movements. In the Second World, the awesome power of the state could create widespread alienation and thereby enable alternative groups to spread their influence. As far as the First World goes, the nuclear threat, the fiscal crisis, and of course, the political

and civil freedom of sorts provided by liberal democratic settings, could reinforce the position of various alternative movements.

Links Among Alternatives

However, all this will take time. And time is not our dear friend. We are fighting against the frenzied, frantic ambition of the strong to perpetuate their dominance of the world by all means, fair or foul. This is why alternative movements must also begin to organize on a global scale. Consumer movements, environmental movements, alternative technology movements, women's movements, peace movements, religious movements, and numerous other alternative movements must get together and work out a common minimum program of ideas and action. In a nutshell, some international alternative movements like the International Organisation of Consumer Unions (IOCU) should take the initiative to organize a world assembly of alternative movements to which leading alternative movements from the First, Second and Third Worlds should be invited. Out of such an assembly could emerge a more concerted endeavour to mobilize the inhabitants of this planet to seek a new way of living.

If we can do this, we will have succeeded in bringing a ray of light to the darkness that shrouds our earth. We must believe that this is possible — that our modest efforts matter. We must have faith in ourselves and faith in our work. As Mahatma Gandhi never failed to remind us, in the end, truth and goodness have always won. If we have faith in that, we may yet live to celebrate the triumph of our humanity.

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