Religious Fundamentalism
Key Terms

Secularization –

leading to increasingly large groups of people who claim no allegiance to any church.

Some of these people are atheists. Others simply do not practice. Still others call themselves spiritual, but not religious.

• Common in Europe and the cities of the U.S.
• Common in former Soviet Union and China.

Fundamentalism –

leading to increasingly large groups of people who claim there is only one way to interpret worship.

Fundamentalists generally envision a return to a more perfect religion and ethics they imagine existed in the past.

• Common in the U.S. and in some Islamic nations.
Religious Fundamentalism

- Not concerned with any specific religion

- A style of political thought, rather than a collection of ideas and values

- Some scholars argue that religious fundamentalism is merely a ‘sub-species’ of the ideology of nationalism
Fundamentalist Principles

- Fundamentalists see religion as a set of firm principles that cannot be challenged.
- Such principles should be the guiding light in issues such as personal conduct and the organization of social, economic and political life.
- “Politics is religion” (Ayatollah Khomeini)
Public / Private Divide

- In the West, politics in religion has been restricted by the spread of liberal culture and ideas → thus, there is a public/private divide
- But fundamentalism’s refusal to accept that religion is a personal matter is what establishes its ideological credentials
- “Existing structures must be replaced with a comprehensive system based on religious principles”
The Fundamentalist Impulse

- Fundamentalism refers to a commitment of ideas and values seen to be ‘basic’, or ‘foundational’
- These principles are seen to be enduring and unchanging in character
- And they usually derive from spiritual texts claiming the true word of God
Religious fundamentalism...

- Has a proven ability to generate political activism and mobilize the faithful
- Can offer certainty in an uncertain world
- Displaces socialism as the creed of political renewal and social justice
- Works on both psychological and social levels
- No political blueprint
Anti-modernism

- Although religious fundamentalism is anti-modern in character, this image alone is misleading.

- Religious fundamentalism is selectively traditional (i.e. return to ‘family’ values, *Shari’a* law) and selectively modern in character.
Religious fundamentalism…

- Across the world, fundamentalisms have exploited the advantages of modern mass communication
- Accept technology, science, the machinery of the modern state and even nuclear weaponry over the ‘descent in to other-worldly’ mysticism – such as the Buddhists
- ‘Dynamic’ interpretation of scriptures
Militancy – Why?

1. Religious conflicts deal with core values and beliefs

2. Identity politics – distinction between ‘them’ and ‘us’

3. Emphasis between ‘good’ and ‘evil’
Consequences?

- A willingness to use anti-constitutional political action
- Although fundamentalists regard God’s law as higher than human law, it does not follow that all groups will disregard human law
- The most controversial issue is the fundamentalists’ use of violence
Various forms of Fundamentalism

- Derive from different religions
- Emerge from very different societies
- Differ according to the political causes they are associated with
Islamic Fundamentalism

- Guided by the teachings of Muhammad (570-632AD) and revealed in the Koran
- Two main sects: Sunni (majority) and Shiite/Shi’a (10% - mostly in Iran and Iraq)
- Islamic fundamentalism was revived in 1928 when the Muslim Brotherhood was founded in Egypt (Led by Hassan al Banna)
- Brotherhood pledged to revitalize Islamic faith and provide alternative to Western domination
Growth of Muslim Brotherhood

- Egypt’s defeat in Arab-Israeli War of 1967 provided an opportunity for the Muslim Brotherhood to expand.
- Since 1970s, fundamentalist groups attracted growing popular support.
- Led by popular revolution in Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini proclaimed the first Islamic Republic in 1979.
Christian Fundamentalism

- Christianity - the world’s largest religion
- Three main divisions: Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant
- Political significance of Christianity declined with advance of liberal constitutionalism
- Emphasis on single and moral issues
- Ethnic nationalism in Northern Ireland appealed to working-class Protestants as well as fundamentalists
The New Christian Right

- 60 million US citizens say they are ‘born again’ Christians; of those, half describe themselves as fundamentalists.
- A broad coalition of groups concerned with what they see as a decline of moral and social issues.
- Campaign to restore traditional family values.
‘born again’

- ‘Pro life’ agenda
- Ronald Reagan and George Bush Sr. embraced the new Christian Right agenda by making ‘pro life’ political appointments, but they failed to deliver on the moral agenda
- 2000 - the Christian Right achieved a boost from the election of George W. Bush and his Vice President, Dick Cheney – both ‘born again’ Christians
- John Ashcroft, a leading evangelical was appointed Attorney General by George W. Bush
Religious Conflict

The Big Question: Can secular society exist alongside traditional and fundamentalist religious sects and states?

• We are quick to notice fundamentalism abroad (i.e. Salman Rushdie’s death sentence by Shi’a clerics) and not so quick to recognize it at home (abortion clinic bombings; Southern Baptist Convention’s calls for women to submit to their husbands’ authority).

• American evangelical Christianity and Islamic fundamentalism are the two most influential fundamentalist movements in the world.

• Fewer and fewer states are governed by an official church.
KEY QUESTION:

What Role Does Religion Play in Political Conflicts?
Conflicts along Religious Borders

- **Interfaith Boundaries**
  - Boundaries between the world’s major faiths.

- **Intrafaith Boundaries**
  - Boundaries within a single major faith.
Interfaith Boundaries

Nigeria:
- Multilingual country with about 110 million inhabitants.
- The North is a Muslim zone.
- The South is a domain where Christianity prevails, along with local traditional religions.
- North and South ethnic groups have considerable disdain for each other.
- In the past decade, fundamental religious division began to threaten the future of the state.
  - Northern Muslim preachers are calling for an “Islamic Republic”.
  - Calls for secession are growing in the Christian south.
- In the late 1990’s, Nigeria was OPEC’s fourth largest oil producer.
- Breakup of Nigeria would have far-reaching implications.
Interfaith Boundaries

Sudan:
- Muslim north and Christian south.
- Constant conflict between the two.
- Sharia religious laws: were being imposed over the entire country.
- The war has devastated the south:
  - Millions have been dislocated.
  - Hundreds of thousands have starved.

In the early 21st century, the war rages on.
Interfaith Boundaries

- The African Horn:
  - Religious map of Ethiopia is more complicated than that of Nigeria or Sudan.
    - Heart of the former mountain kingdom contains the cultural core area of Amharic (Coptic) Christians.
    - Islam won some adherents at base of mountains, but Christian rulers maintained control.
    - Military dictatorship was overthrown in 1991.
    - Contains a large Muslim population of Somalis in its eastern zone.
    - Problems still continue between the different religions.
Interfaith Boundaries

South Asia:

• Part of Britain’s colonial empire.
• In 1947 a political boundary was established between Islamic Pakistan and multicultural India.
  - produced one of the largest human migrations of modern times.
  - Millions of Muslims crossed into Pakistan and Hindus moved into India.
Interfaith Boundaries

- India proclaimed itself a secular federation and sporadic religious conflict followed for 30 years.
- In India during the 1980’s, several events occurred that led to more intense conflict.
  - The Sikhs campaigned for greater or outright independence.
    - Demanded a separate state in the Punjab.
    - Indian army raided the Sikh’s holiest shrine causing more than 1000 deaths.
    - India’s prime minister, Indira Gandhi, was assassinated by Sikh members of her bodyguard.
Second development occurred during the late 1980’s when the site of a holy shrine claimed by both Muslims and Hindus became a battleground.

- Muslims regained control of the site.
- In late 1992 a mob of Hindu fundamentalists stormed the mosque and demolished it.
- In early 2002 the mosque was to be rebuilt, but new waves of violence erupted.

Hinduism began to exhibit the sort of fundamentalism and militancy that had been associated with other faiths.

- On-going conflict with anti-Indian militants from Pakistan has helped fuel fundamentalist movement.
- Hindu fundamentalists have caused conflicts with Christianity as well.

CONCLUSION: The rise of fundamentalism is affecting virtually all religions today.
Interfaith Boundaries

The former Soviet Union:

- Make-up of the Soviet Union when it was first formed.
  - Fifteen Soviet Republics and other territories of lesser rank.
  - Russia, the largest republic, was divided into 70 territories.
  - Soviets inherited more than one hundred ethnic groups plus their:
    - Languages, beliefs, and life ways
    - Parts of two great religious realms - the Eastern Orthodox Church and Islam.
Interfaith Boundaries

- The Soviets discouraged religious practice throughout the country.
- When the USSR collapsed, Soviet Republics became independent states, and ethnic strife broke out almost immediately.
  - Christians and Muslims fought.
  - Islam quickly revived in the central Asian republics.
  - The Russian Orthodox Church is experiencing a resurrection.

Kazakhstan poses the most serious potential spatial problem.
  - Islamic - Christian interfaith boundary runs right across the state.
  - Virtually all Christians live in the north.
  - Almost all Muslims live in the south.
  - Unless the interfaith border becomes a political border, a major problem could arise.
Interfaith Boundaries

- Europe: the former Yugoslavia
  - When the political system failed, the Muslims were attacked by Christians.
  - Ethnic cleansing was also undertaken between the Christian factions.
  - All Yugoslavians are of Slavic ancestry; what divides them is culture.
Interfaith Boundaries

- Bangladesh - growing unrest between Muslims and Hindus.
- Sri Lanka - ongoing problems between Buddhists and Hindus.
- Southeast and Southwest Asia:
  - Catholics and a minority of Muslims
  - Israel’s conflict with its neighbors:
    - Conflict with the Palestinians has been going on since 1937-1938.
    - Present-day conflict → Gaza / West Bank / Settlements in Occupied Territories.
Intrafaith Boundaries

In the Islamic realm: Conflict between Sunni and Shi’ite branches.
- The Iran-Iraq conflict of the 1980’s
- After the Gulf War, the Sunni-controlled army of defeated Iraq moved against the Shiite communities of the south
- Conflict in Lebanon