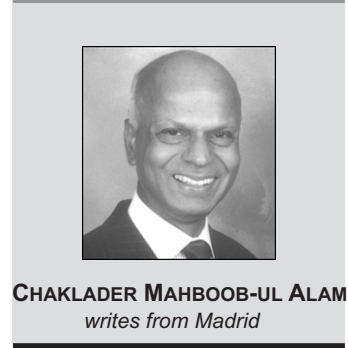


Secularism and the West



CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM writes from Madrid

FIRST, let me explain as to why I am writing this piece. Here, in the West, every time I open a newspaper, listen to the radio or watch the television, while referring to the Muslims in general, simplistic platitudes or outright derogatory terms such as Islamists (those who want to establish an Islamic state by enforcing the Sharia), intolerant fanatics, fundamentalists, "integrists" (those who want a theocratic state where the religious authorities also control the conduct of civil life), Islamic terrorists (as though there are no Christian or Jewish terrorists) etc. are used with such frequency, carelessness, and wanton disregard for the truth (even by the so called experts) that I cannot help feeling that people in the West do not have much knowledge about their own society and definitely far less about the Muslim ones. (Islam or at least most of Islam does not even have an organised Church, meaning religious establishment like the Catholic or the Anglican Church.) I am convinced that the media is partially responsible for this widespread vilification and demonisation of Islam and the Muslims. The impression one gets from a large section of the media is that all of the one thousand two hundred million Muslims of the world (needless to say, there are many widely divergent strains of thought in the worldwide Muslim community) are religious fanatics, whose societies are controlled by the mullahs and every decision of the state is religiously driven. At the same time, the media gives everybody to understand that in Europe and the US, the societies are completely secularised – that religion is an individual matter, that it does not play any role in the affairs of the state. Therefore, every Westerner can feel high and mighty about it. But is it correct to assume that the Western societies have been completely secularised? In order to examine the issue

rationally, let us first of all define secularism. What do we really understand by secularism? What are its origins? According to most dictionaries, secularism means a complete separation between the Church and the State. Secularism in politics and philosophy advocates the establishment of civil societies and the institutions of government based on reason and not on religious tradition and dogma. Religious belief and practice thus do not play any role in the affairs of the State and become matters of individual choice and conscience. In a completely secularised society, religion is a private matter for every citizen, – he can be a practising or non-practising Christian, Muslim or Jew. He can, if he so chooses can even be an atheist or an agnostic. Is this really the case in the West? The history of secularism in Europe is closely tied to the history of Christianity. At its beginning, Christianity with its emphasis on the supreme value of the individual was the religion of the poor and the underprivileged. Then, it was indeed a private matter. Its followers were persecuted all across the Roman empire. Although churches reputed to have been founded by the apostles enjoyed some prestige, ordinary churches were simply places of worship. They did not have a central authority nor a hierarchical clergy. Whatever authority the churches exercised over their followers was strictly on a local basis. All this changed when under emperor Constantine (fourth century), Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Following the emperor, the rich and the powerful abandoned paganism and converted to Christianity. The emperor was recognised as the head of both state and church. The church was transformed into a centralised hierarchical organisation. Since Rome was the centre of the empire, soon the bishop of Rome also became the head of Christian church, which gradually started acquiring property, wealth and power. The emperor continued to exercise final authority in religious matters. But the situation changed drastically, when the Western empire collapsed (fifth century) under the weight of the barbarian invasions. In the absence of the emperor in Rome, (the seat of the government of the empire had to be moved to Constantinople), the Roman bishop (the pope), besides having

enormous ecclesiastical powers over Western Christianity (as opposed to Graeco-Oriental Christianity) gradually came to acquire powers of a political government. When at the invitation of the pope, the Franks under Charles Martel and later his son Pepin drove the invading Lombards from the city of Rome, conquered more territories in Italy and made a gift of them to him, the grateful pope, in return crowned Pepin as king and later Pepin's son Charlemagne as the Roman emperor (A.D.800). After the collapse of Charlemagne's empire, in the tenth century, the German king

Although today, the US preaches secularism to the world, the republic was founded on strong religious grounds. Fleeing from the civil strife in England, the Puritans (who wanted to "purify" the Church of England from the remnants of Roman Catholicism) settled in the New England area, the defeated Anglican Royalists migrated to the southern colonies after Charles I was beheaded, devout Catholics went to Maryland and of course, the Quakers to Pennsylvania. These religious groups and many more splinter groups still exert great influence in the American society.

religious country. In most oath-taking and official ceremonies, God's name is invoked. All over the country, public school teachers daily lead students in a Pledge of Allegiance in which the words "under God" are uttered. (From this, one can only imagine what degree of religiosity exists in the church-run schools.) All US coins carry the solemn statement "In God we trust". No non-Christian (not even a Jew) has ever become the president or vice-president of the United States. In fact, before John Kennedy, no Catholic was allowed to become the president. In this context, it is worth

saying, "Scratch a Protestant and you will find a Fundamentalist." Luckily, the Christian Right is not as powerful in Europe as in the US. But religion still plays an important role in the civil society. As everybody knows, a constitution for the expanded EU is now being drafted. In response to Pope John Paul's wishes to emphasise Europe's religious heritage, (meaning Christian heritage), the conservative parties, who currently control the majority of the governments of the EU members have included three direct references to religion in the document, which certainly goes

Even though religious freedom is guaranteed by the constitution, the presence of the Catholic church and its symbols in almost every state activity is considered as something quite natural. As in France, Catholic schools and colleges are in great demand and are heavily subsidised by the State. The Greek constitution recognises the Eastern orthodox church as the dominant faith and owes allegiance to Jesus Christ as the head of Eastern Christianity. In Britain, the position of the Church of England is very solid. So much so that no one can ascend the throne, if he or she belongs to another faith except Christianity as professed by the Church of England. The king or queen is also the head of the Church of England. In my opinion, most Muslims will not have great difficulty in accepting the name of God or even the name of Prophet Jesus in the constitutions. What they find annoying and hypocritical, is the fact that the mere mention of the name of Allah provokes so much hate speech and anti-Muslim hysteria in the West. Then one is automatically branded as a "fundamentalist" or even worse, as an "Islamist". Recent outbursts of Giscard d'Estang, who is currently the chairman of the Convention for the Future of Europe, against Turkey's entry into the EU, because of different religious and cultural identities and a recent incident in the European Parliament, where delegates from all countries seeking EU membership were allowed to speak except only the Turkish delegate, go to prove that Europe is not as secular or as tolerant as its apologists would like it to be. In the West there are schools, colleges, clubs, hospitals and even powerful political parties which carry religious tags such as Christian, Catholic, Baptist, Jewish etc. and no one is surprised or embarrassed about this phenomenon. No one talks about Jewish fundamentalism or Christian fundamentalism. Symbols of Christianity are everywhere, even in public schools and public hospitals. But the very mention of Islam or something Islamic makes everybody cringe. Anything or anybody remotely related to Islam automatically becomes a suspect and provokes another hate campaign. What baffles me is if there can be Christian this, that or the other, why can't there be Islamic this, that or the other (even Islamic democracy)? Muslim or predominantly Muslim

societies are far from being perfect. I am the first one to admit that many aspects of our society need urgent reform. Religion still plays an important role (as it does in the West) in the lives of many hundreds of millions of Muslims as private individuals but there are not many who would like to live in an Islamist state under the sharia law, if not for anything else but for the fact that the world has changed during the last fourteen hundred years. The principles and practices of religious tolerance and secularism are not monopolies of the West. As the Indian Nobel laureate Amartya Sen recently reminded everyone bent on dividing the world into "impenetrable civilizational camps" that "when Akbar was making his pronouncements on religious tolerance in Agra, in the 1590s, the Inquisitions were still going on; in 1600, Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake, for heresy, in Campo dei Fiori in Rome." Prof. Sen could have added that at about the same time, hundreds of thousands of Spanish Muslims and Jews, who had been forcibly converted into Christianity after the fall of the Muslim temporal power in Spain, were being massacred and the survivors expelled from Spain by the Christian king and the Catholic church seeking "pureza de la sangre" (purity of blood) for the future generations of Spaniards. (It would be difficult to find a more tolerant society than the civil society in al-Andalus – modern Spain and Portugal – where the Christians, the Jews and the Muslims lived in peace and harmony for many centuries.) Secularisation is an ongoing process. The Western (meaning predominantly Christian) and Muslim societies are at different stages of secularisation. Simplistic generalisations in oppositional binary terms (good vs evil, believers vs infidels, we vs "the other" etc.) and indiscriminate use of derogatory platitudes such as Islamists, fundamentalists, fanatics, radicals, terrorists etc. do not help the task of the moderates on both sides, who are desperately trying to build bridges between the West and the Muslim world. I am also inclined to agree with what Nicholas D. Christof recently wrote in an article titled "Revising Islam" in the *New York Times*, "History suggests that focusing on the moral deficiencies of other peoples simply underscores one's own."

LETTER FROM EUROPE

Secularisation is an ongoing process. The Western (meaning predominantly Christian) and Muslim societies are at different stages of secularisation. Simplistic generalisations in oppositional binary terms (good vs evil, believers vs infidels, we vs "the other" etc.) and indiscriminate use of derogatory platitudes such as Islamists, fundamentalists, fanatics, radicals, terrorists etc. do not help the task of the moderates on both sides, who are desperately trying to build bridges between the West and the Muslim world.

Otto conquered Italy and the pope recognising him as the strongest of the temporal authorities in Europe declared him as the emperor. Thus, a strange quasi-theocratic entity called the Holy Roman Empire was established where the temporal powers were exercised by the emperor but his authority had to be confirmed by the pope (Holy Roman Church) at coronation. The pope, who also had a powerful weapon called the power of excommunication, not only exercised spiritual power but also had an important say in all matters of state. In the thirteenth century, papacy reached the height of temporal power under Innocent III, when the church governed every aspect of human life. Although after Innocent III, the overwhelming power of the Church started to decline, the Church continued to exercise enormous power in the Western Christendom until the so-called Age of Enlightenment or the Age of Reason (late seventeenth century), when secularism, at least in theory, came to be accepted as a preferable method of organising civil societies. In practice, religion kept playing (and still plays) an important role in the constitutional democracies of the Western Christendom. This is, however, true that the Church has lost its previous hegemonic powers.

In the context of this column, it is perhaps relevant to mention that all these religious groups were Christian. Of all of these religious groups, the group which exercised the most influence on the evolution of subsequent American political thought was no doubt the Puritan group. Following the Calvinistic doctrine, the distinction between the church and the State was maintained, but it was the responsibility of the State to guarantee strict adherence to church doctrine and ceremony and to punish the detractors. Every human activity was examined from a simplistic good versus evil point of view. The infamous witchcraft trials of Massachusetts in the seventeenth century and more recently the "crusade" against the Goddess communists under McCarthyism are mere manifestations of this intolerant religious doctrine. More than two hundred years after the introduction of this doctrine in the country and despite many challenges from more progressive thinkers, the influence of this doctrine is still very considerable in every walk of life in the US and even in the conduct of its foreign policy. (Remember Bush's rhetoric – crusade, axis of evil, operation infinite justice etc.) Under the guise of false secularism, the US still remains a deeply

mentioning that fundamentalism as a religious movement first started in the United States in the early part of the twentieth century. It believed in the precepts of traditional Christianity, opposed Darwin's theory of evolution and insisted on educating the children not at schools and universities but at Bible Institutes. From the growing power and influence of the Christian Right in the United States (as it is evident on the issue of Palestine), it can easily be surmised that the fundamentalist movement (now known as the Evangelical movement), instead of disappearing is growing. According to Michael Lind, co-author of a book called, *The Radical Center: The Future of American Politics*, "The constant references by the presidential candidates to their religious faith during the 2000 campaign demonstrate the cultural influence of Christian conservatives." Again according to Michael Lind, "George W. Bush is president today because the religious right vetoed the nomination of John McCain. And John Ashcroft is attorney general because Mr. Bush needed to reward his supporters on the religious right. His bio-ethics commission is headed by the religious right's favourite intellectual, Leon Cass". Actually, seeing all this, one is inclined to have more faith in the

against the spirit of secularism. The Europeans are quite rightly proud of their heritage but I feel compelled to remind them that the heritage they are so proud of includes the philosophical, scientific and cultural achievements of ancient Greece and Rome, where paganism was the "religion", not Christianity. Again, talking about heritage, what about the contribution made by the Muslim Europeans, who during Christian Europe's dark age, kept the torch of Ancient Greek civilisation shining at Schools of Learning in Cordoba and Toledo? The constitutions of many member states invoke God's name in one way or the other. Let us have a look at only a few of these constitutions. The preamble to the German constitution starts with the following solemn words, "Conscious of our responsibility to God and men, the German people approve this constitution". The Irish constitution makes similar references to God almighty. The Italian constitution acknowledges the pre-eminent position of the Catholic church, which by right enjoys enormous privileges. Although after Franco's death, the Catholic church has lost its overwhelming powers, the post-Franco Spanish constitution still provides for co-operation between the State and the Catholic church.

However, experiences in several countries showed that maximum output in preventing the spread of infection can be secured by initiating targeted interventions for poor, marginalised, and vulnerable population who are at the highest risk. Programmes aimed at general population often fails to reach the people at genuine risk. It was mentioned earlier that HIV transmission has a characteristic nature of spread from high prevalent population to population with low prevalence. Therefore, it requires an intensively focussed set of activities addressed at particular risk-behaviour based population. Evidence suggests that behaviour

change only works if the interventions are targeted at the particular risk group, and the nature of the activities may be different for different target groups although the critical elements of the intervention remain the same. Critical elements should consistently include non-stigmatised and easily accessible and affordable outreach services. At the same time all the intervention plans should be assessed within the purview of ethical norms and human rights standards before they are implemented.

Dr. Syed Kamaluddin Ahmed is a mental health professional.

Targeted intervention: A cost-effective approach to HIV/AIDS prevention

DR. SYED KAMALUDDIN AHMED

OVER the last decade, a considerable advance has been made in the field of HIV/AIDS prevention in Bangladesh, although, even until recently, the country has been found in a very low prevalence situation. Major accomplishment in the field includes, among others, timely commitment of the national government and formulation of a national policy, developing time bound planning and implementation strategies, establishing country-wide networking among relevant stakeholders and finally generating resources from different sources. Although implementation initiatives are in place since the nation and its government realised the nature of the problem and necessity for an early initiative, the intervention programmes are yet to take a definite shape. Implementation of effective prevention and intervention programmes specially in HIV/AIDS prevention calls for feasible, doable and cost-effective strategies. The strategies need support from highest political level and participation of programme planners and managers, communities, and individuals. Different source documents suggest that an effective implementation of HIV intervention strategies should include i) evidence-based planning with intensification of surveillance and research; ii) allocation of adequate resources for developing a sustainable HIV/AIDS prevention programme; iii) strengthening of national capacities for a sustained response with enhanced political commitment, development of strong leadership, and strengthening of public health infrastructure; iv) heightened and expanded community level responses; v) building a sustained partnership for multi-sectoral action; vi) reducing vulnerability of the poor and the marginalized; vii) creating enabling environment for safe behaviour through implementation of policies, legislation and services; and finally viii) ensuring the 'most vulnerable' an access to HIV/AIDS care and support.

disease and its spread are related to certain behavioural practice which are modifiable, and these behaviours are more prevalent among certain identified groups of population. The typical epidemic wave of the disease primarily involves specific high-risk behaviour practicing population and through a bridge population reaches the general population. Therefore, logically, if timely intervention is initiated among the target population there would be more chances of arresting or limiting the spread of the epidemic. The size of the target population would obviously be much smaller than the general mass. Moreover, a particular target population would have more chances of being homogeneous and have commonalities in their behavioural practice, which would be easier to address even within a very limited opportunity. However, different target population may need different programme components and distinct implementation strategies. Any preventive initiative addressing the general population, on the other hand, may need a wider implementation armamentarium and huge budgetary implications. Targeted intervention, precisely for HIV/AIDS prevention, may be defined as "a set of activities and approaches aimed at reducing the risk of infection among people who practice high-risk behaviour". So far, in a situation of limited opportunities, targeted intervention is the most preferred strategy. If we look at the global and regional scenario of HIV/AIDS epidemic and take into consideration vulnerable factors that are well in existence in our situation, it may be safely concluded that wave of the epidemic is inevitable if proper preventive measures are not taken at the earliest. Fortunately, the epidemic of HIV infection, like many other infective conditions, may be predicted for some of its unique characteristics. The disease spreads through some specific routes and follows some particular spread pattern. As mentioned earlier, the presence of the infection may be identified, in most circumstances, among certain high-risk behaviour practicing population cohort and from there it spreads to general population through a bridge population. Although the disease spreads very fast, the predictability of the epidemic provides the opportunity for timely intervention. Therefore, one has to take into cognizance the

In our situation and in also others, it is most often seen that the interventions for HIV/AIDS prevention are, by and large, directed to general population and consequently the activities are frequently limited to general awareness programmes... However, experiences in several countries showed that maximum output in preventing the spread of infection can be secured by initiating targeted interventions for poor, marginalised, and vulnerable population who are at the highest risk.

time pressure for initiating action once the situation is anticipated. Whatever action is initiated it should definitely be cost-effective, for most of the ill-fated countries have very limited resources for intercepting any new emerging phenomenon. Targeted intervention has been found to be most cost-effective intervention modality in conditions having typical epidemic pattern like that of HIV/AIDS. Targeted intervention has some fundamental agenda that are to be always followed to make the intervention truly functional. One very relevant and basic question is always asked and that is how would one identify a target population. In order to identify the target population the primary task is to identify the risk behaviour and to determine probability of its spreading the infection. Then particular population groups who practice the particular risk behaviour are to be identified, and finally the presence of the infection in that population cohort needs to be determined. Once the target populations are identified, the other prime issue is to prioritise the at-risk populations and their locations. In order to do that, one has to first identify the relevant risk behaviour and the population practicing that particular behaviour most, and then to map out their habitations. Thereafter, effort should be made to acquire maximum information about the population, develop rapport and gain their trust. Prioritisation of target population in the case of HIV/AIDS prevention depends on the factors like size of the identified population, their chance of getting infection under prevailing circumstances, current frequency of disease transmission among the population and feasibility of developing an intervention programme. Target identification and its prioritisation would facilitate designing and implementation of a realistic intervention plan and it would be easier to monitor and evaluate the programmes later.

well-circumscribed intervention programme would call for a total community participation. Community participation has many positive yields that would ultimately facilitate the whole implementation process and its outcome. Community participation is a primary quality component that makes any implementation initiative sustainable. It helps to protect the vulnerable in high-risk situation, and gives dignity to the poor and marginalised. Local community people are better aware of the existing situation and the functional needs, and therefore are better educators. Community participation in reality acts as true motivators and thus performs as multiplier. Community involvement brings with it different resources and logistics are better looked after. Experience and scientific evaluation of different interventions suggest that any targeted intervention should have certain qualitative components. Any intervention targeted at any particular population cohort should be based on proper information on the epidemic, and understanding of the vulnerability and specific risk behaviours, and the national governments and the civil society alike should be able to analyse the situation to respond appropriately. There should be active participation of the community in all stages of programme planning and their implementation. This will strengthen the intervention process and facilitate an uninterrupted journey towards desired accomplishment. Initiatives targeted at a particular group of population should be holistic in addressing all the components prescribed in a well acknowledged intervention programme. Piece meal programme development very rarely results into a complete yield. The services developed there of should certainly reach the population particularly at risk right at the places where the risk behaviour is practiced, and the coverage should be at its maximum. Even if a small fraction of people practicing high-risk behaviour remains unattended, the possibility of epidemic being

contained would be minimum. It should be recognised that every single citizen of the country irrespective of their socio-economic background or political identity has the right to receive the services they need. It should therefore be ensured that the marginalised and outreach population or those who feel them to be marginalised must have an easy access to the services they require. At the same time adequate care should be taken so that targeting a particular population may not be seen as singling them out and thus increasing the stigma. Targeting should therefore always be for programmatic purpose only. It should also be made sure that any component of those targeted interventions would not be prejudiced leading to negligence and poor quality. It is imperative to adopt maximum quality assurance that meets the standard of best practices and of course are acceptable to the population under consideration. The functional components for targeted intervention may vary according to population characteristics, nature of their vulnerability and their intervention needs. Taking together, the components for a successful targeted intervention for HIV/AIDS prevention should include behaviour change communication; condom promotion; diagnosis, treatment and care for sexually transmitted diseases; safe blood transfusion and safe injecting practice; counselling and services for pregnant mothers and those contemplating pregnancy; creation of an enabling environment; and finally care and support for people already infected by the virus or developed AIDS. Integration and comprehensive implementation of all the required components for a particular target population depends on an efficient programme management.

In our situation and in also others, it is most often seen that the interventions for HIV/AIDS prevention are, by and large, directed to general population and conse-

quently the activities are frequently limited to general awareness programmes. In order to develop political commitment and ensure a mass participation of general population in identifying the need for such interventions, the necessity for a general awareness programme cannot be ignored.

change only works if the interventions are targeted at the particular risk group, and the nature of the activities may be different for different target groups although the critical elements of the intervention remain the same. Critical elements should consistently include non-stigmatised and easily accessible and affordable outreach services. At the same time all the intervention plans should be assessed within the purview of ethical norms and human rights standards before they are implemented.

Dr. Syed Kamaluddin Ahmed is a mental health professional.

