

Islam vs. Secular "-ism"

Contributed by Adibudeen
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by Maryam Sakeenah, Contributing Writer The facade of 'freedom of expression' does little to hide the real motives behind the republication of the Danish caricatures. It is a blatant provocation, a mischief--and any fool can see that. No sir, not the same bait each time. This time round, you only proved that with all your noise about freedom and liberal values, you're so badly and pathetically mired up in your self-created prejudices. This time, it is you who took the bait--and we're having our last laugh.

All the same, some important lessons emerge from it. For one, it helps one see deeper into the West's much-touted secular creed. Europe chose to wear proud the secular label for the tolerance, pluralism and freedom that being secular entails. And yet, it is ironic that so many years down the line, Western secular society continues to be trapped in fanatical prejudices and intolerance against an increasingly ghettoized Muslim community. Prejudice and misinformed bigotry against Islam in the West's secular polity have reached manic proportions. Fear and hatred of the Muslim stereotype to an excessive and obsessive degree pumped up by the media is palpable in Western society. Michael Savage, a popular talk-show host in America remarked on his show: "When I see a woman walking around with a burqa, I see a Nazi. That's what I see. How do you like that? A hateful Nazi who would like to cut your throat and kill your children. When a woman wears a burqa, she's doing it to spit in your face. She's saying, 'you white moron, you, I'm gonna kill you if I can.'" In France, the headscarf is banned; in UK teachers wearing the veil have to seek recourse to courts to win the right to dress like they want. All over Europe and America, Muslim populations face all kinds of discrimination and even victimization, which has put Muslims everywhere on the defensive, increasingly insecure in trying to practise their faith. Secular Western society grows more exclusivist and supremacist by the day. The West's secular creed has assumed a totalitarian character. The values of freedom and tolerance it claims to champion are applied only selectively, as secular societies refuse to integrate or even accommodate religion. It has become an aggressively fanatical creed, wearing proud its irreligion with a militant religiosity. According to Phillip Bond and Adrian Pabst writing for the International Herald Tribune, "European societies enshrine the primacy of secular law over and against religious principles. Far from ensuring neutrality and tolerance, the secular European state arrogates to itself the right to control and legislate all spheres of life; state constraints apply especially to religion and its civic influence. Legally, secularism outlaws any rival source of sovereignty or legitimacy. Politically, secularism denies religion any import in public debate and decision-making. Culturally, secularism enforces its own norms and standards upon all other belief systems." The secular commitment to freedom of expression has become a justification for intellectual abuse, slander and propaganda directed against a community--very frequently, 'immoderate' Muslims. A whole array of Western pseudo-intellectuals, journalists and leaders participate in the verbal onslaught, seeking cover under the shield of freedom of expression. According to Karen Armstrong, "With freedom of speech comes a lot of responsibility. Anything that tramples on sensitivities is not freedom of expression. And whatever comes from the heart can never offend like this." The secular intellectual reserve of the West has failed to define what freedom of expression really means; that it is not the right to hurt, abuse, blatantly malign and provoke in calculated moves. Ironically, however, state legislation in many secular countries effectively checks what is defined as 'anti-Semitic' expression--which also includes the intellectual crime of doubting the statistics of the Jewish Holocaust. There goes freedom of expression. States in the West loyally commit themselves to it, living under a grandiose fantasy of superior humanity and a higher civilization. With this narcissistic perception comes the license to play the global Big Brother, dictating the order of things arbitrarily. Secularism comes packaged nice and appealing, wrapped in humane vocabulary. It is all about democracy, individual liberty, freedom, tolerance, pluralism and moderation. States in the West loyally commit themselves to it, living under a grandiose fantasy of superior humanity and a higher civilization. With this narcissistic perception comes the license to play the global Big Brother, dictating the order of things arbitrarily. Dennis Rahkonen writes in 'Ugly American needs a Makeover', "Our insufferable arrogance and foreign policy excesses are garnering us record levels of international opprobrium. Washington tries to thrust its wayward will on understandably resistant mankind." Secularism is nurturing an ultraconservatist extremism in Western state machinery, screeching madly onward towards what Huntington called the 'Clash of Civilizations.' Ideology-lessness or poverty of vision are the gifts of secularism. Wrapped up in promises of liberation and democracy, the secular vision is depraved, devoid of an ethical orientation. As a result, we see secularism's 'missionary soldiers' committing heinous crimes against humanity while in a drunken stupor of arrogant self-righteousness. The West's apathetic insensitivity to Israel's blatant human rights violations of the hapless Palestinians reflects just that, as does their support and their sordid deals with the highly corrupt and unpopular Fatah. Seven years on, the secular missionary zeal with which Afghanistan was 'liberated' has quite dissipated. The spokesperson of a women's NGO in Afghanistan lays bare the West's bid on her country: "The US militarily occupied Afghanistan to 'bring freedom and democracy' to the Afghan people, but it has empowered and equipped the criminal bands of the Northern Alliance, making a game of the values of human rights. The destitution and suffering of our people doubles every day. Our children fall victim to NATO's non-stop bombardments. The Northern Alliance bloodsuckers have key government posts, human rights violations, corruption, crime and violence have reached their peak, and women in prisons are raped as a common practice. If these foreign troops leave Afghanistan, we will feel no vacuum, but rather more free. Neither the US nor any other power wants to actually release the Afghan people from these fetters." The megalomania of the Secular 'ism' is not just wreaking havoc in the foreign policy misadventures of the Western world. Greater crises are brewing up in Western societies. This great demographic crisis has its seeds in Enlightenment Europe's celebrated dissociation from religion. It was a shortsighted triumph, ignoring the reality that human societies cannot survive in a secularized milieu. The natural corollary is the

amoral relativized morass we observe at the heart of Western civilization. Today, religious morality and universal ethics are absent from the Western consciousness. And the absence makes its presence felt. According to Mitt Romney, "Europe is facing a demographic disaster. That is the inevitable product of weakened faith in the Creator, failed families, disrespect for the sanctity of human life and eroded morality..." On the social level, Secularism generates a culture of degeneracy, a society of minimal selves, ephemeral lives. Socially, secular societies have abandoned the cultural cohesion based on transcendental human values religion creates. This is what makes secular society fragmented, excluding those it defines as the 'other.' Secularism is fundamentally flawed, as it overlooks the undeniable reality that man by nature cannot create a society with multilaterally co-existent beliefs and systems. By nature, man propagates his belief, fights for it and aspires for the pre-eminence of his own ideology. A state of absolute equality and pluralist co-existence of multiple opposed beliefs is a Utopian dream. Secularism aspires to create this Utopian state, but fails to achieve it, given the inalterability of human nature. It eventually evolves into an authoritarian creed, weeding out remnants of archaic religious belief. Because of its inherent amorality and absence of the universal ethical idealism religion could give, Secularism eventually degenerates into a ruthless imposition of irreligion, often discriminatory, intensely intolerant, divisive and exclusivist. This is exactly what is plaguing Western societies today. A reactionary response to the secular onslaught has been the growing rise of Evangelicism. Evangelicism, however, is more of another fanatical creed than a comprehensive system built around universal religious morality. It is an imposition of the 'love of God', having done 'untold damage to non-Christian societies in the name of Jesus' (Z. Sardar, *The New Statesman*), including the printing and distribution of counterfeit 'Korans', propagation of anti-Islamic blasphemous literature and incitement of apostasies among despondent Muslim communities. Like Secularism, the Evangelist is deluded into believing that all is fair as a 'benevolent act in the name of Jesus.' It is Islam alone, with its stringent moral basis, that stands as a veritable alternative and an effective bulwark. For, it knits into a comprehensive whole, both the secular and the religious aspects of life, and imbues them with a pristine, absolute morality that is all-embracing in its universality. Unlike Secularism and other fanatical creeds, Islam does not blindly cling to a hidden ideological agenda under cover of a civilizing mission. It energetically denounces the violation of human rights both in the name of religious fanaticism, and in the name of secular liberalism and democracy. It is not selective, and upholds what secular and narrow creeds cannot--an objective universal Truth transcending the limits of human fallibility and endeavour. It towers above the morass of 'isms' the world is riddled with. The Prophet (blessings and peace be upon him) said in his Last Sermon:

"O People, just as you regard this month, this day, this city as Sacred, so regard the life and property of every Muslim as a sacred trust. Return the goods entrusted to you to their rightful owners. Hurt no one so that no one may hurt you. Remember that you will indeed meet your Lord, and that He will indeed reckon your deeds. "O People, it is true that you have certain rights with regard to your women, but they also have right over you. If they abide by your right then to them belongs the right to be fed and clothed in kindness. Do treat your women well and be kind to them for they are your partners and committed helpers. "You know that every Muslim is the brother of another Muslim. You are all equal. You are all sons and daughters of Adam, and Adam was made from dust. There is no superiority of an Arab over a non Arab, or of a white over a black. Nobody has superiority over another except by piety and good action. "Be my witness, O Allah, that I have conveyed your message to your people".

Rights of non-Muslim subjects are clearly outlined in Islamic Law, and their honour, freedom and safety is guaranteed in the Islamic society. Muslim communities in history have maintained exemplary levels of tolerance towards minorities. The first Islamic community was essentially pluralist, deeply integrated and egalitarian--in so much more meaningful ways than what any modern-day secular society can boast of. Since the nature of human society is that a single belief or system is bound to gain ascendancy over others, it is important for the triumphant system to have a strong basis in absolute universal morality so as to include all in a single human bonding. A truly universal and inclusive system can only be one that upholds justice as its highest value, and guarantees the protection of basic human rights without discrimination and narrow delineations. Distinctions are unavoidable, as humanity is not a monolithic entity but a diverse, multi-layered multiplicity. However, distinctions based on ethnicity, race, social status and nationalism eventually dwindle into narrow fanatical creeds. A system that allows for no distinction but that of a humanizing faith offers a promising, egalitarian vision. The ideal human community is one held together by the bonding of ideas and faith. Not just because this faith is the highest human trait, but also because it is essentially liberating; its commitment to universal morality means it includes and respects all; its merit is that it does not divide humanity into those of a 'lesser' and those of a 'higher' God. It is a guarantee of true, veritable and meaningful human liberation. A system according supremacy to none but those of 'righteous conduct' (which is solely judged by God), is truly egalitarian, progressive, promising and visionary. Thinking minds both in the West and non-Western societies are gradually feeling a disaffection with the avowed Secular world view. Sped up by the ongoing War on Terror, the distinctions between fanaticism in the guise of religion and pristine Islam are becoming clearer to see. Muslims are feeling the urge to find out and inquire for themselves the Whole Truth-- and it is leading many Homewards. That explains the growing numbers of converts to Islam in the West and the ever-increasing numbers of young, educated 'born again' practising Muslims the world over. And that is why, what with all the hypocrisy and the insanity around, we have grounds for hope. That is why the puerile tricks by publishers of blasphemous caricatures and Dutch documentary-makers are merely a puny, ridiculous, self-defeating endeavour. Photo by Yan Boechat