

allow our religions to be bartered in the marketplace of money and power.

Many religions are facing their own crises of extremism today. Given the human tendency to stay in denial, however, most followers of these religions also may not see or understand the signs and parameters of such phenomena. Greatly contributing to our obliviousness is a concept known in the field of psychology as “attribution bias” in which, cognitively, we humans tend to attribute different reasons to ourselves than we would to others—for the same action. What Rabbi Heschel said decades ago is still valid: “The religions of the world are ... no more isolated than individuals or nations. Energies, experiences, and ideas that come to life [for one] ... continue to challenge and to affect every religion. Horizons are wider, dangers are greater. No religion is an island.”<sup>66</sup>

Whether the extremisms are promoted in the name of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism—or an entirely other belief system (democracy, freedom, human rights, free market, technology, values)—we have to be able to see them through the shrouds within which they are packaged. That’s important because these extremisms pose a threat to the common human civilization, heritage, and well-being. And the route to this eventuality goes through serious spiritual as well as intellectual deprivation.

### **The Evil Promoted by the Hobbesian Mindset**

There is no denying that we live in a world that is highly adversarial—perhaps much more so than ever before on most dimensions. Even the system of nation-states<sup>67</sup> as well as the legal systems worldwide seem to have been built upon that very assumption of the fundamentally adversarial nature of human relationships. By marginalizing the role of culture, the current politico-economic institutional system also weakens the concept of society in our lives. The collective and individual patterns of thought and behavior seem to have evolved in recent history to follow the guidelines of Thomas Hobbes, the influential Enlightenment philosopher.<sup>68</sup> The assertion of Hobbes’s outlook on human nature is unambiguous: “There Is Always Warre Of Every One Against Every

## RADICAL REVOLUTION OF VALUES

One .... So the nature of War, consisteth not in actuall fighting; but in the known disposition thereto ...”<sup>69</sup>

Because this Hobbesian human disposition is expected to be the norm, ideas and systems must effectively function within a very narrow set of objectives. And this applies to the current geopolitical scenario. As the discipline of anthropology tells us, “there is no actual reason to assume that war has always existed. Technically, war refers not just to organized violence but to a kind of contest between two clearly demarcated sides.”<sup>70</sup>

In that sense, the Cold War itself can be looked at as essentially a military conflict between the “religions” of capitalism and communism. The tussle between these two ideologies, each with exclusive claims over how to organize a society and its politico-economic structures, came at a very large cost to the human race (as evidenced by the conflicts in the second half of the twentieth century. Even the “local” price for the principal contestants can be tantamount to a weakening of the moral compass, as pointed out by the eighteenth-century writer Samuel Johnson: “Among the calamities of war may be justly numbered the diminution of the love of truth, by the falsehoods which interest dictates, and credulity encourages.”<sup>71</sup>

An ideology such as nationalism plays a similar role in damaging human well-being. Since the global entrenchment of the nation-state concept, this prejudice seems to have taken over all others. Almost a century ago, just before the onset of WWII, it is this exploitation of human passion that forced writer Aldous Huxley to wail: “All that we can be sure of is that nationalistic feeling was never so acutely inflamed as it is today and the expenditure on armament never higher.”<sup>72</sup>

Nationalistic ideology as currently promoted identifies a person with a nation-state. It further places that state beyond right and wrong, good and bad—advocating that the specific state’s interests have primacy over all other considerations. It then demands blind loyalty, and attachment to such objectives, from all those upon whom it affixes the identity label. Much else—including fact, reason,

truth, independent thought, and even moral consideration—is to be suspended, or subordinated to the nationalist ideology.

The ideology itself thus assumes the status of the prime and incontrovertible truth, effectively making the state a sacred object of devotion and worship. In George Orwell's elaboration of the phenomenon in 1984: "Whatever the Party holds to be truth is truth. It is impossible to see reality except by looking through the eyes of the Party.... It needs an act of self-destruction, an effort of the will."<sup>73</sup>

Aldous Huxley also clarified that nationalism elevates "the ugly reality of prejudice and passion to the rank of an ideal."<sup>74</sup> Such "vicarious triumph in the religion of nationalism"<sup>75</sup> all over the world poses serious perils to the human race. It provides all the disadvantages of the traditional religion, and absolutely none of the advantages. And it tends to be combined with the traditional religion to yield a potent tool for political exploitation and control. For a democracy, the bipartisan prevalence of nationalism in the United States is rather daunting and is used quite effectively to steer the trusting public.

With powerful ideological and economic forces continuously jockeying for dominance, both the collective and the individual thus become the losers. In societies constantly at war with this or that enemy, would information and truth get weaponized? With intense power play among so many politico-economic contestants, is it even reasonable to expect information integrity within the political system? In his famous essay ("An outline of Intellectual Rubbish") Bertrand Russell made a pointed observation: "There is no nonsense so arrant that it cannot be made the creed of the vast majority by adequate governmental action."<sup>76</sup>

Despite all the misgivings in various quarters, the political system in the United States is still considered a democracy in much of the world. Yet there are no guarantees the image or the reality would remain what it is today. Dr. King's provident observation a generation ago is still presciently valid: "if American democracy gradually disintegrates, it will be due as much to a lack of insight as to the lack of commitment to right."<sup>77</sup> Thus, the predicament staring us in the face demands insight, not just intelligence; conscience, not

just conception; resolve, not just resource; wisdom, not just wit; and courage, not just comprehension.

In the societal context, a dream becomes potentially fulfillable only when we realize and accept that it will always be unfulfillable. Complacency in preserving democracy, for example, does not just risk deteriorating the institution; it could destroy it. The downward slide may have become more apparent in the recent past, yet it can only be looked upon as the accumulation of various changes in the past. *Democracy in America*, written almost two centuries ago by Alexis de Tocqueville, is still considered a seminal treatise on the political system of the United States. Tocqueville's observations are rather astute for having been made almost two hundred years ago.<sup>78</sup> More importantly, they may be equally valid today.

I had remarked during my stay in the United States, that a democratic state of society, similar to that of the Americans, might offer singular facilities for the establishment of despotism.... A more accurate examination of the subject, and five years of further meditation, have not diminished my fears.... If despotism were to be established amongst the democratic nations of our days, it might assume a different character; it would be more extensive and milder; it would degrade men without tormenting them.<sup>79</sup>

A clear understanding of the detrimental impact of the Hobbesian mindset on our individual and collective well-being makes us less vulnerable to manipulation, thus augmenting freedom in our thought and action. It is time the ordinary citizen took notice.

### **Unrecognized Civilizational Impact**

A few decades ago, terrorism was not an everyday word. Today it is. When growing up as a child in Pakistan some half a century ago, I wouldn't have been able to identify known terrorists (even though I was a relatively well-informed child). Today, a lot of children in the United States would be able to point to "domestic terrorists"—