EXPLAINING THE GLOBAL RELIGIOUS REVIVAL
THE EGYPTIAN CASE

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It is a truism that global forces have greatly heightened social instability, economic distress, and cultural uncertainty in the contemporary world. The widespread phenomenon of religious revival is said to be part of the picture. How should one explain the resurgence of religion across the world—as a cry of misery, an assertion of identity, a revolt against the uncertainties produced by modernisation? It is evident that how we try to explain it will determine our expectation of its promise and its threat. But there is also the question of exactly what we are required to explain, of how we are to identify a world-wide phenomenon called the religious revival. Is there an essence here that connects it to what our historians and anthropologists have called the past of religion? In what sense was the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) government in India rooted in historical Hinduism? What connects the Christian Right alliance with the American administration to the Islamist opposition groups in Egypt? Should we see al-Qaeda as an integral part of the Islamic revival? Is the growth in everyday piety in numerous countries integral to ‘fundamentalism’? Should we regard the increasing interest by philosophers, anthropologists, and historians in theological languages as part of the same ‘religious revival’—even though very many of them are non-believers—or simply as scholars for whom the language of theology is suggestive of new ways of thinking about some problems in the modern world?

In statistical terms Christianity is, of course, globally pre-eminent: scattered across the world, Christians now constitute one third of its population—and a third of them live in what were once Euro-American colonies. It has been pointed out that although Christianity was brought to these countries by European missionaries, it is now an integral part of the ethnic identity of the populations who profess it. Christian movements in one ex-colonial country even proselytise energetically in another. All of this is part of the global religious revival. In contrast, the spread of Islam over the last two centuries has been globally much less dramatic. A mere fifth of the world’s population, the presence of
Muslims in Europe and North America, is due to their migration from Africa and Asia rather than to conversion; African-American converts to Islam are the only significant exception to this generalisation. In purely statistical terms the relative strength of Muslims in the world is unremarkable. And yes, there are acts of violence carried out by small groups of Muslim militants around the world, but these can scarcely be compared in scale with the recent destruction wrought by Christian American and (to a lesser extent) Jewish Israeli armies. So what are we trying to explain?

I want to begin by focusing on some explanations of the so-called world-wide revival, but with special reference to the world of Islam, and within it to the part I happen to know best. I shall concentrate on the Arab countries, and particularly on Egypt. I hope, nevertheless, that testing explanations of the religious revival in one country will throw some light on how we might view such explanations in general. Because an important aspect of this so-called ‘revival’ is that however trans-national such movements may be, they are all placed within the context of particular nation-states, and part of their strength comes from their ability to address that context.

The common assumption that the Islamic revival in all its forms needs to be explained by reference to the acute economic and sociological problems of those countries is reflected in media reactions to the 2002 UNDP report on Arab countries. Thus, *The New York Times* article on the report by Barbara Crossette quoted extensively from it, focusing on the many negative features in the socio-economic picture of ‘Arab culture’, and concluded: ‘Then came the attacks on the United States, giving the report unexpected new relevance as explanations for Arab anger against the West are being sought.’1 The clear implication of this remark, as well as of others in which supposedly authoritative commentators on the Middle East are cited in support, is that the violence connected to political Islam—and perhaps the Islamic revival itself—is generated by the economic uncertainties, political failures, and social instability of something called Arab culture. Thomas Friedman was even more explicit. ‘If you want to understand the milieu that produced Bin Ladenism, and will reproduce it if nothing changes, then read this

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