

The Role of Socio-Economic Factors in People's  
Forming and Maintaining Religious  
Fundamentalist Belief Systems  
*Master Thesis*

Name: Arina den Besten

## **Abstract**

Regularly, a connection is made between fundamentalism and poverty or feelings of marginalization. However, it is not clear whether past and current research confirm such a relationship exist. Using a semi-systematic literature review, this thesis studies the role socio-economic factors play in people's developing and maintaining religious fundamentalist belief systems. A statistically significant relationship with fundamentalism is found for education level, income, employment status, and socio-economic status. Moreover, many members of fundamentalist movements are economically disadvantaged, experience threats to their socio-economic status, or see their attempts to better their status fail. This thesis discusses furthermore how the relationship between socio-economic factors and fundamentalism can be best conceptualized. It concludes that socio-economic factors are an INUS condition for people's forming religious fundamentalist belief systems. That is, they are one of the causes of people's fundamentalist belief systems, but only when other conditions are present. Research suggests that fundamentalism might be a way for people to cope with uncertainty resulting from poor economic circumstances.

## Table of Contents

Introduction .....	4
Chapter 1 Beliefs, Belief Systems and What Makes Them Fundamentalist .....	6
1.1 Beliefs and Belief Systems.....	6
1.2 Fundamentalist Belief Systems .....	8
Chapter 2 Reviewing the Literature .....	11
2.1 Selection of publications .....	11
2.2 Descriptive and Historical Studies .....	13
2.3 Quantitative Studies .....	17
2.4 Weighing the Evidence .....	23
Chapter 3 Conceptualizing the Role of Socio-Economic Factors in the Development of Fundamentalist Beliefs.....	25
3.1 Explaining Fundamentalism.....	25
3.2 In-Between Socio-Economic Factors and Fundamentalism.....	28
Conclusion.....	30
Bibliography.....	32

## Introduction

Even though fundamentalism comes with rigid interpretations, high levels of commitments, and limitations to individuals' opportunities in life, many people still ascribe to such a worldview. Some scholars even argue that the number of fundamentalists is increasing.<sup>1</sup> This raises the question of why people adopt these beliefs. A variety of theories exist, explaining fundamentalism using factors like personal psychology and grievances, group processes, and social and cultural changes. Regularly, a connection is made between poverty or feelings of marginalization and fundamentalism. Lester Thurow, for example, states,

The rise of religious fundamentalism is a social volcano in eruption. Its connection to economics is simple. Those who lose out economically or who cannot stand the economic uncertainty of not knowing what it takes to succeed in the new era ahead retreat into religious fundamentalism.<sup>2</sup>

In reality, things are not so simple. While many studies claim that there exists a causal relationship between socio-economic factors and people's forming religious fundamentalist belief systems, it is not clear to what extent the current literature confirms this. Moreover, studies vary in or lack an account of how socio-economic factors make people more receptive to fundamentalist worldviews.

In this thesis, I will study the role socio-economic factors play in people's turn to fundamentalism. Hence, the research question is: *what role do socio-economic factors play in people's developing and maintaining religious fundamentalist belief systems?* Socio-economic factors are variables like education level, income, and occupational status that measure the financial and social status of an individual. To limit the scope of this thesis, I will focus on religious fundamentalism rather than fundamentalism in general. A definition of fundamentalist belief systems will be given later.

To answer the research question, I will focus on several sub-questions. In the first chapter, I will discuss how people form beliefs. As this is a very broad topic, I will concentrate on aspects that are relevant to the subject matter of this thesis. Moreover, in this chapter, I will discuss the concept of fundamentalism and propose a definition of fundamentalist belief systems.

After this, in chapter 2, I will discuss the question: what evidence has been found in previous research of the role of socio-economic factors in people's developing and maintaining religious fundamentalist beliefs? I will answer this question by means of a literature review. Because there exists a wide variety in the way the term fundamentalism is used in previous research, I will use a semi-systematic/integrative literature review. By doing the literature review in a semi-systematic way and establishing clear selection criteria, I can prevent biases from occurring.

The third sub-question, covered in chapter 3, is: how should we conceptualize the role of socio-economic factors in people's developing and maintaining religious fundamentalist belief systems? There exist several possible roles that socio-economic factors can play in relation to fundamentalism. They can form a sufficient condition or a necessary condition. However, it is also possible that socio-economic situation is a condition that makes the development of fundamentalist belief systems more likely or a condition that makes it more likely only when other conditions are present. Finally, it could be that socio-economic conditions are not a condition for people's forming fundamentalist belief

---

<sup>1</sup> Michael O. Emerson and David Hartman, "The Rise of Religious Fundamentalism," *Annual Review of Sociology* 32, no. 1 (August 1, 2006): 127–44, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.32.061604.123141>.

<sup>2</sup> Lester C. Thurow, *The Future of Capitalism: How Today's Economic Forces Shape Tomorrow's World* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1996), 232.

systems. Based on the literature review in chapter 2, I will discuss what is the best way to perceive this relationship.

By providing an overview of what is already known about the role of socio-economic factors in people's forming fundamentalist beliefs and how this relationship should be conceptualized, I will add to the existing knowledge about fundamentalism. It will provide a better understanding of the reasons why people adopt fundamentalist belief systems. This is not only of academic interest but also relevant for society and faith communities. Economic factors, like poverty, are one of the measures that can be most easily controlled by governments. Hence, if economic factors play a role in the development of fundamentalist beliefs, this can give guidelines for policies to prevent religious radicalization. Besides this, it can also help faith communities to better understand how people from the same religion come to adopt belief systems that are fundamentalist.

# Chapter 1 Beliefs, Belief Systems and What Makes Them Fundamentalist

Before focussing on fundamentalist belief systems, I first will discuss what beliefs are and how they are formed. This will give a first insight into the possible role that economic factors can play in the formation of fundamentalist belief systems. This chapter necessarily will be limited in its extent. As the topic of beliefs is very wide and spans various subdisciplines, like epistemology, psychology, neuroscience, and sociology, I cannot give a complete overview of all research that has been done on belief formation. Hence, I will limit myself to key points and notions that will be of interest to the main research question. In the second half of this chapter, I will discuss what fundamentalism is and provide a working definition of fundamentalist belief systems.

## 1.1 Beliefs and Belief Systems

Every person holds a vast number of beliefs. These include beliefs about things we encounter, religious beliefs, ideological beliefs, beliefs about beliefs, et cetera. Some examples are ‘It is raining outside,’ ‘God exists,’ ‘It is wrong to cheat on a test,’ ‘The Bible is literally true and infallible,’ ‘Arsenal is my favourite football team,’ and ‘Fundamentalist Islam is the only true religion.’ A belief can be defined as the attitude that is held towards a proposition when that proposition is regarded as true.<sup>3</sup> It is generally accepted that there exist three doxastic attitudes towards propositions. One either believes them, is in a state of disbelief, or suspends judgement.

Beliefs are important drivers of behaviour. Martin Fishbein and Icek Azjen make a distinction between beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviour.<sup>4</sup> This distinction between attitudes and beliefs is not in conflict with the above definition of beliefs as propositional attitudes. While beliefs can be seen as an attitude, this is a specific attitude towards a proposition about an object.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, the proposition is regarded as true. This is different from how Fishbein and Azjen use the concept of attitude. Fishbein and Azjen mean with attitude an attitude regarding an object. They define it as “a learned predisposition to respond in a consistently favourable or unfavourable manner with respect to a given object.”<sup>6</sup>

In this conceptual structure, beliefs form the building block for attitudes, intentions, and behaviour. The attitude of a person towards an object is determined by the totality of beliefs the person has towards that object. These beliefs involve attributes of the object and an evaluation of these attributes. So, attitudes have an affective or evaluative nature. These attitudes are related to a person’s intentions to perform various actions regarding the object in question, which are related to behaviour. This distinction between beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviour shows that a person’s beliefs towards an object cannot directly predict their actions towards that object. Behaviour is determined by intentions and attitudes. Moreover, not only beliefs about the object are involved, but also beliefs about the consequences of the actions and normative beliefs about the actions play a role. These shape the attitude towards certain behaviour, which in turn influence the intentions. Take, for example, the topic of climate change. A person may hold certain beliefs about this subject, such as ‘Climate change

---

<sup>3</sup> Simon Blackburn, “Beliefs,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen, *Belief, Attitude, Intention, and Behavior: An Introduction to Theory and Research* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1975), 11.

<sup>5</sup> Object is used here in a generic sense. It can refer to physical objects, but also persons, institutions, behaviour, events, etc.

<sup>6</sup> Fishbein and Ajzen, *Belief, Attitude, Intention, and Behavior*, 6.

forms a problem for society' and 'As an individual, I cannot do much to prevent climate change.' This can lead to the person having a moderate attitude towards climate change, resulting in moderate intentions. The person can, for example, intend to recycle their waste, but when it rains to still take the car instead of travelling by bike. This then is related to the totality of a person's behaviour towards the climate.

New beliefs or changes in beliefs can arise in several ways. Jens Rydgren described six mechanisms through which new beliefs arise.<sup>7</sup> This can happen through (1) observation and other experiences. Most of the time, these descriptive beliefs are veridical, which means that they are not much influenced by personal factors, like attitude, personality, or desires.<sup>8</sup> Beliefs can also be formed through (2) testimony or information from others. This also includes information from media, books, et cetera. This can lead to beliefs of the form 'P said X' or a direct belief 'X'. Next, beliefs can be formed by (3) induction or (4) deduction from beliefs that one already holds. These inferential beliefs may be based on logical reasoning or evaluative consistency. The latter means that a person is likely to infer positive attributes for liked objects and negative attributes for disliked objects. Take, for example, Lara who is a hardcore Democrat and has a strong negative evaluation of Republicans. Suppose she is about to be introduced to a man of whom the only information she has is his political affiliation. Then, Lara will be more likely to assume that the man is dishonest and closed-minded if he is a Democrat compared to when he is a Republican. Personal factors have been found to play an influential role in the formation of inferential beliefs.<sup>9</sup> Next, new beliefs can also be formed by (5) adapting beliefs to desires. An example of this is wishful thinking. Finally, beliefs can be formed through (6) mechanisms that reduce cognitive dissonance, for example, to bring one's beliefs in line with one's actions. Often, beliefs are not formed through a single mechanism but a combination of them. As beliefs are often dispositions, most of the time, these processes are unconscious.

Individual factors play an important role in the formation of beliefs.<sup>10</sup> Factors like age, gender, nationality, religion, education level, personality, mood, past experiences, and so on determine which beliefs are formed. This means that people with different backgrounds likely will have different beliefs. Individual factors influence the sources of information people encounter and their experiences. Besides this, these characteristics will also lead to differences in the way experiences and information are remembered and interpreted. Hence, if two people experience the same thing, this still can lead to the formation of different beliefs.

Beliefs are not independent, because they are related to each other. A belief system is a set of beliefs that is bound together by a form of dependence.<sup>11</sup> This interdependence or constraint means, first, that given some beliefs in the belief system, one can predict with some success other beliefs that are part of the belief system. For example, if someone believes that the Bible is literally true, it is likely that this person also holds the related belief that the earth has been created in six days. Moreover, a change in one of the beliefs in the belief system will result in the change of some of the other beliefs. Belief systems can differ in range, that is, in the number and diversity of objects included in them. Within the belief system, beliefs differ in centrality. More central beliefs are related to more beliefs and thus,

---

<sup>7</sup> Jens Rydgren, "Beliefs," in *The Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology*, ed. Peter Hedström and Peter Bearman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 73–74.

<sup>8</sup> Fishbein and Ajzen, *Belief, Attitude, Intention, and Behavior*, 132.

<sup>9</sup> Fishbein and Ajzen, *Belief, Attitude, Intention, and Behavior*, 143.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen, *Predicting and Changing Behavior: The Reasoned Action Approach* (New York: Psychology Press, 2010), 24.

<sup>11</sup> Philip E. Converse, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics (1964)," *Critical Review* 18, no. 1–3 (2006): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08913810608443650>.

these beliefs are less likely to be changed. Belief systems are often open.<sup>12</sup> This means that there exist no clear boundaries between beliefs that are part of the belief system and beliefs that are not.

## 1.2 Fundamentalist Belief Systems

What makes an individual a fundamentalist? Despite the growing literature on fundamentalism, there has been given little attention to providing clarity to the concept itself. Many studies lack a rigorous definition at all. Moreover, fundamentalism can be approached in various ways. In some works, the term fundamentalism also includes secular movements, while others only apply it to religious movements or even argue that it can only be applied to Western Christian groups. It would be a large-scale project to define fundamentalism. Hence, I will mention some important points and provide a working definition for this thesis.

The term fundamentalism originated from Protestant Christian movements in the United States in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>13</sup> They stood for a return to the foundation of the Christian faith against liberal interpretations of the Bible. The movement centred around five main tenets: the inerrancy of the Bible, Christ's deity, his birth from a virgin, his substitutionary atonement, and his physical resurrection and second coming. Nowadays, the term 'fundamentalism' has moved beyond this initially meaning and has been applied to a wide variety of movements. These include Wahhabism, Haredi Judaism, and Sikh fundamentalism. But besides this, fundamentalism also has become to include non-religious movements, like environmental extremism, neo-Nazism, and fascism.

In trying to provide conceptual clarity and defining the concept in such a way that it can be used in a wide variety of contexts, Rik Peels gives the following definition:

A movement is *fundamentalist* if and only if (i) it is reactionary towards modern developments, (ii) it is itself modern, and (iii) it is based on a grand historical narrative. More specifically, a movement is fundamentalist if it exemplifies a large number of the following properties: (i) it is reactionary in its rejection of liberal ethics, science, or technological exploitation, (ii) it is modern in seeking certainty and control, embracing literalism and infallibility about particular scriptures, actively using media and technology, or making universal claims, and (iii) it presents a grand historical narrative in terms of paradise, fall, and redemption, or cosmic dualism.<sup>14</sup>

However, the focus in this thesis will be on individual fundamentalists rather than movements. Socio-economic factors vary at an individual level and affect individuals' beliefs. This is not to withhold that group dynamics play an important role in the development of a fundamentalist worldview and that socio-economic factors may have an indirect effect on group ideology. However, not every member of a fundamentalist movement will necessarily hold all the beliefs that are advocated by the movement. One can believe only part of truths claimed by the movement or join for altogether different reasons than conviction of the truth of that what is preached.

Bob Altemeyer and Bruce Hunsberger define fundamentalism in terms of a set of beliefs. According to them, fundamentalism is:

The belief that there is one set of religious teachings that clearly contains the fundamental, basic, intrinsic, essential, inerrant truth about humanity and deity; that this essential truth is

---

<sup>12</sup> Robert P. Abelson, "Differences Between Belief and Knowledge Systems," *Cognitive Science* 3, no. 4 (October 1979): 359, [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15516709cog0304\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15516709cog0304_4).

<sup>13</sup> Harriet A. Harris, "Fundamentalism(s)," in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies*, ed. J.W. Rogerson and Judith M. Lieu (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 110–13.

<sup>14</sup> Rik Peels, "Defining 'Fundamentalism'," unpublished manuscript, February 24, 2020.

fundamentally opposed by forces of evil which must be vigorously fought; that this truth must be followed today according to the fundamental, unchangeable practices of the past; and that those who believe and follow these fundamental teachings have a special relationship with the deity.<sup>15</sup>

Fundamentalist beliefs are a core component of what makes someone a fundamentalist. Besides this, the phenomenon has also other dimensions, like affections and conative states. It comes with emotions, wishes, goals, practices, and rituals. Nevertheless, in this thesis, I will focus on fundamentalist beliefs.

What makes a belief fundamentalist is not merely its propositional content.<sup>16</sup> For example, the belief that men are superior to women is commonly held by fundamentalists. Nevertheless, not everyone who holds this belief will be a fundamentalist. Suppose one thoroughly researches the relationship between men and women and comes, although falsely, to the conclusion that men are superior. It seems like this would not count as a fundamentalist belief because the belief was formed in an open-minded, well-researched way. More importantly, this belief is only one belief. Fundamentalists will also hold other, often stereotypical, beliefs. So, one can hold the belief that women are inferior, while not being a fundamentalist. Therefore, fundamentalism is often defined as a family resemblance rather than in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions.<sup>17</sup> An individual or movement is then seen as fundamentalist if it fulfils sufficiently many stereotypical characteristics.

So, rather than focusing on individual fundamentalist beliefs, I will focus on fundamentalist belief systems. This does not mean that fundamentalist belief systems only include fundamentalist beliefs. Such a belief system can also include beliefs that are shared with many non-fundamentalists, for example, the belief that God exists. Nevertheless, the belief system as a whole can be said to be fundamentalist. Moreover, next to a fundamentalist belief system, individuals can also have non-fundamentalist belief systems. For example, a person's religious belief system can be fundamentalist, while their beliefs regarding climate change are non-fundamentalist. Nevertheless, fundamentalist belief systems play a key role for people. They provide people with meaning and a view of self and the world.<sup>18</sup>

Taking it all together, this provides us with a working definition of fundamentalist belief systems. Regarding the propositional content, I will follow the definition of Peels of fundamentalist movements given above. In contrast with the definition of Altemeyer and Hunsberger, this definition allows for the concept of fundamentalism to also include non-religious variants. So, a fundamentalist belief system will be here defined as follows:

A fundamentalist belief system is a belief system that involves beliefs that are (i) reactionary towards modernity in ethics, science, or innovation; (ii) that seeks certainty and control by advocating a literalistic and infallible interpretation of particular texts or making universal claims; (iii) and that gives a grand historical narrative in terms of paradise, fall, and redemption, or cosmic dualism.

---

<sup>15</sup> Bob Altemeyer and Bruce Hunsberger, "Authoritarianism, Religious Fundamentalism, Quest, and Prejudice," *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 2, no. 2 (1992): 118.

<sup>16</sup> Rik Peels, "Responsibility for Fundamentalist Belief," in *Epistemic Duties: New Arguments, New Angles*, ed. Kevin McCain and Scott Stapleford (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2021), 224, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429030215-18>.

<sup>17</sup> Malise Ruthven, *Fundamentalism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 6.

<sup>18</sup> Ralph W. Jr. Hood, Peter C. Hill, and W. Paul Williamson, *The Psychology of Religious Fundamentalism* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2005), 15.

Moreover, a religious fundamentalist belief system is a fundamentalist belief system where the constraint is religion.

Studies based on quantitative methods use various ways to determine whether people are fundamentalist. There exist three general methods for this, namely, by denominational affiliation, doctrinal beliefs, or self-identification.<sup>19</sup> All three methods have their limitations. However, much of the quantitative analysis of fundamentalism is based on secondary data, so often the choice of measure has to be based on the available data.

The first method classifies people as fundamentalists based on the denomination they are part of. There exist several classification schemes for Christian denominations in the United States.<sup>20</sup> This method focuses on the beliefs of the movement rather than individual beliefs. However, this does not take into account the difference between actions and beliefs. People can be fundamentalists while not being part of a fundamentalist denomination or vice versa. Moreover, much care is needed in classifying the various denominations. An alternative method is to classify fundamentalists based on the beliefs they hold. For example, Bob Altemeyer and Bruce Hunsberger have created a 12-item religious fundamentalism scale, with items like “God has given humanity a complete, unfailing guide to happiness and salvation, which must be totally followed.”<sup>21</sup> However, with this approach, it is hard to distinguish fundamentalists from conservatives. Finally, classification of fundamentalists can be done based on self-identification. This means that people themselves indicate whether they are fundamentalists or not. However, people can differently define this concept, especially across cultures. Moreover, fundamentalism has obtained a negative connotation over time and is often used pejoratively. This can make people less likely to label themselves as fundamentalists. As all these methods have their shortcomings, Robert Woodberry and Christian Smith advise that it is best to, wherever possible, combine several measures to classify people as fundamentalists.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Robert D. Woodberry and Christian S. Smith, “Fundamentalism et al: Conservative Protestants in America,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998): 33, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.24.1.25>.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Tom W. Smith, “Classifying Protestant Denomination,” *Review of Religious Research* 31, no. 3 (1990): 225–45.

<sup>21</sup> Bob Altemeyer and Bruce Hunsberger, “RESEARCH: A Revised Religious Fundamentalism Scale: The Short and Sweet of It,” *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 14, no. 1 (2004): 48, <https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327582ijpr1401>.

<sup>22</sup> Woodberry and Smith, “Fundamentalism et al,” 38.

## Chapter 2 Reviewing the Literature

Already in 1959, Everett Perry conducted a study on the effects socio-economic factors had on the rise and decline of fundamentalism in the United States.<sup>23</sup> He found that socio-economic factors played an important role in the development of American fundamentalism, but the relationship was not straightforward. Socio-economic circumstances lead to certain social and religious needs, like longing for security and self-determination. Involvement in fundamentalist movements was found to be a way to meet these needs. Since then, much research has been done on fundamentalist beliefs and how it relates to socio-economic factors. However, a review that synthesises all these findings is missing so far. Many publications assume that there exists a relationship between socio-economic factors and fundamentalist beliefs, claiming, for example, that people in poverty or those without a job are more likely to form fundamentalist beliefs. However, it is not clear whether current research confirms this. By reviewing the past and current literature, I hope to help fill this knowledge gap. The question that I seek to answer with this review is: what evidence has been found in previous research of the role socio-economic factors play in people's forming and maintaining religious fundamentalist belief systems?

Socio-economic factors are a combination of social and economic factors that measure the financial and social status of an individual or group of individuals. Examples are education level, income, employment status, and occupational status.<sup>24</sup> These factors affect the experiences people have, the information they gather, and how experiences and information are processed. Hence, people from different socio-economic backgrounds will have different beliefs. At the same time, people from similar backgrounds can form certain beliefs that are much alike. This could also be the case for fundamentalist beliefs. It could be that certain socio-economic factors can lead to common experiences, information, or ways of processing which make it more likely for people to form religious fundamentalist belief systems. Here, fundamentalist belief systems are defined using the definition given in the previous chapter.

### 2.1 Selection of publications

Potential studies were identified by searching online databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science. The search term 'fundamentalism' was used combined with various terms relating to socio-economic factors like 'socio-economic', 'socioeconomic', 'income', 'job status', 'deprivation', and 'poverty'. Besides this, 'snowballing' was used to identify potential studies. This means that references in already selected studies were used to obtain new potential studies.

Several criteria were used to determine which publications were included in the review. First, studies were selected based on their definition of 'religious fundamentalism'. Because of limits to the time and resources available, only studies that classified the subject of study as religious fundamentalism were considered. The definition of fundamentalism in the publication and the way the term was operationalized were compared with the definition used in this thesis. If those were in line with each other, the publication was included. This meant that, for example, a paper that grouped conservatives and fundamentalists together was excluded. Many studies focused on people's membership of

---

<sup>23</sup> Everett L. Perry, "Socio-Economic Factors and American Fundamentalism: A 1959 Doctoral Dissertation," *Review of Religious Research* 1, no. 2 (1959): 57–61; see Everett L. Perry, *The Role of Socio-Economic Factors in the Rise and Development of American Fundamentalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1959).

<sup>24</sup> Here, employment status is used to refer to whether someone is employed or unemployed. Occupational status is a measure of the prestige of one's occupation.

fundamentalist movements rather than individual's fundamentalist beliefs. This was measured by fundamentalist denominational affiliation. These studies were included, although some care is needed in the interpretation of these results. Not all members of a fundamentalist movement will necessarily hold the beliefs that are advocated by the movement. Still, I included these studies as other ways of classifying fundamentalists also have limitations.

Studies that solely studied terrorist movements were excluded. In these studies, the focus was on explaining why people use violence or support the use of it. Often this was the only criterion used to distinguish extremists. This is problematic for this research because one can have a fundamentalist belief system without promoting violence. Moreover, not all those who support or use violence are necessarily fundamentalists. Hence, these studies were excluded.

Regarding socio-economic background, studies were included when it was mentioned that one of the goals of the study was to investigate the relationship between fundamentalism and social or economic factors, or both. If such a goal was not mentioned, studies were included only if at least two socio-economic factors were included. This was done to prevent reporting bias. Studies that investigated fundamentalism in other contexts than socio-economic background often included control variables. However, it can be the case that only results for control variables that are significant or likely to be significant were included. This means that in those studies, it is more likely that socio-economic factors were reported when they had significant effects on the variable in question than when they were not significant. This will bias the results of the review. Hence, only studies that used at least two socio-economic factors were included. This meant that some studies that only used education level as a control variable in the analysis were excluded.

Finally, in quantitative studies, the number of observations was checked. One study specifically was excluded because out of a total sample of 1,013 survey participants only 15 were classified as fundamentalist.

This resulted in a final selection of 21 publications.<sup>25</sup> Table 1 shows some characteristics of 19 of these studies. Two descriptive studies are not included in the table, as they discussed fundamentalism in general, not related to a specific religion or region. Two third of the selected studies are of a quantitative nature. The other studies are descriptive or historical. No meta-analyses, conceptual studies, or works based on interviews with fundamentalists were found that fit the selection criteria. All but one publication studied fundamentalism in the context of Christianity or Islam. Regarding region, the studies are more differentiated, although about half of the studies investigated fundamentalism in North America.

---

<sup>25</sup> If multiple chapters of a book written by different authors were selected, they were counted as separate studies.

Table 1: Characteristics of the selected studies

	Number of studies
<b>Method</b>	
Descriptive/Historical	5
Quantitative	14
<b>Religion</b>	
Christianity	12
Hinduism	1
Islam	11
<b>Region</b>	
Africa	5
Asia	8
Europe	3
North America	10

*Note:* Two studies are not included as those did not discuss fundamentalism in the context of specific religions or regions. The total number of studies presented here is 19. Totals for religion and region may not sum to 19 as some studies consider multiple religions or regions.

## 2.2 Descriptive and Historical Studies

In total, seven studies were selected that made use of historical or descriptive methods to study the relationship between socio-economic factors and fundamentalism. The socio-economic groups that were most likely to have a fundamentalist worldview, according to these studies, can be classified into four categories. Those are recent urban migrants, the traditional middle class, university students and recent graduates, and the poor. Table 2 shows for each of the selected studies which categories were discussed.

Table 2: Overview of socio-economic categories discussed in the selected descriptive and historical studies

	Urban migrants	Traditional middle class	Students	The poor
Almond, Sivan, & Appleby, 1995	x		x	x
Bruce, 2000		x	x	
Dekmejian, 1995	x	x		x
Hoffman, 1995			x	
Moaddel, 1996		x		
Piscatori, 1994				x
Riesebrodt, 1993	x	x	x	

The first group are people from a rural background who recently moved to urban environments, often for economic reasons. Martin Riesebrodt argued that in Iran during the 1960s and 70s, people who migrated to urban environments because of the poor conditions in the countryside were attracted to fundamentalism.<sup>26</sup> According to R. Hrair Dekmejian, this phenomenon was not only visible in Iran but also in other parts of the Arab world.<sup>27</sup> Besides economic difficulties, like unemployment and housing shortage, urban migrants also faced a cultural identity crisis. People were uprooted from their familiar background with its social structures and arrived in an alien environment. Urban societies were much more modern in morals and values than the traditional rural villages. This led migrants to a search to maintain or create an identity. Many turned to fundamentalism as a way to make sense of the world. This has not only been noticed in Islam but also in fundamentalist Christianity urban migrants have played an important role.<sup>28</sup>

This search for identity also has been found to play a role in the turn of members of the traditional middle class to fundamentalism. The often traditional middle class faced a cultural alienation from upper strata.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, their socio-economic status was threatened due to limited opportunities for upward mobility. In Iran, due to economic and cultural reasons, there arose a separation in cities between the lower and upper classes. The traditionalist middle and lower classes lived in the old city, while the more modern middle and upper classes moved to the newer parts. Not only did this lead to a loss of status for the bazaar, but it also led to an alienation from the higher classes who had very different cultural norms. Also, within the bazaar, this changing culture led to conflicts, especially intergenerationally. Many chose fundamentalism as a way to preserve traditional values. A further driver towards fundamentalism was the hostile attitude of the state towards the bazaar and clergy, displayed in the tearing down of bazaars and economic support for competitors.<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, Mansoor Moaddel argues that the economic restructuring of the Shah in Iran in the 1960s led to opposition by the traditional middle class who were affected the most by this policy.<sup>31</sup> While this explains why the small shopkeepers in the bazaars were inclined to protest, it does not make clear why they turned to fundamentalist Islam, especially, as earlier many of them had been supporters of the liberal-nationalist National Front. Moaddel argues that oppositional ideological discourse is produced as a reaction towards state ideology. This means that many of the themes that played a role in the state ideology also were at the heart of the ideology of the opposition, for example, the relationship with the West, the position of women, and the role of religion in politics. Because the state's policy and ideology were secular, the protest was based on religion. Similarly, in Syria, the economic undermining of certain social classes together with support for secular ideas and practices from the government led to the rise of Islamic fundamentalism.

A similar process was also seen in the upsurge of Christian fundamentalism.<sup>32</sup> The rise of large corporations formed a threat to many small enterprises, while for many traditionalists the increasingly

---

<sup>26</sup> Martin Riesebrodt, *Pious Passion: The Emergence of Modern Fundamentalism in the United States and Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 156.

<sup>27</sup> R. Hrair Dekmejian, *Islam in Revolution: Fundamentalism in the Arab World*, 2nd ed. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 47.

<sup>28</sup> Riesebrodt, *Pious Passion*, 83; Gabriel A. Almond, Emmanuel Sivan, and R. Scott Appleby, "Explaining Fundamentalisms," in *Fundamentalisms Comprehended*, ed. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), 436.

<sup>29</sup> Dekmejian, *Islam in Revolution*, 49.

<sup>30</sup> Riesebrodt, *Pious Passion*, 152 ff.

<sup>31</sup> Mansoor Moaddel, "The Social Bases and Discursive Context of the Rise of Islamic Fundamentalism: The Cases of Iran and Syria," *Sociological Inquiry* 66, no. 3 (1996): 330–55, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-682X.1996.tb00224.x>.

<sup>32</sup> Riesebrodt, *Pious Passion*, 97.

popular socialist labour unions had ideological problems. Together with the economic uncertainty after the first world war, this led to many social classes being economically affected. Hence, a fundamentalist ideology that provided safety became more attractive. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that in terms of class distribution, in the 1920s, fundamentalist movements did not differ significantly from general Protestant movements in which a high share of adherents came from the lower and upper class. Moreover, Riesebrodt argues that members of the first fundamentalist churches in the United States did not come from a specific social class.<sup>33</sup> Instead, members from all social classes were present. A reason for this is that, ideologically, fundamentalism was not directed at a certain class. Instead, there were other reasons besides economic ones to associate. Here, again, changing moral values and a struggle to combine traditional and modern values are used as an explanation for the rise of fundamentalism. Nevertheless, changes in the economic structure also played a role, but these were not limited to a small part of the population.

Thirdly, university students and recent graduates make up a major share of many fundamentalist movements. Valerie Hoffman argued that in Tunisia and Algeria many of the leaders of fundamentalist movements were well-educated, often at secular institutions.<sup>34</sup> However, a large share of the followers they attracted were university students and recent graduates with a rural or traditional background. The parents of many of these students had no or only low levels of education. While these students had, often at considerable costs, obtained high education levels, economic prospects were bleak. There were far more graduates than jobs, and incomes were low. This discrepancy between the availability of higher education and suitable jobs led to discontent. Almond, Sivan, and Appleby notice that in some countries, government policy towards the educational system created an imbalance between the supply and demand of college graduates.<sup>35</sup> This had led to an increase in fundamentalist movements in several parts of the world. Hoffman concludes, “Actual class affiliation is not as important for the rise of Islamic fundamentalism as ‘an incongruity between high aspirations and the decrease in economic and political opportunities.’”<sup>36</sup> Together with a struggle for identity in an environment in-between traditional values and modern Western culture, this has led to many students and recent graduates being attracted to fundamentalism.

Riesebrodt also mentions that young people from a traditional background with a secular education were attracted to fundamentalism in Iran.<sup>37</sup> This also applied to a group of white-collar government workers, for whom fundamentalism was for a way out of the conflict between traditional values and modern culture. A similar process was also at work in the clergy.<sup>38</sup> Among them, most fundamentalists had a middle- or lower-class background. While they hoped to make a career and gain social status as a religious leader, opportunities for this were limited in the 1960s. Besides a general loss of prestige of the clergy, religious education became less important relative to secular education. This limited the opportunities for upward mobility of clergy from lower-class backgrounds.

Finally, the poor are found to be more likely to have fundamentalist beliefs. Not only has this group been found to be attracted to fundamentalism because it gave them a way to escape from an alienated society, but it also provided them with the means to cope with their circumstances. The poor who were generally committed Muslims were attracted by the call for social justice in fundamentalist Islam.<sup>39</sup> On

---

<sup>33</sup> Riesebrodt, *Pious Passion*, 82.

<sup>34</sup> Valerie J. Hoffman, “Muslim Fundamentalists: Psychosocial Profiles,” in *Fundamentalisms Comprehended*, ed. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 203.

<sup>35</sup> Almond, Sivan, and Appleby, “Explaining Fundamentalisms,” 433.

<sup>36</sup> Hoffman, “Muslim Fundamentalists,” 209.

<sup>37</sup> Riesebrodt, *Pious Passion*, 159.

<sup>38</sup> Riesebrodt, *Pious Passion*, 148.

<sup>39</sup> Dekmejian, *Islam in Revolution*, 48.

an ideological level, it promised a better future life on earth, and otherwise in heaven. Besides this, also practical help was often provided to the poor like social services and health care.

In these four categories of people attracted to fundamentalism, different socio-economic grievances were at play. For urban migrants and the poor, their grievance was their dire socio-economic situation. The traditional middle class has been attracted to fundamentalism as they experienced a loss of socio-economic status, while university students saw their hopes of upward mobility thwarted. However, in all cases also a struggle to maintain or create an identity in a changing world is mentioned. Hence, socio-economic factors alone do not seem to be a sufficient condition for the formation of fundamentalist beliefs.

This is also the account given by Steve Bruce. He argued that fundamentalist movements, like all movements, are seen as more attractive by some social classes.<sup>40</sup> For fundamentalism, those are marginalized classes. People who experience a recent loss of influence or status and those who experience upward mobility but are not able to fulfil their aspirations are most attracted to fundamentalism. Especially if these economic changes threaten the preservation and transmission of cultural values, some traditionally religious people will turn to fundamentalism.<sup>41</sup>

Almond, Sivan, and Appleby confirmed this too. According to them, the majority of fundamentalists come from less economically developed backgrounds.<sup>42</sup> Besides this, short-term economic changes, like recessions, inflation, and unemployment can create grievances in certain groups of society. These can make them more susceptible to fundamentalism. These factors are mainly indirect constraints and stimuli for fundamentalist movements. Not everyone who is laid off directly becomes a fundamentalist. However, these structural factors create potential recruits. Contingency factors, that are, shock or trigger factors, are needed to mobilize these people. This could, for example, be a sudden change in government policy or riots caused by longer periods of economic or political instability.

A slightly different account is given by James Piscatori. He argued that fundamentalist Islam is not so much a consequence of economic failure but the inept reaction of national and local leaders to these economic problems.<sup>43</sup> While social and economic disequilibria, caused by, for example, rapid urbanization, are important catalysts for fundamentalist movements, unsuccessful leadership in dealing with these problems is the main cause of the rise of these movements. While governments fail, fundamentalist movements are able to successfully offer social services, like schooling, health care, and poverty relief.

Taking all this together, it is suggested that socio-economic factors play indeed a role in the formation of fundamentalist beliefs. Mainly the lower and middle social classes have been attracted by fundamentalism. A majority of members of fundamentalist movements are economically disadvantaged, experience threats to their socio-economic status or see their attempts to better their status fail. In all studies, also other factors played a role, most notably a struggle to combine traditional and modern values. A limitation of these studies is that they mostly focus on fundamentalist forms of Islam. Only one study discusses fundamentalism in the context of Christianity. It is not clear whether the results are generalizable to other religious groups.

---

<sup>40</sup> Steve Bruce, *Fundamentalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 14.

<sup>41</sup> Bruce, *Fundamentalism*, 118.

<sup>42</sup> Almond, Sivan, and Appleby, "Explaining Fundamentalisms," 430.

<sup>43</sup> James Piscatori, "Accounting for Islamic Fundamentalisms," in *Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements*, ed. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994), 361–62.

## 2.3 Quantitative Studies

Several studies investigate empirically whether fundamentalists have different socio-economic backgrounds than non-fundamentalists. Various methods and approaches are employed to test the relationship between fundamentalist attitudes and socio-economic factors. These studies use data gathered by surveys. The selected quantitative studies can be distinguished into three groups. First, some studies investigate how general socio-economic characteristics, like employment status, income, or occupational status, influence whether people form fundamentalist beliefs. Next, there are studies that analyse how the religious belief system of parents and their socio-economic status affect the worldview of their children. Thirdly, some of the selected studies discuss how feelings of marginalization or deprivation affect the formation of fundamentalist belief systems.

Almost all studies found some significant relationships between socio-economic background and fundamentalists beliefs or affiliation. Mansoor Moaddel and Stuart Karabenick sought to explain fundamentalist orientations in eight countries in the Middle East.<sup>44</sup> They found that in all but one country, socio-economic status, measured by a combination of education level and income, had a strong negative effect on the level of fundamentalism of the respondents. Especially people living in rural areas with low socio-economic status had a high level of fundamentalism. The authors argued that people with low levels of education lack the skills to weigh different perspectives and analyse and make sense of the world on their own. Moreover, people with low incomes have fewer opportunities to encounter people with different perspectives or from other backgrounds. Hence, people with low socio-economic status are more likely to develop fundamentalist beliefs. The effect of being employed on the degree of fundamentalism was also studied. Only for respondents living in Tunisia and Turkey, this was found to have a significant effect.<sup>45</sup> In those countries, unemployed respondents were more likely to have fundamentalist beliefs.

Similar results were found in other studies. Albert Mayer and Harry Sharp conclude that members of small neo-fundamentalist Protestant sects had significantly fewer years of education, lower incomes, and a lower job status than those from different denominations.<sup>46</sup> Even when controlling for ascribed background factors, like urban versus rural background and foreign versus native background, it was found that fundamentalists had below-average worldly success, only followed by Lutherans, Baptists, and Catholics. Fundamentalism was also associated with worse socio-economic backgrounds among Christians and Muslims from native and immigrant backgrounds in Western Europe.<sup>47</sup> Those who had lower education levels, were unemployed, had low job status, or were living in rental houses displayed significantly higher levels of fundamentalism. Although this held for both Christians and Muslims, the effect sizes were larger for the latter. Still, these variables could only explain to a small extent the variation in degrees of fundamentalism between individuals.

Nancy Ammerman studied not only how socio-economic variables affected self-identification as a fundamentalist but also the extent of fundamentalist beliefs and anti-modern attitudes among church

---

<sup>44</sup> Mansoor Moaddel and Stuart A. Karabenick, "Religious Fundamentalism in Eight Muslim-Majority Countries: Reconceptualization and Assessment," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 57, no. 4 (2018): 676–706, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12549>.

<sup>45</sup> Here and in the remainder of this thesis, significance refers to an alpha of 0.05. This is the value most commonly used in the selected studies.

<sup>46</sup> Albert J. Mayer and Harry Sharp, "Religious Preference and Worldly Success," *American Sociological Review* 27, no. 2 (1962): 218–27.

<sup>47</sup> Ruud Koopmans, "Religious Fundamentalism and Hostility against Out-Groups: A Comparison of Muslims and Christians in Western Europe," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 41, no. 1 (2015): 33–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2014.935307>.

leaders of the Southern Baptist denomination.<sup>48</sup> Education level and occupational prestige were used as predictors. Initially, income was also included but later excluded as it had no independent effect on the variables. Education level and occupational prestige had a significant effect on the degree of fundamentalism of laity church leaders. Those with a high school degree or some college education were most likely to hold anti-modern attitudes and self-identify as fundamentalists. Blue-collar workers and farmers were found to be the most fundamentalist in their beliefs among the laity church leaders. For clergy, occupational prestige was not included as all respondents had the same occupation. It was found that for them, education played an important role in the various facets of fundamentalism that were investigated. In conclusion, while those from the lowest social strata were most likely to have fundamentalist beliefs, anti-modern attitudes and self-identification as fundamentalist were found most among those with moderate levels of exposure to modernity through education or employment.

Lisa Blaydes and Drew Linzer studied the level of religiosity of Muslim women in 18 countries in which Islam was the dominant religion.<sup>49</sup> Fundamentalist beliefs were more prevalent among women who were married and those without a job than, respectively, unmarried women and those who were employed. The probability that women belonging to these latter categories were classified as fundamentalists was up to 8% higher than for other women. Moreover, education level had a strong effect on the degree of fundamentalism. Finally, also social class significantly affected the level of fundamentalism, but the effect size was quite small. The authors argued that a lack of economic opportunity is the most important predictor of fundamentalist beliefs rather than social class. Generally, women can gain financial security either through employment or marriage. Conservative beliefs and a pious lifestyle make a woman a more attractive marriage partner. Hence, when the economic opportunities of women are limited due to poverty, low education levels, or unemployment, fundamentalism is attractive as a way to gain financial security through marriage. However, the authors do not assess whether possibly the causal relationship works the other way around. It could also be that fundamentalist women are more likely to marry and become housewives, while more liberal women are less likely to conform to traditional gender roles. Nevertheless, on a country level, it was found that in countries with a big difference between male and female salaries, women were far more likely to hold fundamentalist beliefs. Besides this, also per capita GDP had a significant negative effect on the estimated proportion of women with fundamentalist beliefs.

Another study by Thaddeus Coreno found that white Protestant fundamentalists in the United States did not come from a specific class background.<sup>50</sup> Rather, fundamentalists were found to have the lowest socio-economic status within each class. On average, fundamentalists had fewer years of education, lower incomes, and lower socio-economic status. In logistic regression, all three variables were also found to have a significant negative effect. However, this only explained 16 per cent of the variance in religious affiliation. A reason for this is that, although fundamentalists were disproportionately found in the lower classes, they were spread out over the whole class structure. Analysis of characteristics of mainliners and fundamentalists within each class consistently found that fundamentalists came from the lower tiers of each class.

---

<sup>48</sup> Nancy T. Ammerman, "Southern Baptists and the New Christian Right," *Review of Religious Research* 32, no. 3 (1991): 213–36.

<sup>49</sup> Lisa Blaydes and Drew A. Linzer, "The Political Economy of Women's Support for Fundamentalist Islam," *World Politics* 60, no. 4 (2008): 576–609, <https://doi.org/10.1353/wp.0.0023>.

<sup>50</sup> Thaddeus Coreno, "Fundamentalism as a Class Culture," *Sociology of Religion* 63, no. 3 (2002): 335–60, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3712473>.

Christian Smith investigated how the socio-economic position of American fundamentalist Christians compared to that of other people.<sup>51</sup> Fundamentalists were the most likely to have only a high school degree or less, compared to evangelicals, mainline, liberals, Catholics, and non-religious respondents. Moreover, the only group with lower mean years of education were the non-religious, but the differences between the groups were small. Fundamentalists belonged to the groups with the highest share of people in the paid labour force, but they had the smallest proportion of people with a high income. Most of the self-identified fundamentalists had low or medium incomes, although many of the liberals and non-religious also had low incomes. Most notably, 62% of fundamentalists reported that in the last ten years their economic situation had become better, which was the highest percentage out of all groups. Besides this, logistic regression was used to predict religious identity. The socio-economic variables that were significant for fundamentalists were education level and income, while employment status was not.<sup>52</sup> Compared to all Americans, fundamentalists had a significantly lower income and compared to only churchgoing Protestants, fundamentalists had a significantly lower education level. Overall, it was found that the socio-economic status of fundamentalists is slightly lower than that of other Christian groups.

A slightly different approach was taken by Melissa Waters, Will Heath, and John Watson. They analysed the relationship between membership of fundamentalist denominations and income in the United States on a state level.<sup>53</sup> They argue that there might exist a two-way relationship between religious affiliation and income level. Not only is religious affiliation potentially affected by socio-economic background, but this can also work the other way around. Religious values, attitudes, and traditions can affect education and income levels too. Hence, this study used simultaneous estimation of these effects to be able to distinguish between them. They found that per capita income had a significant negative effect on membership of fundamentalist denominations. However, the effect of per capita income on non-fundamentalist Protestant membership was of a similar magnitude. Moreover, median education level was found to positively affect fundamentalist membership. At the same time, in states with higher percentages of fundamentalist membership, the average per capita income was significantly lower. This confirms that there exists a two-way relationship between the two variables. It is valuable that this study investigates the relationship between socio-economic factors and fundamentalism in both directions. Neglecting the effect of fundamentalism on socio-economic factors means that the effect in the other direction can be overestimated. However, it would have been even more informative if this was done on an individual level rather than on a state level.

Not only does an individual's socio-economic background play a role, but also the background of their parents could be potentially influential. Several studies, therefore, investigated how the education level and income of parents affect the degree of fundamentalism of their children at various ages. Lee Ellis studied these effects for college students in the United States and Malaysia from various religious backgrounds.<sup>54</sup> Correlations of parents' education level and family income with the self-rated degree of fundamentalism were calculated. Hardly any of the correlations were statistically significant, and the signs were mixed. Malaysian Muslims from the poorest families were only slightly more likely to regard themselves as fundamentalists. However, these findings could be due to how religious

---

<sup>51</sup> Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 83.

<sup>52</sup> Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 239.

<sup>53</sup> Melissa S. Waters, Will Carrington Heath, and John Keith Watson, "A Positive Model of the Determination of Religious Affiliation," *Social Science Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (1995): 105–23.

<sup>54</sup> Lee Ellis, "Religious Variations in Fundamentalism in Malaysia and the United States: Possible Relevance to Religiously Motivated Violence," *Personality and Individual Differences* 107 (2017): 23–27, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2016.11.012>.

fundamentalism was measured. Students had to rate their degree of fundamentalism on a scale from 1 to 10 and only those who answered 10 were regarded as fundamentalists. From the Malaysian students, about 40% was considered fundamentalists, while for the US students this was only about 15%. Besides this, only correlations between the variables were considered. Hence, the generalizability of these findings is limited.

A paper by Amy Adamczyk studied the same topic, but instead, denominational membership was used to classify participants as fundamentalists.<sup>55</sup> It was suggested that children who went to college might be more likely to switch to non-fundamentalist denominations because of the critical thinking skills acquired. Moreover, the higher social status resulting from this might lead to a disconnect from the church respondents grew up in. However, if parents had a college degree and were able to integrate that with their fundamentalist beliefs, their children might be more inclined to still affiliate with a fundamentalist denomination at a later age, even when obtaining a college degree. It was found that whether one or both parents had a college degree did not significantly influence the likelihood that children with a fundamentalist background would later in life switch to a more liberal denomination. Only when comparing children without a college degree with parents without a college degree to children whom both themselves and their parents had college degrees did parental education level have an effect. Besides this, it was found that children with a higher education level and higher current income were more likely to have switched to a more liberal denomination. The authors concluded that differences in education level between parents and children did not have a significant effect on the religious orientation of children. Yet, the education level of children did play a role. A limitation of this study is that it did not take into account what the effect was of parents' education level or fundamentalist beliefs on the education level of children.

When studying the effect of parents' socio-economic background on the degree of fundamentalism of children, different mechanisms play a role. The socio-economic status of parents can directly influence the worldview of children, but this can also happen indirectly.<sup>56</sup> Socio-economic factors can affect the beliefs of parents, which in turn affects the beliefs of children. Alan Acock, Charles Wright, and Kay McKensie studied this in a sample of Christian parents and teens in the United States. They found that the socio-economic status of both fathers and mothers significantly affected their degree of fundamentalism. For children, this effect was negligible. Instead, the religious beliefs of the parents played an important role in the degree of fundamentalism of the child. These studies indicate that the direct effect of parents' education level and socio-economic status on the level of children's fundamentalism may be limited. Instead, parents' socio-economic background mainly played a role in the formation of their own beliefs. This in turn affected the beliefs of their children.

Finally, three studies investigated the role of people's perception of their socio-economic position in the formation of fundamentalist worldviews. Economic grievances occur not only on an individual level but also on a group level. Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Sophia Kuijper constructed measures of personal relative deprivation, fraternal relative deprivation, and socio-economic fear, and studied how these relate to fundamentalist beliefs.<sup>57</sup> People who experience these grievances can experience a form of worthlessness. Extreme ideologies, like religious fundamentalism, might help to restore feelings of significance by committing to specific ideological goals. However, no significant relationships were

---

<sup>55</sup> Amy Adamczyk, "Religious Switching: Does Parents' Education Matter?," *Research in The Social Scientific Study of Religion* 15, no. 1 (2004): 51–70.

<sup>56</sup> Alan C. Acock, Charles Wright, and Kay McKensie, "Predicting Intolerance: The Impact of Parents' Own Tolerance vs. Social Class and Religious Fundamentalism," *Deviant Behavior* 3, no. 1 (1981): 65–84.

<sup>57</sup> Jan Willem van Prooijen and Sophia M.H.C. Kuijper, "A Comparison of Extreme Religious and Political Ideologies: Similar Worldviews but Different Grievances," *Personality and Individual Differences* 159, no. December 2019 (2020): 1–6, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2020.109888>.

found between the different grievances and religious fundamentalism in regression analysis. Still, socio-economic fear and the degree of religious fundamentalism had a significant negative correlation. The authors suggest that it is likely that religious fundamentalism is associated with other grievances not studied here. Specific religious grievances like perceived blasphemy could affect the degree of fundamentalist beliefs.

Similarly, Mansoor Moaddel found no positive relationship between a possible socio-economic grievance and fundamentalism.<sup>58</sup> Iranians who displayed a higher level of fundamentalism were less likely to think that the current economy only worked towards the good of a few big interests instead of all the people. Still, socio-economic status, which was measured by a combination of education level and income, had a significant negative effect on fundamentalism. Moaddel proposed that higher levels of education allow people to better analyse situations and consider alternative viewpoints, while a higher income leads to less status insecurity. Hence, people with a higher socio-economic status were expected to be less likely to develop fundamentalist beliefs. Similarly, in a study of Muslims in Western Europe, it is found that respondents who reported a higher household's standard of living were significantly more likely to be fundamentalist.<sup>59</sup> In contrast, those who were employed were less likely to have a high degree of fundamentalism than those who were unemployed. Education level had no significant effect.

In conclusion, all studies found at least some statistically significant relationship between socio-economic factors and fundamentalist beliefs. The studies that investigated the relationship between general socio-economic background and fundamentalism all found several factors that were of importance in explaining fundamentalist variables. Especially, socio-economic status and education level were found to be key variables. Nevertheless, in general, those socio-economic factors could only explain the variation in fundamentalist beliefs to a small extent. Besides this, most studies also found that one or two variables did not have a statistically significant effect in the expected direction. However, this could potentially be due to some degree of multicollinearity. The different socio-economic variables, like education level, income, and socio-economic status are not independent. If the variables are highly correlated, this will lead to large standard errors and imprecise estimates of coefficients. This is a possible explanation of why some socio-economic factors were found to have no statistically significant effect.

Another share of the selected studies investigated the relationship between parents' socio-economic status and the beliefs of their children. It was found that the direct effect of parents' education level and income on the beliefs of their children is not significant. Instead, the socio-economic background of parents affected their own beliefs, which in turn influenced the religious beliefs of their children. Besides this, the one study that investigated the religiosity of children at a later age found that their socio-economic status later in life also played a role in whether they remained fundamentalists.<sup>60</sup>

Finally, the relationship between fundamentalist beliefs and one's perception of their socio-economic background has been studied. The three selected studies found no significant relationship or even effects in the opposite direction. This is a surprising result, as all historical and descriptive studies

---

<sup>58</sup> Mansoor Moaddel, "Monolithic Religious Markets, Fragmented State Structures, and Islamic Fundamentalism among Iranians and across the Middle East and North Africa," *Revue Internationale Des Études Du Développement* 229, no. 1 (2017): 33–62, <https://doi.org/10.3917/ried.229.0033>.

<sup>59</sup> Natalie Delia Deckard and David Jacobson, "The Prosperous Hardliner: Affluence, Fundamentalism, and Radicalization in Western European Muslim Communities," *Social Compass* 62, no. 3 (2015): 412–33, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768615587827>.

<sup>60</sup> Adamczyk, "Religious Switching," 64.

argued that people who perceived their economic circumstances as unstable were more likely to have fundamentalist beliefs.

A shortcoming of these quantitative studies is that only one study investigated the potential two-way relationship between fundamentalist beliefs and socio-economic factors. Waters, Heath, and Watson found that socio-economic background did not only affect whether one has fundamentalist beliefs, but this also worked the other way around.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, while many of the studies find a relationship between socio-economic situation and religious fundamentalism, they fail to explain *why* this is the case. It is not clear why people turn to religious fundamentalism rather than other forms of religion or non-religious fundamentalist belief systems. Another limitation is that all but one studies focus on Christian or Islamic variants of fundamentalism. It is not clear whether the results also apply to other religious fundamentalist belief systems.

Something that should also be taken into account is to what extent the definitions of fundamentalism used in the studies are comparable. Not all studies included a definition of how they use the term fundamentalism. However, more relevant in this context is how fundamentalism is operationalized. A study by Lyman Kellstedt and Corwin Smidt found that the choice of measure can have important consequences for the findings. They looked to the correlates of various interrelated measures of fundamentalism.<sup>62</sup> It was found that fundamentalists had significantly lower levels of education than evangelicals and other Protestants when the classification was based on denominational affiliation. However, no significant differences were found when self-identification was used to categorize fundamentalists. They also used a criterion based on doctrinal beliefs, for which the results were similar to the denominational measure. However, this doctrinal measure used only one question about biblical literalism regarding the creation story. Using only a single belief for such a complex phenomenon can lead to considerable measurement errors. Nevertheless, the choice of measure affected which social correlates were found to be significant.

A different study also found that the different strategies identified groups with distinct demographic characteristics.<sup>63</sup> Clyde Wilcox divided a sample of respondents into people who held fundamentalist beliefs but were not part of a fundamentalist denomination, people who did not hold fundamentalist beliefs but were part of a fundamentalist denomination, and people who both held fundamentalist beliefs and were a member of a fundamentalist denomination. The only denominational group and only beliefs group were found to have different demographic backgrounds. The latter had higher education levels and occupational status. However, the differences between these groups were amplified as the respondents who fitted both definitions were excluded. This group was found to be the closest to denominational fundamentalists regarding education level, but their occupational prestige was more similar to the doctrinal fundamentalists. It is not clear from the paper whether Wilcox used only Biblical literalism as a measure for doctrinal fundamentalism or included a wider range of variables.

These findings suggest that fundamentalism is not a unidimensional phenomenon. The various operationalizations seem to stress different aspects of fundamentalism. Measurements based on doctrine emphasize the importance of beliefs and the strength with which they are held as the major characteristic of fundamentalism, while a denominational criterion focuses on the role of group processes. At the same time, researchers often do not have much choice as they have to depend on the availability of data when secondary data is used. It also should be noted that these two studies focus on

---

<sup>61</sup> Waters, Heath, and Watson, "Positive Model of Determination," 120.

<sup>62</sup> Lyman Kellstedt and Corwin Smidt, "Measuring Fundamentalism: An Analysis of Different Operational Strategies," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 30, no. 3 (1991): 259–78.

<sup>63</sup> Clyde Wilcox, "Fundamentalists and Politics: An Analysis of the Effects of Differing Operational Definitions," *The Journal of Politics* 48, no. 4 (1986): 1041–51, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2131012>.

white Protestants from the United States. It is unclear to what extent these results can be generalized to other fundamentalist movements and regions.

Of the fourteen quantitative studies selected, seven studies classified fundamentalists based on doctrine, three studies used denominational affiliation, and two studies used self-identification. Moreover, one study used a combination of denominational affiliation and the belief in a literalistic interpretation of the Bible, while a final study used both doctrinal and self-identification measures. In line with the results from Kellstedt and Smidt, for the selected studies that used self-identification, hardly any of the tested socio-economic variables were found to be significant compared to the other measures. So, it appears that the choice of measure indeed affects which socio-economic factors are significant. Self-identification is likely the most unreliable measure of a fundamentalist belief system out of the three. This means that using it may lead to an underestimation of the effect of socio-economic factors.

## 2.4 Weighing the Evidence

The differences in methodology between the descriptive and historical studies and quantitative studies came also with a different approach to socio-economic background. The former studies studied how people experienced their socio-economic situation, while most quantitative studies used more objective and easily measurable indicators of socio-economic background, like income or employment status. Nevertheless, both approaches found that fundamentalists generally come from lower- and middle-class backgrounds. However, socio-economic background alone is not a sufficient condition for the formation of fundamentalist beliefs. In all historical and descriptive studies, also other factors were found to play a role, most notably a struggle to combine traditional and modern values. The quantitative studies confirmed this, as socio-economic factors could only explain a small part of the variation in beliefs and denominational affiliation.

It is noteworthy that the few quantitative studies that investigated how people's perception of their socio-economic status relates to fundamentalism found contradicting results. Studies that used objective measures of socio-economic factors generally found a significant negative relation. For example, Blaydes and Linzer found that the size of the wage gap between men and women was related to the proportion of women with fundamentalist beliefs.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, Coreno concluded that in the United States, fundamentalists were consistently located in the lower tiers of all socio-economic classes.<sup>65</sup> However, when grievances or people's perception of their socio-economic status were considered, different results were found. Van Prooijen and Kuijper found that fundamentalism was not related to feelings of relative deprivation, on both an individual and group level,<sup>66</sup> while Moaddel showed that Iranians who displayed a higher level of fundamentalism were less likely to think that the current economy only worked towards the good of a few big interests instead of all the people.<sup>67</sup> Finally, Deckard and Jacobson even found that fundamentalism was associated with higher perceived affluence.<sup>68</sup>

Taking a closer look at these variables, it appears that most of them actually did not measure whether people experienced threats to their socio-economic status. The survey questions Van Prooijen and Kuijper used in constructing the personal deprivation and fraternal deprivation variables were mainly

---

<sup>64</sup> Blaydes and Linzer, "Political Economy of Women's Support," 602.

<sup>65</sup> Coreno, "Class Culture," 355.

<sup>66</sup> van Prooijen and Kuijper, "Comparison of Extreme Ideologies," 3.

<sup>67</sup> Moaddel, "Monolithic Religious Markets."

<sup>68</sup> Delia Deckard and Jacobson, "The Prosperous Hardliner," 427.

focused on feelings of discrimination or injustice.<sup>69</sup> They used items like ‘It makes me angry when I think about the way I get treated compared to other Americans.’ Likewise, for the socio-economic fear variable, most items were focused on the general economic situation of the country rather than one’s socio-economic position, for example, ‘I frequently worry about the future of America.’ The same holds for the variable used by Moaddel. There the question used is, ‘In your view, to whose benefit does the economy run?’<sup>70</sup> Respondents could answer either that the economy runs for the benefit of a few big interests or the benefit of all people. All these variables do not give much information on how people perceive their socio-economic background.

Deckard and Jacobson asked Muslims in Western Europe what best described their household’s standard of living.<sup>71</sup> Respondents could choose from the options, ‘prosperous,’ ‘living very comfortably,’ ‘living reasonably comfortably,’ ‘just getting along,’ ‘nearly poor,’ or ‘poor’. Those who reported higher levels of affluence were found to be more likely to be fundamentalists. The majority of the sample consisted of first and second-generation migrants. The authors suggest that respondents who were more connected to their country of origin were both more likely to see their economic situation as more prosperous in comparison to where they came from and had religious values that corresponded more to those held in their country of origin. This alienation from Western European values, rather than feelings of poverty, could lead to more fundamentalist attitudes. This means that socio-economic situation is only one of the factors that might play a role in the development of fundamentalist beliefs. So, quantitative research that investigates the role of grievances in the development of fundamentalist belief systems is limited, but the other studies suggest that it plays a role.

It follows that a poor or worsening socio-economic situation is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for people’s forming or maintaining a religious fundamentalist belief system. Some fundamentalists have a high socio-economic status, while many people in poor socio-economic situations do not have a fundamentalist belief system. Nevertheless, the majority of the quantitative studies reported a significant association with fundamentalism for the various factors. Moreover, it was found that mainly the lower and middle social classes have been attracted by fundamentalism. Many members of fundamentalist movements are economically disadvantaged, experience threats to their socio-economic status or see their attempts to better their status fail. So, the past and current literature show that socio-economic background plays a role in how likely people are to develop and maintain religious fundamentalist belief systems.

---

<sup>69</sup> van Prooijen and Kuijper, “Comparison of Extreme Ideologies,” A1.

<sup>70</sup> Moaddel, “Monolithic Religious Markets,” 48.

<sup>71</sup> Delia Deckard and Jacobson, “The Prosperous Hardliner,” 420.

## Chapter 3 Conceptualizing the Role of Socio-Economic Factors in the Development of Fundamentalist Beliefs

The previous chapter concluded based on a review of the literature that socio-economic factors play a role in people's formation and maintaining of religious fundamentalist beliefs. Still, a proper conceptualization is lacking. It is not clear whether socio-economic background can also *explain* the turn to fundamentalism. Moreover, an account of how a poor or worsening economic situation makes people more receptive to religious fundamentalism is missing. These are the problems I will try to tackle in this chapter. First, I will consider whether the relationship between socio-economic factors and fundamentalism is causal, using the criteria of association, temporal precedence, and non-spuriousness. Then, I will discuss how the notions of risk factors and INUS conditions can help to make sense of the role socio-economic factors play in people's turn towards fundamentalism. This chapter will conclude by exploring several theories that propose possible causal mechanisms between socio-economic situation and fundamentalism.

### 3.1 Explaining Fundamentalism

Both fundamentalism and socio-economic situation are multidimensional phenomena. The literature review in the previous chapter suggested that a variety of socio-economic factors are associated with fundamentalism. These range from a below-average education level or income to feelings of injustice or threat towards socio-economic status. This makes it not so straightforward to conceptualize their relationship to fundamentalism. However, most scholars agree nowadays that, in general, fundamentalists are normal people who form their beliefs in at least a somewhat rational manner.<sup>72</sup> research has shown that in most cases fundamentalism is not due to mental disorders.<sup>73</sup> Hence, it should theoretically be possible to understand why people turn to fundamentalism.

The various socio-economic factors are often interrelated and play different roles for different people. This raises the question to what extent pathways towards fundamentalism are generalizable. In the study of how people develop fundamentalist and other extreme belief systems, there are conflicting views on whether there exists a general mechanism that explains why an individual develops a fundamentalist belief system.<sup>74</sup> While some argue that a common process is the cause of these beliefs, others say that pathways are so idiosyncratic and personal that generalizations are not possible. Not only is every person's context different, but situations also affect people in different ways. Nevertheless, the previous chapter found that for many people their socio-economic situation plays a role in the turn towards fundamentalism. This suggests that there do exist commonalities in the way people develop religious fundamentalist belief systems.

However, to explain why people turn to fundamentalism, there is more necessary than just an association between socio-economic factors and fundamentalist beliefs. On the one hand, the previous chapter showed that there exists a statistically significant relationship between socio-economic factors and religious fundamentalist beliefs. On the other hand, it was also found that not all fundamentalists have a poor socio-economic situation. Even more noteworthy, many people in such situations do not

---

<sup>72</sup> Michael Baurmann, "Rational Fundamentalism? An Explanatory Model of Fundamentalist Beliefs," *Episteme* 4, no. 2 (2007): 150–66, <https://doi.org/10.3366/epi.2007.4.2.150>.

<sup>73</sup> See Marc Sageman, *Misunderstanding Terrorism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 82 and references therein.

<sup>74</sup> Quassim Cassam, "The Epistemology of Terrorism and Radicalisation," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 84 (2018): 199, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1358246118000607>.

turn to religious fundamentalism or other extreme ideologies. This raises the question: how should the relationship between socio-economic factors and fundamentalism be perceived?

Rather than having a one-to-one relationship between a poor or worsening socio-economic situation and fundamentalism, these factors can be better perceived as risk factors for the development of a fundamentalist worldview.<sup>75</sup> The concept of risk factors is used in epidemiology to refer to variables that when present increase the probability of a disease occurring. For example, obesity has been found to be a risk factor for the development of cardiovascular diseases.<sup>76</sup> The likelihood that obese or overweight people will get such a disease is much higher than for leaner people, although not all overweight people experience them. This means that other conditions also need to be present for obesity to result in diseases like heart failure. Nevertheless, levels of cardiovascular diseases can be changed by changing the level of the risk factor, obesity.

This concept can be applied to the effect of socio-economic factors on fundamentalism. It implies that socio-economic situation is not a sufficient cause for the development of fundamentalist beliefs, as has been shown by the literature. Nevertheless, it has been found that a poor or worsening socio-economic situation increases the likelihood that a person turns to fundamentalism. This implies that the number of people that turn to fundamentalism can be decreased by bettering the socio-economic situation of people, all things equal. When perceiving fundamentalism in terms of risk factors, it is important to note that this does not mean that the development of fundamentalist worldviews happens unconsciously or is due to a lack of agency. Instead, fundamentalists are often active agents in their search for a new interpretative framework.<sup>77</sup>

An association between two variables does not imply that there exists a causal relationship. Generally, it is assumed that two other conditions also need to be met. These are temporal precedence and non-spuriousness. The latter refers to the condition that there should exist no third variable that can account for the relationship between the variables. In practice, it is often hard to establish definitively that these conditions are met. Instead, it is often argued that a causal relationship is likely to exist when it can be reasonably assumed that the criteria are fulfilled. So, does the relationship between socio-economic factors and fundamentalism satisfy these criteria? The first condition of association is met, as the literature review made clear that there exists a statistically significant association between the variables. For the other two conditions, things are less clear.

Temporal precedence is used as a criterion for causation based on the assumption that causes precede their effects. The study by Melissa Waters and others showed that there exists a two-way relationship between socio-economic variables and fundamentalism.<sup>78</sup> Not only is religious affiliation affected by income and education level, this was also found to work the other way around. However, this does not mean that the criterion is not met so that we need to conclude that there exists no causal relationship between them. If socio-economic circumstances affect whether a person forms fundamentalist beliefs independent of how their situation changes afterwards, the condition is fulfilled. The qualitative studies argued that this is indeed the case. Moreover, the studies that investigated the relationship

---

<sup>75</sup> Quassim Cassam suggests the notion of a risk factor, and also the later discussed concept of an INUS condition, can be helpful in the context of radicalization. Mitja Sardoč, "Radicalisation, Violent Extremism and Terrorism: An Interview with Quassim Cassam," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 13, no. 1 (2020): 169, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2019.1675939>.

<sup>76</sup> Kerstyn C. Zalesin et al., "Impact of Obesity on Cardiovascular Disease," *Endocrinology and Metabolism Clinics of North America* 37, no. 3 (September 2008): 663–84, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecl.2008.06.004>.

<sup>77</sup> Kristen Renwick Monroe and Lina Haddad Kreidie, "The Perspective of Islamic Fundamentalists and the Limits of Rational Choice Theory," *Political Psychology* 18, no. 1 (March 17, 1997): 33–34, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0162-895X.00043>.

<sup>78</sup> Waters, Heath, and Watson, "Positive Model of Determination."

between the socio-economic status of parents and the beliefs of their children are helpful in this regard. As teens and young adults do not have much control over their socio-economic status, the effect of these factors, if any, will be mainly in the direction of fundamentalist beliefs, rather than the other way around. As such a relationship was found, it can be concluded that in this context the cause precedes its effect.

The third criterion states that the relationship between socio-economic situation and fundamentalism should be non-spurious. If the association is spurious, then there exists a third variable or set of variables that affects both socio-economic situation and fundamentalist beliefs which has not been taken into account in the analysis. Another possibility is that the relationship found is due to mere coincidence. However, this latter option is not likely as the relationship between socio-economic factors and fundamentalist beliefs is found over a range of studies, both qualitative and quantitative in nature, in several contexts. However, it is still possible that it may appear that fundamentalist beliefs are caused by socio-economic factors, while, in fact, this is due to the third variable. For example, several studies have found that younger people are more likely to turn to fundamentalism. Moreover, people's socio-economic position is affected by age. Hence, it could be that the whole effect of socio-economic situation on fundamentalism is due to variation in age, and therefore there exists no causal relationship between the former two. However, this has been found to not be the case. The literature shows that socio-economic situation has an independent effect on people's degree of fundamentalism apart from age. Several other variables can also be excluded, like gender, marital status, and ethnicity because many of the quantitative studies included these as control variables. The possibility of spuriousness cannot be eliminated completely. However, as long as no potentially confounding variables can be identified, it can be reasonably assumed that the relationship is causal if also the other criteria are met.

These criteria suggest that the relationship between socio-economic factors and fundamentalism is causal of nature. However, as already noted in the concept of risk factors above, other conditions need to be met before a poor or worsening socio-economic position will lead to the development of fundamentalist beliefs. The notion of an INUS condition can help to explicate this. An INUS condition is "an insufficient but necessary part of a condition which is itself unnecessary but sufficient for the result."<sup>79</sup> Suppose that there exists a condition *A* which is not a sufficient condition for bringing about some *P*. However, *A* occurring with some other conditions *X* is sufficient for *P*. Still, it is not necessary, as some other conditions *Y*, not including *A*, can also cause *P*. Then, *A* is an INUS condition of *P*. To illustrate this concept, John Mackie used the example of an electrical short-circuit causing a fire. A short-circuit is only one of the possible ways in which a fire can start. So, it is not a necessary condition. Moreover, a short-circuit alone is not a sufficient condition. Other conditions need to be met before a short-circuit will start a fire. For example, there needs to be flammable material in close proximity. So, a short-circuit is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for the start of a fire. Nevertheless, together with the other factors, the short-circuit can be said to be the cause of the fire. In that sense, it is an INUS condition.

We can apply this notion to the causal relationship between socio-economic situation and the formation of fundamentalist beliefs. Socio-economic factors are in itself not a sufficient condition for the formation of fundamentalist beliefs, as many people in poor economic circumstances do not become fundamentalist. So, other conditions also need to be present, like conflicts between modern and traditional values. Although such combinations of conditions are sufficient for the formation of fundamentalist beliefs, they are not necessary as there also exist other pathways towards

---

<sup>79</sup> John L. Mackie, "Causes and Conditions," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (1965): 245.

fundamentalism. Hence, it is possible that people who do not experience economic struggles still become fundamentalists. So, it is important to not only understand what the role of socio-economic conditions is in the development of fundamentalist beliefs but also to identify which other conditions are necessary to form a sufficient condition. One way to do this is by looking at *how* a poor or worsening socio-economic situation can make people more receptive to religious fundamentalism.

### 3.2 In-Between Socio-Economic Factors and Fundamentalism

Many of the studies discussed in the previous chapter lack an account of how socio-economic factors affect the likelihood that people form fundamentalist belief systems. In chapter 1, it was discussed how experiences, information, and beliefs of others influence the beliefs that people form. One of the elements that play a role is individual factors, like socio-economic situation. Not only does socio-economic situation affect the experiences people have and the information they gather, but it also affects how these are processed. Hence, people from different socio-economic backgrounds are likely to have different beliefs.

The studies analysed in the previous chapter discussed several ways in which this may happen in the context of fundamentalist beliefs. Low education levels were suggested to relate to a lack of critical thinking skills and the ability to assess different perspectives. Education leads to a lowering of barriers to enlightenment, making people less receptive towards literalist and exclusivist interpretations of religion. Moreover, people who experience feelings of uncertainty caused by economic struggles were said to be attracted by the clear identity fundamentalist groups provide.

Many of the qualitative studies suggested that people from certain social classes with a traditional background were exposed to modern culture through education or work. This meant that they had to reflect on their values and identity. However, many of them experienced threats to their socio-economic status or saw their hope for upward mobility thwarted, through modern business or policy from a secular government. This disappointment in or anger towards modern groups in society made people turn away from modern values towards a fundamentalist belief system. Moreover, fundamentalist groups provide a clear identity and ways to cope with economic struggles.

Several theories explain support for fundamentalist ideologies in terms of uncertainty. These theories were not included in the previous chapter as they did not directly refer to socio-economic factors. Nevertheless, these factors can be incorporated into them without much effort. According to uncertainty-identity theory, when people experience uncertainty, they are likely to seek ways to reduce this.<sup>80</sup> However, reducing uncertainty is cognitively challenging and, because of the nature of the world, can never be done completely. Therefore, people tend to focus on reducing the most important uncertainties. According to Michael Hogg, those are the ones that relate to the self, like uncertainty about one's identity, moral values, and social attitudes.<sup>81</sup> One of the ways to diminish this uncertainty is by associating with a group, as they provide a clear identity and a sense of belonging. Groups with clear structures and beliefs, like fundamentalist movements, are especially effective at reducing self-

---

<sup>80</sup> Michael A. Hogg, "From Uncertainty to Extremism," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 23, no. 5 (2014): 338–42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721414540168>.

<sup>81</sup> Michael A. Hogg, Janice R. Adelman, and Robert D. Blagg, "Religion in the Face of Uncertainty: An Uncertainty-Identity Theory Account of Religiousness," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 14, no. 1 (2010): 72–83, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868309349692>.

uncertainty. Not only does a fundamentalist worldview meet people's need for meaning, but it can also provide a sense of coherence.<sup>82</sup>

Another theory relates the turn to fundamentalism not so much to self-uncertainty but to uncertainty regarding whether one is able to obtain their goals. Reactive approach motivation theory argues that people experience uncertainty when they are pursuing goals in their life but are unsure whether they can attain them.<sup>83</sup> By engaging with a different goal, people will inhibit other concerns, like the ones relating to their previous goal, by a form of tunnel vision. Goals that are abstract and can never be fully attained are especially suitable for this. While these goals, for example, ideals, can be pursued indefinitely, it is easy to act towards them and disillusionment is less likely. Again, religious fundamentalism is one of the possible ideals that people can turn towards to resolve the anxiety stemming from uncertainty. This theory goes well with the observation from several qualitative studies that university students and the clergy have been attracted to fundamentalism. While these people expected to improve their social status and economic situation through education, this was not possible because of a lack of economic opportunities. This could have led to uncertainty regarding the attainability of their goals, making them more receptive to fundamentalism. Moreover, circumstances like unemployment or economic crises can cause people to experience uncertainty. This uncertainty can be general but also related to the self or social and economic goals. According to the above theories, this explains why people in these situations are more likely to turn to fundamentalism. A downside of both these theories is that they do not explain why some people turn to religious fundamentalism, rather than other ideological movements.

In conclusion, several explanations exist of how a poor or worsening socio-economic situation makes people more likely to turn to fundamentalism. Most of these theories have not yet been studied in the context of both socio-economic factors and fundamentalism. So, further research is necessary to establish that these relationships indeed hold. Nevertheless, the theories suggest possible ways in which the two variables affect each other. Moreover, they show that the relationship is not univocal. Rather, socio-economic situation connects to fundamentalism in several ways and is mediated by other factors.

---

<sup>82</sup> Hood, Hill, and Williamson, *Psychology of Religious Fundamentalism*, 15.

<sup>83</sup> Ian McGregor, Kyle Nash, and Mike Prentice, "Reactive Approach Motivation (RAM) for Religion," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 99, no. 1 (2010): 148–61, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0019702>.

## Conclusion

In this thesis, I sought to answer the question: what role do socio-economic factors play in people's developing and maintaining religious fundamentalists belief systems? Chapter 1 considered some aspects of how people form beliefs. New beliefs are formed through a combination of experiences and mental processes. Moreover, already existing beliefs play an important role. People do not easily change their beliefs and they seek cognitive consistency between beliefs. Individual background characteristics are also involved as they affect the experiences people have and how these are processed. Hence, people in different socio-economic situations are likely to have different beliefs. After that, I discussed the concept of fundamentalism. I proposed that fundamentalist beliefs are part of an individual's belief system and provided a working definition.

In chapter 2, I performed a semi-systematic literature review. 21 studies were selected that discussed the relationship between people's socio-economic situation and fundamentalist belief systems. According to the selected historical and descriptive studies, urban migrants, the traditional middle class, students and recent graduates, and the poor were attracted to fundamentalism. A majority of members of fundamentalist movements were economically disadvantaged, experienced threats to their socio-economic status, or saw their attempts to better their status fail. Besides this, many struggled to create or maintain an identity in a changing world.

The selected studies that used quantitative methods found a significant relationship between socio-economic factors and religious fundamentalism. Especially a higher education level and socio-economic status made people less likely to develop fundamentalist beliefs. However, these factors could only explain a small proportion of the variation in the degree of fundamentalism. Besides this, it was found that for young people, socio-economic situation mainly played a role through its effect on the belief of their parents rather than directly affecting the beliefs of the children. Finally, the relationship between socio-economic grievances and fundamentalism was not found to be significant, but this was mainly due to the way in which the variables were defined.

The final chapter discussed how the relationship between socio-economic factors and religious fundamentalist belief systems should be conceptualized. The concept of risk factor was used to make sense of the relationship. If a poor or worsening socio-economic situation is present, it is more likely that an individual has a fundamentalist belief system. Moreover, the relationship is likely causal. This led to the conclusion that socio-economic factors are an INUS condition for religious fundamentalist belief systems. Socio-economic factors are one of the causes of religious fundamentalist belief systems, but for this to happen also other conditions need to be present.

Several limitations of this research have already been mentioned throughout the chapters. One of these is the clear focus of studies on fundamentalism in Christianity and Islam. Only one of the selected studies discussed the phenomena in the context of Hinduism. It is not clear whether socio-economic factors play a similar role in people's forming other religious fundamentalist belief systems. Moreover, it would also be worthwhile to investigate whether the relationship that has been found transports over to non-religious fundamentalist belief systems and other extreme beliefs. It could be that a similar mechanism plays a role in the formation of, for example, extremist beliefs or conspiracy beliefs.

This research showed the importance of considering the choice for operationalizing fundamentalism. It seems that categorizing people based on self-identification instead of beliefs or affiliation leads to different demographic characteristics. Further research is necessary to better grasp how the choice of the measure affects which people are categorized as fundamentalist and which measure best

approximates the phenomenon of fundamentalism. Another point of attention for future research is the existence of a two-way relationship between socio-economic variables and fundamentalism. It is important to take into account that whether someone has a fundamentalist belief system or not can affect their socio-economic situation and their perception of it.

The results of this research also have practical implications. Fundamentalist movements can be perceived as harmful as they limit the right of certain minority groups and sometimes use extremist methods. This can be a reason for policymakers to want to prevent the spread of such ideologies. This research indicates that policy aimed at improving people's socio-economic situation might be effective. However, as only a small proportion of people from a poor socio-economic background form fundamentalist belief systems, policies better tailored to those people might be more beneficial. Besides this, programmes that help people cope with uncertainty can play a role in prevention. However, the discussion in the final chapter on how socio-economic situation affects people's forming fundamentalist belief systems showed that much is still unclear about this. A search for meaning and identity seems to play a role, but further research is necessary to investigate how this exactly works.

Another avenue of future research, related to this, could focus on first-person perspectives on fundamentalism. So far, the number of studies that study the causes of fundamentalism by taking the perspective of the fundamentalist into account is limited. No such studies were found that fulfilled the selection criteria. Asking fundamentalists how they perceive the role their socio-economic situation played in their turn to fundamentalism will be informative. This will not only further understanding but can also help to determine which other factors need to be present for a poor or worsening socio-economic situation to result in the forming of a fundamentalist belief system.

There is still a long way to go before we have gotten a good grasp on the causes of fundamentalism. Nevertheless, it is clear that simple explanations that equate poverty or feelings of injustice with fundamentalism will not do. Explanations for the existence and attractiveness of fundamentalism for certain people should do justice to the multidimensionality of the phenomenon. Moreover, only by paying attention to the complexity and layeredness of people's motivations and their reasons for adopting beliefs can we hope to further our understanding of fundamentalism and its causes.

## Bibliography

- Abelson, Robert P. "Differences Between Belief and Knowledge Systems." *Cognitive Science* 3, no. 4 (October 1979): 355–66. [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15516709cog0304\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15516709cog0304_4).
- Acock, Alan C., Charles Wright, and Kay McKensie. "Predicting Intolerance: The Impact of Parents' Own Tolerance vs. Social Class and Religious Fundamentalism." *Deviant Behavior* 3, no. 1 (1981): 65–84.
- Adamczyk, Amy. "Religious Switching: Does Parents' Education Matter?" *Research in The Social Scientific Study of Religion* 15, no. 1 (2004): 51–70.
- Almond, Gabriel A., Emmanuel Sivan, and R. Scott Appleby. "Explaining Fundamentalisms." In *Fundamentalisms Comprehended*, edited by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995.
- Altemeyer, Bob, and Bruce Hunsberger. "Authoritarianism, Religious Fundamentalism, Quest, and Prejudice." *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 2, no. 2 (1992): 113–33.
- . "RESEARCH: A Revised Religious Fundamentalism Scale: The Short and Sweet of It." *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 14, no. 1 (2004): 47–54. <https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327582ijpr1401>.
- Ammerran, Nancy T. "Southern Baptists and the New Christian Right." *Review of Religious Research* 32, no. 3 (1991): 213–36.
- Baurmann, Michael. "Rational Fundamentalism? An Explanatory Model of Fundamentalist Beliefs." *Episteme* 4, no. 2 (2007): 150–66. <https://doi.org/10.3366/epi.2007.4.2.150>.
- Blackburn, Simon. "Beliefs." In *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*. Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Blaydes, Lisa, and Drew A. Linzer. "The Political Economy of Women's Support for Fundamentalist Islam." *World Politics* 60, no. 4 (2008): 576–609. <https://doi.org/10.1353/wp.0.0023>.
- Bruce, Steve. *Fundamentalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000.
- Cassam, Quassim. "The Epistemology of Terrorism and Radicalisation." *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 84 (2018): 187–209. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1358246118000607>.
- Converse, Philip E. "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics (1964)." *Critical Review* 18, no. 1–3 (2006): 1–74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08913810608443650>.
- Coreno, Thaddeus. "Fundamentalism as a Class Culture." *Sociology of Religion* 63, no. 3 (2002): 335–60. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3712473>.
- Dekmejian, R. Hrair. *Islam in Revolution: Fundamentalism in the Arab World*. 2nd ed. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995.
- Delia Deckard, Natalie, and David Jacobson. "The Prosperous Hardliner: Affluence, Fundamentalism, and Radicalization in Western European Muslim Communities." *Social Compass* 62, no. 3 (2015): 412–33. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768615587827>.
- Ellis, Lee. "Religious Variations in Fundamentalism in Malaysia and the United States: Possible Relevance to Religiously Motivated Violence." *Personality and Individual Differences* 107 (2017): 23–27. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2016.11.012>.
- Emerson, Michael O., and David Hartman. "The Rise of Religious Fundamentalism." *Annual Review of Sociology* 32, no. 1 (August 1, 2006): 127–44. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.32.061604.123141>.
- Fishbein, Martin, and Icek Ajzen. *Belief, Attitude, Intention, and Behavior: An Introduction to Theory*

- and Research. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1975.
- . *Predicting and Changing Behavior: The Reasoned Action Approach*. New York: Psychology Press, 2010.
- Harris, Harriet A. “Fundamentalism(S).” In *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies*, edited by J.W. Rogerson and Judith M. Lieu, 110–13. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Hoffman, Valerie J. “Muslim Fundamentalists: Psychosocial Profiles.” In *Fundamentalisms Comprehended*, edited by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- Hogg, Michael A. “From Uncertainty to Extremism.” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 23, no. 5 (2014): 338–42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721414540168>.
- Hogg, Michael A., Janice R. Adelman, and Robert D. Blagg. “Religion in the Face of Uncertainty: An Uncertainty-Identity Theory Account of Religiousness.” *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 14, no. 1 (2010): 72–83. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868309349692>.
- Hood, Ralph W. Jr., Peter C. Hill, and W. Paul Williamson. *The Psychology of Religious Fundamentalism*. New York: The Guilford Press, 2005.
- Kellstedt, Lyman, and Corwin Smidt. “Measuring Fundamentalism: An Analysis of Different Operational Strategies.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 30, no. 3 (1991): 259–78.
- Koopmans, Ruud. “Religious Fundamentalism and Hostility against Out-Groups: A Comparison of Muslims and Christians in Western Europe.” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 41, no. 1 (2015): 33–57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2014.935307>.
- Mackie, John L. “Causes and Conditions.” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (1965): 245–64.
- Mayer, Albert J., and Harry Sharp. “Religious Preference and Worldly Success.” *American Sociological Review* 27, no. 2 (1962): 218–27.
- McGregor, Ian, Kyle Nash, and Mike Prentice. “Reactive Approach Motivation (RAM) for Religion.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 99, no. 1 (2010): 148–61. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0019702>.
- Moaddel, Mansoor. “Monolithic Religious Markets, Fragmented State Structures, and Islamic Fundamentalism among Iranians and across the Middle East and North Africa.” *Revue Internationale Des Études Du Développement* 229, no. 1 (2017): 33–62. <https://doi.org/10.3917/ried.229.0033>.
- . “The Social Bases and Discursive Context of the Rise of Islamic Fundamentalism: The Cases of Iran and Syria.” *Sociological Inquiry* 66, no. 3 (1996): 330–55. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-682X.1996.tb00224.x>.
- Moaddel, Mansoor, and Stuart A. Karabenick. “Religious Fundamentalism in Eight Muslim-Majority Countries: Reconceptualization and Assessment.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 57, no. 4 (2018): 676–706. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12549>.
- Monroe, Kristen Renwick, and Lina Haddad Kreidie. “The Perspective of Islamic Fundamentalists and the Limits of Rational Choice Theory.” *Political Psychology* 18, no. 1 (March 17, 1997): 19–43. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0162-895X.00043>.
- Peels, Rik. “Defining ‘Fundamentalism.’” Unpublished manuscript, February 24, 2020.
- . “Responsibility for Fundamentalist Belief.” In *Epistemic Duties: New Arguments, New Angles*, edited by Kevin McCain and Scott Stapleford, 221–38. New York: Taylor & Francis, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429030215-18>.

- Perry, Everett L. "Socio-Economic Factors and American Fundamentalism: A 1959 Doctoral Dissertation." *Review of Religious Research* 1, no. 2 (1959): 57–61.
- . *The Role of Socio-Economic Factors in the Rise and Development of American Fundamentalism*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1959.
- Piscatori, James. "Accounting for Islamic Fundamentalisms." In *Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements*, edited by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994.
- Prooijen, Jan Willem van, and Sophia M.H.C. Kuijper. "A Comparison of Extreme Religious and Political Ideologies: Similar Worldviews but Different Grievances." *Personality and Individual Differences* 159, no. December 2019 (2020): 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2020.109888>.
- Riesebrodt, Martin. *Pious Passion: The Emergence of Modern Fundamentalism in the United States and Iran*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
- Ruthven, Malise. *Fundamentalism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Rydgren, Jens. "Beliefs." In *The Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology*, edited by Peter Hedström and Peter Bearman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Sageman, Marc. *Misunderstanding Terrorism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017.
- Sardoč, Mitja. "Radicalisation, Violent Extremism and Terrorism: An Interview with Quassim Cassam." *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 13, no. 1 (2020): 166–74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2019.1675939>.
- Smith, Christian. *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- Smith, Tom W. "Classifying Protestant Denomination." *Review of Religious Research* 31, no. 3 (1990): 225–45.
- Thurow, Lester C. *The Future of Capitalism: How Today's Economic Forces Shape Tomorrow's World*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1996.
- Waters, Melissa S., Will Carrington Heath, and John Keith Watson. "A Positive Model of the Determination of Religious Affiliation." *Social Science Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (1995): 105–23.
- Wilcox, Clyde. "Fundamentalists and Politics: An Analysis of the Effects of Differing Operational Definitions." *The Journal of Politics* 48, no. 4 (1986): 1041–51. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2131012>.
- Woodberry, Robert D., and Christian S. Smith. "Fundamentalism et al: Conservative Protestants in America." *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998): 25–56. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.24.1.25>.
- Zalesin, Kerstyn C., Barry A. Franklin, Wendy M. Miller, Eric D. Peterson, and Peter A. McCullough. "Impact of Obesity on Cardiovascular Disease." *Endocrinology and Metabolism Clinics of North America* 37, no. 3 (September 2008): 663–84. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecl.2008.06.004>.