FUNDAMENTALISM AND THE RESURGENCE OF RELIGION

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The dramatic global resurgence of religious movements since the 1970s has caught most scholars of religion by surprise. For most of us, such revitalization of religion was not considered possible since the fate of religion in the modern world was to be one of an irreversible trend toward secularization and privatization. According to our Western myth of modernization, the future of religion offered several options, but neither its resurgence as a political force and marker of social identity, nor its ability to shape human beings according to its own ethos, were among them.¹

For intellectuals trained in Western academia it was particularly disturbing that these resurgent religious movements were not culturally or politically “progressive,” like the Latin American liberation theology with its fusion of Marxism and Christianity. To the contrary, most of these religious movements were either aggressively nationalistic or “fundamentalist” with a strong emphasis on patriarchal authority and morality or both.² Equally irritating was the fact that by joining these


movements, the lower classes did not become revolutionary but pious, and women did not fight against patriarchalism but submitted to it or even embraced it.

Faced with these events, social scientists had to cope with their cognitive dissonance and did so in interesting ways. Some authors have simply insisted that their expectations of modernization and secularization are basically sound. Focusing on the resurgence of religion in “developing countries” allowed them to pretend that these revivals of religion are still part of an ongoing process of modernization. And, not surprisingly, many have taken pains to detect a “Puritan spirit” or an “inner-worldly asceticism” in such movements. Although this observation is not necessarily false it narrows our understanding of such movements to those aspects which best fit our expectations while omitting those which do not. Moreover, such a perspective ignores the resurgence of religion as public force in the West.

Other authors have chosen the opposite route of instant conversion by denying the existence of any general trend towards secularization in the West and elsewhere. In particular, rational choice theorists and their mostly functionalist allies (what Stephen Warner has labeled the “new paradigm”) have a rather narrow understanding and simplistic explanation of secularization. Max Weber has once suggested that secularization is the result of the emergence of relatively autonomous


