

Globalism (Part Six): Tide And Countertide

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The Aga Khan, the 49th hereditary Imam of the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims and a direct descendant of Islam's founder, Muhammad, perceives "a deep and vigorous countertide ... a 'new tribalism'" shaping our world.¹ The next two articles in this series will discuss the nature of this countertide, review its worldwide extent, and assess its dangers.

If globalism is a force resulting in bigger, consolidated units, the "new tribalism" yields smaller units, decoupled from the mainstream. Globalism manifests itself in integration and *interdependence*; tribalism in *localism* and *independence*. An analogy from normal life may help in understanding this: Globalists seek to house people in a single apartment building under one homeowners' association; tribalists prefer to house people in a large number of small, free-standing bungalows.

For our purposes, we will treat tribalism as a *fragmentation* process, wherein large, integrated structures break into smaller sets and subsets. To understand fragmentation, just drop a mirror. The mirror fractures, fragments scattering everywhere. The fragments are not all the same size. Pick up one of the larger pieces. Drop it. That piece fractures, fragments scattering everywhere. One can repeat the process several times, each time breaking larger pieces into smaller ones.

This is fragmentation in its most literal sense. The verb *fragment* comes from the Latin verb *frangere*, "to break." English gets the noun *fracture* and the adjective *fragile* from that same word. To *fragment* is "to break or separate."² Synonyms include *fracture*, *rupture*, *split*, *burst*, *blow up*, *explode*, *break in pieces*, *smash*, *shatter*, *splinter*, *disintegrate*, *decompose*, and *dismantle*.³

Fragmentation is a process that can be fast—but more often takes years to run its course. More importantly, fragmentation is a destructive process. It should not surprise us, then, that God treats it as rebellion. As the mirror example illustrates, fragmentation can be iterative, repeating over and again to form new, ever smaller, units. An empire, like the Soviet Union, breaks up into nations. A nation breaks up into groups arranged by ethnicity (as in the old Republic of Yugoslavia) or by religion (as in the India/Pakistan cleavage).

In the last century, Africa experienced fragmentation time and again, as larger nations, like the huge Belgium Congo, broke up into small units, often around basically tribal lines. There are many more, and smaller, nations in Africa today than there were in 1900.

Examples of fragmentation exist elsewhere. Scotland wants to separate from Great Britain, as does a piece of Ireland. There is also a Welsh separatist movement. French Canadians want to separate from Canada. A somewhat viable movement exists in Hawaii for some sort of secession from the United States. We see secessionist movements in Indonesia and militarized nationalist initiatives in the former territory of Yugoslavia. *It is almost a paradox: The movement to fragment is global!*

Tribalism can take place at other levels too, where the fragmentation—whether we term it deconstruction or decomposition or decoupling—is just as obvious. School districts fracture into

small units. Religious groups split in reaction to doctrinal or governmental differences. Even something as historically monolithic as the Catholic Church is not today nearly so universal as its name implies. Quite the contrary, it is now fragmenting increasingly, like a mirror repeatedly broken. Finally, we know that families fragment. The extended family is almost an anachronism in the Occident, and the nuclear one seems terribly endangered as well.

We would be blind indeed if we missed the fragmentation occurring within God's church today. We in the church exploit the modern tools of communication; we have web pages galore. We have everything that, from a carnal standpoint, should permit us to get together and stay together, yet we only fragment the more. The worldwide church is history for now. This countertide of fragmentation is a powerful force; even with God's Spirit, we have so far not been able to hold it in check.

In its largest context, fragmentation is a definitive characteristic of the postindustrial society, of which the United States is the leading example today. In such a society, one witnesses

the breakdown of virtually all of the sources of moral authority that prevailed in the middle of the twentieth century: organized religion, large social institutions like corporations or labor unions, neighborhoods, families, and the nation itself. . . . While economic freedom produces prosperity and technological innovation, moral freedom undermines community and detaches individuals from one another. . . . So, the story about the shift to postindustrial society is . . . the story of social disorder, disrupted neighborhoods, growing poverty, loneliness and broken families.⁴

God's Word and Tribalism

God uses at least three powerful metaphors to refer to fragmentation:

Vomiting, or Spewing from the Mouth

The idea behind this metaphor is total rejection, with a sense of violence and even anger. The rejected material is separated from the body, quite permanently.

For the land is defiled; therefore I visit the punishment of its iniquity upon it, and the land vomits out its inhabitants. . . . [L]est the land vomit you out also when you defile it, as it vomited out the nations that were before you. (Leviticus 18:25, 28; cf., Leviticus 20:22)

The King James Version uses the verbs *vomit* and *spew*, but they are the same verb, *qow'*, in the Hebrew.⁵

In the New Testament, the image appears in Christ's letter to the Laodicean Church: "So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of My mouth" (Revelation 3:16).⁶

The apostle Peter provides another good example. Quoting Proverbs 26:11, Peter describes false teachers as those who return to their own vomit. Apostasy is so perverse that it will lead people to return to what they had, earlier, totally rejected as utterly foul.

Scattering of Sheep

This is certainly the most prevalent metaphor for fragmentation in God's Word. Christ Himself quotes what is probably its most famous example: "I will strike the Shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered" (Matthew 26:31 quoted from Zechariah 13:7).

The metaphor derives from the common biblical image of Israel as sheep in God's pasture, God being, of course, their Shepherd. Psalm 23, "The Lord is My shepherd," is a classic example, as is Psalm 80, which commences with the words, "Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, You who lead Joseph like a flock."

Sheep, in the absence of a responsible shepherd or in the presence of a predator are sure to scatter. The prophet Jeremiah applies this fact to Israel in metaphor:

My people have been lost sheep.
Their shepherds have led them astray;
They have turned them away on the mountains.
They have gone from mountain to hill; . . .
All who found them have devoured them. . . .
Israel is like scattered sheep;
The lions have driven him away.
(Jeremiah 50:6-7, 17)

The prophet Ezekiel provides another example. In this case, greedy shepherds scatter the sheep. God, the good shepherd, finds them.

For thus says the Lord God: "Indeed I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock on the day he is among his scattered sheep, so will I seek out My sheep and deliver them from all the places where they were scattered on a cloudy and dark day. (Ezekiel 34:11-12; cf., verses 13-31)

In Leviticus 26:33-38, God makes it clear that He "will scatter you among the nations and draw out a sword after you" (cf. Ezekiel 5:2, 12). The context makes it clear that this scattering is the result of sin. Jeremiah 18:15-17 clearly tells us *who* does the scattering and *why*: "Because My people have forgotten Me, . . . I will scatter them as with an east wind before the enemy."

God scattered Israel because of their sins.

For the Lord will strike Israel, as a reed is shaken in the water. He will uproot Israel from this good land which He gave to their fathers, and will scatter them beyond the [Euphrates] River, because they have made their wooden images, provoking the Lord to anger. (I Kings 14:15)

Ezekiel records yet another example of God's scattering.

Also I lifted My hand in an oath to those in the wilderness, that I would scatter them among the Gentiles and disperse them throughout the countries, because they had not executed My judgments, but had despised My statutes,

profaned My Sabbaths, and their eyes were fixed on their fathers' idols.
(Ezekiel 20:23-24)

The metaphor works beautifully in reverse, where God, as a good shepherd, *re-gathers* His scattered sheep: "Hear the word of the Lord, O nations, and declare it in the isles afar off, and say, 'He who scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him as a shepherd does his flock'" (Jeremiah 31:10).

As a final example, notice the prophet Micah's comments: "I will surely assemble all of you, O Jacob, I will surely gather the remnant of Israel; I will put them together like sheep of the fold, like a flock in the midst of their pasture . . ." (Micah 2:12).⁷

Sifting of Grain

This metaphor most famously appears in reference to Israel in the book of Amos:

"Behold, the eyes of the Lord God are on the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from the face of the earth; yet I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob," says the Lord. "For surely I will command, and will sift the house of Israel among all nations, as grain is sifted in a sieve; yet not the smallest grain shall fall to the ground." (Amos 9:8-9)

The metaphor appears also in Isaiah 30:28 in reference to the Gentile nations, especially Assyria. In the New Testament, Christ tells Peter, "Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat" (Luke 22:31). Additionally, the Old and New Testament references to scattering by the winnowing fan may be a subset of the sifting metaphor.⁸

Sifting is a scattering process, but with some important nuances. To *sift* is

1. To put (flour, for example) through a sieve or other straining device in order to separate the fine from the coarse particles;
2. To distinguish as if separating with a sieve: *sifted the candidates for the job*;
3. To apply by scattering with or as if with a sieve: *sift sugar on a dessert*;
4. To examine and sort carefully: *sift the evidence*.⁹

Metaphorically, sifting carries the ideas of

1. a *trial* (that is, an examination) to distinguish between different levels or grades of qualities;
2. a *separation* of these different grades with the intent to produce something more refined and more usable;
3. a *spreading* of the sifted particles thinly and evenly about a larger entity.

So, God says He will try the peoples of Israel, spreading them "among all nations." He encourages us, though, by making it clear that He will not lose track of even one individual.

All three of these metaphors are powerful, having advantages over the modern terms *fragment* and *tribalism*. *Tribalism* as a word is too academic for many people. *Fragment* has a real weakness as well: It is generally used as an intransitive verb, as in "The civilization fragmented more and more each day." The implication is an unguided, even automatic, decay process—something that just happens. For example, the sentence "The nation fragmented" does not tell us who or what *caused* the peoples of the nation to separate.

The verbs *scatter*, *sift*, *vomit* and *spew* do not suffer from this weakness at all. All four commonly appear as transitive verbs: *God* scatters Israel; *God* sifts Israel; *God* spews from His mouth; the *land* vomits out the people. There is no question here about agency; God uses these verbs to indicate *who* causes or performs the scattering, sifting, vomiting or spewing, and *why*. This direct statement of agency makes these metaphors far more vivid than modern-day terms like *fragmentation* and *tribalism*.

The Disintegration Process

It is important to understand that fragmentation is only one part of the larger, usually more extended, process of *disintegration*. In the case of a broken-mirror, fragmentation and disintegration take place virtually at the same time. However, in social life, the disintegration of an organization is a process that can take years and even decades to run its course. While there may be individual variations, the four-step process of disintegration generally follows this sequence:

1. Disengagement. *Disengagement refers to the intellectual, emotional and psychological separation of a person from an organization.* It can be subtle, even imperceptible, at first. People begin to miss meetings, be slow in paying their dues, and the like.

In the church context, disengagement manifests itself in an argumentative attitude, in ceasing to contribute monetarily, or in the slow but sure forsaking of the assembling of God's people on the Sabbath (Hebrews 10:25). No *geographical* scattering occurs at this phase.

2. Fragmentation. *At this stage, the individual physically breaks off from the group.* He may not separate himself from the organization geographically, but he no longer identifies with its values or goals, and therefore breaks away.

In a church context, the cause of fragmentation may *appear* to be a single issue of disagreement over doctrine or government, but in all likelihood, the difference is far broader. It is important to note as well that a group can be fragmented and *not* be scattered. This is the case with the church today. It is *fragmented*, but not geographically *scattered* any more than in the days of the Worldwide Church of God. Broadly speaking, members still reside in the same geographic locales, yet they no longer attend their former congregation.

3. Scattering. *Geographic scattering is the next step in the disintegration process.*

Sometimes a person moves away for the explicit reason of separating himself from the organization with which he no longer identifies. This is a *geographical* event.

For us in the church, it is vitally important to recognize two facts about scattering:

First, a people fragmented in spirit, broken apart by disparate ideas of doctrine, governance, and the like, *will eventually become a people scattered geographically*. As we saw in the scriptures quoted above, this is the story of ancient Israel (I Kings 14:15). Historically speaking, it may take decades for the process of disintegration to go that far, but *the physical scattering will happen*. In this fact lies the long-term danger of fragmentation for any peoples, and God's own people are no exception.

Second, and more positively, the mere fact that the members of an organization become geographically separated for a while does *not* mean that the organization itself is in the process of disintegration. This means that geographical scattering can take place when *no* process of disintegration exists at all. The members of a group may be united in spirit, but become physically separated due to factors beyond their control. In this case, the organization may actually become stronger by virtue of the separation of its members.

This appears to be the case in the early church. As a result of Saul's persecution immediately after Stephen's death, there was a general scattering of the Jerusalem church (Acts 8:4). Luke gives not so much as a hint, however, that the church was in any way disunited. In fact, only a chapter later he writes, "walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, [the churches] were multiplied" (Acts 9:31). Note the plural of *churches*; there were several, perhaps many, congregations. Though separated in body, they were united in spirit. They were *not* part of a disintegration process, but were in fact growing!

Together, these two examples from history—the scattering of ancient Israel due to sin and the dispersion of the early church—point out an important distinction between scattering as the result of sin and scattering as the result of God's purposes to strengthen.

The generalization remains valid, through, that when scattering is part of the process of disintegration, its cause is *spiritual*—a matter of the mind coming to doubt, devalue and ultimately reject a group's values and goals. Physical scattering is, properly, the *effect* of reprobate thinking.

4. Dissolution. *In this final stage of the disintegration process, the organization disbands, becoming no longer viable.* Examples may be the Vandals, Heruli and Ostrogoths, which Herbert Armstrong understood to be "three of the first horns [which] were plucked out by the roots" (Daniel 7:8; cf. Revelation 13:1-10). These Germanic peoples successfully invaded Italy, but then simply seem to *disappear* from history, losing all national identity. The descendants of these people, of course, still exist to this day, for the Vandals, Heruli and Ostrogoths did not just vanish into thin air. Rather, they suffered severe battle losses, were decimated by disease, lost political power, and

intermixed with others around them. As a result of all or some combination of these circumstances, they vanished as distinct groups, becoming indistinguishable from their neighbors.

Very often, a core of people—a remnant, as it were—has the foresight to see the coming dissolution of their organization and takes steps to arrest the process. They generate membership drives or adjust the group's goals and aims to attract more people. In the case of Israel, both national and spiritual, God Himself will intervene to stop the disintegration process before it goes all the way to total dissolution. He "will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob" (Amos 9:8; cf. Matthew 24:22). This intervention, of course, is the thrust of Romans 11, where God promises to graft Israel again into the good olive tree: "And they also, if they do not continue in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. . . . And so all Israel will be saved" (Romans 11:23, 26).

Next month, we will focus on fragmentation in the context of today's globalism and notice the gigantic sweep of the "new tribalism." In addition, we will see that the story of ancient Israel is in part the story of God's building a single nation. What does He think of people who desire to retain their narrow tribal identifications at the *expense* of a unified nation?

1 The Aga Khan, quoted by Yahya Sadowski, "Ethnic Conflict," *Foreign Policy*, Summer 1998, p. 12. Mr. Sadowski is associate professor at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University.

2 *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition*, 1992, "fragment."

3 *The Original Roget's Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases (Americanized Version)*, 1994, "fragment."

4 Francis Fukuyama, "Getting It Right," *The National Interest*, Winter 1999/2000, p. 130. Mr. Fukuyama's comments appear in his review of the latest edition of Daniel Bell's classic book *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting*. Bell's works are essential reading for anyone trying to make sense of the current American *zeitgeist*.

5 Other occurrences appear in Job 20:15; Proverbs 23:8; 25:16; Isaiah 19:14; 28:8; Jeremiah 48:26; and Jonah 2:10.

6 See Mark 10:34, where Christ refers to people spitting on Him. This is clearly an example where spitting represents anger and rejection.

7 Other scriptures referring to the gathering of a scattered people include Deuteronomy 30:3; Isaiah 11:12; 54:5-7; Jeremiah 3:18; 16:14-15; 23:7-8; 31:8; Ezekiel 36:24.

8 See Isaiah 30:24; 41:16; Jeremiah 4:11; 15:7; 51:2, Matthew 3:12; and Luke 3:17.

9 *The American Heritage® Dictionary*, "sift."