

the pathology of humanism.

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I wish to put a series of propositions about the rise of fundamentalisms – Islamic, Christian and Jewish. Each one's principal motive is reaction against modernity. That is, Western modernity, which combines the material progress that has been generated by capitalist industrialisation and the humanist culture that framed it.

The provocation has been the nihilistic consequences of humanism, a movement that started in the Renaissance with the ambition of founding a human-centred view of existence to replace the religious one that had preceded it. Humanism failed to find its own answers to the great metaphysical questions that confront all humans: Where do I come from? What should I do with my life? What happens to me at death?

The philosopher Nietzsche put it that with the 'death of God' the truth about existence has become that life is either absurd or horrible. He satirised the modern individual as the 'last man', whose only interest in life is his digestion, that is, comfort. Nihilism (the belief that there is nothing) is the inevitable endpoint of the humanist cultural experiment. Needless to say, humans cannot live with the ultimate conclusion that this is all there is. So humanist modernity has generated a series of reactions against itself. Fundamentalism is one.

From believing in nothing there is a leap to the opposite – fanatical attachment to a body of doctrine that is claimed to be absolute and universal, the word of God himself, spoken directly through one or other of his chosen prophets. Freud would have included this reaction under his psychological category of 'negation,' where fear that I believe nothing surfaces as its opposite: dogmatic assertiveness that I know the one Truth.

People who deeply know what they know are usually relaxed in themselves, feeling no need to assert their faith. The need to convince others cloaks a need to convince oneself. It is insecurity about belief that triggers intolerant dogma as defence.

Fundamentalism is a symptom of fragile faith.

There is plausibility to the sociological caricature of anomic life in the modern city. The lonely, anonymous individual lost in the mass metropolis; with a job that brings little fulfilment, intimacies that tend to be half-hearted and fleeting, finds his or her endemic anxiety anaesthetised by a cornucopia of consumption. The restless mind may be distracted in luxury apartments with ever new gadgets; in orgiastic sport, nightclubs, and a permanent banquet of foods, drinks and drugs; in a wealth of intellectual fads supplied in the New Age supermarket. In this context, the most tempting of antidotes is certainty. In particular, what beckons is the certainty provided by belonging to a strong community with fixed boundaries, and the certainty of dogmatic, unquestioned belief. The mainstream Christian churches with their liberal attitudes, their tolerance of just about anybody and anything, seem like pale and ineffectual offshoots of nihilist humanism. It is little wonder that it is Pentecostalist churches that are growing, with their combination of vital contemporary music and fundamentalist views on scripture and morals. Likewise, liberal and secular Judaism has spawned a fundamentalist reaction.

Fundamentalist Islam brings with it an additional, potent ingredient – power envy. As the foremost Western scholar of Islam, Bernard Lewis put it, the Muslim world has spent 500 years in economic and social stagnation, watching the West remorselessly increasing in wealth and global power. Osama bin Laden combined fundamentalist belief with a mania for destruction. Lewis argues that the fatal flaw in Islam has been its xenophobia, its refusal to open itself to the benefits of humanism. It has closed its mind to modern science, and the entire spirit of enquiry that has driven Western progress.

Fundamentalism today is one of humanism's great pathologies. It is a creation of the West and will continue as long as we fail to rediscover, from within our own culture, new persuasive answers to the central metaphysical questions mentioned above.

Without such answers we humans cannot live.

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anarchy, state and utopia.

fulcrum

We must be careful to draw a clear distinction between two arguments being put forward by Carroll: the first is that fundamentalism of all kinds is a negative reaction against humanism. The second is that half a millennia of social and economic stagnation under Islamic rule produced a geographic region prone to power envy of the West, which has manifested itself through 9/11. Both positions are probably true, or at least worth consideration, although in fact they should be treated separately.

Nihilism is perceived as a destructive force, a cancer drawing away the life blood of Western society: The Last Man, consumed by hedonism – the pursuit of pleasure for the sake of pleasure alone – quickly escalates to selfishness, moral bankruptcy and vapid narcissism. The total existential despair felt when 'keeping up with the Kardashians' – that intense feeling that 'keeping up' and 'falling into the void' might be the same thing – stands as testament to the possibility of interpreting the collapse of sophisticated civilisations in the minutiae of apparently trivial cultural products. However, the comparison, after all, is no different from extrapolating the decline of the Roman empire from lurid descriptions of its infamous orgies.

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche presented only two possible resolutions to nihilism: faced with meaninglessness, humanity would crumble; alternatively, the very absence of truth would drive us forward, propelling us to some superhuman plane of Being. Sadly, the concept of the *übermensch* is better remembered for the Hitlerian rhetoric of its presumed counterpart: *der untermensch* – which took on racial dimensions unimaginable by Nietzsche. Ever since, it has become something of a tainted text (to say the least).

The suggestion that nihilism is an unresolved question in the equation of modern global society, which only requires a convincing metaphysical solution to be explained away, is a superficially attractive one – if for no other reason than that anomie, or more precisely apathy, is an obvious endpoint of a society no longer able to confront the 'great metaphysical questions.'

If we were to seriously reconsider Nietzsche's dilemma, we could perhaps reopen the entire question of nihilism as a productive force. This isn't conceived in a religious context – that's too spiky a subject. Rather, we have in mind a reconsideration in social and economic terms. For if we were to cut loose the strings that bind us to our past, to admit that the sum of human history is of no greater value than the indefinable present, and that the status quo is a construct intended to oppress us, then we might feel differently about racing into the darkness. To rebut Nozick's most abhorrent philosophy:

in anarchy and statelessness we might yet find utopia.

This brings us to Islam and the category of power envy. Bernard Lewis locates the source of scientific and sociopolitical stagnation of the Islamic world (which for centuries had been the most sophisticated and advanced civilisation on the planet) within Islam's shift to exclude permitted forms of heresy. Christianity, by contrast, with its enormous diversity of beliefs (from papists to Lutherans and puritans to Latter Day Saints) as well as its long tradition of counter-heretical claims (in which two ideologically distinct groups could simultaneously claim absolute truth and divine preference – with both peaceful and combative results), has always been fuelled by doubt and scepticism. The possibility of heresy was intrinsic to Christianity, and thus subsequently to the humanist Enlightenment that it produced. In a sense, the Darwinian success of Christianity lies in its ability to incorporate random mutations and adapt to its environment. This goes beyond any value judgement of the religion itself. Fulcrum are atheists – the most militant form of nihilists.

In this respect, neoliberalism and contemporary Islam share an important feature: neither has a structure for accommodating permissible heresy that may prove ideologically vital later on. The lesson from this is that unless heretic positions are fostered from within the church of late-capitalism, the inevitable collapse of neoliberal global society (all that is solid melts into air) will likely lead to total ideological vacuum: the neo-dark ages. Ironically, it is only through entertaining nihilism that we might make some sense of humanity.



Joan of Arc – once a heretic, now a sacred martyr – captured by the Burgundians at Compiègne. Mural in the Panthéon, Paris.