

Europe's creed of intolerance

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At a time when the international advisory buzzwords for Pakistan and the Muslim World are tolerance and accommodation and rejection of 'Islamic extremism', Muslims in so-called secular Europe are facing increasing discrimination and intolerance. What an irony that while Muslim states and societies are being told to move away from extremism, those doing the advising are themselves in the throes of anti-Muslim fever - both at the level of the state and society.

In countries like Pakistan, which claim their Islamic character and thereby the centrality of Islam in their state and society, there is no obsession with other religions and their symbolisms. We have Christian church schools and we have Christian students in the mainstream of education in this country that have never had the state legislate against their show of religious symbols like crosses around their necks in school. This is despite the fact that we are an Islamic not a secular state, within the definitional parameters of the European notion of secularism. Of course individuals and groups in our society indulge in hate crimes, just as individuals and groups in Europe do by desecrating Jewish cemeteries and Muslim places of worship and attacking Muslim migrants - and, of course, often violence is part of these campaigns, be it the bombing of a church in Pakistan or the wholesale massacre of Muslims in Gujarat, India. The difference, though, is that in countries like Pakistan the state opposes such actions, whereas in the case of Gujarat the state actively supported the massacre and in Europe, increasingly, the state is adding fuel to the discrimination against its Muslim citizens.

The most recent reflections of this active involvement of the state in discriminatory policies against Muslims and other religious minorities - that now form sizeable populations in some European states - is the issue of the headscarf in France and Germany. The French have chosen to legislate against the wearing of religious symbols in state schools - be it the headscarf, the cross (here it is the size that will be the deciding factor!) or the Jewish yarmulke. Of course, the French used the battle cry of secularism to move forward on this count and therefore all religious symbols had to be equated. But the fact is that the real issue was the headscarf which reflects an overt manifestation of Muslim identity. In fact, the whole debate has been conducted in a most absurd fashion because the issue of the scarf has become a means for the French to legitimately pursue their anti-Muslim sentiment. French feminists insist that the headscarf denotes the subjugation or repression of the Muslim woman - a total absurdity since women choose to wear it and even if they are compelled to by their families, that is an issue for these women to resolve - after all they have the state machinery for support - not for the feminists to forcibly intervene in.

The secularism argument has given legitimacy to the growing anti-Islam tide that prevails in the West and which 9/11 allowed to become overt. Of course, the logic of the headscarf being a threat to the essence of French secularism may well be expanded to greater heights of absurdity. If the argument is that French Muslims should fall in line with mainstream French 'secular' society, then tomorrow Muslim girls will be targeted again for their more conservative morality. After all, someone may make the argument that if Muslim girls do not have sex before marriage or do not go in for contraception, they are threatening the French way of life and secularism! So will Muslim girls be forced to accept these social norms, as they are now being forced to discard their modest clothing, including the headscarf in school? Where will the eventual line be drawn on the notion of secularism? And how secular is France in any case? Do they give public holidays for all religions or is only Christmas a public holiday? How does that fit in with the secular nature of the state? Perhaps it is time the 5 million Muslims of France should ask that question since they are to accept the French notion of secularism.

But the situation in Germany, which again has a growing Muslim population, is even worse. To begin with, Germany has always been loathe to accept foreign nationals as part of German society. German nationality is only by birth and migrant workers were always referred to as 'guest workers' - never ac-



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states like Bavaria and Baden-Wuerttemberg have drafted laws, treating different religions differently. From autumn of this year, schoolteachers will be banned from wearing the Muslim headscarf (is this always distinguishable from a non-Muslim headscarf or is the identity of the wearer the defining factor?) but not the crucifix or Yarmulke or even nuns' habits. To get around Article Four, the Bavarian government has declared that the scarf has become a 'symbol of fundamentalism and extremism' and the Bavarian government has categorised the scarf as a political, not a religious symbol! This attitude, itself is what is reflective of extremism and intolerance - but clearly Muslims are being targeted by both France and Germany on different interpretations of the same symbol. Talk about being ridiculous. The French see a young Muslim girl's headscarf as a religious symbol threatening the very structure of the state's secular creed, while some German states see the scarf as a threatening religious symbol!

Interestingly, while the French political leadership has led the fight against the headscarf, the German president (this being a largely ceremonial post in Germany), Johannes Rau, argued that if the *hijab* is banned from the classroom, then symbols of other faiths must also have to go. "Our constitution requires equal treatment of religions in the public sphere - including schools. That does not put our Christian heritage in question." But it would appear that in Bavaria, and other states, Germans feel that their Christian heritage is being threatened by the Muslims expressing their identity overtly through the headscarf!

This approach should send a warning to the rest of the 'secular' world, and a foreboding sense of déjà vu. After all, it was in Germany many decades earlier that the Jews were seen as a threat and were therefore first isolated and gradually, the discriminatory legislation against them grew and eventually the holocaust happened. And the beginnings of that racist religious creed were also from Bavaria. The world watched till it was too late, so while it may be fashionable in present day Europe to accept penalties on the headscarf, the logic has a terrible end.

Some in Asia also tried to ape the West in moving against the overt symbols of Islam. Singapore legislated against the wearing of the headscarf in schools but pressure from Malaysia soon put Singapore into a more accommodative mode. But other attacks against Islam continue in so-called secular states. The case of India is glaring in this regard. It has now become a regular feature of news from India to hear of Hindu extremist groups wanting to take over mosques or to place images of Hindu deities in mosques.

So where does all this leave the Muslim world? To begin with, are Muslim states with heterogeneous religious groups, legislating against the overt symbols of Christianity? No. We know the absurdity of such actions because some in our societies are educated in Christian schools. Even the MMA government in the Frontier province, despite being viewed as a fundamentalist government, has not legislated against overt non-Muslim symbols in schools and colleges.

The reality is that extremism and intolerance are becoming more endemic in Europe - with the states of Europe bolstering such trends. Post - the end of the Soviet Union and the liberation of Eastern Europe there has been a resurgence of the Christian ethos in Europe, and with this has come the resurgence of the crusading mind set against Islam. All this may have remained covert, but 9/11 allowed it to gain an overt acceptability. But, unfortunately, for Europe's new crusading fever, there is a growing European Muslim population - Germany itself has almost 3.5 million Muslims - and this population cannot be ignored or discriminated against at will.

If the world is to fight extremism and intolerance, the Europeans should do some serious introspection and set their own house in order before they target the Muslim states on the issue of fundamentalism and extremism. And the same holds true for non-European 'secular' states where whole Muslim populations have been massacred with official connivance. And the Muslim world should move out of its defeatist and defensive psyche that has taken over after 9/11.

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The views expressed by the writer are her own