

**Understanding Fundamentalism: Christian,
Islamic, and Jewish Movements**

Richard T. Antoun

Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 2001. 181 pages.

From the opening pages of the preface until the last sentence of the conclusion, this book is well-written, authoritative, and insightful. The author draws upon some 40 years of rich experience as an anthropologist in the Middle East and further afield to offer a clear analytical account of fundamentalism in the three monotheistic traditions of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. His book also draws upon a decade of teaching and debate about fundamentalism with undergraduate students at the State University of New

York at Binghamton, and the clarity of his writing reflects an appreciation of the needs and interests of students.

Antoun defines the phenomenon of fundamentalism as “an orientation to the world, a particular worldview and ethos, and as a movement of protest and outrage against the rapid change that has overtaken the people of an increasingly global civilization at the end of the twentieth century.” He argues that it has defining characteristics wherever it is found: scripturalism (belief in the literal inerrancy of sacred scripture); the search for purity in an impure world; traditioning (making the ancient immediately relevant to the contemporary situation); totalism (taking religion beyond the worship center to home, school, workplace, bank, and elsewhere); activism (challenging establishments, both political and religious, sometimes by violent protest); struggle of good and evil; and selective modernization and controlled acculturation. These themes are explored in depth over the course of five chapters, with a sixth chapter based on a case study that presents a recording of conversations between the author and a “fundamentalist” in Jordan in 1986.

The author argues that the worldview and ethos of fundamentalism is the same across cultures, but that the cultural content and historical circumstances of its emergence are not. So, for example, he suggests that Muslim fundamentalism is driven by outrage at western cultural and economic penetration; Jewish fundamentalism draws its energy from the anti-Semitism of eastern and central Europe during the late nineteenth and twentieth century; Christian fundamentalism, especially in America, has reacted to the ideology of patriotic and progressive Protestantism, the claims of positivist science as reflected in biblical criticism, and the doctrine of evolution.

The author relies upon the scholarship of others (e.g., Lawrence, Riesebrodt, Lustick, and Levine and Stoll) for an analysis of who finds a fundamentalist worldview attractive, but some key characteristics emerge. For example, many fundamentalists are urban migrants caught between rural culture and modernized cities. In other words, they are marginalized members of out-of-power groups, or to use Antoun’s phrase, *outs* struggling against *ins*. However, the author is keen to emphasize that fundamentalism and fundamentalists are *ideal types*. No one individual or movement is completely fundamentalist. Rather, they demonstrate a complex combination of attributes that, when put together, can be regarded as evidence of a fundamentalist worldview.

While making the phenomenon of fundamentalism easier to understand, at the same time Antoun successfully conveys its complexity. It can be political/apolitical; confrontational/avoiding confrontation; separa-

tionist/integrationist; this world-/next world-oriented; or concerned with an internal/external enemy. However it is manifested, its increase is clearly explained as part of a shifting power balance in the world, which has seen many countries (especially in the Third World) increasingly disadvantaged as the number of world powers declines. More nations are becoming marginalized from the international arena and politically deprived, and advanced capitalism has widened the gap between rich and poor. Set against this background, fundamentalism is a reaction, both ideological and affective, to personal, socioeconomic, and technological upheaval.

This book's strength lies in its analytical and written clarity. Antoun makes a complex subject readable and accessible and, by the end of the book, readers have a better understanding of the motives and worldview of those who, for example, feel moved to commit acts of violence and terrorism in religion's name. He has achieved one of anthropology's methodological goals: empathizing with fundamentalist worldviews without being sympathetic. He draws upon a wide range of examples to support his arguments (e.g., the Bethany Baptist Academy, Hamas, and Gush Emunim), and maintains a meticulous and even balance between Christian, Jewish, and Muslim cases. In addition, Antoun gives a straightforward explanation of complex socioeconomic, politico-theological, and territorial realities without being simplistic, as well as a comprehensive glossary for those who might find his terminology unfamiliar. Likewise, a comprehensive list of further reading suggestions covering general texts and specific volumes about Christian, Muslim, and Jewish fundamentalism is provided. The book should be essential reading for students in a wide range of humanities disciplines, but especially in religious studies, theology, sociology, anthropology, and politics.

However, there are some shortcomings. Antoun gives little critical evaluation of the term *fundamentalism* as it is now used as part of contemporary religion's vocabulary. It is a contested word, for its accuracy and meaning continues to be hotly debated by scholars, but none of this is conveyed. For maximum effect as a teaching text, Antoun could have made more substantial references to other academic definitions and studies of fundamentalism (e.g. *The Fundamentalism Project*) and could have described more fully the term's evolution since its appearance in 1910. It would have been useful if the further reading suggestions had been annotated in order to point readers toward the strengths and weaknesses of other related texts.

Given the degree of public and academic interest in fundamentalism, this book felt a little flimsy. While it is no bad thing for a book to be affordable and easily readable in an afternoon, I was left wanting considerably more.

The conclusion does not go beyond summarizing the previous chapters. Some consideration of the significance of fundamentalism in the future might have been a more thought-provoking way of rounding off the volume.

These criticisms aside, this book lives up to its title and will help readers grasp some of the conceptual, linguistic, and analytical tools necessary to pursue their interest in religious fundamentalism. It is likely to be a valuable addition to the libraries of established academics, as well as of undergraduate students, and deserves to be widely read and appreciated both within and outside the academy.

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