INTRODUCTION

THEORETICAL ISSUES IN THE STUDY OF RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM

As anyone who has attempted to study the subject is likely to confess, what has been conceptualized as religious fundamentalism in the Muslim world, and elsewhere, is a complex phenomenon. This complexity, while requiring a correspondingly complex framework to understand it, is not simply due to its periodic historical emergence or cross-national variability. Rather, Islamic fundamentalism in particular represents a marked historical discontinuity with the Islamic modernism of the last decades of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth. That is, Muslim theologians-cum-intellectual leaders had taken positions on some of the significant issues facing their faith that were cross-nationally similar under a recognizable set of concurrent historical conditions but diametrically opposed to positions taken by a similar group of thinkers decades later. Complexity is also revealed by the variation in fundamentalist beliefs and attitudes among the public that has been documented by survey research in recent years. The basic challenge is thus to construct a theoretical framework that captures both the historical diversity and cross-national variability of religious fundamentalism as well as one that accounts for the relationship between fundamentalism as a discourse produced by its harbingers to address historically significant issues and fundamentalism as a set of beliefs about and attitudes toward religion.

To address this complexity, this book proposes a theoretical framework to address three sets of empirical questions related to religious fundamentalism. First, how do we incorporate the reformist fundamentalism of the eighteenth century, Islamic modernism of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth, and Islamic fundamentalism of the second half of the twentieth century into a broader historical narrative of the relationship between Islamic movements and varying social contexts? How do we conceptualize this sequence of fundamentalism-modernism-fundamentalism? Is it possible to explain this sequence in terms of variation in the same set of historical variables or does it reflect a broader change in people's spiritual needs? Second, how does the knowledge about the dynamic of this sequence help to understand cross-national
variation in fundamentalist beliefs and attitudes among the ordinary publics and vice versa? To what extent do the historical variables proposed to account for change in Islamic movements also enhance our understanding of variation in fundamentalist beliefs and attitudes across countries, religious faiths, and ethnicities? Third, what is the relationship between fundamentalism as a discourse on issues and fundamentalism as a set of beliefs and attitudes?

In this chapter we introduce the concept of “cycle of spirituality” as a heuristic device to describe the sequence of fundamentalism-modernism-fundamentalism that marked the history of the Islamic movement from the eighteenth through the twentieth century. We then suggest a series of variables related to the structure of intellectual markets, the political structure and form of the ruling regimes, the role of the state in culture production, discursive space, besieged spirituality, and dysphoric emotions as instances of social and psychological processes that may shape religious discourses as well as beliefs about and attitudes toward religion. We also attempt to empirically demonstrate that fundamentalist beliefs and attitudes predict people’s orientations toward the sociopolitical and cultural issues that were also the concerns of the leaders and activists of the fundamentalist movements in their historical contexts.

**TWO APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM**

The vast and sprawling literature on religious fundamentalism in the contemporary Middle East has almost exclusively focused on the sociopolitical and religious discourses of the leaders of the fundamentalist movements, their organizations and sociopolitical behavior. There has been very little attention given to the fundamentalist beliefs and attitudes among the ordinary public. Until recently, we knew little about how widespread such beliefs and attitudes are and their linkages with people’s socioeconomic backgrounds, other beliefs and attitudes as well as the broader religious, ethnic, and national contexts in which they live. Related to these questions are the connections between people’s fundamentalist beliefs and attitudes and their orientations toward the religious discourses advanced by leaders of the fundamentalist movements.

Considerable information is available on the discourses, organizations, behaviors, and backgrounds of the leaders and activists of the past Islamic fundamentalist movements. Yet this empirical knowledge may not reflect the religious orientations and attitudes of the people who live