There have been three pivotal episodes in the history of ideological movements in the Muslim world in the period between the mid-eighteenth century and the end of the twentieth. Each of these episodes had far-reaching impact on the cultures and religions in Muslim-majority countries in the immediate subsequent period and beyond. The first was the reformist fundamentalism of the eighteenth century, which transformed into militant movements in the first part of the nineteenth. The second was the rise of secular ideologies in the second half of the nineteenth century. These ideologies were institutionalized in the secular authoritarian interventionist states in the twentieth century. The third was the rise of religious fundamentalism, which began in Egypt in 1928, then spread to the rest of the Arab world in the second half of the twentieth century. Among the Iranian Shi'is, religious fundamentalism first emerged in the mid-1940s. Later in the sixties and seventies, religion constituted a key element of the cultural opposition to the state. Islamic fundamentalism also produced its own extremist offshoots, branching out into religious violence and al-Qaeda among the Sunnis, and clerical fanaticism and the Islamic regime in Iran among the Shi'is.

As proposed in the previous chapter, beyond economic or political interests, a critical factor that shaped all these movements are people’s yearnings and search for meaning, security, empowerment, and a comprehensive understanding of life. At their core, these movements thus represented a sequence that first reflected the rise of sacred spirituality, then the popularity of secular spirituality and Islamic modernism, and finally again, the upsurge of sacred spirituality. The variation in the style and symbolism, organizational form, and religious or secular discourses that were associated with different trends in this sequence was undoubtedly shaped by a host of sociological and social psychological factors.

In this chapter, we begin with a discussion of the controversy over the concept of Islamic fundamentalism. We then provide an overview of the historical sequence described above by discussing Islamic orthodoxy,
modernism, and fundamentalism. To specify the distinctly religious factors contributing to the generation of Islamic fundamentalism and modernism in the contemporary period, this chapter presents analyses of the effect of social processes on spiritual experiences as presented in the expressions of Muslim intellectual leaders of these movements. We also expand on the concept of discursive space, which we defined in the previous chapter as a cognitive mechanism that promotes the development of tolerant, moderate, and transcendental discourse, and which we proposed helps to understand the relationship between social change and religion in the late nineteenth century and how the narrowing of this space in the twentieth century contributed to the particularly violent form of religious fundamentalism.

Although we cannot mine the thought process of religious intellectual leaders, this chapter attempts to provide an interpretation of the historical record in order to lay the groundwork for a more effective and meaningful connection between the discourse of religious fundamentalism and the fundamentalist beliefs and attitudes that will be discussed in the later chapters of this book.

**Controversy Over Islamic Fundamentalism**

The term “fundamentalism” is controversial and readily acknowledged for its etymological variability and inherent ambiguity in current discourse about the nature of certain types of religious movements in the contemporary Muslim-majority countries that are dubbed fundamentalist. The religious origin of fundamentalism in the United States can be traced to the Presbyterian General Assembly of 1910 (Wills 1990; Smith 1998), the World’s Christian Fundamentals Association founded in 1918, the Protestant movement in the 1920s, the Northern Baptist Convention of 1920, and especially the series of books called *The Fundamentals* published by evangelicals in that decade. The latter listed five defining characteristics of true Christian believers (Marsden 1980). These characteristics are beliefs that stem from the inspiration of the Bible and the inerrancy of Scripture with respect to:

- The virgin birth of Christ
- The belief that Christ’s death was the atonement for sin
- The bodily resurrection of Christ
- The historical reality of Christ’s miracles