

## **A lasting solution for Kabul and Srinagar:**

Hard secularism Hard secularism Hard secularism Hard secularism Hard secularism

Dr Koenraad Elst

At the time of the Ayodhya crisis, the Indian Left advocated “hard secularism” as the only solution. This would mean outlawing Hindu parties, imprisoning Hindu leaders, and bullets for the Kar Sevaks. In the past month, the Americans have been trying out this hard secularism in Afghanistan: eliminating Islamic fundamentalism by bombing the already tattered remains of Kabul and Kandahar.

But the results of this approach were not altogether satisfying. For the short term, the Americans could at least congratulate themselves for having killed this many mothers and maimed that many children. But even they cannot fail to realize that in the long term, their bombs will prove to be the seeds of more jihad fervour and better-equipped commandos striking at even larger targets than the World Trade Centre. The destructive religious fire is not quenched with violence.

Therefore, let us explore a different secularist strategy, hard like stainless steel, yet gentle and bloodless. It must strike at the root of the problem. Now, crimes have their root in the minds of their perpetrators. In the case of the attacks on the WTC and the parliament building of Srinagar, these minds were filled with zeal for Islam. The perpetrators, especially those who sacrificed their own lives in their line of duty, were not evil people. On the contrary, they were brave and full of devotion to what had been instilled in them as the true religion.

Then what was it that made them cross the threshold from the subjective goodness of their moral feelings to the objective evil of their acts? The answer is: their mistaken beliefs. With Socrates, I am convinced that evil ultimately stems from ignorance, from false beliefs. It is up to us, secularists, to make sure that future generations grow up free from such beliefs, or at least to equip them with the scientific temper that will allow them to identify and weed out wrong ideas.

Recently, an example drilled into the public consciousness was the question of the history schoolbooks, and whether these should inform pupils of the fact that the Vedic seers ritually ate beef. Should we not rather, in order to spare certain religious sensibilities, misinform them that the taboo on beef existed since all eternity? Of course not: it is better to let them know that despite the current Hindu taboo on beef, kine were ritually sacrificed (and tasted) according in several Vedic rites. Every secularist will agree with that.

Likewise, all schoolchildren should learn the true story of Mohammed as related in the sources and certified by scholars. Granted, Mohammed did preach and practise war against the Infidels. To that extent, the lessons learned by the Taliban in their Madrassas were true enough. But they should also learn a more problematic truth.

When Mohammed had his first “revelation”, his first vision of the archangel Gabriel, he himself was convinced that this was a morbid hallucination. Or in the terminology of his day: that he was possessed by an evil spirit. He even considered committing suicide in order to spare himself the life of a mental patient. His wife Khadija managed to calm him down, and he got used to the recurring hallucinations, which he interpreted as messages from God to His prophet. But except for a few followers, his contemporaries saw through his claims of prophethood.

A dozen times, the Quran itself mentions in passing the skeptical reactions of the Arabs, who called him “ghost-possessed”, “a madman”, at best “a fanciful poet”. Later on, they were forced to submit to Mohammed’s military power, but they had understood correctly that Mohammed’s “revealed” utterances were the products of his own brain. Every Quran reader endowed with the scientific temper can see for himself how the Book contains strictly nothing that indicates a Divine origin, nothing that was beyond the mental horizon of a 7<sup>th</sup>-century Arab businessman vaguely acquainted with Biblical lore. So, the belief that Mohammed received Divine revelations laying down the law for all mankind and valid till Doomsday, is a mistake.

The whole division of mankind in the Faithful and the Infidels, division which led to the Partition, to endless riots and to cross-border terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir, is based on a false belief. We can spare ourselves these ravages if we instill the scientific temper in ourselves and our children. Initially, this may encounter resistance, for some people will feel offended in their most cherished certainties. Yet, experience teaches that before too long, it comes easily.

The Egyptian Nobel-winning author Naguib Mahfouz has testified how in his youth, his countrymen looked upon Islam as quaint folklore, good for elderly people who were soon to take it with them into the grave. Nobody had forced this skeptical attitude upon them, it came naturally as soon as modernity had made it available. Admittedly, Islamic belief has staged a great comeback since then. But the clock will swing back, it always does. Already, many people in the Muslim world voice their doubts, some outspokenly at the risk of their lives, others discreetly.

Speaking for myself, I can say I understand the resistance and the initial pain which Muslims feel when confronted with a reasoned refutation of their beliefs. At the same time, I also understand and welcome the feeling of liberation which follows the grudging admission that these beliefs are unsustainable, and that the skeptics were right all along. I have gone through these stages myself when I outgrew the Catholic Christian faith in which I had been brought up.

This was not at all a matter of "hate", or some such term of abuse with which some will try to criminalize my rejection of Christianity. I still value Christian art, Christian music, Christian philosophy, and some of the virtues instilled by a Christian upbringing. Only, I have had to reject the defining core belief of Christianity, simply because it is untrue. Jesus was a cult leader with a high opinion of himself, but he also preached some of the nobler ideas from Judaism as well as from the ambient Hellenistic philosophies, some even borrowed from Buddhism. His sayings include lucid observations ("to him who hath, shall be given"), practical wisdom ("give unto Caesar what is Caesar's") and mystical ideas ("the Kingdom is within you"), apart from wild self-centred claims and outlandish predictions of an imminent Domsday. His record was mixed, like that of most men. But the point is: he was definitely not the Redeemer of mankind from original sin, he was not the Messiah who came to restore David's kingdom, and he was not God's only-begotten Son. The core doctrine of Christianity, like that of Islam, is a mistake.

The new generations of this country should not be kept in the dark. They should learn about Vedic cow slaughter, about the findings of Bible scholarship, and about the insights of psychology into the process of Quranic "revelation". This will contribute mightily to the prevention of religious fanaticism. Secularists of the world, unite for the critical study of religion in every Madrassa.

Dr. Koenraad Elst