INTRODUCTION

It is commonplace today to divide American Protestantism into dying and thriving groups. The old mainline Protestant churches, especially the United Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church (USA), are shrinking. In contrast, conservative Protestant churches are holding on to their share of the expanding American population. This book is about the survival of the latter type of religious groups. Members of such churches may consider it arrogant to question why conservative churches are doing relatively well. Yet it seems true that objectively the strength of conservatism should be a puzzle. After all, we live in a time of rapid change. It is not obvious why at such a moment leaders who advocate conserving old ways are relatively popular.

Several reasons for the continuing strength of conservative Protestantism are straightforward. Compared to the mainline groups, conservative Protestants have more children. Moreover, their leaders discourage conditions associated with being unchurched: childlessness and divorce. People stay in or join churches because they want their children to have a religious education. Divorced people stay away from churches, in part, because so many congregations are family-oriented.

Conservative Protestants also devote more time and energy to evangelism. A congregation's outreach program is important. Sponsoring revivals and advertising programs at a church may aid growth. Of more importance, however, is whether a congregation is encouraged to reach out to others. Even near-strangers can be influential, especially if the strangers tell a conversion story that makes clear a need shared with the potential newcomers to a congregation. Almost all of the people discussed in this book first became interested in their new congregations because of some comments made by a member of the congregation who

was also a newcomer's family member, friend, neighbor, or coworker. Conservative Protestant churches survive, in part, because they try harder to do so.

Such churches also retain more of the people who grow up in the churches. Any significant changes in lifestyle or religious affiliation are often influenced by exposure to new options but deterred by social pressure from others favoring the status quo. Urban living and education are likely indicators of exposure to new ideas; conservative Protestants are more likely to live in rural areas and less likely to be highly educated. The degree of social pressure to remain the same is related to the frequency of interaction with similar people. White conservative Protestants have the highest marriage rates and, among those living in multi-adult households, conservative Protestants are more likely than members of other religious groups to live in religiously homogeneous households. Moreover, conservative Protestants tend to live together in the same parts of the United States. Because they live in households and regions where people share similar religious beliefs, conservative Protestants experience greater social pressure not to switch religions.[1]

But it is also true that many people switch from having no religious preference or from being a member of a mainline religion to being a member of a conservative Protestant church because they find such churches to be appealing. During the period 1972–87, about one out of five people raised in mainline Protestantism left that religious family to join a conservative Protestant church. Within conservative Protestantism, one out of seven switched to mainline churches. Why the difference?[2] The purpose of this book is to further our understanding of what people like about conservative Protestant congregations. As Coalter, Mulder, and

1. The data confirming my description of conservative Protestants can be found in Kosmin and Lachman (1993:71–2, 258, 240, 107).
2. Such differences cannot be interpreted as moving from a liberal to a conservative congregation. For instance, in Middletown (Delaware Country, Indiana), almost all white conservative congregations have theologically conservative pastors, but the white mainline congregations are led by pastors who are roughly equally divided among three theological categories: conservative, moderate, and liberal (Johnson and Tamney 1986:52). Thus, an unknown number of people switching to conservative denominations in Middletown would have been members of mainline congregations with conservative pastors or of congregations that had had such pastors. The data about the 1972–87 period is in Greeley (1989:34–6).

Weeks (1996:33) emphasized, "People join or leave congregations, not denominations." To understand national changes, it is necessary to study specific congregations.

In 1996 my assistants (Peggy Shaffer and Susan M. Ryan) and I began a study meant to find out why people joined successful conservative churches and what currently appeals to them about the churches they joined. The interviewees were residents of "Middletown," who recently joined Protestant churches. "Middletown" refers to the county containing the city of Muncie, Indiana. Robert and Helen Lynd (1929) wrote the classic study of this community, giving the town its sociological label. They believed that Middletown was reasonably representative of white, Anglo-Saxon culture. What is important about Middletown for our purposes is that it contains a variety of Protestant churches.

The issue is not why people are religious but why they have joined a specific congregation. These are distinct matters. For example, a person might be religious because she wants to believe in a life after death and attends a specific church because her friends are members. In another type of case, the two matters may be closely connected. For instance, a person might be religious because he wants to feel loved by Jesus, and the person may belong to a specific church because the congregation's liturgy makes him feel close to Jesus. Our objective was to discover why the person was attracted by a specific congregation.

Whether or not a particular congregation is popular certainly depends, in part, on the resources available to it. Congregations with money, paid staff, and abundant volunteers are more likely to offer attractive programs and thus to be popular, all else aside. Similarly, groups with skilled workers such as eloquent preachers and talented musicians are better candidates for success, at least within Protestantism. In the text, I will note from time to time the presence of such resources, but they are not my primary concern. What I wanted to know was what it is about conservative Protestant theology and rituals that people find appealing.

Chapters 3 through 6 concern the four congregations in the 1996 study. In them I describe what people found attractive in each of the congregations. In writing Chapter 2, I used other sources of information. In order to understand the appeal of conservative Protestantism in the early-modern United States (i.e., prior to World War II), I used historical research and some classical sociological studies, including the work of

the Lynds in the 1920s and 1930s. Knowing what made conservative congregations appealing during early-modernity helps give us a better perspective on more recent developments.

In Chapter 1, I develop the framework used throughout the book by discussing both the nature of conservative religion and theories about what makes the content of a religion appealing to contemporary Americans.

CHAPTER ONE

EXPLANATIONS FOR THE SUCCESS OF CONSERVATIVE RELIGIONS

Diverse forms of religion exist in every society. The different responses to the publication of Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* illustrate these different forms. The appearance of this novel aroused such strong feelings that Islamic fundamentalists placed a bounty on the author's head, prompting the British government to protect Rushdie by moving him from one "safe house" to another. I use the reaction of Islamic fundamentalists to Rushdie and of Westerners to the Muslim responses, as well as the defense put forth by Rushdie and those sympathetic to him, to develop the concepts of traditionalist, modern, and late-modern religions. In the latter part of this chapter, I present alternative explanations for the appeal of traditionalist religion. The term "conservative religion" is used to refer to religions that are either clear-cut cases of the traditionalist type or approximations of it.

THE EPISODE

On 26 September 1989, Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* was published in Great Britain. Beginning with India in October of that year, the book was banned not only in Muslim societies but also in Kenya, Singapore, South Africa, Tanzania, Thailand, and Venezuela. All these societies, except the last, have significant Muslim minorities. In February 1989, a radio announcer read a statement on Tehran radio from Ayatollah Khomeini, who was the spiritual leader of Iran's Muslims at the time. The statement included the following remarks:

> I inform all the intrepid Muslims in the world that the author of the book entitled *The Satanic Verses*, which has been compiled,

> printed, and published in opposition to Islam, the Prophet, and the Koran [Quran], as well as those publishers who were aware of its contents, have been sentenced to death.
>
> I call on all zealous Muslims to execute them quickly . . . (*Observer*, 19 February 1989).

Prior to this *fatwa* (i.e., an Islamic legal opinion), eight thousand Muslims took part in a protest march in London, and six people died in Pakistan participating in a riot linked to the publication of *The Satanic Verses* in the West. The Ayatollah's death sentence captured the world's attention and further inflamed the situation. Demonstrations occurred in various parts of the world, including London and New York City, in which people chanted "Death to Rushdie" (*New Straits Times* [Malaysia], 27 February 1989).

A small part of the novel, but the part from which the book's title most immediately derives, concerns an incident in the life of Muhammad that was recorded by two early Arab historians, but which Quranic commentators later discredited because it implied that one cannot take for granted that the Quran is literally and totally the work of God (Mojtabai 1989:3). According to these "Satanic Verses," Muhammad briefly allowed Muslims to use female intercessors with Allah, naming three goddesses who were worshipped in Mecca at the time when Muhammad was trying to convert the Meccans. Rushdie "used the incident as an extended metaphor for both the ambiguity of revelation and the ostensible willingness of the Prophet to compromise in unfavorable circumstances" (Piscatori 1990:772).

In another incident, the scribe, Salman, alters the verses dictated by Mahound (the name of the character who bears some resemblance to Muhammad) and supposedly revealed to him by God's messenger, Gabriel. In the novel, when the text is read back to him, Mahound does not at first notice the changes. When Mahound becomes suspicious, Salman leaves for another city, fearful for his life. "There could hardly be a more direct attack on a fundamentalist construal of the holy word" (Steiner 1995:105). In another episode, a poet, Baal, hides in a brothel and conceives a plan to name the whores after Muhammad's wives. It is easy to understand why the novel would offend Muslims.

Translators and publishers of Rushdie's books have been personally assaulted or killed (*New York Times* 1991; Weisman 1991). In 1997, the Iranian foundation that originally promised $2 million to Rushdie's killer raised the bounty by $500,000. The following year, the Iranian

government disassociated itself from the death sentence given Rushdie, but bounty hunters may not be swayed by this action (Goshko 1998). Subsequent to the government's action, the reward for Rushdie's death was increased to $2.8 million (*Wall Street Journal*, 13 October 1998).

The Satanic Verses won Britain's Whitbread Prize as best novel of the year. The editors of the *New York Times Review of Books* chose it as one of the best books of 1989 (there were thirteen in all).

THE FUNDAMENTALIST RESPONSE

Khomeini's judgment was based on the Quranic verse, "Those who molest God's messenger, for them awaits a painful punishment" (9:61). According to Islamic law, such a sentence must be passed by an Islamic court, which would have jurisdiction only in countries under Islamic law (Ahsan and Kidwai 1991:54–5). Thus the validity of Khomeini's *fatwa* is debatable. The nature of the punishment Khomeini decreed was based on a precedent set by Muhammad: "Shortly after he had captured Mecca in January 630, he had Kaab ibn al Ashraf, a poet, decapitated for mocking the Quran" (Hiro 1989:298). Khomeini's condemnation, although not always his death sentence, was popular among both the elite and the common people in the Muslim world (Hiro 1989:299).

Rushdie's Islamic critics were especially upset because the author was raised in a nominally Muslim home, first in India and later in Pakistan. Because Rushdie was born a Muslim, even though he never considered himself religiously Islamic and now claims only a cultural Muslim identity (Rushdie 1991b), he was charged with apostasy. While Islam emphasizes the importance of personal commitment for salvation, the traditional belief lingers that an individual is born into a religion. Individuals are not free to renounce their religious heritage; at the extreme, apostates are to be killed. This attitude exemplifies a crucial aspect of traditionalist religion, namely the subordination of the value of the individual to the preservation of the group.

That Rushdie should die has been accepted by many Muslims. *International Guerillas* is a Pakistani film that was popular with local audiences. The film presents Rushdie as a Rambo-like figure pursued by four Pakistani guerillas. God kills him using bolts of lightning, a scene that evoked shouts of approval from audiences (*The Australian*, 16 May 1990). Rushdie has not been the only target. When the Japanese translator was stabbed to death in 1991, a spokesperson for the Pakistan Association in Japan said, "the murder was completely 100 percent connected with

the book. . . . Today we have been congratulating each other. Everyone was really happy" (quoted in Bedford 1993:163; see also Dempsey 1997). Traditionalist religion may be linked to violence because the group and not the individual is significant. The group symbolizes the sacred, thus any insult to its culture is blasphemy.

Most Islamic political leaders rejected the death sentence against Rushdie. The foreign ministers at a meeting of the forty-six-member Organization of Islam Conference condemned Rushdie's book but also rejected the death sentence. The Conference urged member-states to ban *The Satanic Verses* (Associated Press 1989) and asked all countries to pass laws protecting religious beliefs against insult and abuse (Appignanesi and Maitland 1989:145). Measures less extreme than murder, such as censorship, may be used to "protect" traditionalist religions. Killing and censorship are ways to preserve the group.

Rushdie's novel created such a sensation because of political processes occurring among Muslims at the time of its publication. In Great Britain, South Asian imams (Muslim religious leaders) were trying to establish themselves as political spokespersons for their discriminated-against constituency. Simultaneously Khomeini was struggling with pragmatists for control of the Iranian revolution (Keppel 1994:33–9; Milani 1994). The imams and Khomeini tried to use *The Satanic Verses* episode to rally people to their political programs. The episode occurred because the Islamic world is far from united. Thus it must be kept in mind that what I am describing as Islamic fundamentalism represents only one faction in the Islamic world.[1]

TRADITIONALIST RELIGION

The fundamentalist response illustrates what I mean by "traditionalist religion." *Traditionalism* means "a deliberate effort to regenerate tradition and make it socially significant again. . . . [It] is a form of engagement with the modern world" (Lechner 1993:23). In the process, traditionalists may support important social changes. What traditionalists seek to preserve, above all, is valuing the group more than the individual, even to the point of being willing to kill someone who symbolizes a threat to the group or to that for which the group stands. People such as Rushdie

1. Of course, there were quite varied responses to Rushdie's book among Muslims. Muslim writers especially have called for the end of state censorship (Naïm 1994; see also Evans 1996). In this book, the term "Islamic fundamentalist" refers to Khomeini and those expressing sympathy for his attitude toward Rushdie.

must be killed because their example is a threat to the cohesion of the group:

> "We believe in collective justice," a right-wing Jewish leader explained. By that he meant that any individual who was part of a group deemed to be the enemy might justifiably become the object of a violent assault, even if he or she were an innocent bystander (Juergensmeyer 1993:165).

Extremists in various traditions think in collective or group terms that implicitly devalue individual life. Because the focus is on the group, some Pakistanis in Japan could feel "really happy" about the death of the Japanese translator of Rushdie's book.

Such tragedies have occurred in the United States. After studying violence at abortion clinics, Dallas A. Blanchard and Terry J. Prewitt (1993:225–6) included "a justification for violence" among a list of six commonalities shared by Protestant, Catholic, and Mormon fundamentalisms. They found violence to be a result both of the substitutionary theory of the atonement, which assumes that a sacrificial offering must precede divine forgiveness for sin, and of a stress on "a literal, fiery hell of eternal punishment," which reinforces "the notion of a God who is vindictive and unremittingly violent, a God of self-congratulating cruelty" (p. 262). However, my suggestion is that the acceptability of violence is not dependent on specific beliefs about atonement and hell. Rather, violence is acceptable because traditionalists devalue the individual compared to the group.[2]

Traditionalism means not only the superiority of the religious group over the individual but also the dominance of the religious group over all the other institutions of society. Khomeini spoke as both a religious and a political ruler in Iran. Similarly, traditionalism means the cultural triumph of the group's ideology. Artists such as Rushdie have no literary license. Iranian fundamentalists in state institutions have tried to eliminate the influence of Western and pre-Islamic Persian cultures (Milani 1994; Riesèbrodt 1993:128). In the traditionalist worldview, there is no

2. The Fundamentalism Project, organized by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, has documented the willingness of traditionalists in various religious traditions to use violence – among Jews (Aran 1991), among Muslims (Voll 1991), among Sri Lankan Buddhists (Manor 1994), and among Hindus (Embree 1994).

separation of church and state, and traditionalist religious values are hegemonic.

The justification of labeling such a religious culture "traditionalist" requires an understanding of the modernization process.

TRADITIONALISM AND MODERNIZATION

Modernization theory assumes that we are part of a historical process dating back to premodern times. There is no definitive list of characteristics of this process, nor do all sociologists agree on the usefulness of this theory (for a general discussion of this topic, see Sztompka 1993). However, modernization theory remains an important part of sociology, and I have found it useful for studying change in Western and Eastern societies (Tamney 1992a, 1996).

Modernization can be viewed using long or short timeframes. For the moment, I limit the discussion to the long term. As such, modernization means the process of change from small, traditional societies up to the contemporary world. It is assumed that when the most technologically advanced societies existing at various points in time are compared, they will reveal directions of social change. That is, it is assumed that increasing technological sophistication produces social changes in a predictable manner.

The modernization process, as I conceive it, has five basic components: technological development, societal expansion, structural differentiation, the fragmentation of a society's culture, and the growing importance of the individual at the expense of groups. In this book, I will not dwell on the first two factors but shall simply assume that over time societies have become more technically sophisticated and have integrated larger numbers of people. As I shall argue, a traditionalist religion seeks to eliminate the last three components of the modernization process.

A traditional society is essentially a large family with a unique culture. Thus modernization means development from a society "in which all the major roles are allocated on an ascriptive basis, and in which the division of labor is based primarily on family and kinship units" (Eisenstadt 1964:376). Political, religious, and educational tasks, for instance, are assigned to people with certain family statuses, such as the oldest heads of families. Each group (i.e., an extended family or a tribe) has its own culture, which is permeated by religious beliefs and values. However, religion per se does not exist. For instance, "In the traditional cultures of western Africa, 'religion' did not exist as an indigenous category, but was introduced by missionaries . . . " (Peel 1993:89). Ethnic