CONCLUSIONS

APPROACHES TO FUNDAMENTALISM AND THE CYCLE OF SPIRITUALITY

The conceptual framework constituting the organizing theme of this book in order to describe and analyze religious fundamentalism is drawn from two complementary approaches: one historical and the other based on contemporary beliefs and attitudes toward religion. The way fundamentalism was conceptualized in the historical approach was intended to distinguish religious fundamentalism from other cultural movements that have emerged in the Muslim world. The historical approach covered the period between 1700s, when the three Muslim empires of the Mughals, Ottomans, and Safavids were on the course of disintegration, and the second half of the twentieth century, when Muslim-majority countries were mostly dominated by various forms of authoritarian regimes. During that period, we identified two major episodes of religious fundamentalism. The first was the reformist fundamentalism of Shah Waliallah in India and Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahhab in Arabia in the eighteenth century. The other was the Sunni and Shi’i fundamentalism of the twentieth century. In between, there was a secular cultural episode that was manifested in the rise of various forms of modern cultural movements.

We interpreted this sequence of fundamentalism-secularism-fundamentalism as reflecting a broader cycle of spirituality that alternated between sacred and secular sources. Our interpretation of the historical processes that contributed to the rise of religious fundamentalism highlighted the diachronic relations among the factors that prompted intellectual leaders to focus on religion as a framework to address and resolve the sociopolitical and cultural issues facing their faith and societies.

The second approach assessed and analyzed variations in fundamentalist orientations among the ordinary public, using findings from surveys carried out in Egypt, Iran, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia. These analyses highlighted the variables that were similar to these historical factors as well as a set of other sociological and social psychological variables in order to assess empirically the strength of their synchronic relations with an attitudinal measure of religious fundamentalism. The analyses provided evidence that the two approaches were complementary in that the
attitudinal measure of fundamentalism correlated with variables measuring orientations toward significant sociopolitical and cultural issues across nations, religions, religious sects, and ethnicities. The direction of these correlations was consistent with the beliefs and attitudes displayed by the leaders and activists of religious fundamentalist movements toward these issues. That is, people with stronger fundamentalist beliefs and attitudes display orientations toward sociopolitical and cultural issues that were similar to the orientations displayed by the leaders and activists of these movements.

In parallel fashion, both approaches showed that religious fundamentalism is weakened under pluralistic cultural conditions, the state’s structural heterogeneity, or elite diversity and conflict, and enhanced by a monolithic culture imposed from above by the secular authoritarian state and by in-group solidarity. Further, fundamentalism has been negatively linked to the introduction or the usage of new communications technologies. Historically, the introduction of the press to the Muslim world in the nineteenth century contributed to the expansion of secular discourses and Islamic modernism. Likewise, on the individual level, our survey data showed that the use of the Internet, personal computer, and Satellite TV was inversely related to fundamentalist attitudes and beliefs.

Our interpretation of the historical context in which religious fundamentalism emerged and of the expressions of the intellectual leaders of this movement supported the view that fundamentalism was reinforced by a perception of besieged spirituality—that the faith was under attack and the solidarity of the religious communities was being undermined by secular and un-Islamic currents. Likewise, considering people’s assessment of the significance of Western cultural invasion or the belief in a U.S. or Jewish conspiracy against Muslims as proxy measures of the perception of besieged spirituality, findings from the surveys showed that these measures were directly linked to religious fundamentalism.

In the same way that the fundamentalist movements aimed at restoring the rule of the shari’a in people’s lives, the link between fundamentalism and attitudes toward a good government as one that implements only the shari’a law was significant and positive across the four countries. Finally, such factors as fatalism, the feeling of powerlessness, and the perception that happiness may not be realized in this world were linked to fundamentalist beliefs and attitudes. This connection is consistent with the interpretations that fundamentalism resonates with such psychological conditions under state authoritarianism. Under such fundamentalist