

# Tobacco use and religion

## Role of religion in tobacco control

All religions are concerned with the well-being of humans, including their health, and therefore with the negative health impact of tobacco use. Religion has a strong influence in the Eastern Mediterranean Region and is a part of daily life. It therefore has the potential to play an important role in any comprehensive tobacco control strategy.

## Islam and tobacco use

In Islam, the body is a gift from God and people have a responsibility to protect it. International meetings of respected Islamic scholars in 1996 (Jordan) and 1999 (Libya) have concluded that tobacco use is against the teachings of Islam. As early as 1602, a *fatwa* (religious opinion) was issued in Morocco prohibiting the use of tobacco. The Grand Mufti of Egypt declared in 1999 that smoking was forbidden in Islam. In Pakistan, the Council of Islamic Ideology declared tobacco use to be an un-Islamic act in 2000.

In 1996, the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean published the first edition of *Health education through religion: an Islamic ruling on smoking*, which surveyed the fatwas related to tobacco use. The fatwas held that tobacco use should be forbidden because of the well-established health and financial damage it inflicts on users and society as a whole.

## Christianity and tobacco use

Support for tobacco control has also come from Christian leaders, including the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. A *Christian View on Smoking*, issued by the Coptic Church in Egypt in 2000, outlined the Christian opposition to tobacco use as an addiction that damages the health, as well as the spiritual and material welfare, of individual users and society. A smoke-free law was issued by the Vatican in 2002.

## Faith-based tobacco control strategies

In 1984, the Thirty-seventh World Health Assembly passed a resolution calling for countries to include a spiritual dimension in their health strategies based on their particular social and cultural patterns. The WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean has taken this forward through a series of publications on religion and health, high-level meetings of religious leaders and scholars, and support for faith-based tobacco control activities.

From its own internal documents, we can see that the tobacco industry views faith-based tobacco control initiatives as a threat. This is a sign of their potential to enhance tobacco control in the Region.

## Role of religious leaders and organizations in tobacco control

Faith-based tobacco control represents new partnership opportunities for public health. Faith-based charitable organizations and religious leaders can be involved in tobacco control activities. Religion also plays an important role in education in many countries, offering opportunities to impart information about tobacco use to young people.

Religious leaders are important members of civil society and exert considerable influence within the Region. They can play a key role in promoting healthy lifestyles, including ending tobacco use. This role was recognized at a meeting on tobacco and religion held at WHO headquarters in Geneva in 1999.

## Mecca and Medina as smoke-free cities

Saudi Arabia has adopted a faith-based approach to tobacco control. In 2001, the holy cities of Mecca and Medina were declared tobacco-free by King



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Fahd. Sales of tobacco were banned within the two cities, including in restaurants and cafes. This complimented the existing smoke-free legislation on smoking in public places (including hospitals, schools and government offices) and social norms that prohibit tobacco use in and around the holy mosques.

Civil society, including anti-tobacco and charitable religious groups, are involved in implementation of tobacco control in the cities. Large signs around the holy mosques proclaim the smoke-free status of the cities and Red Crescent volunteers and the keepers of the mosques remind anyone smoking of this and hand them a faith-based message about health.

Both cities attract around eight million visitors each year, many as pilgrims during the annual Hajj pilgrimage and during the holy month of Ramadan. Awareness-raising tobacco control activities focus on the pilgrimage season and Ramadan. This provides a unique opportunity for the dissemination of smoke-free norms and tobacco control messages via the pilgrims to the countries they return to.

## **Tobacco-free fasting**

The holy month of Ramadan, with its month-long fast, is a time when many Muslims attempt to give

up bad habits. This can be an excellent time to stop smoking or chewing tobacco. Tobacco control activities can build on this through awareness raising and providing support for cessation of tobacco use. Ramadan tobacco control campaigns have taken place in many countries of the Region. Christian fasting periods, such as Lent, can also be a good time for campaigns.

## **Best practices and the way forward**

Faith-based tobacco control strategies are an important tool in the fight against tobacco in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region. However, they should be viewed as one part of a comprehensive overall approach to tobacco control. They can include:

- ▶ raising public awareness of religious views and rulings regarding tobacco use
- ▶ engaging religious leaders in dialogue and partnerships on tobacco control
- ▶ mobilizing faith-based organizations to support tobacco control initiatives, including smoke-free policies, tobacco cessation and healthy lifestyles education.