

The Role of Religious Education in Peace Building Process

Dr. Rashid Ahmad *

Abstract

No religion in the world teaches violence, insecurity of life and property as all religions have taught peace, security, forbearance, affection, patience, mercy, tolerance, justice, moderation, protection of humankind, co-existence and human dignity. Religion and extremism cannot go side by side while on the other hand religion, education and peace cannot be separated from one another. Religious education can counter extremist ideologies by creating awareness amongst people about their rights and duties. In this regard the role of religious institutions, madrassas, schools, colleges and universities is very important and a reformation of their syllabi is equally important. The role of churches, mosques, temples, pagodas, etc. is also of great importance. The role of the state is pivotal in curbing extremist ideologies through religious education by reformulating the educational objectives. This paper will focus on the issue to explore the effectiveness of religious education in countering violent ideologies

Keywords: Religion; Education; Extremism; Peace Manual.

Introduction:

It is a well known fact that no religion of the world teaches violence, insecurity of life and property as all religions have taught peace, security, forbearance, love, affection, benevolence, patience, mercy, tolerance, justice, moderation, protection of humankind, co-existence and human dignity as prime attributes of mankind. In essence, all religions have been a peaceful response to the prevailing extremist ideologies of their times. However, it is important to note at the very outset, that religious teachings should not be confused with the practice of the followers.

It is a general perception that the more religious the people the more extremist and violent they are. In the words of Ibrahim Kalim: "At the other end of the spectrum is the believer who sees religious violence as an oxymoron at best and the mutilation of his religious faith at worst. Religions do not call for violence, this believer would argue. Religious teachings are peaceful at their base, meant to reestablish the primordial harmony between heaven and earth, Creator and created. When religious groups turn violent, it is because specific religious teachings and feelings have been manipulated to foment conflict for political gains. Violence is committed in the name of religion, but not condoned by it. The only valid criticism the secularist can raise against religion is that religions have not developed effective ways to protect themselves from such manipulations and abuses".¹

Religious Education and Extremism

Religion and extremism cannot go side by side while on the other hand religion,

* Assistant Professor, Shaykh Zayed Islamic Center, University of Peshawar

education and peace cannot be separated from one another. According to revealed teachings, the first human being on the surface of the earth was Adam, who was the first human as well as the first Divine messenger. Divinity did not abandon human beings without comprehensive guidance. A Prophet brings Divine knowledge with him in order to teach it to the people and guide them to the straight path. The *Qur'an* says about Adam: "And He (Allah) taught Adam all the names".² A well-known interpreter of the *Qur'an* Muhammad Asad says about this verse:

"(This verse) and the subsequent verses show that owing to his knowledge of those "names" man is, in a certain respect, superior even to the angels. The "names" are a symbolic expression for the power of defining terms, the power of articulated thinking which is peculiar to the human being, and which enables him, in the words of the *Qur'an*, to be God's vicegerent on earth. And in order to make a systematic use of his thinking, man must learn. Therefore the Prophet (PBUH) said: "If anybody goes on his way in search of knowledge, God will make easy for him the way to Paradise".³

The very first revelation of the *Qur'an* was about the knowledge:

"Read in the name of thy Lord who created man from a clot. Read and it is thy lord the bountiful who teacheth man that which he knew not".⁴

In another verse, the *Qur'an* teaches us this prayer: "O my lord enhance my knowledge".⁵

The Prophet (PUBH) has pronounced the acquiring of knowledge as an obligatory noble deed on several occasions. He said: "He who goes out (of his home) to receive knowledge is in the way of Allah until he returns home".⁶ And said: "Acquiring knowledge is an obligation on every Muslim".⁷

It is a well-known fact that man is born with some Divine attributes - like mercy, compassion, patience, forgiveness, trust, truthfulness and containment etc. - which are ingrained in his soul. His ultimate aim in this world is to acquire the highest pedestal of these attributes which will make him a perfect man. In that case, the soul will also approach its real and ultimate source i.e., the Creator. Religion prepares man to redeem this noble goal by a regular process of training and exercise.⁸

Aims of Education

Education is the process of knowing through which man can get excellence. The aims of education can be summarized as follows:

1- Education should aim at a balanced growth of man in all aspects like spiritual, intellectual, imaginative, physical, scientific, linguistic, both individually and collectively and motivate these aspects towards goodness and the attainment of the perfection of character.

2: The aim of education should be social mobilization of a person to play a positive and a constructive role in society.⁹

In the words of Dr. Zafar Iqbal, "education is broadly viewed as the intellectual and moral training of individuals through which their potentialities are

developed, the traits of the Creator included in them, and the culture of the people is transmitted to the coming generation. Education not only seeks to instill morals in young minds but it also stimulates them to fit in to the fabric of social life. Education, no doubt is an instrument for the material fulfillment as well as the spiritual development".¹⁰

The issue of religious education and extremism is of a multidimensional nature. It should be borne in mind that there is no bifurcation of knowledge. Any knowledge which serves humanity is indeed a religious one and any knowledge which is harmful to society and humanity, is a satanic one.

Misinterpretation of Religious Teachings

No doubt, in many cases the extremist ideologies are based on religious teachings because most of the extremists consider implementation of their religious ideologies on society as their religious duty. They do not hesitate from using force for this purpose. They quote such verses from their religious literature which cause hatred amongst different segments of society, while doing so they do not bother to study the context of the verses. For instance, there are many verses of the *Qur'an* as well as many sayings of the Prophet (PBUH) about unlawful killing and about patience, but these are mostly ignored. The *Qur'an* Says: "Whoever kills a person (unjustly), except as a punishment for murder or (as a prescribed punishment for spreading) disorder in the land, it is as if he killed all of humanity."¹¹ At another place, it says: "(The true servants of Allah are those who) do not take any life which Allah has forbidden save justly; who do not commit unlawful sexual intercourse and whosoever does that shall meet its penalty".¹²

The Holy *Qur'an* has criticized very unequivocally those who spread chaos and anarchy in society. It says:

And amongst people there is he whose conversation seems pleasing to you in the life of the world, and he calls God to bear witness to that which is in his heart, but in truth he is the most quarrelsome of opponents. And when he turns away, he runs about in the land to cause corruption and destroy crops and life, and God does not like corruption. And when it is said to him, "Fear God", his arrogance leads to more sins. Hell is, therefore, sufficient for him. And that is indeed an evil abode.¹³

On another occasion it states: "And when it is said to them, 'Do not spread corruption in the land', they say, 'We are only reformers!' Truly, it is they who spread corruption but they perceive it not".¹⁴

The Prophet (PBUH) said in his address during his last pilgrimage: "Indeed, your blood and your property and your honor are inviolable, like the inviolability of this day of yours and this month of yours and this land of yours until the day you meet your Lord".¹⁵ He also said at another occasion: "That you serve food and give the salutation of peace to the one whom you know and the one whom you do not know".¹⁶ Once he said to his wife: "O A'isha, God is Gentle and He loves

gentleness. He bestows for the sake of gentleness what He does not bestow due to harshness.¹⁷

Misunderstanding and misinterpretations of religious literature also cause extremism. While, the best way is to leave the matter of interpretation to scholars of high caliber and unless a person is not specialized in his field, he should not be allowed to interpret religious issues.

The other problem is that those who consider Islam to be a religion that essentially condones violence pick certain verses from the *Qur'ān*, link them to cases of communal and political violence in Islamic history, and conclude that *Qur'ānic* teachings justify the unjust use of violence. The same can be done practically to any religion, but Islam has enjoyed much more fanfare than any other religion for the past thousand years or so. The apologist makes the same mistake, but in a different way, when he rejects all history as misguided, failing to see the ways in which the *Qur'ān*- or the Bible or Rig Vedas- can easily, if not legitimately, be read to support intra-and interreligious violence. This is where the hermeneutics of the text, in the sense of both commentary on the *Qur'ān* (*tafsīr*) and the inner or esoteric meanings of the *Qur'ān* (*ta'wīl*) becomes absolutely necessary. The text itself is not violent, but it does lend itself to multiple readings that can justify peaceful or violent ends.¹⁸

Solution

Religious education can counter extremist ideologies by creating awareness amongst people about their rights and duties. This is possible in a democratic system as inclusiveness is a major characteristic of democracy and religion. Values of democracy like the protection of basic human rights, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, etc. are in fact the essence of religion. A democratic society is considered a tolerant one which is the main goal of religious education as well.

The root causes of extremist ideologies lie in problems like poverty, injustice, exploitation and frustration etc. while religious education can address all these issues effectively. In this regard the role of religious institutions, madrassas, schools, colleges and universities is very important by reformulating their syllabi according to the need of the hour.

The curriculum of religious education may be developed keeping in view the following points in mind:

1- Theological Bases of Extremism

In the context of theology and philosophy, questions of peace and violence are treated under the rubric of good and evil (*husn/ khayr* and *sharr*, or *qubh*). War, conflict, violence, injustice, discord, and the like are seen as extension of the general problem of evil. Muslim philosophers and theologians have been interested in theodicy from the very beginning, and for good reason, because the basic question of theodicy goes to the heart of religion. How can a just and perfect God allow evil and destruction in a world He says He has created in perfect balance, with a purpose, and for the well-being of His servants? We can

rephrase the question in the present context: Why is there so much violence, turmoil, and oppression rather than peace, harmony, and justice in the world? Does evil – of which violence is an offshoot - belongs to the essential nature of things, or is it an accident that arises only as the privation of goodness?¹⁹

2- Philosophical Foundations of the Ideology of Extremism

Another problem in considering the connection between Islam and violence is the current literature's dominant focus on the legal and juristic aspect of the issue. Questions about the use of force, conduct in war, treatment of combatants and prisoners of war, and other international law concerns are discussed mostly within a legal context, and the classical Islamic literature on the subject is called upon to provide answers. This is an important and useful exercise, but it does not address the **deeper philosophical** and spiritual issues that must be included in any discussion of religion and peace. This is especially true for Islam, for two main reasons:

First, legal views of peace and violence in the classical period were articulated and applied in the light of the overall teachings and **aims of Islamic law** (*maqasid al Shari.ah*). The maqasid provided a context within which the strict legality of the law was blended into the necessities and realities of communal life. Political conflicts couched in the language of juridical edicts remained as political conflicts and were never extended to a war of religions between Islam and Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, or African religions, which Muslims encountered throughout their history. It should not be surprising that the fatwa of a jurist of a particular school of law allowing the use of force against a particular Christian ruler was not interpreted as an excuse to attack one's Christian or Jewish neighbors.

Second, the spiritual and ethical teachings of the *Qur'ān* and *Sunnah* underpin all Islamic principles, including, mutatis mutandis, the question of peace and violence. The legal injunctions (*afkām*) of the *Qur'ān* concerning peace and war are part of a larger set of spiritual and moral principles. The ultimate goal of Islam is to create a moral and just society, in which individuals can pursue a spiritual life, and the toll of living collectively, from economic exploitation and misuse of political authority to the suppression of others, can be controlled to the greatest extent possible. Without accounting for this larger picture, it is impossible to see how Islam advocates a positive concept of peace or how its political and legal precepts, which are exploited so wildly and irrationally by both the secular and religious fundamentalists of our day, lead to creating and sustaining a just and ethical social order".²⁰

4- Jus ad bellum (justice to war)

5- Jus in bello (Law of war)

A thorough study of the Holy *Qur'ān* and *Sunnah* reveals that the permanent relationship between Islamic State and non-Islamic States is based on peace and not on hostility. While it is also a fact that the cause of jihad is aggression and not difference of belief. Islamic teachings allow armed struggle against aggression

only. Islamic teachings have laid down specific rules and regulations about the conduct of war and distinguish non combatants from the combatants. Muslim Jurists have documented it in *adab al- F arb*.

6- Management of emotions

This part of the curriculum will help the students to overcome emotional problems like frustration, irritation, depression, nervousness, anger, aggravation, hate, disappointment and unhappiness, etc.

7- Rights and Responsibilities

Rights and duties cannot be separated from each other as whenever any right is claimed there will be responsibility as well on the reciprocal basis.

9- Democracy and Justice

Almost all the jurists are unanimous that administration of justice is the foremost duty of a state and only those societies can make progress where justice and supremacy of the law carry are paramount. In contemporary world all this is possible in a democratic society only.

10- Conflict and Violence

11- Conflict avoidance, management and Resolution

The concept of conflict and conflict resolution is multidimensional. Conflict may take place between two family members, between and among class mates, colleagues, society members and even between and among states.

Open communication and face-to-face discussion of conflicts are considered in peace - building as more productive to building good relationships, - rather than avoidance of violence. They reduce the cost of an ongoing conflict and address all parties' grievances. When a third party is part of a peace building intervention, it is mainly to facilitate communication, reduce tension, and assist in rebuilding relationships. Such interaction is necessary to engage the conflicting parties in truly building peace. Islam encourages such a process through active intervention, particularly among Muslims themselves.²¹

12- Pluralism

Pluralism is a meaningful engagement with the characteristics of diversity in religion and culture etc. Pluralism is something beyond tolerance as it is helpful in seeking understanding of each other in every aspect of life It paves way for dialogue which is very helpful in sorting out the commonalities of different communities.

Role of Worship Places

In this regard the role of churches, mosques, temples, pagodas etc is also of great importance, as a considerable portion of society regularly visit their worship places. These worship place serves as centers for worship as well as for religious education. This is very true of all worship places but in Muslim societies particularly mosque can play this role very effectively. Dr. Khalid Alavi says:

The second most important role the mosque has is it serves as a centre for educational activities, in fact, it was an educational institution from the beginning. All the Prophets were, in reality, teachers and educators,

their foremost duty being to teach people the art of living a balanced, spiritual life; starting from performing ablution to deeper devotional and meditational practices. Scholars of Hadith wherein the Prophet called himself a teacher.²²

If religious leaders of all faiths use these worship places for spreading the message of peace and tolerance then, many problems of our society could be solved. It is quite possible that these worship places can become centers of all activities reflecting the social and material life of the people.

The role of the state is pivotal in curbing extremist ideologies through religious education by reformulating the educational objectives.

To achieve these goals the following suggestions may be considered:

1- A council of experts of religious affairs should be constituted to formulate details of the curricula and syllabi by incorporating material about peace, tolerance and co-existence extracted from the religious literature.

2- The study of comparative religions should be a part of the syllabus, as it will help the students in knowing about the beliefs and way of life of others. Thus, it will be helpful in creating a tolerant society.

3- Study of the major civilizations of the world will also be helpful in achieving the goal of national unity.

4- Special training programs should be organized for the teachers in order to inform them about the latest developments in their particular subject and bring their attention towards their responsibility in this regard.

5- Interfaith dialogue may be helpful in this regard keeping in view the difference between debate and dialogue as the first one leads to differences while the second one is helpful in understanding each other's point of view.

6- Exclusive research centers for the study of extremism should be established. There should be a national centre of excellence where all research work carried out in other centers be collected and then dispensed in society.

7- Regular seminars, symposiums and workshops should be organized on regular basis where academicians and scholars should be invited to discuss the matter at length. The suggestions made in these forums should be made public.

8- Books and pamphlets should be published for the awareness of common people.

9- Research grants and scholarships will be another good incentive for the students to take interest in the subject.

The last few decades have witnessed a tremendous development in the mass media. In fact, it is a double edged sword; it can harm as well as benefit society. If media gives proper attention and time to such programs which are helpful in creating a tolerant society, then it will be a great contribution to the noble cause of uprooting extremism from the society. For instance, media can present religious programs based on ethical values.

The issue of human rights is closely related to religious education. There are two kinds of rights from the religious perspective: one are the exclusive rights of Allah, and the other are human rights. Islam has laid down more emphasis on

human rights as compared Allah's rights. From the Islamic perspective, violation of Allah's rights may be forgiven but the violation of human rights is unforgiveable unless forgiven by the aggrieved person. Therefore, religious education includes human rights in its teachings. If teaching of human rights is made part of the syllabi of religious education, then its better result can be expected.

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