Many Fundamentalisms

The “war against terrorism” being waged by the United States has a great deal of popular support. Revenge for the so-called “attack on America” on December 11th 2001 is certainly a prominent sentiment driving popular support for the war in the US. But there is more to the support than revenge. Undoubtedly, geopolitical strategy or economics are also factors. For instance, there is no doubt that the search for secure supplies of oil played a part in the war currently being waged in Afghanistan, and why this war may now may be extended to include Iraq. Yet economics or politics does not fully explain why many otherwise fairminded people in the United States continue to support a war waged by the richest and most powerful country of the world on one of the poorest. In the present and projected wars between grossly mismatched antagonists, there is also, in the United States, a sense of being engaged in a moral effort. Many Americans do believe that this is a just war and moral, a war as President Bush never tires of telling us, between the forces of good and evil.

The perceived morality of the war or terror is what makes it a popular effort. But what is the basis of this moral judgement? What makes “us” good, and what makes “them” evil? While a great many factors are at play in creating these distinctions between us and them, lurking very prominently among these are the distinctions between “our” freedom, civility, democracy, and even our belief in God, and “their” fundamentalism. Such is the power of oft-repeated representations that even for those who know very well that the term fundamentalism was actually coined in the United States, to describe a group of late nineteenth-century Protestant Christian literalists, tend to forget this fact. Somehow “fundamentalism” in our times automatically conjures up images of bearded, dark-coloured men in strange dresses, wearing turbans, wielding AK47s and blowing up innocent people. When we hear fundamentalism, we
think of the middle east, rather than the American south, of Muslim terrorists rather than
Christian arsonists who murderer doctors and women seeking to control their own fertility.

Fundamentalism refers to an ideology which takes certain articles of faith to be
inviolable, beyond question. Because of the origins of the term in religious discourse,
fundamentalism is often used only relating to matters of religious belief. Thus for religious
fundamentalists, some issues, whether the virgin birth, the divine nature of the revelation in a
holy book, or the infallibility of a prophet or religious guide, are simply not to be questioned.
But are these the only unquestionable fundamentalisms around us? I would like to suggest not.
Other ideologies which we normally do not associate with fundamentalism, are in fact equally
fundamentalist in their application. Which ones am I talking about? Well, free-market
fundamentalism comes to mind. The unquestioned, and for most part, unquestionable belief in
the beneficial operation of market forces untrammeled by any other human agency does appear
to be pretty much like the fundamentals of a religious faith. But there are other fundamentalisms
too!

One of the reasons why many otherwise sane and sensible people in the US support the
so-called war on terrorism, is their belief (reiterated constantly by the political leadership and the
media) that “our” way of life, of thinking, is better, more humane, more free, more civilized than
those of their opponents. Crucial to this notion of civilization are certain ideas about the place
of religion in politics. Despite the contradictions of the ubiquitous “God Bless America,” one of
the reasons why not only G. W. Bush, but also his erstwhile political opponents believe in this
war, is because the American way of life includes the separation of religion and politics, of
Church and State – quite unlike the extremist and intolerant views of Muslim fundamentalists
against whom this war is being waged. President Bush’s early pronouncements about the war
being a Crusade were therefore quickly suppressed. It is even more interesting to note how the war was quickly dubbed variously as an operation to ensure “Infinite Justice” or “Enduring Freedom” – all stridently secular undertakings! One reason why this war is justified and supported then, is the notion that unlike “the fundamentalists,” the Americans do not see this as a religious war... as if killing people in the name of secularism were somehow more defensible than doing so in the name of religion!!

Strange it may sound, this secularism is one of the reasons why this war is deemed a just one, a war for a better way of life. Central to this better way of life is the notion that separation of Church and State, and the separation of religion and politics is not just the American way of life, but a universally superior way of conducting social and political business. It is because Americans and more generally the western world is promoting these ideas (along with those of free market economics, and electoral politics) that their cause is a just one. But, to elevate these ideas to a universal principle, a transnational, transcultural, yardstick with which to measure the “evolution” or “development” of a society, is nothing more than the subscription to yet another fundamentalism.

Where do these ideas, particularly those of the separation of religion and politics, come from? As an organizing principle of social and political life, this idea has its origins in sixteenth century sectarian wars within European Christianity. The only way that European societies, particularly in Western Europe, could come up with of living with sectarian diversity was through the separation of Church and the State. Over time, with the rise to social economic and political prominence of new social groups, with the rise of long distance trade, and then industrial capitalism, these ideas came to be further reinforced. Religion, we were told, was something to be relegated to the domain of the private. Public or political structures, ideally,
should be secular. The point I am trying to make here is that we need to realize that these ideas were the products of a particular history, that the separation of “religion” and “politics” were the products of a certain political, economic, and social context, which produced a specific mechanism of dispute resolution. It was, however, another history, the history of conquest and colonialism, a history of military, economic, and cultural imperialism which made this, with many other parochially European developments and ideas into universal shibboleths, and the standards of judgement and evaluation for the rest of the world. Asia, Africa, or the region we call the middle east today, had historically developed their own methods of dispute resolution and dealing with plurality. These did not necessarily relegate religion to the realm of the private and personal. With European colonialism however, these methods of dispute resolution were simply dismissed as primitive or backward. Western colonisers or a new western educated elite in the colonized countries tried hard to impose new western derived standards of secularism into their societies. The reactions to such impositions, the rejection of THAT fundamentalism, is what we are seeing today in the prominence of ideologies of religious fundamentalisms – whether Islamic, Hindu, Sikh, and, perhaps, also Christian. Repeating that history yet again – by positing our fundamentalism against theirs, by trying to justify a war fueled by equally parochial interests as a battle of a universal good against universal evil -- will only mean that we perpetuate the battle between fundamentalisms.