



The King is Dead....Long Live the King: A Theory Concerning the Current Wave of Authoritarianism

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Abstract

Not so long ago it looked as if the march of Western Liberal Democracy was unstoppable; like it was only a matter of time before every despot on the planet would be replaced by a well-functioning parliament protected by a well written constitution. It seemed like the rule of law would eventually and inevitably replace the rule of men. Something seems to have changed. Authoritarianism now appears to be blossoming, not only in the predictable parts of the world like Asia, South America and Africa, but also in the presumed bastions of democracy like Europe and even the United States. What is happening? This article proposes a theory to explain this phenomenon. It begins by distinguishing fear from anxiety and points out the way in which tyrannical leaders confuse the two to manipulate their populations. It then examines the human struggle between freedom and fear in two important periods of history—the biblical Exodus from Egypt and the Age of Enlightenment—to reveal how humanity has put its faith first in God, then in kings and finally in reason. But reason, having exposed its own limits over the course of the last century, has led us to a profound sense of meaninglessness. In fact, after about 400 years we have come now to the end of the Enlightenment period, which was also known as the Age of Reason. Gazing into the abyss of Post-Modernity and still unable to confront our own ontological anxiety, many are easy prey to wannabe dictators, who offer a feeling of refuge in a crowd rather than the individual responsibility of empowerment. The article concludes with the theologian Paul Tillich's insight that "the courage to be" free depends on the willingness and the ability to embrace the anxiety born of the experience of meaninglessness.

1. Introduction

Not so long ago it looked as if the march of Western Liberal Democracy was unstoppable; like it was only a matter of time before every despot on the planet would be replaced by a well-functioning parliament protected by a well written constitution. It seemed like the rule of law would eventually and inevitably replace the rule of men. Something seems to have changed. Authoritarianism now appears to be blossoming, not only in the predictable parts of the world like Asia, South America and Africa, but also in the presumed bastions of democracy like Europe and even the United States. What is happening?

At its root authoritarianism relies on fear, both for it to come to power and for it to remain there. There are two kinds of fear, which for the purposes of this inquiry I will distinguish as fear and anxiety. Fear has a specific object. It could be a fear of failing a test or losing one's job or not being liked by one's friends or starving to death or being killed by a perceived

enemy. Whether the fear is large or small, real or imagined, held by an individual or by a nation, it has a concrete and nameable object; it is a fear of something. Anxiety, on the other hand, has no specific object; it is the feeling of being threatened by something nebulous and not only unnamed, but unnamable. It is an uneasy sense of dread even to the point of terror. As such, anxiety is more a feature of the human condition than it is the consequence of any particular outward danger. Authoritarians are adept at tapping into this ontological anxiety, stoking it further and then presenting themselves as the solution to the problem they themselves are causing. They do this by attaching the anxiety onto specific fears—the terrorists, the Socialists, the Jews, the immigrants, the Blacks, the rapists and drug dealers—which they then claim they alone know how to deal with. As soon as anxiety is attached to a nameable fear, a group of citizens can be molded into a mindless mob that can be as violent as it is frightened. This is especially so during times of heightened uncertainty such as the world is now experiencing, when authoritarians can even more easily position themselves as the strong and capable captain needed to steer the ship of state through the fog. There are now at least five major concerns in the world that are available to wannabe dictators to fuel the anxiety and which lend themselves to being associated with particular objects of fear: the economic consequences of globalization, global climate change, jihadist terrorism, large numbers of people migrating from the developing world and the COVID-19 pandemic. There may soon be others.

While ontological anxiety is always present, it remains mostly in the background of the human condition. It becomes more obvious and more available to be manipulated during times of social, political and economic turmoil, when the larger order of things appears to be breaking down. William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) captured this sense of a world unravelling most famously in his poem “The Second Coming”.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Though this poem was written in 1919, one can hear its reverberations in today’s endless rounds of TV interviews and press conferences, which are often filled with a lack of all conviction as well as a passionate intensity that tries to drown it out. And significantly, Yeats contextualizes the anxiety in terms of the unfolding of huge cyclical historical patterns. What we are experiencing today may well be the fulfillment of what he already envisioned a century ago and which is most memorably captured in the last two lines of the poem’s final stanza.

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

And so, we are left with more questions than answers about the particular epoch in which we find ourselves today. But I do believe they are the right questions in that they can lead us

to a deeper understanding of the time we now live in and the appearance of authoritarianism in it. To do this I will explore aspects of two important periods in our history.

“Entering the Promised Land requires not just an outer release from captivity, but also an inner transformation of consciousness.”

2. The Exodus from Egypt

Let us begin this exploration with one of the oldest accounts of the struggle between freedom and fear. Of course, most historians believe it to be more myth than history, but nevertheless, even after Millennia it remains a cornerstone in the historical consciousness of our civilization. The Book of Exodus in the Old Testament tells the story of how the Jewish people, freed from bondage in Egypt, wandered through the Sinai Desert for 40 years before arriving in the Promised Land. I have been in the Sinai Desert where I camped and hiked for a week, and I can say from personal experience that it does not take 40 years to cross it. It might, however, take 40 years (which is approximately the span of two generations) to overcome a slave mentality. In fact, we read in the Bible that “God led them not by the way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said: ‘Lest peradventure the people repent when they see war, and they return to Egypt.’” Entering the Promised Land requires not just an outer release from captivity, but also an inner transformation of consciousness.

Soon after leaving Egypt, the Pharaoh changes his mind and decides to recapture the slaves he had just freed. The Israelites, seeing the approaching Egyptian army, tremble with fear and complain to Moses: “For it were better for us to serve the Egyptians, than that we should die in the wilderness.” Moses responds: “Fear ye not...The Lord will fight for you.” And, indeed, God then parts the Red Sea and destroys the Egyptian army. But despite witnessing these astounding miracles, the Israelites before long once again give into their fears and long for the safety they felt back in Egypt. First, they complain to Moses that they will die from not having water to drink and enough to eat. God then provides them with water to drink and rains down manna from heaven to feed them. But even that is not sufficient to allay their fears and to trust in the God who freed them from bondage. Later, when Moses goes up to Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments and he is gone so long that the people once again become fearful, they plead with Aaron, Moses’ brother, to make for them a god they can see to lead them. Aaron, clearly not a strong leader, gives in to the crowd and the result is the infamous episode of the Golden Calf. When Moses finally does descend from the mountain with God’s laws inscribed on two stone tablets, he is so outraged by what he sees that he smashes the tablets. The point that clearly emerges from the narrative is that human beings, even a chosen people, are easily prey to their fears and prepared to sacrifice everything for the feeling of safety. Whether that sense of security comes from a Pharaoh who holds them in bondage or a Golden Calf that they imagine holds them in its god-like protective embrace, it’s obvious that they are not yet ready to be a self-governing people.

Two major things are being accomplished as the Israelites wander for decades in the desert: the twelve tribes are uniting to become one nation and this nation is developing into a self-

governing entity under the rule of law. For example, while in the wilderness, the Israelites bring their everyday difficulties and quarrels with one another to Moses to be adjudicated. Moses is not a king; he is depicted as a teacher and a judge dispensing justice according to God's law. While sitting in judgement one day, Moses explains to Jethro, his father-in-law who had come to visit him, what he is doing:

“Because the people come unto me to inquire of God; when they have a matter, it cometh unto me; and I judge between a man and his neighbor, and I make them know the statutes of God, and His laws.”

Jethro then offers him some valuable management consulting:

“The thing that thou doest is not good. Thou wilt surely wear away, both thou and this people that is with thee; for the thing is too heavy for thee; thou art not able to perform it thyself alone. Hearken now unto my voice, I will give thee counsel... Thou shalt provide out of all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating unjust gain.... And let them judge the people at all seasons; and it shall be, that every great matter they shall bring unto thee, but every small matter they shall judge themselves; so shall they make it easier for thee and bear the burden with thee.”

Moses follows this advice and thereby establishes a judicial system with local courts operating at the lower levels and with himself as a kind of one-man Supreme Court. The Israelites are undergoing nation building, and it is to be a nation without a king—at least not an earthly one.

Throughout the Book of Exodus, the Israelites are often described as “stiff-necked”. In fact, God Himself says to Moses: “I have seen this people, and, behold, it is a stiff-necked people”. Much ink has been spilled by Talmudic scholars over the centuries to interpret the meaning of this term. Though there is a general consensus that it means something like “stubborn” or “unwilling” or “resistant”, there is a good deal of debate regarding exactly what it is they are resisting. Without any pretense of being among the ranks of these scholars, I would like to offer my own interpretation. I believe that the resistance of the Israelites derives not from stubbornness at all, but rather from anxiety. It is the anxiety born of being asked to surrender to and trust in the unknown and unknowable. In fact, despite the many miracles that God has already performed for them, when they arrive at the border of the Promised Land and they need to prepare for battle with the Canaanites, they once again are unable to trust in God. They become frightened and even cry out that they feel too small to fight and would rather return to slavery in Egypt. God immediately punishes them by condemning them to continue their wandering in the wilderness until two entire generations have died out. The Promised Land, He says, will not be for them but for their children. To have absolute faith in God would require of them that they embrace the ultimate mystery; what Paul Tillich (1886-1965), the great Christian theologian of the 20th Century, referred to as the “God above God” which is simultaneously both “ground of being” and “abyss”. For Tillich faith in God encompasses a surrender to the anxiety inherent in the being/nonbeing dichotomy, which is

present in the awareness of death and which is at the heart of all existence. In this regard it is noteworthy that God several times says to Moses that He must shield His own face even from Moses, for it would kill him. And after Moses has spent 40 days and nights with God on Mount Sinai, when he descends his face beams so much light that he must wear a veil to protect the Israelites from its powerful intensity. Although the Israelites have experienced living under the protection of divine providence, they nevertheless are still unable to confront the terrifying awareness of their own existential vulnerability.

If we now jump to 40 years later, past the death of Moses on the border of the Promised Land and then many years after that, past the death of Joshua who succeeded Moses and conquered the Land of Canaan, and then even later than that to the time of the Judges, we read in the last line of the Book of Judges: “In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did that which was right in his own eyes.” Despite having been brought to the Promised Land, the Israelites have become a lawless nation with each individual acting in his own self-interest. In fact, the Bible tells us, it was a period of widespread corruption and depravity. The commandments that God had given them have been forgotten and even the priests of the holy ark have become dishonest. There is increasing social unrest including intermittent battles with the Philistines and other neighboring nations, occasional worship of local heathen gods and some of the tribes of Israel have even begun fighting one another. The order of things is breaking down, and though the Israelites are no longer slaves they are also not yet free.

Which brings us to the First Book of Samuel where we read that at this time the people of Israel go to Samuel, who now leads the nation as did Moses in the role of a judge, and they say to him: “Give us a king to judge us.” God tells Samuel that with this request the people are not rejecting him as their leader but rejecting God Himself. Samuel, following God’s instructions, then warns the people what they can expect from a king:

“He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. Some he will assign to be commanders...and others to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. Your male and female servants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become slaves.”

But the people insist; they say: “Nay, but there shall be a king over us; that we also may be like all the nations; and that our king may judge us, and go out before us, and fight our battles.” These last words are the very same words that Moses had said to them as they fearfully watched the Egyptian army pursuing them. “Fear ye not;” Moses had told them, “the Lord will fight for you.” The people, however, no longer put their faith in God but rather in a king. They have come full circle from an involuntary bondage to a Pharaoh to a voluntary slavery to a king. Samuel selects Saul to be their king, “And all the people shouted, and said: ‘Long live the king.’” Saul was the first in what would become a succession of kings and the

establishment of a hereditary monarchy under King David. The Israelites of the Bible did not achieve the necessary maturity as a people to be truly self-governing, I believe, because as individuals they were unable to be with their own human anxiety. Instead, they translated it into the fear of external enemies, and so they devolved into an authoritarian society no longer operating under the rule of law but rather under the rule of a king.

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3. The Age of Enlightenment

The next historical period is the 17th and 18th Century Age of Enlightenment. Obviously, this is such a profound, complex and rich time in Western cultural history, that it would be impossible to examine it fully here. Instead, I will focus only on a few relevant themes.

The philosophers of the Enlightenment period put their faith neither in God nor in a king, but rather in the light of reason. From the earliest recollections of human memory, and very likely long before, divine forces (regardless of which religion) played an active role in the affairs of human beings and human beings, in turn, were embedded in a world permeated by those divine forces. Major decisions of war and peace, life and death as well as the more mundane concerns of commerce and marriage almost always required the counsel of the priests. Though this was true until the Enlightenment, we can already see it waning in the preceding centuries with the emergence of Renaissance Humanism and the Scientific Revolution.

Though it is impossible, of course, to say exactly when a particular period of history began, a good case can be made that the Age of Enlightenment began with René Descartes (1596-1650) and Galileo Galilei (1564-1642). For Plato and the later Christian Neo-Platonic philosophers such as Saint Augustine (354-430), reason was man’s means of apprehending the cosmic order of the outer world. Descartes, however, turned inward to view reason as man’s means not of finding order but of constructing it. In other words, Descartes made man the source of his own certainty and using this as a starting point, he sought to devise a philosophy, which was based on a premise so self-evident that it would be irrefutable. With his famous “cogito ergo sum” (“I think therefore I am”) in 1637 he established not only his own philosophy but also one of the foundational principles of the entire Age of Enlightenment. Specifically, Descartes shifted the basis for acquiring knowledge from a reliance on external authority and tradition to an internal method of rational thinking. This also was Galileo’s contribution to the spirit of the Age. Among his many scientific discoveries in astronomy, physics, mathematics and engineering, one of those for which he is probably most remembered is his observations of the moons of Jupiter, which confirmed Nicolaus Copernicus’ (1473-1543) heliocentric model of the Solar System. But because the heliocentric model contradicted the teachings of the Church at the time, he was first examined by the Inquisition in 1615 and finally in 1633 condemned by it and punished with life-long house arrest and prohibition from publishing

his work. It was not merely that Galileo advocated for some new astronomical observations regarding certain celestial objects. His real crime was that he undermined Church authority by granting the power to determine the truth about reality to individual reasoning and scientific experimentation rather than to established dogma. He also was one of the first to say that the laws of Nature are mathematical and that the Church should have sway in matters of faith and ethics but not of science. By championing the scientific method and its independence from religious oversight, like Descartes, Galileo contributed enormously to the foundational principles of the Age that was just dawning.

“The freedom to reason for oneself led not only to questioning the position of the planets in the cosmic order, but also the position of the monarch in the social order and in due course to the political revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries.”

At its heart the Age of Enlightenment, which has sometimes been called the Age of Reason, was a call for the freedom to think for oneself. In 1784 Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) wrote a short essay entitled, “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?”, the opening paragraph of which was a clarion call to the Age:

“Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not a lack of understanding but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The motto of enlightenment is therefore: *Sapere aude!* Have courage to use your own understanding!”

Public education and discussion were encouraged and found a home in the salons, debating societies, Masonic Lodges and coffeehouses of London, Paris, Berlin, Vienna and other European cities. Some debating societies were even open not only to upper-class men, but also to women and working-class people as well. Though the focus was at first primarily on a questioning of religious norms, it soon also came to include the political domain as well. This new openness and faith in the individual’s power and right to reason eventually brought a shift in the understanding of the social contract from being based on the Divine Right of Kings to being based on the consent of the governed. Inevitably, the freedom to reason for oneself led not only to questioning the position of the planets in the cosmic order, but also the position of the monarch in the social order and in due course to the political revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries. Thus, both the heavenly and the earthly monarchies were simultaneously overthrown with the intention of creating a kind of secular Garden of Eden established by free-thinking men and women of all classes in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance and universal humanism. We in the 21st century are the children and beneficiaries of that Enlightenment period and we have reaped many benefits from that inheritance. The

wealth and comfort of our society as well as our elected form of government derive directly from those free-thinking philosophers and scientists.

But there was also a down side to the reliance on reason. Descartes' separation of mind from matter freed the mind to use rational thinking and experimentation to determine truth for oneself rather than being forced to accept the pronouncements of orthodoxy and tradition. And this led to an exuberant outburst of creativity and optimism, which produced extraordinary progress not only in philosophy, science and political theory, but also in fields as diverse as economics, psychology and the arts. However, what was not so obvious, at least not at first, was that this liberating separation of self from world eventually became a gulf so wide that it isolated and reified the self while it simultaneously commoditized the world. In fact, as both self and world became more materialistic objects of study than living expressions of Nature, not only did the gulf separate subject from object, it also separated subjects from each other. Individuality led to individualism rather than to the envisioned community of noble inquiring minds. Although reason at first excelled as the self's tool for exploring the world in the service of creating and testing knowledge, it also eventually revealed its own limits. Already as early as 1686 in his "Discourse on Metaphysics", Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) pointed out those limits when he considered what in modern times would come to be known among neuro-scientists as "the hard problem"; namely, the unknown connection between a specific object in the physical world and the particular quality it produces in one's experience. For example, the tomato I see and the quality of redness I experience when I see it. And if we cannot explain the relationship between the objective world and our subjective experience of it, then ultimately, we cannot really explain anything—at least not anything meaningful to us.

Though reason may be useful for dealing with the practical matters of daily functioning, it is insufficient for addressing the deeper human concerns such as, for example, purpose or values or death. Another leading light of the Age, the Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711-1776), even went so far as to write in his "Treatise of Human Nature" that "Reason is wholly inactive, and can never be the source of so active a principle as conscience, or a sense of morals". In fact, according to Hume, reason is subservient to experience, which he claimed is the actual source of all knowledge.

In the end, reason fails us because it is able to provide neither a profound enough understanding of reality nor the sense of being at home in it, both of which had once seemed so imminent. Instead, it has led us to a kind of meaningless nihilism. In fact, the term "nihilism" was often used by critics of the Enlightenment, having been popularized by Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743-1819), an influential German philosopher and literary figure of the time. By exposing established orthodoxy as merely interpretations that had become entrenched myths, the Enlightenment philosophers introduced the possibility that each human being could use reason to construct his or her own interpretations. At first this produced an intoxicating feeling of emancipation, but eventually it became clear that if each one can have his own truth, then there is no more truth and the search for it itself becomes meaningless. Whatever brilliant theories and proofs we may devise and however useful their practical benefits may be, they ultimately leave us unsatisfied, because they do not connect us to a world in which we experience being at home. Rather they leave us ever more isolated from the world and from each other and relegated to the role of observer rather than participant. This sense of

loss and futility is perhaps nowhere more poignantly captured than in “Faust” by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832). In the prologue, Mephistopheles is chatting with God about the current condition of humans on the Earth. God asks him “how all below is doing now”. Mephistopheles answers:

How men torment themselves is all I see.
The little god of Earth sticks to the same old way,
And is as strange as on that very first day.
He might appreciate life a little more: he might,
If you hadn't lent him a gleam of Heavenly light:
He calls it Reason, but only uses it
To be more a beast than any beast as yet.

Far from being the source of his freedom and happiness, reason (that “gleam of Heavenly light”) has become a torment and made man even more beastly than any other beast. And as for the fruits of reason, in 1751 the first volume of the famous multi-volume Encyclopedia was published in Paris to tremendous acclaim and quite a bit of notoriety. Denis Diderot (1713-1784) and Jean d’Alembert (1717-1783), the two French *philosophers* who were the editors of this massive compendium, announced to the world that it contained nothing less than the groundwork for the basic facts and principles of all branches of knowledge, particularly in light of the major discoveries of the prior one hundred years. Such was the hubris of the Age, and it was probably inevitable that it soon would be exposed and humbled. Again, in “Faust” we read that all that knowledge actually amounted to nothing. In the words of Dr. Faust himself, who we meet in the opening scene where he sits “restless” at his desk:

Ah! Now I've *done* Philosophy,
I've finished Law and Medicine,
And sadly even Theology:
Taken fierce pains, from end to end.
Now here I am, a fool for sure!
No wiser than I was before:
Master, Doctor is what they call me,
And I've been ten years, already,
Crosswise, arcing, to and fro,
Leading my students by the nose,
And see that we can know – nothing!

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Instead all Joy is snatched away,
What's worth knowing, I can't say,

With the removal of God and King from human affairs and with the disenchantment of reality by generations of scientists and engineers who turned Nature into a resource to be exploited, man now finds himself alone in an empty world and so despondent in a life without meaning that he is even willing to sell his soul to the Devil in a desperate attempt to break out of the limits of his own mind, in which reason has trapped him. Though Faust

becomes outwardly wealthy, he remains inwardly poor. And we must not forget that the Age of Enlightenment led not only to the French Revolution, but soon after that to the Emperor Napoleon and the restoration of the monarchy.

Which brings us finally to one of the best-known critics of the Enlightenment, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). We all know his anguished outcry that “God is dead”, but not so well known are the words that followed:

“God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?”

Like the wealth and comfort, this anguish also is part of our inheritance from the Enlightenment. Using reason, we have freed ourselves from the myths of God and King, but in doing so we have trapped ourselves with the very tool we thought would free us. And now, like the Israelites in the wilderness, we are unable to break free of our own mentality. Reason has led us to meaninglessness, which has left us feeling small, desperate and filled with anxiety. The Promised Land remains as distant as ever.

4. Conclusion

Just as with God and the monarchy, reason has also been overthrown. All the brilliant philosophic and scientific advances of the past few centuries have brought us, step by logical step, to the strangeness of the post-modern world. It took only a few years after Nietzsche for us to arrive at Albert Einstein’s (1879-1955) insight that reality is relative, at Werner Heisenberg’s (1901-1976) insight that it is indeterminable (the Uncertainty Principle), at Karl Popper’s (1902-1994) insight that ultimately truth can never be proven, at Kurt Gödel’s (1906-1978) Incompleteness Theorems that demonstrate that axiomatic mathematical systems cannot be simultaneously complete and consistent, at the bleak emptiness, of Samuel Beckett’s (1906-1989) “Waiting for Godot” and at the mind baffling insights of Quantum Physics. With every step, ironically and paradoxically, we have used our rational minds to dismantle not only reality, but rationality itself. Reason has been turned on itself to expose its own limits. After about 400 years, we have come to the end of the Age of Enlightenment, full circle from Descartes’ quest for certainty to the reluctant acceptance of uncertainty. And I believe it is this strange and confusing period we currently live in, no longer strongly tethered to either reason or truth, that has also brought us inexorably to a Kellyanne Conway, who could look straight into the cameras and assert that there are “alternative facts”.

To live knowing that you ultimately do not know and, in fact, that it is not even possible to know, is to enter an abyss of profound meaninglessness. It was the experience of this abyss that Nietzsche gazed into and that Tillich, the theologian, considered the primary hallmark of our time. And in the political domain, it is this anxiety, born of meaninglessness, that plays

directly into the hands of 21st Century autocrats. Here is Tillich from his book, “The Courage to Be”, which first appeared in 1952:

“Twentieth Century man has lost a meaningful world and a self, which lives in meanings out of a spiritual center. The man-created world of objects has drawn into itself him who created it and who now loses his subjectivity in it...The anxiety of doubt and meaninglessness is, as we have seen, the anxiety of our period.”

Although we in the 21st Century have given ourselves permission to rule ourselves, apparently, we do not feel entirely up to the responsibility. The autocratic rulers of our time are not politicians in the real and original sense of the term, they are actually cult leaders. The difference between a politician and a cult leader is that a politician will admit what is not known and will ask for people’s courage to deal with the uncertainty, while a cult leader will offer the pretense of certainty and the reassurance that he is the one with the necessary courage to do the fighting for them. Rather than empowerment, authoritarians offer refuge; they offer the comforting feeling of being part of a group, which grants a sense of belonging. They tap into the

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resident anxiety of their base and stoke it until it becomes attached to identifiable fears, which can be translated into explosive anger; and then the outburst of anger frees their followers from the feeling of helplessness, at least for a while, and alleviates the need for individual courage. Political rallies are almost indistinguishable from soccer games; they are a form of entertainment in which an audience passively watches from the stands while the leader performs. The performance is all about the home team winning and the audience participation consists of mindless mass chanting of slogans, which is not only allowed but encouraged. And afterwards the hooligans gather in the streets for a cathartic release of their rage.

For the Israelites wandering in the wilderness, their anxiety was triggered by the prospect of total surrender to an invisible God. For us today, it is the confrontation with the bleak emptiness of a world bereft of all meaning. As Tillich might put it, so long as we cannot find within ourselves the “courage to be” in the face of the anxiety inherent in being human, many of us will continue to avoid the responsibility of freedom and will rather seek to be temporarily soothed by charlatans. We will be like the Israelites who said to Samuel: “Give us a king who will fight for us”. History moves in huge cycles; everything seems to change, but something fundamental remains the same. Donald Trump and all the rest of the current crop of authoritarians are not an aberration; they are fitting icons for our time.

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