

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

RICHARD T. ANTOUN, *Understanding Fundamentalism: Christian, Islamic and Jewish Movements*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press. 2001, xiv + 174 p., Index.

Like many fields of study, the academic discourse on religious fundamentalism has been defined by successive, but not necessarily cumulative, waves of scholarship. First, beginning in the late 1980s, there appeared a series of "pathbreaking" monographs, such as Bruce Lawrence's *Defenders of God*, or Gilles Kepel's *La Revanche de Dieu*, which provided tentatively formulated—for some, overly sweeping—accounts of the apparent resurgence of religious belief, practice, and identity in the modern world. By the mid 1990s, these were succeeded by a wave of ethnographic studies, historical works, and cross-cultural comparisons, at the acme of which one might place *The Fundamentalism Project*, an internationally authored, multi-volume work under the general editorship of Martin Marty and Scott Appleby. Meanwhile, regional studies, and especially ethnographic works dealing with specific "fundamentalist" communities, institutions, movements and cultural manifestations, have continued to make their appearance, refining the grand theories of religion and modernity that were embedded, or more cryptically implied, in earlier works. But most recently, the academic market has seen a third wave of publications on the topic of fundamentalism: shorter, single volume works that purport to synthesize the diverse insights of the first and second waves, and present these to a less specialized audience, often with mixed results.

Richard Antoun's *Understanding Fundamentalism*, falls into the last of these categories. Clearly aimed at an undergraduate and/or lay audience, this work aims to summarize the secondary literature on so-called fundamentalist movements within the three Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, Islam), with the addition of a chapter drawing upon the author's own fieldwork on the transformation of popular attitudes to Islamic law and custom in rural Jordan from the early 1960s to the late 1980s. As the book's title suggests, Antoun's focus is very broad, encompassing an eclectic variety of movements, institutions and social tendencies: the Italian Catholic movement, *Comunione e Liberazione*; the Haredi ("ultra-Orthodox") Jewish community in Mea Shearim, Jerusalem; the New Christian Right in the USA; Hamas in Palestine; the Welfare Party in Turkey; the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria; Jewish and Afrikaner settler movements; and others. Gathering such disparate groups into a single discussion, Antoun argues that, underlying differences

in cultural content and historical circumstance, one finds a common pattern. For instance, adherents to these movements tend to be drawn from structurally comparable social sources, such as newly urbanized migrants, disaffected youth, or lay professionals whose upward mobility has been frustrated by Western neo-imperialism, or official ideologies of secular nationalism. But most importantly, for Antoun, these movements share a common worldview, ethos and affective orientation to the world, constituting the "ideal type" of fundamentalist personality: someone who places God and his sacred scriptures at the centre of social life, who possesses a Manichean vision of a world divided into good and evil, and who expresses outrage at the progressive displacement of religious authority and the loosening of moral standards in the modern world.

Antoun unpacks this ideal type by elaborating several key themes. For instance, "scripturalism" (not to be confused with the more narrow practice of Biblical literalism) is defined as an emotional attachment to sacred texts: a panacea for the "thirst for certainty," and an interpretive practice for rendering everyday life meaningful through the artful application of proof-texts. The "quest for purity" encompasses numerous strategies through which fundamentalist movements are able to sustain themselves, ranging from physical, social and symbolic forms of separation from the impure world of secular nationalisms, modern bureaucratic mentalities, or late-capitalist consumer fantasies, to direct forms of confrontation, military struggle, or even martyrdom. "Selective modernization" and "controlled acculturation" refer to the complex, and often contradictory, patterns of negotiation and compromise through which fundamentalists both distinguish themselves from the rest of society and yet remain in continual traffic with it, such as in the case of Islamic banking, where, Antoun notes, legal scholars have shown remarkable flexibility in the reinterpretation of *riba* (the Islamically prohibited practice of accruing interest on investments), in order to permit Islamic financial institutions to function within a global regime of capitalist accumulation.

Given the length of Antoun's book, one must not expect to find an exhaustive exploration of any of these themes, let alone elaborate descriptions of the many movements or cultural practices under consideration. Nevertheless, *Understanding Fundamentalism* is recommendable as an introductory undergraduate textbook. Students with little or no knowledge of, say, the Iranian revolution or the rise of the Moral Majority in the United States, will find Antoun's accounts accessible and illuminating. Teachers will find little that is objectionable. In particular, they may take comfort in Antoun's ability to disarm the uninitiated reader of the sort of gross prejudices one continues to find in the popular media, where fundamentalist institutions, cultural practices and adherents are regularly misconstrued as backward-looking, inflexible, or unintelligent. But readers in search of greater understanding of the complex and remarkably disparate manifestations of "reactionary" religion in the world today—movements for which it is not even necessarily helpful to use the term "fundamentalist"—would be better served by steering clear of works that purport to tell all in under 200 pages, and focussing instead on

specific case studies, where, pardon the pun, the devil can be found in the details.

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